

Minnesota Should Restore Voting Rights to 65,000 Citizens

Minnesota denies the vote to more of its people with a felony conviction than most other states in the Upper Midwest. Nearly 65,000 Minnesotans are currently locked out of our democracy, representing 1.6% of the state’s Voting Age Population (VAP). People of color are disproportionately impacted, with African Americans disenfranchised at **4.5 times** the state average. Latinx Americans are disenfranchised at **2.3 times** the state average. Historically, “Jim Crow” felony disenfranchisement laws – like Minnesota’s – were used to dilute the power and voice of the Black community. Today, Minnesota can and must address the legacy of racial injustice by expanding the right to vote.

Most Disenfranchised Minnesotans Live in the Community

Minnesota’s high disenfranchisement rate is driven by the state’s large community supervision population and its restrictive voting laws.¹ The state forbids all people in prison, and those on felony probation or parole from voting—a practice that is more restrictive than 23 states and Washington, D.C.² In order to ensure that all Minnesotans have a voice in our democracy, Minnesota should extend voting rights to all people affected by the state’s criminal legal system.

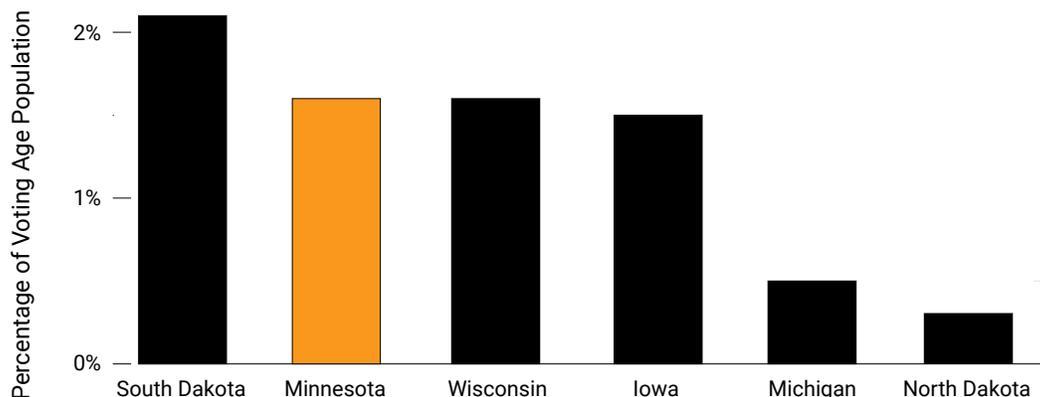
While Minnesota has one of the lowest imprisonment rates in the country, the state ranks fifth nationally in

the rate at which it holds its residents under community supervision.³ As a result, most disenfranchised people in the state are currently living in their communities. Of the nearly 65,000 Minnesotans denied the vote due to a felony conviction, 85% or 55,000 people are under community supervision.⁴ Ensuring universal suffrage would guarantee representation and redemption for all Minnesotans.

Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice Produce Racial Disparities at the Ballot Box

Minnesota’s voting laws disproportionately disenfranchise people of color who are overrepresented in the state’s criminal justice system.

Felony Disenfranchisement Rates in Upper Midwest, 2020



For example, African Americans make up only 7% of Minnesota's population, but 36% of the state's prison population. Black-white disparities in the state's prison population are twice the national average, with African Americans imprisoned at 10 times the rate of whites.⁵ In addition, Native Americans make up 1% of Minnesota's population, but 9% of the state's prison population.⁶

Racial disparities among people in Minnesota's large community supervision programs are also significant. African Americans make up 19% of people on probation and 28% of people on supervised release.⁷ Native Americans make up 6% of people on probation and 10% of people on supervised release. High felony disenfranchisement rates among communities of color dilutes representation in the state's political system.

Research shows that racial disparities are driven, at least in part, by biased sentencing. A 2016 study in the *American Journal of Sociology* found that differences in Minnesotans' race, skin color, and Afrocentric features influence their likelihood of being sentenced to prison, as opposed to being placed on probation or having their charge adjusted to a misdemeanor.⁸ Restoring the vote would help to dismantle the legacy of "Jim Crow" laws by ensuring that people who have experienced imprisonment and criminalization are guaranteed a voice in our democracy.

Supporting Voting Rights Improve Public Safety

Research suggests that re-enfranchisement can facilitate successful re-entry and reduce recidivism. University of Minnesota's Christopher Uggen and New York University's Jeff Manza find that among people with a prior arrest, there are "consistent differences between voters and non-voters in rates of subsequent arrest, incarceration, and self-reported criminal behavior."⁹ Having a say and a stake in the life and well being of your community is at the heart of democracy. By ending disenfranchisement as a collateral consequence of a conviction, Minnesota can improve public safety.

Minnesota Can Remove This Stain on Its Democracy

Minnesota can and should look to implement reforms that reinstate voting rights for those affected by the

criminal legal system. Eighteen states now extend the right to vote for people as soon as they leave prison. Maine and Vermont have never taken away the right to vote for people in prison and DC recently reinstated it.

The expansion of voting rights and democratic engagement should garner bipartisan support. A 2020 survey conducted by the *Marshall Project* and *Slate* found that a plurality of white people in prison supported Donald Trump. While data on the party affiliations of people in prison is limited, such evidence undercuts claims that restoring the vote will universally benefit a single political party.¹⁰

Expanding the franchise to people affected by the criminal legal system would build on Minnesota's recent reforms. In 2008, Minnesota became one of just a handful of states to include racial impact statements for proposed sentencing policies, which has helped lawmakers vet bills for potentially racially disparate effects.¹¹ Lawmakers should continue their work to address longstanding racial disparities by guaranteeing voting rights for all.

Endnotes

1. MN Const. art. VII, § 1.; Your Voice Your Vote Minnesota. [Historic Roots of Felony Disenfranchisement](#).
2. Chris Uggen, Ryan Larson, Sarah Shannon, and Arleth Pulido-Nava. 2020. [Locked Out 2020: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights Due to a Felony Conviction](#). Washington: Sentencing Project.
3. Laura M. Maruschak and Todd D. Minton. 2020. ["Correctional Populations in the United States, 2017-2018."](#) Washington: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
4. Chris Uggen, et al. 2020.
5. Ashley Nellis. 2016. ["The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in State Prisons."](#) Washington: Sentencing Project.
6. U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. [Quickfacts: Minnesota](#).; Minnesota Department of Corrections. 2020. ["Adult Prison Population Summary."](#)
7. Minnesota Department of Corrections. 2019. ["Annual Report: Minnesota Statewide & Supervised Release Outcomes."](#)
8. Ryan D. King and Brian D. Johnson. 2016. ["A Punishing Look: Skin Tone and Afrocentric Features in the Halls of Justice."](#) *American Journal of Sociology*, 122(1), 90-124.
9. Christopher Uggen and Jeff Manza. 2004. "Voting and Subsequent Crime and Arrest: Evidence from a Community Sample." *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 36(1), 193-216.
10. Nicole Lewis, Aviva Shen and Anna Flagg. (2020, March 13). [What Do We Really Know About the Politics of People Behind Bars?](#) *The Marshall Project*.
11. Marc Mauer. 2009. ["Racial Impact Statements: Changing Policies to Address Disparities."](#) *Criminal Justice*, 23(4), 16-21.