

FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT RATES FOR WOMEN

In recent years there have been a growing number of studies examining the impact of laws in 48 states and the District of Columbia that deny voting rights to persons convicted of a felony offense. In 48 states and the District of Columbia, prisoners are not eligible to vote; in 33 of these states, persons on probation and/or parole are also ineligible to vote, and in 14 of these states a felony conviction can result in loss of voting rights for life.

The most sophisticated examination of disenfranchisement rates provides an estimate of 4.7 million Americans who are unable to vote as a result of a current or previous felony conviction.¹ While this study and others provide breakdowns of disenfranchised persons by race or ethnicity, no studies to date have estimated the number of women affected by these policies. This briefing paper analyzes existing data to produce estimates of these rates.

Nationally, our analysis finds that an estimated 676,730 women are currently ineligible to vote as a result of felony disenfranchisement laws. This represents 0.63% of the women's voting age population. While this study only analyzes national data based on other studies, we can expect that the rate of disenfranchisement in the most restrictive states will be considerably higher than this average.

We also find that given the disproportionate rate at which African American women are under supervision in the criminal justice system, their rate of disenfranchisement is considerably higher. An estimated 245,925 African American women cannot vote, a rate of 1.92%, or one of every fifty black women. This rate of disenfranchisement is three times the national average for women. But since the national average also includes black women, we can develop a more appropriate analysis by comparing disenfranchisement rates between black women and non-black women; this results in a disparity ratio of 4.3 (1.92/.45). Because of inadequate data on corrections populations nationally, we are not able to provide estimates of disenfranchisement rates for Latinas or other racial/ethnic groups.

Female Felony Disenfranchisement (2000)

Category	Total Population Disenfranchised	Female Population	African-American Female Population	Non African-American Female Population
<i>Prison</i>	1,209,243	79,810	41,743	38,067
<i>Probation</i>	1,320,684	290,550	95,308	195,243
<i>Parole</i>	444,405	53,329	23,916	29,412
<i>Jail</i>	57,710	6,521	2,962	3,559
<i>Ex-Felon</i>	1,654,497	246,520	81,996	164,524
Total	4,686,539	676,730	245,925	430,805
<i>Total US Voting Age Population</i>		108,133,727	12,839,485	95,294,242
Disenfranchisement %		0.63	1.92	0.45

¹ Christopher Uggen and Jeff Manza, "Democratic Contraction? Political Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States," *American Sociological Review*, 2002, Vol. 67.

While men represent the overwhelming majority of persons in the criminal justice system, the number and proportion of women in the system has been increasing at nearly double the rate for men over the past two decades. The number of women in state and federal prisons rose by 680% from 12,300 in 1980 to 92,000 in 2002, and the number of women in jail and on probation or parole also continues to grow at an increasing rate, approaching one million women under correctional supervision. If these trends continue, the disenfranchisement impact will play an increasingly significant role in women's political participation in coming years.

Methodology: Our analysis begins with the national level data on disenfranchisement as developed by Uggen and Manza, broken down by categories of criminal justice supervision. Within each category, we apply data for the year 2000 from the Bureau of Justice Statistics on the proportion of women within that corrections population group in order to estimate the number of women affected by disenfranchisement policies. These are as follows: prison -- 6.6% (2000); probation -- 22% (2000); parole -- 12% (2000); jail -- 11.3% (2000). Among persons in jail, only those serving a sentence for a felony conviction are disenfranchised. To estimate the number of disenfranchised women among the ex-felon population, we use a figure of 14.9% as an estimate for the women's proportion of all felony convictions. This figure represents an average of rates taken from BJS reports on felony sentencing for the years 1988-2000. To estimate the numbers of African American women among the population of disenfranchised women, we apply the BJS rates for women in each category to the total numbers for African Americans as developed by Uggen and Manza. Since there is no breakdown of correctional populations by race and gender combined, we use the overall distribution proportions for women in this regard. To calculate disenfranchisement rates, we use Census Bureau population estimates for 2000. For these various reasons, these overall rates should be treated as estimates of the disenfranchised population.

The Sentencing Project is a national non-profit organization engaged in research and advocacy on criminal justice reform, and is a member of *Right to Vote*, a national campaign working to remove barriers to voting for people with felony convictions.