

DISENFRANCHISED VETERANS IN THE UNITED STATES

An estimated 4.6 million Americans are currently unable to vote as a result of laws that disenfranchise persons with a felony conviction.¹ These laws vary widely by state, but encompass general categories of felons in prison or jail, on probation or parole, and in 12 states, persons who have completed their sentence but are still subject to disenfranchisement.

Military veterans who have subsequently been convicted of a felony constitute a significant portion of the disenfranchised population. This briefing paper analyzes the available data and finds that an estimated 585,355 veterans are unable to vote as a result of a felony conviction. Approximately one of every eight disenfranchised persons is a veteran. The breakdown of data for disenfranchised veterans in various criminal justice categories is seen below.

DISENFRANCHISED VETERANS

Prison	151,155
Jail	6,752
Probation	165,085
Parole	55,551
Ex-Felons	206,812
Total	585,355

These estimates were developed using the following data: 1) Total disenfranchised population and breakdown by category from the Uggen/Manza research; 2) The veterans' proportion of disenfranchised persons is derived from an estimate that veterans constitute 12.5% of offenders in state prison, based on the 1997 inmate survey (most recent data available) conducted by the Department of Justice; similarly, an estimate of veterans constituting 11.7% of jail inmates is also taken from the Department of Justice; 3) For estimates of the veterans' proportion of persons on probation and parole, we have used the 12.5% figure for prison inmates (by definition all persons on parole were previously in prison, and there are no separate veterans' estimates for probation populations). Overall, the estimates for ex-felons are likely to be conservative since the proportion of veterans among the state prison population (and therefore, among former felons as well) has been declining in recent years. Data from the Department of Justice indicate that this rate has declined from 20.2% in 1986 to 12.5% by 1997. Should this rate have continued to decline since 1997, then the estimates for other categories of offenders would be on the high side.

More than a half million military veterans are unable to participate in the electoral process due to felony disenfranchisement laws. These figures suggest that policymakers should engage in a reconsideration of the wisdom of such laws and their function in a democratic society.

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