



## **Homelessness and Felons: A Layered Issue**

By Preston Saunders

Eight percent of the US population are convicted felons, nearly 27 million people, with African American men making up 33% of that total. However, not all of them are guilty, and of those that are, many find that the title of felon is a far worse punishment than they deserve for their crime. Not only does a felony limit job opportunities and lead to poverty or homelessness, but a felony conviction is a major tool of disenfranchisement and disproportionately destroys the livelihood of minorities in America.

With around 2 million African Americans currently disenfranchised, as well as 13% of African American men excluded from voting due to felony convictions, the judicial process that determines the standard for felony conviction is broken and biased. Our understanding of a felony typically involves burglary or arson, but it can also include more minor offenses such as threatening someone, injuring a racehorse, or being in possession of any amount of marijuana. Between 2001 and 2010, there have been 8.2 million arrests for marijuana, with black people and especially young black men being 3.73 times more likely to be convicted than white people or

other groups. This leads to higher rates of social exclusion in black communities and larger homeless populations in those areas due to criminal records preventing them from getting reliable work.

Re-registering for voting rights in states like California is simply an application process, but in the 11 most extreme states like Mississippi, felons must obtain rare permissions via executive order from the governor or have a bill passed in the legislature with a two-thirds majority. It is otherwise illegal to vote, even after probation or parole. Many states don't allow for any form of re-registration, and most deny the right to sit on a jury as well. In 1974, the case of Richardson vs. Ramirez failed to give felons equal voting protections under the Constitution. Even though states determine their laws for felons independently, many feel that blocking voting rights is a major transgression of American democracy, as even if citizens are convicted of a crime, that does not make them less of an American or undeserving of a voice in politics. The US has a long history of excluding minorities from the vote, from literacy tests at polls in the 1950's up to today, where minorities with higher wrongful conviction rates than other populations are blocked from voting for years on end. Nearly 6.1 million Americans were unable to vote due to felony convictions in 2016, and the number will likely be higher in 2020.

Thus, it is also increasingly difficult for felons to find work and housing after being released from prison. Not only are the conditions under which they can work in public industries strictly controlled, but their employment in private businesses is also monitored under exclusionary employment laws and licensing requirements. Felons and ex-felons sometimes suffer from addiction and mental health problems from their time in prison, and even if they do not, are stereotyped as so by employers and recruiters. This limits their ability to find work and forces them to rely on friends and family for food and shelter. Some return to prison out of necessity, as meals and other benefits like healthcare are more easily accessible. This costs taxpayers thousands when providing them access to decent jobs would alleviate financial

burdens on both sides. Post-release, two-thirds of offenders remain unemployed and without stable housing for three or more years. Of course, precautions are good when hiring an ex-felon, as they are with any prospective employee, but current exclusionary laws cover the job market broadly instead of restricting areas based on a person's previous convictions. The refusal to take into account maturity, time passed since an offense, and overall qualification is counterintuitive, and even reformed, model citizens experience discrimination because of their prison history. Social exclusion via voting rights, wrongful convictions or assumptions based on profiling, and income inequality due to job unavailability all equally contribute to the issue of disenfranchisement and the large homeless felon population in the United States.

#### *References*

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