

On behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a 50-year-old organization dedicated to supporting communities living in the deep south of the United States, this intervention seeks to highlight the denial of rights to individuals convicted of a crime. One of the SPLC's main areas of focus has been on the issue of felony disenfranchisement – a policy and practice that denies voting rights to people who have been convicted of a crime. Oftentimes, the loss of voting rights exceeds the actual term of imprisonment or other sentence the person received for the related offense. The result is that many adults who have not committed an infraction in years are still nevertheless completely barred from voting and from having a political voice in the governing structure that impacts their daily lives. For numerous individuals, a conviction means they are unable to find employment or earn a livable wage; they cannot afford adequate, if any, healthcare; their children are stigmatized because of their parents' status; and their communities suffer due to the cycle of poverty.

It's important to emphasize the racial inequities that are caused by the practice of felony disenfranchisement. In the United States, for example, approximately 2.2 million Black citizens have been banned from voting, and thirty-eight (38) percent of the disenfranchised population in the country is Black. African Americans constitute only fourteen (14) percent of the country's population. Policies of felony disenfranchisement have resulted in the denial of voting rights to some communities more than others, causing much greater harm to those affected.

For those states seeking to strengthen their democratic practice, allowing individuals who have suffered harm from flawed policies and institutional disparities to exercise the power of the vote is an obvious step to take. Unfortunately, today in many countries felony disenfranchisement laws enable such harms to continue because those whose rights are being denied are shut out of the democratic governance of the country. Moreover, the requirement in some nations that individuals pay financial debts before being allowed to vote further perpetuates the permanent denial of voting rights to people who are poor.

The Southern Poverty Law Center calls on member states participating in the UN Forum on Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law to recognize felony disenfranchisement as a serious threat to democracy and to undertake the greatest efforts towards dismantling such laws.