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The Long Shadow of the Jailhouse: Leading Journal Tracks Black Disenfranchisement

More African Americans are in prison today than at any time in American history, and their punishment does not end with their prison terms, according to new research in *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*.

Volume 8, Number 2, of *Souls* titled “**Racializing Justice, Disenfranchising Lives**” shows that the impact of the justice system reaches far outside the prison walls, keeping Black ex-convicts from voting and from effectively rejoining society.

“The punishment does not end when a prisoner hears the doors clang shut for the last time and returns home a ‘free’ man,” says **Keesha M. Middlemass**, a political scientist at Rutgers University-Newark, in her introduction to the special issue. “Rather, the collateral consequences of a felony conviction have devastating effects on individuals, families, community, and society.”

Chief among the limits are laws that forbid ex-convicts from voting. While such laws are race-neutral on their face, Middlemass shows how they disenfranchise minorities in far greater numbers than whites. In this special issue, she and the other contributors explore the growth of the minority prison population and the laws that affect ex-convicts when they are freed:

- The American prison population has increased five-fold in the last three decades and now leads all nations of the world in the number of people incarcerated.
- In California, youth of color are more than eight times more likely to be incarcerated than are white youth.
- Forty-eight states place limitations on former felons’ right to vote. The only two states that allow prisoners to vote while incarcerated are Vermont and Maine.
- Barriers to regaining voting rights can be high, including the requirement to obtain a pardon from the governor in eight states.

“America is fast becoming a police state in which individuals are tagged with a felony label and their access to society is regulated and controlled,” says Middlemass.

According to the latest Justice Department statistics, more than two million people are incarcerated, seven million people are under correctional supervision, and thirteen million adults have been convicted of a felony in the U.S. today. Forty-seven million Americans have some type of criminal record

There is some hope for improvement, says Middlemass. In the last decade, 11 states have passed laws scaling back provisions that disenfranchise former felons. She and her fellow contributors present arguments in favor of further changes in these laws:

- Felony disenfranchisement laws has not been shown to deter future crimes
- Once released from prison, felons should not be considered a threat to the electoral process when they are no longer considered a threat to society
- Around the world, the practice of forbidding prisoners from voting is not the norm
- Former convicts who vote are less likely to be arrested again than are former convicts who do not vote.

“Current policies are inflicting huge costs upon society, yet there seems to be no clear policy goal or objective of imprisoning so many people, except one – to lock up and continually imprison men of color,” says Middlemass. “Instead of allowing those who are branded with a felony conviction to toil at the edges of society, as throw-away citizens, America can re-tool her criminal justice system and dependence on imprisonment to cure society’s ills.”

Published by Routledge, *Souls* is a quarterly interdisciplinary journal that maps the intellectual contours of the contemporary Black experience. Each issue contains articles, symposia, interviews, and book reviews by scholars, writers, and political leaders in the Black community.

Subscription information for *Souls* or a sample copy of “**Racializing Justice, Disenfranchising Lives**” (Volume 8, Number 2) can be obtained from the address below.

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**Racializing Justice, Disenfranchising Lives
Volume 8, Number 2**

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