

OPINION



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Ending Lifetime Sentences on Voting Rights

An unduly punitive law made right

BY MARC H. MORIAL

A wrong has been made right in the state of Maryland.

In a long overdue reversal led by the state's legislature, ex-offenders in Maryland—citizens who have done the proscribed time for their crime—will automatically regain the right to vote once they have been released from jail.

Prior to this vote, Maryland required all individuals with past felony convictions to complete all terms of their probation and parole before their access to the polls could be restored through what many described as a lengthy and confusing process.

The previous policy—which disproportionately impacted communities of color—was unduly punitive; delaying and denying

men and women who paid their debt to society and completed their prison sentences the quintessential right of any citizen who lives in a democracy. Such tactics of voter disenfranchisement must not be tolerated or become an acceptable policy option in a nation that professes to be governed by democratic tenets.

Once the Maryland bill becomes law, an estimated 40,000 men and women currently on felony probation or parole will have their right to vote restored—many of them in time to vote for their local and national leaders, including our nation's new president.

While there is much to applaud, we must recognize that this victory is a drop in the proverbial bucket. Today, in the United States of America, almost six million citizens are effectively locked out of the democratic process because of laws that disenfranchise citizens convicted of felony offenses.

Maryland now joins 13 other states, plus the District of Co-

lumbia, in immediately restoring the voting rights of ex-offenders upon their release. There are nine states that permanently bar certain ex-offenders from voting at all. Two states, Maine and Vermont, do not restrict voting rights to any citizen with a criminal conviction, even those still in prison, but this is a battle that must continue to be fought around our nation.

Among other benefits, voting promotes public safety. When we allow citizens to fully re-integrate back into society the transition must include more than securing employment or housing. While those pursuits and others are important, civic engagement can establish a vested interest in the well being of the communities where ex-offenders make their homes, work and pay taxes.

Because of the enduring tangle of race and the criminal justice in our nation, the majority of convicted felons disproportionately come from racial and ethnic communities, effectively disenfranchising not only individuals but entire communities. The res-

toration movement is therefore a movement to confront racial discrimination in the criminal justice system. Throughout our nation, nearly one in 13 African-American adults is banned from voting because of these laws. And it should come as no surprise that the states that have the harshest policies just happen to be those states with legacies of slavery, segregation, discrimination, voter suppression and the denial of the right to vote. Felon disenfranchisement is a tactic to suppress the vote, as much as voter id laws and it must be stopped.

America should not be in the business of denying individuals the right the vote. We are a stronger and truer democracy when we offer all citizens this fundamental right. Denying an ex-offender the right to vote serves no real purpose other than to undermine the democratic principles on which our nation is founded.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.



Every Young Black Kid Gets 'the Talk' on Racial Profiling

'I AM KALIEF BROWDER'
BY BRANDEN MILES

The day before I started high school, my father took me up to the park around the corner from our house to have "the talk."

It's the talk black families had when Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in Florida. It's the talk we had when Michael Brown was shot and killed in Missouri. It's the talk we had when Tamir Rice was shot and killed in Ohio. And it's the talk we had when Sandra Bland was found dead in a jail cell following a traffic stop in Texas.

If you're a black teen, it's a talk about how to survive.

My dad made sure I understood that I was going to be profiled—even put in danger of harm or arrest—simply because of the color of my skin.

I didn't have to wait long to experience this harsh reality firsthand. When I was 16, my friends and I walked through a popular entertainment store in Cambridge, Mass. to meet up with some of our classmates.

A security guard at the door stopped us.

He looked at each of us, and then asked us to empty our back-

packs. Confused, we protested that we hadn't touched anything—and we hadn't. But the image of three young black guys passing through a store with backpacks was enough to make the security guard suspicious. It felt like he was presuming our guilt.

My friends and I were lucky enough to be released with-

out charge. However, on any given day, over 50,000 young people are detained in state and local prisons nationwide. Although young black people are just 17 percent of the nation's juvenile population, we account for 31 percent of all juvenile arrests.

He was just 22. President Barack Obama mentioned Browder recently, when he issued an executive order banning juvenile solitary confinement in federal prisons. That was a welcome step, though it leaves the much greater number of young people locked up in state and local prisons without the same protection.

The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, on the other hand, does offer some relief to incarcerated youth at the state level. The ruling upheld a previous decision that mandatory life sentences without parole for people under 18 were unconstitutional. Moreover, it worked retroactively, requiring that anyone who'd received the sentence when they were still underage must have the opportunity to argue for their release.

These two decisions reflect positive steps towards criminal justice reform, but they're only helpful to young people who've already been arrested and locked up. That's not enough. Every level of our legal system must be examined not only for inhumane detention practices and police brutality, but also racial profiling.

I didn't know Kalief Browder, but I do know that the criminal justice system sees me the same way it saw him. That's because we share three traits that presume our guilt: Being young, black, and male.

It's time to change that. Because I don't want to have to give "the talk" to my own child.

Branden Miles interns on the *Criminalization of Poverty Project* at the Institute for Policy Studies. Distributed by OtherWords.org.



Browder's torture was so severe that he took his own life shortly after his release in 2013. He was just 22.

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