

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/on-independence-day-whose-freedom-do-we-celebrate>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Independence Day is a celebration of freedom. A day filled with barbecues, fireworks, and red, white, and blue. But the reality is more grim, because not everyone in this country shares the independence we commemorate on this day.

In 1852, Frederick Douglass [delivered an address](#) in which he asked:

Sadly, 245 years after the United States declared its independence, freedom remains inaccessible for many Black and brown people, including immigrants, in this country. This injusticethe facade of freedom for allpervades [our history](#), from the displacement and persecution of Indigenous people, to slavery, to Reconstruction Era laws that effectively continued to enslave Black people, to mass incarceration today. The Declaration of Independence was written by and for white men, actively excluding Black people, Indigenous people, women, and others. This nations founding fathers deprived others of the rights they bestowed on themselves.

The United States still restricts the freedom of millions. Today, nearly two million people are incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails, and thousands of immigrants are detained awaiting deportation. Black and brown people are disproportionately harmed by this overreach. They are far more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, convicted, harshly sentenced, and saddled with lifelong conviction records than white people. Black and Latinx people make up roughly [32 percent](#) of the U.S. population, but represent [56 percent](#) of the incarcerated population.

Its not only people who are incarcerated in brick-and-mortar jails and prisons who arent free. A staggering [10.5 million arrests each year](#) trap people [experiencing poverty and homelessness](#), people with [substance use and mental health conditions](#), people who cross the border seeking refuge, and others in criminal legal and immigration systems designed to punish them. [More than 70 million people](#) (one in three adults) have conviction histories, some for things as petty as loitering and disorderly conduct. Probation and parole [upend the lives of 4.5 million people nationwide](#), imposing restrictions that make it harder for people to find and keep jobs, go to school, or access services they need to thrive. People who dont meet the [burdensome requirements of supervision](#) can find themselves reincarcerated for something as minor as failing to report a new address.

This entanglement with the criminal legal system impacts every aspect of peoples lives. People with conviction histories have a harder time getting jobs due to legal barriers and outright discrimination, resulting in a lifetime of lower wages that serve as a [perpetual drag on the earning potential of tens of millions of Americans](#). They also face obstacles securing housing, loans, public assistance, and [even drivers licenses](#). In all but two states and the District of Columbia, [people who are incarcerated lose the right to vote](#), and in several states, they lose this right even after release.

This burdensome system has ravaged the lives of millions, stripping them of the ability to live freely while [failing to make our communities any safer](#). In 1852, Douglass said that more still needed to be done so that all citizens can enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In 2021, the millions who are incarcerated, detained, or live with conviction historiesdisproportionately people of colorhave not been able to realize the freedom this country celebrates in name. Its time to change that.

NEWS

NEWS

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.