

Iowa still near top for locking up blacks, study says

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Iowa once again ranks among the worst states for locking up disproportionate numbers of African-Americans, with blacks imprisoned at 11 times the rate of whites, a recent study shows.

The study, released this week by Washington, D.C.-based [The Sentencing Project](#), gave Iowa low marks in multiple measurements for incarcerating large shares of blacks compared with whites.

But the state's rankings improved enough to drop it out of the No. 1 spot it occupied in 2007, when Iowa incarcerated black people at 13 times the rate of white people. At the time, it was the highest rate in the nation.

"We are glad to see a drop in the incarceration disparity," said Betty Andrews, president of Iowa-Nebraska NAACP, adding that the slight decrease is evidence of Iowa's hard work responding to the "embarrassing" ranking in 2007.

But Andrews and other local advocates say there is still a lot of work to do.

"We should be one of the lowest states" in the study's rankings, state legislator Ako Abdul-Samad said.

Although only 3.1 percent of Iowa's population is African-American, 25.8 percent of the state's prison inmates are black, according to 2014 statistics in The Sentencing Project's study.

"That's criminal in itself," Abdul-Samad said.

According to this year's study, Iowa ranks third for disproportionately locking up African-Americans, with blacks 11.1 times more likely to be incarcerated than whites, based on the state's population.

Iowa also has the country's fourth-highest incarceration rate for blacks, according to this year's study, with 2,349 of every 100,000 black residents incarcerated, compared with 211 per 100,000 whites and 361 per 100,000 Hispanics.

When Andrews saw Iowa's poor showing in the 2007 Sentencing Project study, she pushed for a committee of the Iowa-Nebraska NAACP dedicated to criminal justice reform, she said.

Similarly, the NAACP and other groups have worked with the governor's office, law enforcement officials and other local and state leaders to raise awareness through different initiatives, Andrews said. The NAACP also has worked to provide training to law enforcement and judiciary officials across the state, she said.

Andrews pointed out that this year's study shows slight improvement across the U.S. For example, the study shows the state with the highest incarceration disparity, New Jersey, sees black people incarcerated 12 times the rate of white people, which is lower than Iowa's rate in 2007.

"No state is as high as Iowa once was," she said.

Still, advocates say there is more work to be done. And one place to look is [likely the state's mandatory minimum sentencing laws](#), officials have said.

In a 2013 report, members of Iowa's Public Safety Advisory Board wrote that reducing the racial disparity "in Iowa's prison system will be extremely difficult, absent some modifications" of mandatory minimum sentences.

For three straight years, the Public Safety Advisory Board has recommended that the Iowa Legislature ease minimum sentencing mandates for first- and second-degree robbery.

A Des Moines Register [review in April](#) showed that Iowa had the most restrictive sentencing guidelines among 11 Midwestern states for robbery charges, and, during a four-decade period, 42 percent of Iowa inmates serving prison time for robbery were black.

Abdul-Samad said Iowa should also address the problem through education, offering more resources to help boost [graduation rates among black students](#), who drop out of high school at a disproportionate rate compared with white students.

"We have to begin to deal with systemic change" to reduce Iowa's incarceration rates, he said.

Abdul-Samad said he believes Iowa can improve its racial disparity in prisons if the problem is approached several ways.

"It's something that we can change," he said. "It's doable for us to reverse this trend."

<https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/crime-and-courts/2016/06/15/iowa-still-near-top-locking-up-blacks-study-says/85936006/>

