Alabama's parole system is still broken. How can we fix it?

By Dev Wakeley, worker policy advocate | January 2025

Overview

Alabama's parole system has fallen far short of even its own standards for success over the last five years. These failures have worsened the shortcomings in our criminal justice system. Alabama's three-member parole board granted parole in only 26% of cases in 2024, even though its own guidelines recommended parole in 81%.

Alabama has the lowest parole approval rate of all 50 states, analysis of 2022 data shows. This low rate is accompanied by one of the highest incarceration rates in the country.

Keeping people imprisoned against release guidelines contributes to overcrowding and violence in prisons, as the opportunity for parole is an important incentive for good behavior. And these conditions are why Alabama is facing a lawsuit from the U.S. Department of Justice for failure to protect people the state incarcerates.

How lawmakers can help

Fixing the parole system won't be easy, but Alabama lawmakers have several reasonable solutions available to improve it.

- **HB 40**, sponsored by Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, would allow appeals of parole board decisions to circuit court. This would help remedy the board's stubborn refusal to follow its guidelines.

- Alabama doesn't allow people to attend their own parole hearings. That needs to change. People deserve to be present at the proceedings that determine whether they will remain imprisoned.

- Our state needs to address the significant racial disparities in its parole system. Black men were 25% less likely to be granted parole than white men in 2023.

Bottom line

Alabama's parole system needs to follow its own rules. We need to eliminate racial disparities and increase parole board oversight, and we need to ensure people can attend their own parole hearings. These changes would be an important step to improve our state's criminal justice system and build a more just Alabama.

Former Arise senior policy analyst Mike Nicholson contributed to this fact sheet.