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Governor Signs Landmark Legislation Advancing Racial Justice in California

A historic, first-of-its-kind law in the State, the California Racial Justice Act prohibits the use of race, ethnicity, or national origin in sentencing and convictions

SACRAMENTO – The Governor today signed the historic California Racial Justice Act, also known as Assembly Bill 2542 (AB 2542), which asserts civil rights in the California court system and addresses racial discrimination that leads to unfair convictions and sentencing.

“I am grateful to Governor Newsom for signing AB 2542 and his commitment to rooting out racism from our courts,” said **Assemblymember Kalra** (D-San Jose), lead author of AB 2542. “With the signing of this bill and other actions he has taken, the Governor has well established himself as a national leader on compassionate, thoughtful criminal justice reform.”

“Although there is still much more work to do in fixing our broken criminal justice system, the Racial Justice Act is a historic foundational step in upholding Constitutional protections for everyone and moving us closer to a system that truly reflects justice for all,” he added. “The Racial Justice Act puts into law a manifestation of a continuing struggle most recently represented by millions in the streets demanding racial justice.”

The Racial Justice Act, joint-authored by Assemblymembers Sydney Kamlager (D-Los Angeles), Robert Rivas (D-Hollister), and Miguel Santiago (D-Los Angeles), is the first law of its kind in California that prohibits the state from using:

- Explicit bias against a defendant based on race, ethnicity, or national origin
- Statistical disparities in charging, sentencing, and conviction
- Bias at trial and in jury selection

Systemic racial disparities are pervasive in mass incarceration in California, where [Black men are over eight times](#) more likely to be incarcerated than white men. Nearly a hundred advocacy organizations across the state have urged support for the landmark bill to address systemic racism in the court system.

“The Racial Justice Act is a step toward addressing the deep-rooted racism in our courts and in healing for communities plagued by harmful policies and overrepresented in our prisons and courts,” said **Fatimeh Khan**, California Healing Justice Program Co-Director of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). “In its 70 years working on criminal legal issues in California, the AFSC has witnessed the entrenchment of racist policies that have devastated Black and Brown communities. We thank Governor Newsom for signing such a powerful piece of legislation.”

“Southeast Asians, Pacific Islanders, and other people of color are adversely affected by our court system, which intentionally and unintentionally further criminalizes people based on race and immigration status,” said **Liza Chu**, California Policy Manager at Asian Americans Advancing Justice - California. “Amidst the upheaval of 2020, we thank Governor Newsom for enacting the Racial Justice Act to prioritize fairness and equal treatment under the law.”

“Governor Gavin Newsom, by signing AB 2542 you are moving California toward a more equitable and fair judicial process for black people,” said **Romarilyn Ralston**, a formerly incarcerated organizer and advocate with the California Coalition for Women Prisoners. “We are grateful for Governor Newsom’s leadership in this bold step toward ending discriminatory and racially biased practices in our courts. AB 2542 is an unprecedented piece of legislation and long overdue in correcting a historically anti-black legal-punishment system.”

“We are thankful that Governor Newsom signed the Racial Justice Act and are proud of our state for taking a first step at confronting the racist roots of the criminal legal system,” said **Amber-Rose Howard**, Executive Director of Californians United for a Responsible Budget. “Far too many Black families have been torn apart due to systemic racism and it is time that we address that trauma in our courts. I look forward to our state moving forward in centering racial justice as we continue to address our role in the incarceration crisis.”

“When we confront the pandemics that divide us, we step boldly on the necessary path towards healing,” said **Derick Morgan**, Policy Associate with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. “Ella Baker Center stands proudly with Governor Gavin Newsom, our state Legislature, and the athletes, students and advocates in meeting this moment to confront racism and systemic bias in our systems of justice.”

“We are deeply grateful that Governor Newsom has signed this historic legislation to confront racism in California’s courts,” said **Dora Rose**, Deputy Director of the League of Women Voters of California, “The bottom line is that we can’t keep having trials with all white juries. We can’t continue to allow racially coded language that triggers bias in the courtroom. And we must stop the systemically disproportionate arrest and sentencing that is tearing up our Black communities. The Racial Justice Act will help us accomplish those ends.”

“I am extremely grateful to the Governor for signing the California Racial Justice Act because, despite recent reforms, California’s racial disparities in convictions and sentences are among the nation’s worst,” said **Ken Spence**, Senior Policy Advisor for NextGen California. “By establishing a framework for defendants to challenge the systemic racism and bias in our criminal courts, I am hopeful that the RJA will push our justice system to more closely live up to its ideals.”

“The over 140,000 home care and child care providers represented by UDW are mostly women and people of color and our families have for too long been harmed by a justice system that purports to be blind but in practice judges us primarily on the color of our skin,” said **Doug Moore**, Executive Director of UDW/AFSCME 3930. “By passing AB 2542, California has recognized this harm and taken a meaningful step toward ending it. On behalf of our membership, I want to thank Governor Newsom for signing AB 2542 and moving toward a justice system that treats all Californians as equals.”

The principal coauthors of AB 2542 are Assemblymember Kevin McCarty (D-Sacramento) and Senators Steve Bradford (D-Gardena), Lena Gonzalez (D- Long Beach), and Holly Mitchell (D-Los Angeles). The bill is also coauthored by Assemblymembers Rob Bonta (D-Oakland), Kansen Chu (D-Milpitas), Laura Friedman (D-Glendale), Lorena Gonzalez (D-San Diego), Marc Levine (D-Marin County), Mark Stone (D-Monterey Bay), Phil Ting (D-San Francisco), and Dr. Shirley Weber (D-San Diego) and Senators María Elena Durazo (D-Los Angeles) and Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco).

AB 2542 is sponsored by American Friends Service Committee, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Californians United for a Responsible Budget, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, the League of Women Voters of California, NextGen, and United Domestic Workers, AFSCME, Local 3930.

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Full text of the bill [here](#).