



I  
Voted

# From the Block to the Ballot

Exploring Best Practices  
in Mobilizing Formerly  
Disenfranchised Voters  
in Minnesota



MINNESOTA JUSTICE  
RESEARCH CENTER

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# Executive Summary

Research shows that people with criminal histories are less likely to be involved in the political process ([Morris, 2021](#)). This is the case for myriad reasons including the historic and continued disenfranchisement of system-involved individuals. In the fall of 2022, the Minnesota Justice Research Center, in partnership with several community-based organizations and individuals, embarked on a pilot voter outreach initiative and research project that we called “From the Block to the Ballot.” We sought to explore best practices to educate and mobilize formerly disenfranchised eligible voters (at the time, an estimated 85,600 Minnesotans who had been disenfranchised because of a felony conviction at some point since 2004).

Our primary goals were to 1) evaluate the feasibility of linking administrative and consumer data to accurately identify and reach formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans and 2) explore how to best reach formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans. In addition, we explored whether different modes of

contact—phone calls versus text message—would increase the likelihood of voting among our sample compared to a control group.

Over the course of the four-week pilot effort, we engaged 73 volunteers to support voter outreach. These volunteers were a mix of legal system actors, formerly incarcerated community members, and concerned citizens.

We began with an estimated 85,614 Minnesotans who had been disenfranchised because of a felony conviction at some point since 2004. Of these, we were able to access contact data for about half (54%,  $n=46,516$ ). Our final analytic sample was around 30,000 people (including those we called/texted and the control group). The majority of those in our analytic sample were white, around 45 years old, and living in rural Minnesota. The vast majority

were relatively new voters: nearly 80% of those registered to vote were first registered in 2018 or later.

Our treatment group consisted of 9,440 contacted by phone and 3,319 by text. We reached, with certainty, around 1,000 (about 10%) formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans via phone. Thus, the pilot highlighted significant limitations in contact data quality: around 85% of volunteers' phone calls ended in disconnected numbers, non-pickups, or voicemail. Despite this, the pilot was a powerful lesson in what is possible with a small budget and short timeframe: we found a slight positive effect on 2022 voter turnout for those who we reached with certainty via phone call (13% voted) and via phone with an additional text reminder (14% voted) when compared to a control group (12% voted).

Shortly after our pilot in the spring of 2023, a coalition of nearly 100 organizations and many more individuals built from decades of organizing and legislation efforts to pass a bill to restore voting rights to Minnesotans on felony probation. As of June 1, 2023, roughly 55,000 more Minnesotans now have their voting rights restored; the work to engage these individuals will be significant.

This pilot provided initial insights into: 1) the importance of data quality and documentation systems to contact and engage formerly disenfranchised voters, 2) the structural requirements for a voter engagement effort focused on formerly disenfranchised voters, and 3) the path to get there. We recommend that future efforts:

**1. Prioritize list quality.** Efforts to contact formerly disenfranchised voters must prioritize list quality when doing outreach and consider the unique needs of this population.

**2. Use rigorous and targeted documentation systems.** Consistent, streamlined, detailed, and clear documentation of the contact efforts and outcomes is critical to analyze best practices and explore the impact of different modes of contact on later voting behavior.

**3. Start small and focused.** Future efforts must invest both time and money to train volunteers or paid staff, identify folks with system-involvement and a desire to get engaged civically, and provide volunteers or paid staff with enough time and resources to make successful contact.

Formerly disenfranchised people represent a large population of potential Minnesota voters. These individuals have diverse experiences and perspectives, and they should be prioritized in voter outreach efforts. Disenfranchised voters are, first and foremost, community members who should have a voice in their government. They also have first-hand experience with the criminal legal system, and so they are uniquely positioned to assess and hold accountable those elected positions that impact the system directly: sheriffs, prosecutors, the attorney general, and judges. The next phases of this work are well-positioned to develop the infrastructure to reach this key, yet marginalized voter block and support a truly representative democracy.

# Introduction

The United States was founded on an important tenet of a representative democracy: “No taxation without representation.” Yet, taxation without representation is still very much alive in this country. Centuries after this rallying cry was first heard, millions of tax-paying Americans on correctional supervision are forbidden to vote.

The Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC), in partnership with several community-based organizations and individuals, embarked on a pilot voter outreach initiative and research project that we called “From the Block to the Ballot.” Our goal was to explore best practices to educate and mobilize formerly disenfranchised voters—those of our fellow Minnesotans barred from voting because of a criminal conviction.

The MNJRC is an organization dedicated to transforming the criminal legal system through research, education, and policy development. We connect all our research to action, gathering community members around a common cause. The MNJRC is made up of people with a wide range of knowledge and experience in the criminal legal system, including scholars, practitioners, students, survivors, and those who have served time in prison.



*In the United States, we disenfranchise people who have felony convictions—that is, we remove their right to vote—in three ways: 1) in prison 2) on probation or parole and 3) post-sentence*



## Voter Disenfranchisement

A total of 80 million Americans, equal to the combined population of California and Texas, did not participate in the 2020 presidential election. The reasons for the lack of participation are numerous, but include disinterest in politics, disinterest in the candidates, barriers to voting, and, importantly, disenfranchisement.

In the United States, we disenfranchise people who have felony convictions (that is, we remove their right to vote) in three ways ([Uggen et al., 2022](#)). First, every state except Maine, Vermont, and the District of Columbia disenfranchises people who are incarcerated in prison. Another 15 states (including Minnesota during the 2022 midterm election) disenfranchise people serving felony probation or parole. These citizens are no longer incarcerated, but their right to vote is

denied until they complete the terms of their felony probation, a process that can take more than a decade. Finally, 11 states disenfranchise not only people in prison and on probation or parole but also post-sentence.

In the fall of 2022, Dr. Chris Uggen, Dr. Robert Stewart, and colleagues released a report updating and expanding upon 20 years of work chronicling the scope and distribution of felony disenfranchisement in the United States ([Uggen et al., 2022](#)). Their estimates showed that an estimated 4.6 million Americans in 48 states are denied the right to vote due to a felony conviction (either they are currently incarcerated or on felony probation). Here in Minnesota, Uggen and colleagues estimated that more than 55,000 people were prohibited from voting.



**4.6M  
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*are denied the right to vote  
due to a felony conviction*

Of the total disenfranchised population in Minnesota in 2022, the vast majority (over 80%) were on felony probation or supervised release (i.e., commonly referred to as parole). That is, Minnesotans who had already served their incarceration time and were living in our communities, paying taxes, and using public services made up the majority of those Minnesotans denied the right to elect the leaders responsible for spending their tax dollars and governing public services.

The disenfranchisement of Minnesotans on felony probation has wide-reaching effects. The laws restricting the right to vote for Minnesotans with criminal histories are not well-understood, even among those they directly affect. Many Minnesotans with criminal histories who either never lost their right to vote or have completed their community supervision and are now eligible to vote (“formerly disenfranchised voters” in this report) believe they cannot. Indeed, research

shows criminal convictions and disenfranchisement are not the sole causes for low voter turnout among voters with criminal histories ([Burch, 2011](#)).

The impact of this misunderstanding multiplies the impact of disenfranchisement in the state, making it, to some degree, unmeasurable. As one study puts it, many currently eligible voters are “de facto disenfranchised”—that is, despite the restoration of their right to vote, they don’t exercise that right (Meredith & Morse, 2015). One reason is the fear of possible prosecution for voting while ineligible. Analyses of sentencing data in Minnesota from 2000 to 2019 show that voting while ineligible is quite rare: only 243 people in this period were convicted of voting while ineligible and 134 were convicted of registering to vote while ineligible ([Uggen et al., 2022](#)). Still, the penalty for either violation can be significant: One individual had served 9 years and 10 months of a 10-year probation sentence when he was charged with a new felony for voting. Such prosecutions can have a chilling effect on political participation among those unsure of their eligibility.

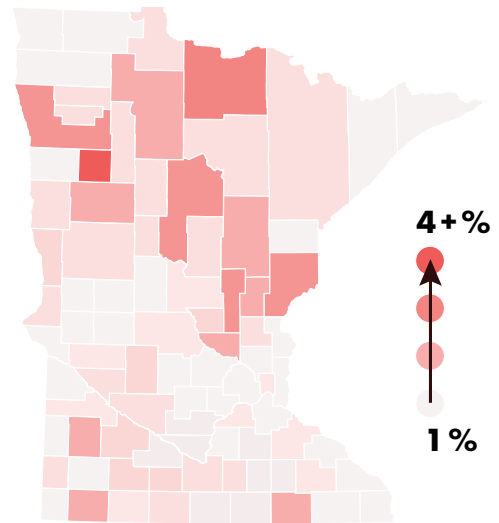
Felon disenfranchisement also disproportionately affects Black Minnesotans. In the original state constitution, Black people were protected from slavery, but denied the right to vote. Today, the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on Black communities has created a proportionately larger population of Black Minnesotans who have criminal histories. Black Minnesotans are 7% of the state’s population, but make up over 30% of the prison population. In 2022, 21% of the disenfranchised population (11,532 persons) was Black ([Uggen et al., 2022](#)).

And while disenfranchisement has a disproportionately negative impact in communities of color

and Native communities, the impact is felt in all communities, rural and urban. As Figure 1 demonstrates, disenfranchisement is widespread; counties in rural Minnesota have higher percentages of non-incarcerated disenfranchised residents and the county with the highest percent (Mahomen County) has a large Native Population and is the only county in Minnesota entirely within an Indian Reservation.

Importantly, research shows that formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans are not a left-leaning monolith; contrary to public perception, they are not overwhelmingly Democratic ([Burch, 2011](#)).

**Figure 1.** Total Non-incarcerated Disenfranchisement Rate, 2021



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A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair and glasses, smiling warmly as she hugs a young child with curly hair. The scene is bathed in a soft, reddish-pink light, creating a warm and intimate atmosphere. The woman's face is in profile, looking towards the child, and her smile is genuine. The child's head is tucked against her, and their hands are visible, holding her. The background is blurred, focusing attention on the subjects.

***The de jure and de facto disenfranchisement of those with criminal histories presents a challenge that needs both legislative and community-based efforts to shift voting participation.***

*“Restoration of voting rights sends a message: our society wants us to grow out of the harms we’ve created, to invest in ourselves and our communities, and to participate fully in our democracy.”*

— Zeke Caligiuri

## Legislative efforts in Minnesota



After the November 2022 election cycle, the Minnesota legislature moved from divided to unified government. The House, Senate, and Governor’s office were all held by one party. Though the majority was narrow in the Senate, the Democrats, the party in power, swiftly advanced legislation that had been blocked for years.

In February 2023, the Minnesota State Legislature passed House File 28/Senate File 26 known as “Restore the Vote.” This historic legislation restores voting rights to thousands of Minnesotans serving felony probation. It was a long time coming and was the product of a long tradition of advocacy by leaders in the African-American community

and people directly impacted by the criminal legal system (including former Representative Raymond Dehn who is formerly incarcerated and received a pardon in 1982). Nearly 100 organizations and many more individuals joined the [Restore the Vote](#) (RTV) coalition to build from these decades of organizing and legislative efforts to pass the bill. The MNJRC supported these efforts through [research](#). As MNJRC Community Engagement Manager Zeke Caligiuri said, “Restoration of voting rights sends a message: our society wants us to grow out of the harms we’ve created, to invest in ourselves and our communities, and to participate fully in our democracy.” At the very least, it’s a start.

*Few studies have examined with rigorous experimental standards the best approaches to increase voter turnout with formerly incarcerated populations specifically.*

## Research on Civic Participation

This legislation is necessary, but not sufficient to shift behavior and raise voting rates among formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans, as previous research has shown. Studies demonstrate that in both younger and older populations, people with criminal histories are less likely to be involved in the political process ([Morris, 2021](#)).

Reasons for low voter turnout are vast and complex. Barriers to voting are significant for many Americans; for those with system-involvement, the added challenge of navigating re-entry likely affects voter turnout. Research also shows those with system-involvement express legal cynicism, a cultural orientation in which they view law and law enforcement as ill-equipped to respond to public needs. This perception may then be linked to system avoidance; in this case, formerly incarcerated

people are less likely to engage with systems that keep formal records like voter registration ([Morris, 2021](#)).

In addition, the civic participation of those living with system-involved individuals (or near populations with higher proportions of formerly incarcerated individuals) is also low. Engaging with and supporting formerly disenfranchised people may have wide-reaching effects on families and communities, including effects on their voting practices. As cited through The Sentencing Project, a 2003 study published by the University of Virginia Law School found that citizens who have never had their own voting rights revoked are choosing not to vote because of spillover effects of disenfranchisement laws ([Druker and Barreras, 2005](#)). In areas where one might know a neighbor or family member who has experienced incarceration, people show the same kind of system avoidance that leads to low voter turnout.

In 2018, Florida passed Amendment 4, an act that restored the voting rights of Floridians with felony convictions after they had completed their sentence, including parole and probation. Prior to the amendment, justice-impacted people in Florida were permanently disenfranchised from voting unless they applied for a pardon through the state's clemency board (a long process marked by barriers, including the payment of fines and fees). An estimated 1.5 million Floridians had their right to vote restored under the act. Yet, research has shown that voter turnout in Florida remained low for those with felony convictions and for people in neighborhoods with higher rates of incarcerated individuals ([Morris, 2021](#)). Similarly, in 2022, Governor Inlee of Washington state signed into law a voting restoration act to automatically restore voting rights to people on community

supervision. Despite this major piece of legislation making “24,000 state residents with past felony convictions now eligible” to vote, “just 414 cast ballots in the midterms” according to the Office of the Secretary of State ([Block, 2023](#)).

Clearly, study after study has shown that the job is not finished when a bill or amendment crosses the Governor’s desk. Here in Minnesota, too, the culture around voting will need to change and voters will need proper information and encouragement by advocacy groups and community members if we are to increase democratic participation.

What is the best way to do this? When examining research and best practices on voter outreach efforts more generally, studies focus on smaller targeted efforts or connecting with voters who are already registered to vote. Some older field experiments have found positive voting outcomes associated with candidate preference interviews ([Kraut and McConahay, 1973](#)) and with phone canvassing close to election day ([Adams and Smith, 1980](#)). More recent studies show the importance of face-to-face contact for grassroots mobilization (e.g. [Gerber and Green, 2000](#); [Sinclair, McConnell, and Michelson, 2013](#)).

TakeAction MN (TAMN), a local organization working in the civic engagement space, Data Analyst River Fiocco explained to the MNJRC that TAMN focuses on conducting phone banks and doorknocking and trying to follow up via a text message, digital ad, mail, and a follow-up call (where they have capacity). TAMN’s contact rate (using contact information from voter file data) ranges from 1-3% when using phones and 10-17% when knocking on doors. In 2022, TAMN staff had 21,128 conversations with potential voters via phones or doorknocking. Their conversion rate for

2022 (that is, the number of people who they had a conversation with that voted in the election) was 53%; for those reached by a follow-up call, it was 67%. (Note that voter file data contains a list of voters who are already registered to vote, a population already more likely to turn out in elections.)

Traditional “Get-out-the-vote” efforts nearly never focus on individuals affected by the carceral system ([Owens and Walker, 2018](#)). Moreover, few studies have examined with rigorous experimental standards the best approaches to increase voter turnout for formerly incarcerated populations specifically. One study in North Carolina used mail-based interventions to encourage formerly incarcerated people to vote. Mailers provided folks with information on voting eligibility and registration. The study found that, while it was impossible to determine whether the mailers actually reached the targeted potential voters, this simple relay of information increased voter participation by a slight margin of 0.8% ([Doleac et al, 2023](#)). To our knowledge, no scholars have studied the impact of phone or text outreach to this particular population. Chronic non-voting within this population is likely amplified by institutional neglect. Further discouraging scholars and advocates from expanding mobilization initiatives, it is difficult to create accurate samples of returning citizens ([Gerber et al., 2015](#); [Burch, 2011](#)). As a result, scholars are largely unfamiliar with the best ways to locate and communicate with unregistered justice-impacted people with the right to vote. Taken together, the research points to challenges reaching this population.

*The goals of the voter turn-out effort were to 1) provide education and information on voting to eligible Minnesota voters with criminal histories, 2) encourage voter participation, and 3) inspire and engage volunteers to commit to civic engagement work.*

## From the Block to the Ballot

In the fall of 2022, the Minnesota Justice Research Center embarked on a pilot of a voter turn-out initiative and research project to mobilize formerly disenfranchised voters to get out and vote and to explore what contact modes work best to get folks to go “From the Block to the Ballot.”

The **goals of the voter turn-out effort** were to 1) provide education and information on voting to eligible Minnesota voters with criminal histories, 2) encourage voter participation, and 3) inspire and engage volunteers to commit to civic engagement work. The **goals of the research** were to 1) pilot and evaluate the feasibility of linking administrative and consumer data to identify formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans and 2) to explore how to best reach formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans. In addition, we explored whether different modes of contact—phone calls versus text messages—would lead to increased likelihood of voting among our sample compared to a control group.

In providing education and information via phone and text, we sought to address the lack of information or misinformation on voter rights as one potential factor of low voter turnout among the formerly incarcerated Minnesotans (recall that this pilot effort was launched the fall before Restore the Vote legislation went into effect). In addition, the pilot focused on engaging and impacting volunteers in the process. By recruiting volunteer community members including those with legal system backgrounds and those who have experienced incarceration first-hand, the team worked to encourage civic participation among those in proximity to the criminal justice system.



Antonio  
Williams of  
T.O.N.E. U.P.

## THE PROCESS

The planning for the pilot began less than a month prior to the launch date—a significant challenge that provided important lessons for designing similar efforts in the future. The voter turn-out initiative comprised a non-partisan, four-week, volunteer-run phone bank and text bank to encourage eligible voters with a criminal history to vote. “From the Block to the Ballot” began with a kick-off event on October 11th and continued right up to the election on November 8th. Volunteers had 12 sessions to choose from, 5 in-person and 7 virtual sessions.

The voter turn-out effort was a collaboration between several organizations with various canvassing and outreach expertise. Twin Cities Diversity in Practice’s “Wanton Injustice Legal Detail” or TCDIP WILD, a platform which provides

connections between legal workers and community organizations in combating anti-black issues, took the lead on recruiting volunteers from the legal community. WILD’s volunteer recruitment strategy consisted of:

- Regular messaging via newsletter and social media channels
- Staffing tables at law school forums
- Board members (senior leaders in the legal industry, general counsels, and managing partners) acting as ambassadors and encouraging their organizations to participate through communications with a direct call to action (to law firms and corporate legal departments)
- TCDIP and WILD selecting one phone bank date as a “Board service day”
- Legal organizations outside of TCDIP membership (legal aid orgs and affinity bars) sharing the opportunity with their bases

The phone and text banking program was led by Antonio Williams and his team from T.O.N.E. U.P., a non-profit organization that provides re-entry services to formerly incarcerated individuals, and The People’s Canvass (TPC), an organization dedicated to training community members in effective canvassing to increase voter turnout. The People’s Canvass also recruited volunteers and paid staff who had system involvement. Finally, TakeAction MN joined the efforts to share resources and space. Over the course of the 12 sessions, 73 volunteers and paid staff supported the outreach.

## TRAININGS

In order to ensure the volunteers conducted quality canvassing, Antonio Williams led volunteer

*Over the course of the 12 sessions, 73 volunteers and paid staff supported the outreach.*

trainings in conjunction with the phone and text bank three times a week for the duration of the pilot. A formerly incarcerated citizen, Antonio shared his story during the training in order to emphasize the importance of voting, especially for the targeted group. An hour of every session was dedicated to a structured training in which Antonio gave tips, helped volunteers practice scenarios, and showed a step-by-step tutorial on how to use CallHub, the canvassing program used in this project. (Returning volunteers were free to skip the training and go directly to making calls if they felt comfortable doing so.)

In the twice-a-week virtual trainings, Antonio began with an ice-breaker question and introductions, then moved into training. He discussed the importance of canvassing, outlined the objectives of the project, and gave a step-by-step tutorial of canvassing. Volunteers would then go off by themselves to conduct phone calls, ending the sessions with group meetings to reflect on conversations they had.

Volunteers also had the option to attend an in-person canvassing session at the TakeAction MN office in St. Paul once a week on Saturdays. Local businesses, owned by people of color, catered these events. Volunteers would arrive and sit around a U-shaped table, where conversations flowed between strangers before Antonio kicked-off the event with his breakout question. The usual

procedure would then follow, with Antonio sharing his personal story and connection to the criminal justice system before walking volunteers through training. In the in-person sessions, volunteers would pair up and practice having conversations with the scripts provided before making phone calls.

## **MODES AND MESSAGES**

The organizers worked with the research team to develop scripts for different outreach approaches. Originally, we hoped to test different messages—a more informational script and more justice-oriented script—in addition to different modes of contact. However, the short time-frame of the pilot, the quality of contact data, and the lack of volunteer experience made a rigorous experiment of different scripts impractical. Our resulting phone scripts began with a brief introduction and an explanation about the upcoming election having an impact Minnesota's future or Minnesota's criminal justice system. Volunteers then encouraged people to vote and gave an overview of voting eligibility and information about how and where to vote. The text scripts were similar to the phone scripts, but shortened. Some scripts included questions to engage the voter and others were just informational. The phone calls were made by volunteers over the course of the pilot and the text messages were sent by The People's Canvass staff using various prepaid phones.

# Findings

## THE LIST

This project was a voter turn-out effort combined with a research evaluation to test quality of data, ability to reach a specific population, and various contact modes. A standard voter outreach campaign would draw on voter data from a campaign data vendor or the publicly available list of registered voters available from the Minnesota Office of the Secretary of State to create the study sample to call and text. These data sources would provide both a list of possible people to select and somewhat recent contact information to reach them.

Crucially, however, these data sources are limited as they include only people who are or have been registered to vote at some point. Our population of interest is people who are or have been involved with the criminal legal system (and specifically those who are formerly disenfranchised). As discussed above, this population is much less likely to have registered or voted prior to their criminal legal involvement. Even those who may have been registered to vote prior to a period of incarceration, many may not have renewed their voter registration status (as is required every four years in Minnesota) since their re-enfranchisement.

Therefore, the standard data sources were inadequate for the purposes of this project.

The research team devised an alternative approach to identify formerly disenfranchised people who were eligible voters and obtain their contact information. Using data from the Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines Commission and the Minnesota State Court of Administrator's Office, the team identified 85,614 individuals with at least one felony-level conviction in Minnesota since 2004 who were likely to have had their voting rights restored following the completion of their sentences. To access contact information (phone numbers), the team contracted with a commercial data vendor, which was able to append relevant contact information for 54% (n=46,516) of the list, which became the study sample.

As we initially set out to explore different messages among the phone and text groups, we randomly assigned each formerly disenfranchised person in the study sample to one of seven primary groups: one control group comprising approximately one-third of the sample (n=15,514), and six treatment groups, with variations on the message and mode, each comprising approximately one-sixth of the sample. Additionally, a portion of each treatment group was randomly chosen to receive a general reminder text on Election Day. Unfortunately, because of time constraints, limited staffing, and data transfer error, volunteers did not reach every person assigned to each treatment condition, nor was coverage evenly distributed across the groups.

Therefore, the primary analysis presented below focuses only on contact mode split into three categories: (1) the control group, (2) people contacted by phone, and (3) people contacted by text. This resulted in an analytic sample



totaling 28,273 formerly disenfranchised people. Table 1 describes the control and two contact mode samples included in the final analysis and their demographics.

Demographic representation was similar across the analytic subsamples. In each subsample, administrative sentencing data identified approximately 20% of respondents as Black, 5% as Native American, 5% as Hispanic, 3% as Asian, and 67% as White. On average, more

than three-quarters of each of the subsamples were identified as male. The average age of the respondents was 44.8 years old, with a consistent standard deviation of 11.3 across the subsamples. According to data from the Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines Commission, compared to the total population of those convicted of a felony in Minnesota since 2004, our sample was slightly whiter (62% in the overall MSGC population vs. to 67% in our sample) and a bit younger (47.7 vs. to 44.8 years).

**Table 1.** Demographics of Analytic Sample

	CONTROL	PHONE	TEXT	TOTAL
N	15,514	9,440	3,319	28,273
Race				
Black	20.0%	20.1%	21.0%	20.2%
Native American	5.0%	5.2%	5.0%	5.1%
Hispanic	4.7%	4.2%	4.6%	4.5%
Asian	3.0%	2.9%	3.0%	3.0%
White	67.2%	67.5%	66.3%	67.2%
Other/Unknown	20.0%	20.0%	0.1%	20.0%
Sex				
Male	77.7%	77.5%	76.4%	77.5%
Age				
Mean	44.8	44.8	45.0	44.8

**Figure 2.** Outreach Overview

**% 12,759** TOTAL CONTACTED

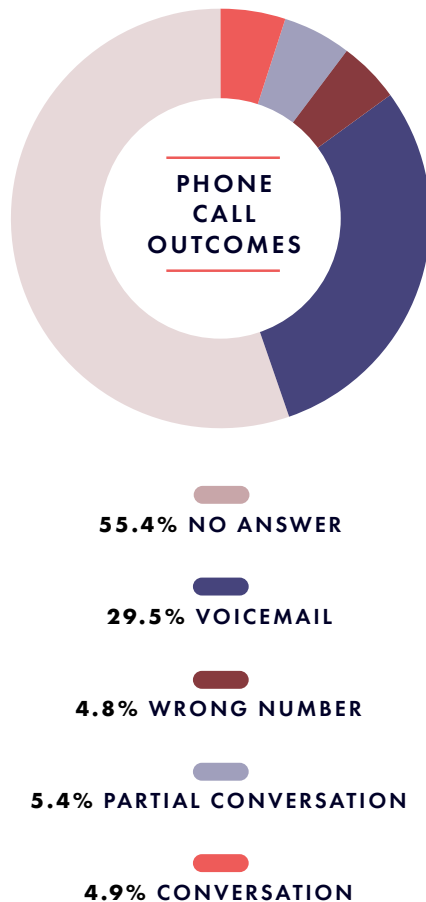
**9,440** BY PHONE

**3,319** BY TEXT



**15% contacted**

of the total population of formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans

**Figure 3.** Phone Call Outcomes

## OUTREACH

In total, volunteers contacted 12,759 likely eligible voters in Minnesota, 9,440 by phone and 3,319 by text. This represents 27% of the original sample (N=46,516) and 15% of the likely total population of formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans (those 85,614 people with at least one felony conviction in Minnesota since 2004 who were likely to have had their voting rights restored).

Volunteers logged calls using an application called CallHub to keep track of date and time, call length, call disposition (that is, whether someone answered, went to voicemail, disconnected, etc.), and any relevant notes about the call. Text logs with messages and text metadata (e.g., date and time) were exported from each phone and compiled into a single dataset. In analyzing the call disposition data, we identified enough categorization error to merit a “re-coding” effort for the phone calls. In short, volunteers did not consistently categorize the outcomes of the calls in a way that helped us identify who we actually reached. While the volunteers made nearly 10,000 calls, a significant percentage of the calls reached voicemails (volunteers were trained to not leave a message). Figure 3 shows a breakdown of reach in relationship to successful contact (that is, a likelihood that the message was actually transferred to the person on the phone). Over half (55%) of the phone calls were to disconnected numbers or to people who never picked up, and nearly another third (30%) went to voicemail. Despite the low quality of the contact data, we reached almost 10% of the phone sample or 975 formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans by phone.

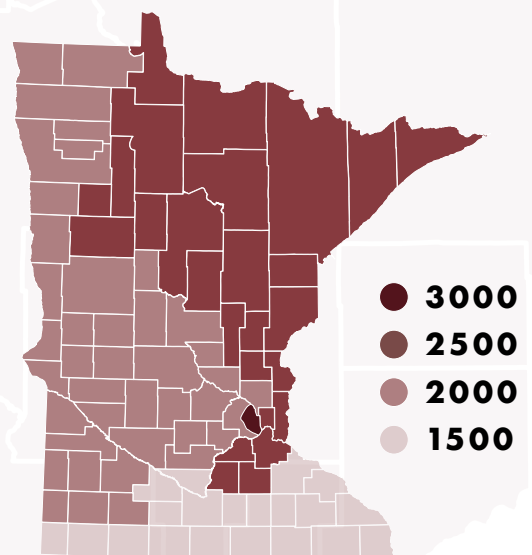
An analysis of the sample of potential voter zip codes shows the geographic distribution was primarily weighted toward rural Minnesota.

*Despite the low quality of the contact data, overall we reached almost 10 percent of the phone sample or 975 formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans by phone.*

As Figure 4 shows, congressional district 8 in northeastern Minnesota had the largest number of potential voters receiving calls. This is important context both for considering future voter outreach efforts across the state and when understanding the population of formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans - this can begin to dispel myths about formerly incarcerated voters being largely BIPOC and living in the Twin Cities metro area.

Taken together, we were able to reach, with certainty, around 1,000 mostly white, mostly rural formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans via phone (and possibly up to around 3,000 additional people via text). Moreover, we were able to definitively reach just over 1% of all people who were formerly disenfranchised because of a felony conviction in Minnesota since 2004. This contact rate is on par with the contact rate of organizations like TakeAction Minnesota, which conduct general voter outreach campaigns targeting already registered voters.

**Figure 4.** Geographic Breakdown of Contacts



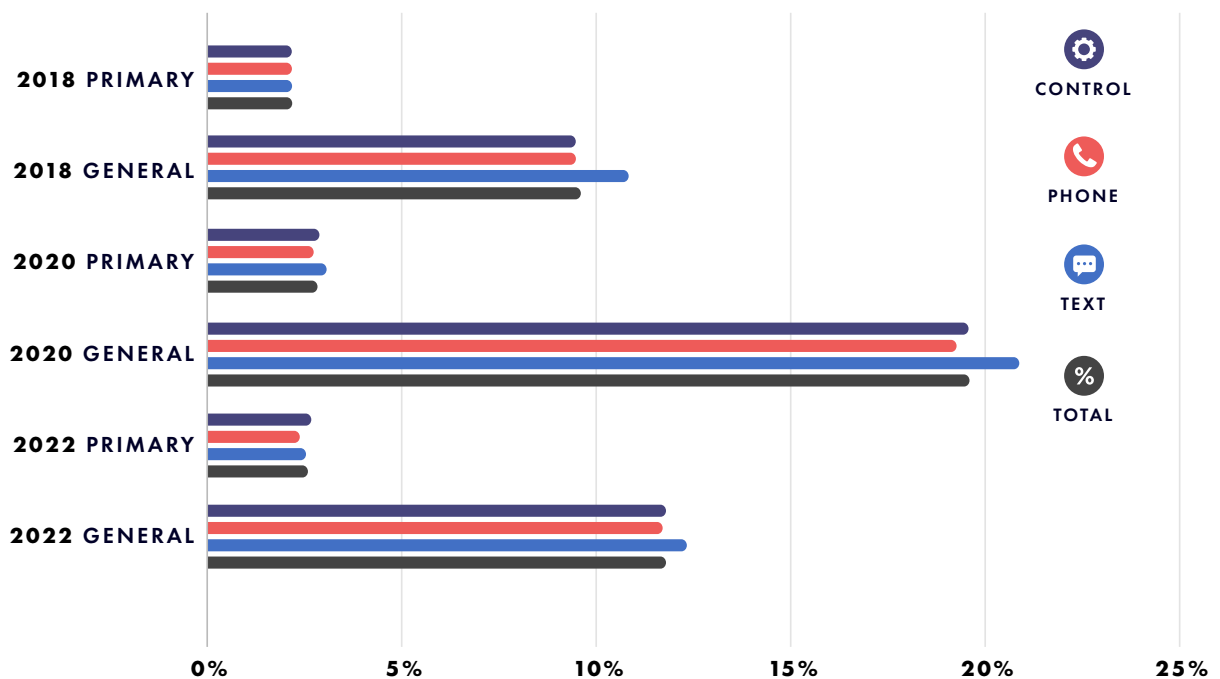
## WHO VOTED?

While our pilot reach was limited, we sought to explore whether contact impacted voting behavior. Following the 2022 midterm election, the research team linked those in the analytic sample to the publicly available voter files from the Minnesota Office of the Secretary of State.

First, we examined voting history more broadly for our analytic sample. Of the 28,273 people in our sample, we were able to confidently link 7,683 people, or 27%, to the post-2022 election voter registration file (that is, 7,683 of the analytic sample were actively registered to vote). As might be expected, the vast majority were relatively new

voters: nearly 80% (n=6,139) were first registered in 2018 or later. Figure 5 describes the voting history for our sample in Minnesota statewide elections from the 2018 primary through the 2022 general election. Prior to the 2022 general election, approximately one-fifth of the control and treatment analytic samples (n=5,849) had voted in at least one statewide primary or general election since 2018. Statewide (2018, 2020, 2022) and presidential (2020) primary turnout has been relatively low, hovering around 3%. Turnout for the 2018 and 2020 general elections, however, was higher, averaging 10% and 20%, respectively, across the groups.

**Figure 5.** Past and Current Vote History by Group (2018-2022)



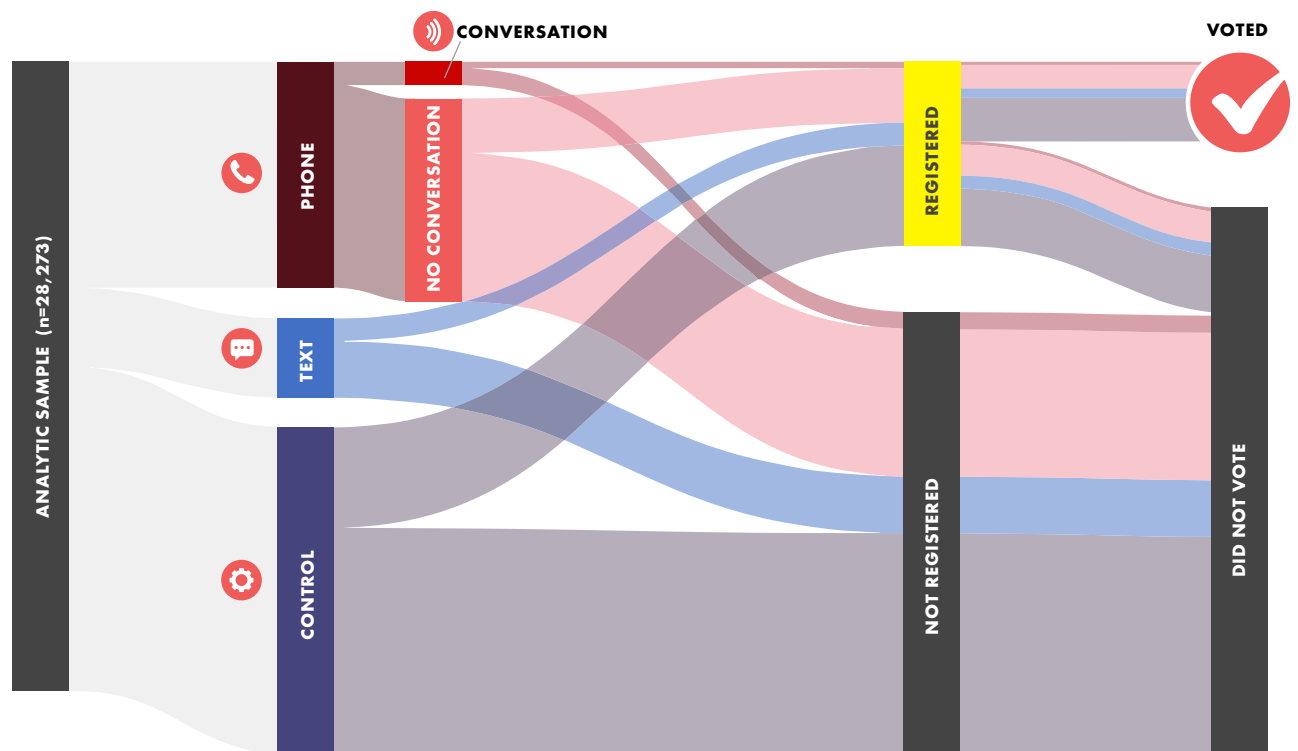
<sup>1</sup>We note that this result is almost certainly an undercount. To identify records in the administrative data and the voter file that refer to the same person, the research team used a probabilistic record linkage algorithm. However, any matching approach is limited by the data points available. The voter file provides birth year but not birthdate, and the administrative data includes identifying information at a point in time that also suffers from quality and consistency issues. Therefore, the matching algorithm was relatively strict and likely missed a proportion of true links.

In the 2022 general election, the average turnout of our entire analytic sample was 12% (11.7% in the control and phone groups and 12.3% in the text group). These differences were statistically non-significant from each other (that is, the differences between the groups could reasonably be attributed to chance rather than the different methods of voter contact). Figure 6 (with footnote) provides a more comprehensive summary of the registration and voting behavior in 2022 of our entire analytic sample, including the phone, text, and control groups.

To control for various factors and isolate the effect of our contact methods, we ran a series of logistic

regression models estimating the effectiveness of the treatments (phone and text) on 2022 turnout compared to the control group. When controlling for vote history and demographics, we did not find evidence of a treatment effect for either contact mode. It is plausible (and, in fact, likely), however, that any effects may have been muted by noise resulting from the quality of the consumer data and leading to overcoverage error. Put differently, if a large proportion of phone numbers were incorrectly or inaccurately associated with individuals in our sample by the consumer data company, at least some of the people we contacted by phone or text were not in our sample.

**Figure 6.** 2022 Registration and Voting Behavior of Analytic Sample

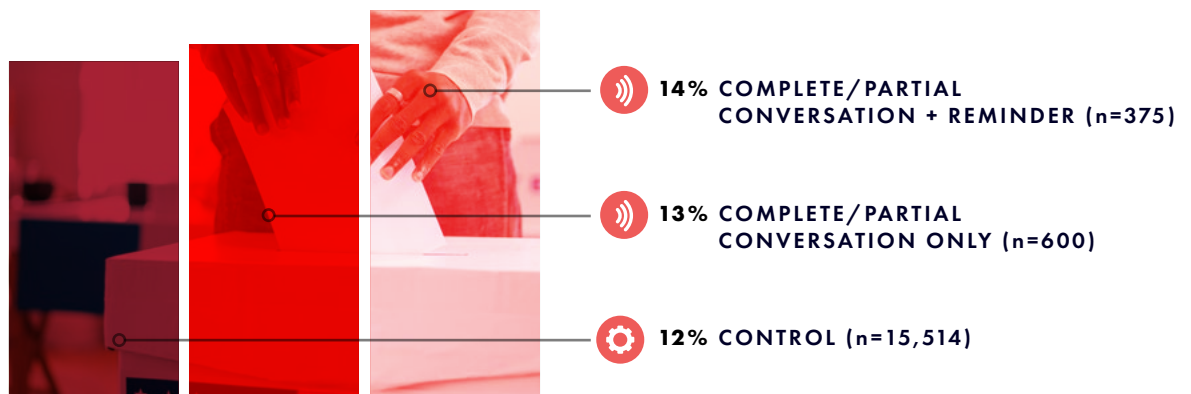


<sup>2</sup>Figure 6 above is a “Sankey diagram” in which the width of the sections represent a proportion of our sample. The diagram begins by breaking out our analytic sample into the two treatment groups (phone and text) and the control group. Then, the phone group is broken down into those who we had a conversation with (at the very top) and those who we did not have a conversation with (including the hang-ups, voicemails, and wrong numbers). From there, we show what proportion of each of those groups (and the text and control groups) who either registered or did not register to vote. Finally, we break up the group of those who registered into those who voted and those who did not.

To address this, we conducted a secondary analysis specifically focusing on the phone group. We limited the phone sample to include only those with whom our outreach team had either a partial or complete conversation (n=975), removing any calls where there was no answer, a voicemail, or a wrong number. We also included whether they received a reminder text on election day. Out of the 975 individuals we successfully reached via phone, 130 people (or 13.3%) cast their vote in the 2022 election. This is a slight increase of 1.6 percentage points compared to the control group, of which 1,861 out of 15,514 individuals (or 11.7%) voted. Regrettably, because of the small sample size, we lack sufficient statistical power to detect an effect of the phone conversations when compared to the control using a regression analysis.

**We did, however, find descriptive evidence suggesting outreach efforts have potential to increase turnout.** Figure 7 compares turnout among three groups: (1) the control group, (2) those with whom we had a complete or partial phone conversation, and (3) those with whom we had a conversation and who also received a reminder text on election day. Compared to the control group, those who we only had one conversation with had a 1 percentage point higher turnout, and those we had a conversation with and who received a reminder text had a 2 percentage point higher turnout. Thus, we strongly recommend that future efforts prioritize and test the quality of contact data prior to entering the field to maximize and evaluate the potential effect of contact.

**Figure 7.** Phone Conversation and Reminder Text Turnout Compared to Control Group



## **QUALITATIVE DATA— A SAMPLE CONVERSATION**

The numbers paint an important picture that demonstrates the challenge of the voter outreach efforts with poor quality contact data. Despite this, the trend suggests phone calls could be an important tool to reach formerly disenfranchised Minnesotans. In digging into the data to explore the qualitative impact, we present two examples of the possibility for change.

For example, on one phone call, one of our volunteers asked an individual if they were eligible to vote. There was hesitation on the other end of the line before the person answered that they were not. The volunteer asked whether they knew why, in order to give the person the right information about voter eligibility. The person responded, "I have a felony." Our volunteer then informed this person that if they had completed parole or probation for their felony conviction, they were in fact eligible in the state of Minnesota. The person on the phone responded, "I didn't know this. My probation ended in 2018." The volunteer confirmed for the person that they were in fact eligible to vote and had been for the last 4 years explaining, "It's confusing 'cause you don't get any form that tells you this, but you are eligible to vote!" The participant asked that the steps to register to be emailed to him, and the volunteer followed up appropriately.

Again, using our information-based script, another volunteer conversed with a justice-impacted person on the status of their voter eligibility. This time, they were aware of their voter eligibility but were

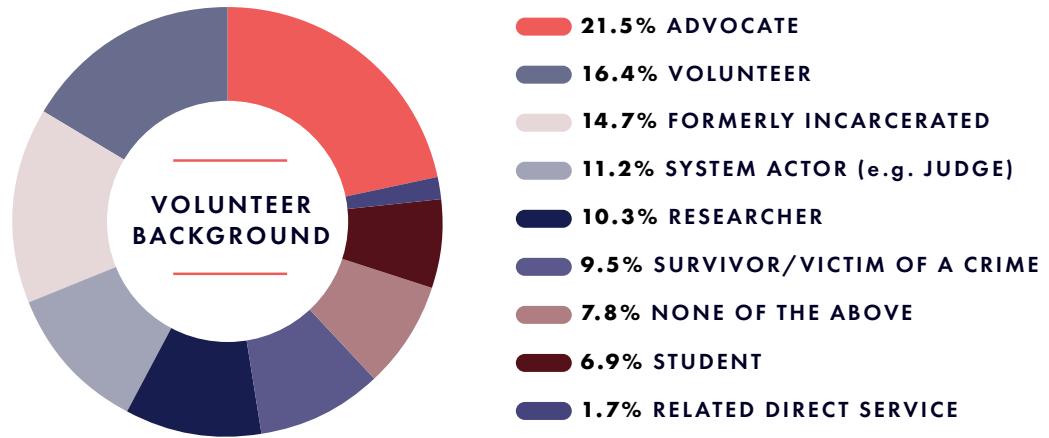
grateful that efforts were being made to contact formerly incarcerated folks. This individual asked questions about our organization and was invited by our volunteer to participate in our initiative. Though they said their schedule was too busy now, they expressed potential interest regardless, asking if they could sign up should they find the time in the future.

Again, using our information-based script, another volunteer conversed with a justice-impacted person on the status of their voter eligibility. This time, they were aware of their voter eligibility but were grateful that efforts were being made to contact formerly incarcerated folks. He asked questions about our organization and was invited by our volunteer to participate in our initiative. Though he said his schedule is too busy now, he expressed potential interest regardless, asking if he could sign up if he found the time.

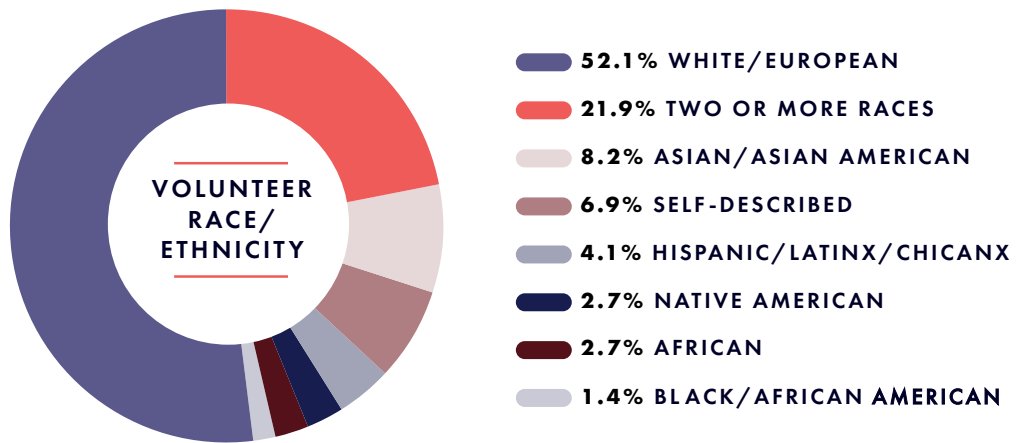
## **THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE**

These efforts were based in community, with phone banks were powered by volunteers. As noted above, we had a diverse mix of 73 volunteers ranging from students to folks formerly-incarcerated, from law enforcement to lawyers. Folks identified as advocates, survivors, and researchers. The racial/ethnic make-up of the volunteers reflected the demographic make-up of Minneapolis (see Figures 8 and 9). The majority were white (52.05%) and women (60.27%), and the age range of those present was mostly between 26-40 (49.32%) and 41-55 (35.62%).

**Figure 8.** Volunteer Background



**Figure 9.** Volunteer Race/Ethnicity



Following the phone banks, the research team administered a brief feedback survey to examine the volunteer experience and identify areas for improvement and scale. Overall, about one-third of volunteers completed the feedback survey (n=27). Volunteers indicated an overall very positive experience with the phone banks. In addition, all volunteers experienced the training as either very helpful or helpful. The majority (55.56%) said they were very likely to recommend the program to a friend, and a few participants even attended multiple phone banks.

Volunteers shared additional feedback on the phone bank process to support the design of future efforts. Many volunteers focused on technical issues in using Callhub. One volunteer wrote, “The CallHub app wasn’t fully mobile friendly. After everyone made a few calls the app said the session ended. Definitely some tech issues to work through and as a person who facilitates a lot of online training the tech problems are the worst so I know the struggle.” Another volunteer indicated, “Technical glitches were frustrating.” In



*Future efforts should consider the design of the call technology as a critical component of a voter outreach effort like this.*

connection with the poor data quality, the challenges volunteers faced with the call technology likely affected our ability to effectively reach our sample population. Future efforts should consider the design of the call technology as a critical component of any voter outreach effort.

### INTERVIEW OUTCOMES

These pilot efforts were designed to mobilize formerly disenfranchised voters and test different contact modes. However, the pilot also had an impact on volunteer perspectives and beliefs. We asked our volunteers if they'd like to further share their experiences with us in an interview following election day. A total of seven volunteers expressed eagerness to elaborate on their experiences. Of the seven, two were male and the rest female; three of the seven were people of color.

Each interview began with getting-to-know-you questions in which we asked about their jobs, values, and history with civic engagement. Those interviewed ranged from self-employed workers to lawyers to Executive Directors. Though they differed in their jobs, one theme across all volunteers was a lifelong commitment to advocacy work. One volunteer was in high school at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. They discussed seeing movements rise and fall and witnessing the effects of life-changing policies. All

the volunteers we interviewed, whether their work was directly related to the criminal legal system or not, had done advocacy work outside of their organizations.

Our volunteers felt especially passionate about voting. All of the eligible voters were active voters. "Well, I think my parents kind of instilled that in me and it just feels good to be part of the community," one volunteer shared. In fact, nearly all interviewees mentioned growing up in households where voting was always practiced. It was routine to see parents go to the polls and come home wearing their "I voted" stickers.



*“Just the history of what led to, for women in particular, let alone people of color to have the ability and opportunity to vote. I just don’t take it for granted. Even when I’m not overly enthusiastic about any of the candidates, I’m not gonna let my vote go to waste because of all the work that others did to give me that right.”*

When asked “Why vote?”, one volunteer expressed, “Just the history of what led to, for women in particular, let alone people of color to have the ability and opportunity to vote. I just don’t take it for granted. Even when I’m not overly enthusiastic about any of the candidates, I’m not gonna let my vote go to waste because of all the work that others did to give me that right.” There was a consensus that voting is a direct extension of the people’s voice. When the right to vote is taken away, so is the voice of the people. One participant, who had been formerly incarcerated, discussed the effect of being silenced: “When I wasn’t allowed to vote it was hard because it felt like I wasn’t even allowed to participate in my own democracy. I had no say in what happened, even though I had to pay taxes and [was] required to have a job and all that stuff. I didn’t get any say in how those tax dollars were spent because I don’t get to vote for people that support causes that I believe in.” Now eligible to vote, they added, “voting is my superpower.”

This passion for advocacy work and voting reform brought our volunteers to the From the Block to the Ballot Program. One volunteer who was formerly incarcerated recognized the importance in having

a figure who’s been in the system speak up and out about it. They found inspiration at our Kick-off event when MNJRC’s community engagement manager, who was once incarcerated, led part of the training. “It was so cool to see someone that wasn’t released that long ago. And here he is up [there], leading a training to help people. I think that was a really impactful moment for me just seeing someone formerly incarcerated recently released, so involved with the community.” Other volunteers similarly noted that Antonio’s leadership in training and community involvement was inspiring.

Our volunteers were also impacted by the conversations they had with folks on the phones. Though many raised critiques of the technical difficulties, they were still able to get some conversations in. “I had a conversation with a man who was formerly

*“And we progressed in the conversation and it led to me driving her to her polling place electing the mayor.”*

incarcerated. He talked a lot about how hard it’s been for him after he’s gotten out of jail... He was just talking about the things that he is worried about and the reasons why he would vote.” Our volunteers found conversations like these especially enlightening. One participant highlighted her initial unawareness to how diverse people’s political stances were here in the Twin Cities until she worked with us. Volunteers also noted that some people needed voting information and they were happy to be able to provide that for them.

We also interviewed our volunteer trainer and community organizer. Antonio Williams, though a huge part in our initiative to turn out voters, could not vote himself last fall. In his years of canvassing and community initiative work, he's had positive impacts and built relationships with those he's talked to. He recalled, "I have friends today who I never knew before, a cold call. And I have friends today who I never knew before a door knock. And I judge it by that, the connections, the quality of the connections. In the movement. I knocked on the door of this GOTV in an apartment complex, and it was a young lady, a young Black lady. And we progressed in the conversation and it led to me driving her to her polling place electing the

mayor." To Antonio, civic participation is crucial. As someone who's been in the carceral system, he understands the direct life impact of policy. That's why he's dedicated his work to community and advocacy work. He notes, "But anytime we're reaching out to my people, as I call all formerly incarcerated individuals, my people, I want to be involved. I believe any program, project or training or anything that involves justice impacted people should always include justice impacted people."

Overall, our volunteers and others involved in the project felt that their work made a difference. "Hopefully the conversation kinda reinforced the importance of going out and using their voice to vote," one said. "We've got a whole pool of people we're trying to reach, and I at least made a little dent in that then I feel like it was worth it," said another. "I hope just spreading the word had an impact and helped people and raised awareness around the issue."



A high-angle, close-up photograph of a person's foot wearing a brown canvas sneaker with white laces. The foot is positioned in the bottom-left corner of the frame. The background is a textured concrete floor with large, blue, hand-painted graffiti that reads "WORLD" in the top row and "THE" in the bottom row. The lighting is soft, and the overall tone is muted. A solid red vertical bar is visible on the left edge of the image, partially overlapping the sneaker.

***"I hope just spreading the word had an impact and helped people and raised awareness around the issue."***

# Lessons Learned and Next Steps

## FROM RESTORATION TO ACTION

On March 2, 2023, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz signed HF 28/SF 26 restoring voting rights to 55,000 Minnesotans on felony probation. We have an opportunity to build a voter bloc of Minnesotans who have first-hand experience with the criminal legal system to advocate for meaningful transformative change. Nearly 100 organizations and many more individuals joined in the [Restore the Vote](#) (RTV) coalition to build from decades of earlier organizing and legislation efforts to pass the bill to restore voting rights to Minnesotans living in our communities. The MNJRC supported these efforts through research. In addition, in the fall of 2022, the MNJRC piloted a voter turn-out initiative and [research](#) project to mobilize formerly disenfranchised voters to get out and vote and to explore what contact modes and messages work best to get folks to move “From the Block to the Ballot.”

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

This pilot provided initial insights into: 1) the importance of data quality and documentation systems to contact and engage formerly disenfranchised voters, 2) the structural requirements for a voter engagement effort focused on formerly disenfranchised voters, and 3) the path to get there. We recommend that future efforts:

**1. Prioritize list quality.** As we began data analysis, it quickly became clear that the quality of contact data provided by commercial data vendors varies widely from vendor to vendor. Accurate contact information for this population was extremely limited. As mentioned, an analysis of the quality of the contact data showed a significant need for better lists and contact information and highlighted the challenge with contacting formerly disenfranchised populations via phone.

**2. Use rigorous and targeted documentation systems.** In addition to better contact lists, this pilot underscored the importance of rigorous and effective documentation systems targeted to our specific population. During the calls, we asked volunteers to categorize the outcomes of conversations using pre-filled categories specific to CallHub, not to the B2B project. These categories overlapped and were not always clearly defined (for example, “not home” and “voicemail” were both category options that could mean the same or different things). As a result, volunteers often mis-categorized calls. The research team spent over two months listening to and re-categorizing thousands of calls to identify our actual reach with more confidence. Consistent, streamlined, detailed, and clear documentation of the contact efforts and outcomes is critical to analyze best practices and explore the impact of different modes of contact on later voting behavior.

**3. Start small and focused.** We also identified challenges activating a diverse volunteer base that joined the efforts with various backgrounds and experiences. The number of successful calls was significantly lower than the contact list, and the quality of the conversations varied considerably. Some volunteers were able to really connect with formerly disenfranchised voters while others stumbled. Future efforts must carve out time and invest in training volunteers or paid staff, identifying folks with system-involvement and a desire to get engaged civically, and providing volunteers or paid staff with enough time and resources to make successful contact.

Finally, phone calls and text messages are only one way to connect with voters. Future efforts should explore doorknocking and other in-person activation efforts. In addition, as past experimental research has explored the impact of mailers, we may also consider examining the potential for mailers to reach formerly disenfranchised voters provided we can get accurate address data.

### WHAT COMES NEXT?

There needs to be a well-resourced and organized program to mobilize, engage, and provide leadership development for formerly disenfranchised voters. This will require 1) a structure to recruit volunteers or hire paid staff to do the civic engagement and organizing work, 2) a process for that organizing work to educate and engage formerly disenfranchised voters (through door-knocking, phone and text banking, and mailing), and 3) a structure to develop formerly incarcerated

leaders during the volunteer recruitment and voter engagement processes and after the election to bring the work to scale and into the future. We look to learn from efforts like those of the Florida Restoration of Rights Coalition (FRRRC).

The next phases will also need rigorous research components to study and evaluate the efforts. This will require 1) a structure to document in detail the recruitment, voter engagement, and leadership development strategies and produce an annual report on these efforts to continually improve the process; 2) the tools to test and evaluate these efforts in relationship to similar efforts across the country and explore success in connection with tangible and measurable outcomes (e.g., in Washington or Florida); and 3) an evaluation of the broader impact for voters and volunteers/staff through interviews and surveys to be shared through a report and used to continually improve the process.

Finally, the on-the-ground organizing and the research project must be aligned. Throughout this pilot, participants and staff grappled with how to prioritize campaign organizing engagement efforts while staying true to research methods. At the MNJRC, this is the work we do. We weave the work of community leaders together with research efforts to broaden the impact. The next phases of this work have the potential to develop the infrastructure to reach some of our state's most marginalized members and support the realization of a truly representative democracy.

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