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CONTACT:
ZERLINE JENNINGS
202.628.0871

States Act to Reduce Racial Disparities in Prisons and Jails

- **Bipartisan approval for reform efforts**
- **Connecticut, Iowa Governors sign legislation to project racial impact of new sentencing laws**
- **Wisconsin executive order mandates oversight**

WASHINGTON, DC- Following the lead of Iowa and Wisconsin, Connecticut, this month, has become the third state since April to implement policy changes to address the rising rate of racial and ethnic disparity among the jail and prison population.

Governor M. Jodi Rell (R-CT) signed legislation which will require examination of the racial and ethnic impact of sentencing laws prior to passage. It provides a means for legislators to anticipate any unwarranted disparities and enables them to consider alternative policies to accomplish the goals of legislation without causing undue negative effects on public safety.

"Just as fiscal impact statements help policymakers assess the effects of proposed policies, so will racial impact statements allow us to anticipate any unintended consequences of criminal justice policy," said Representative Michael Lawlor, chair of the House Judiciary Committee in Connecticut. "By doing so, we will enhance the fairness and credibility of the criminal justice system."

Connecticut has one of the nation's highest rates of racial disparity among its incarcerated population; blacks are confined at 12 times the rate of their white counterparts. The differences in incarceration may signal a failure to address social and economic problems within some communities and can indicate bias within the justice system. The consequences for affected communities are disproportionate rates of voter disenfranchisement, unemployment, and disassociation among its citizens.

Iowa Governor Chet Culver (D) initiated the momentum to address racial disparities in incarceration when he signed the nation's first racial impact sentencing bill in April. The bill's passage followed publication of a [report](#) by The Sentencing Project that showed Iowa led the nation in racial disparity.

"I am committed to making sure government at all levels reflects our shared values of fairness and justice," said Governor Culver in a statement. "And so, while I am very proud of the steps we have taken, and are taking, I want to be clear: our efforts are the first of many steps."

Iowa incarcerates blacks at a rate 13 times that of whites, more than double the national average. "I believe that we need to be tough on crime, but we also need to make sure that our laws are fair and equitable," said Representative Wayne Ford of Iowa, the lead sponsor of that state's racial impact legislation.

Last month, Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle (D) issued an executive order supporting the creation of a Racial Disparities Oversight Commission. Once the order is in effect, state agencies, including the Office of Justice Assistance and Department of Corrections, will be required to develop reporting mechanisms to track traffic citation, arrest, charging, sentencing and revocation patterns by jurisdiction and race.

"Racial disparities in imprisonment raise troubling questions about our commitment to fairness and justice," stated Marc Mauer, Executive Director of The Sentencing Project. "The bipartisan movement to address racial disparities demonstrates that a commitment to fairness is an essential ingredient of a public safety strategy."

The Sentencing Project is a national nonprofit organization engaged in research and advocacy on criminal justice policy issues. To learn more, visit www.sentencingproject.org.