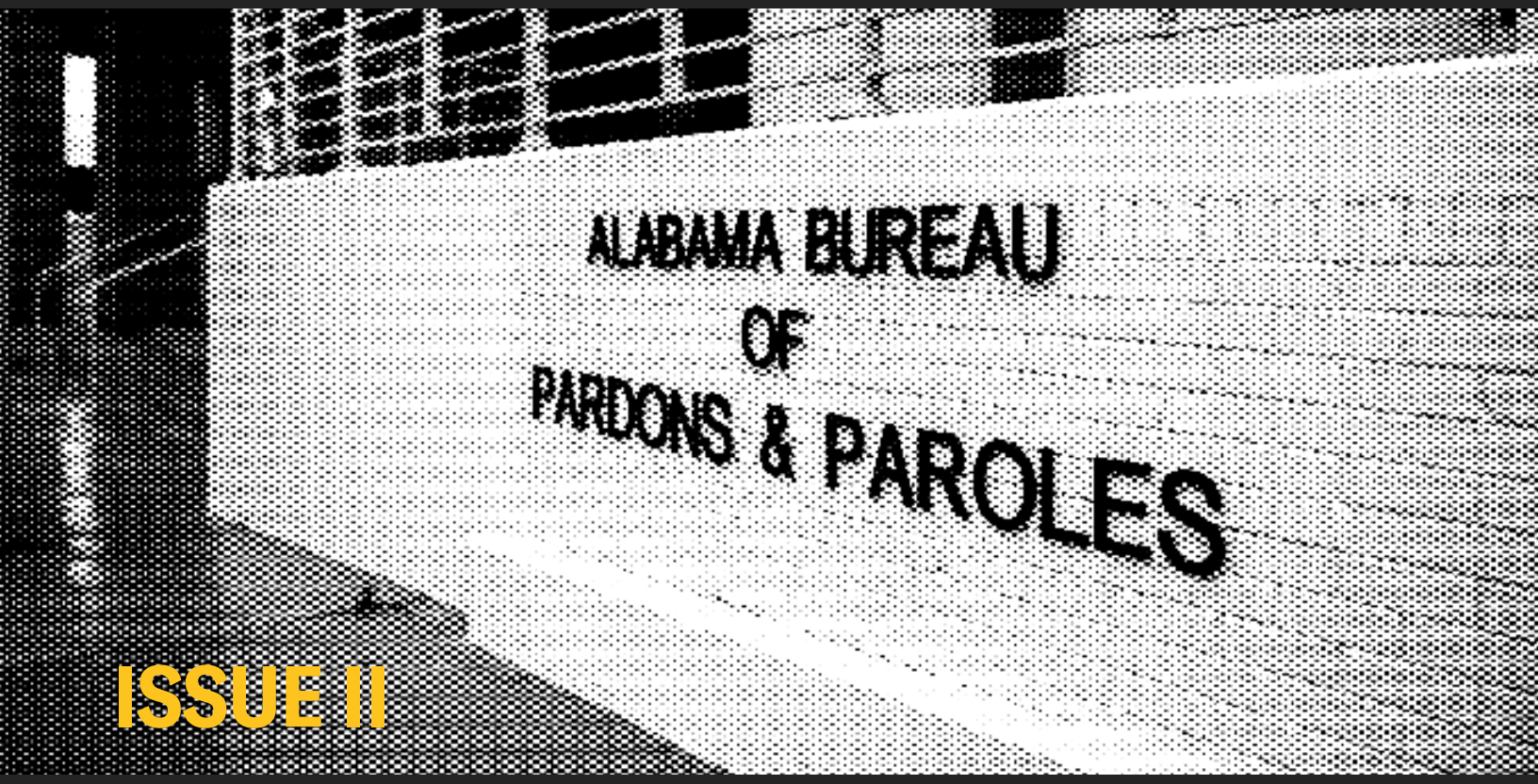
ACLU Alabama

ACLU SMART JUSTICE Alabama

PAROLE WATCH REPORT



ISSUE II

An updated investigation into parole hearings, disparities, and the path forward for Alabama's criminal legal system.

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INTRODUCTION

At a glance, the increase in parole grant rates at the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles seems to indicate reform. But the data tells a different story about the systemic injustices the Board hasn't been able to right.

In the summer of 2023, the ACLU of Alabama released its first Parole Watch Report which analyzed data collected from 267 parole hearings observed in June, July, and August of that year. Following the release of the report, the ACLU of Alabama continued to serve as a watchdog for Alabamians by continuing to attend parole hearings on a weekly basis and monitoring trends within the parole system.

Towards the end of 2023 and into 2024, the state experienced gradual increases in parole rates, though those rates remained significantly lower than those seen just years earlier. In 2017, the Board granted parole at a rate of 55%, the highest grant rate recorded within the past decade. The parole grant rate for 2026 stands at 19%, compared to 8% in 2023. While this reflects measurable progress, the current rate remains well below historical levels and further reform is needed.

THIS REPORT SEEKS TO EXAMINE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

Since 2023, have parole grant rates increased? If so, have they increased enough to conform with the Board's guidelines?

Are low-risk incarcerated individuals being granted parole at a higher rate than other risk categories?

What reform is still needed and possible within the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles?

METHODOLOGY

Our team used a variety of methods to obtain and analyze the information compiled in this report. Because the hearings are held on days, times, and in a location that are not accessible for most Alabamians, the ABPP releases hearing minutes and parole results on its website. Although this information can be useful for loved ones to confirm parole results and release conditions, it does not give the full story of what is taking place at these hearings.

The first half of the data in this report was obtained from ABPP's monthly statistical reports.





The second half of the data was assembled with the data hand-collected by our team from attending over 1,000 parole hearings. This report only includes data from fiscal year 2020 to fiscal year 2026.

Beyond the numbers, we used our experiences of over three years of attending parole and pardon hearings to acquire knowledge about the hearing process, disparities, hearing testimony, and conditions that persist inside Alabama prisons.

In addition, we used various reports, articles, firsthand accounts from family members of incarcerated people, and Joint Prison Oversight Committee Meetings to present a report that shines a light on Alabama's criminal legal system.

KEY FINDINGS

Through our continued investigation, we found that several of the concerns raised in our 2023 Parole Watch Report remain problems.



Despite risk assessments that deem incarcerated Alabamians as "low risk" and safe to work in our communities, 3 out of every 4 people with "low risk" classifications were denied parole in 2025 in 2025.



Former-Chair of ABPP Leigh Gwathney's parole grant voting record remained abysmally low through the end of her tenure in 2025. There were early indications of reform and an increase in parole grant rates following Gwathney's departure, but recent trends show a reduction in parole grant rates.



Racial disparities in parole grant rates have decreased since 2023, but white men are still more likely to be granted parole than Black men.



Opposition still matters. Parole applicants are 4 times more likely to be denied parole if opposition testimony is given at their hearing.



UNDERSTANDING PAROLE IN ALABAMA

The Alabama Bureau of Pardons and Paroles (ABPP) is the state agency that conducts parole hearings and decides outcomes in those hearings. At a parole hearing, ABPP's three Board members consider the offense and background of an incarcerated person to determine whether that person is a worthy candidate for parole and should be released from prison under supervision.

To be granted parole, an incarcerated person must receive a majority (either 2 to 1 or 3 to 0) of grant votes from the Board members. Conditions of release are often placed on people who are granted parole. For example, a person on parole may be required to abide by a curfew or complete a rehabilitative program.

If an incarcerated person is denied parole, the Board members also vote on a "set off date," which is how long a person must wait before their next parole hearing. Set off dates are also determined by majority vote and cannot exceed five years.

DATA TRENDS

Unless otherwise indicated, all hearing-specific analyses in this report are based on parole hearings observed by ACLU of Alabama staff through our Parole Watch initiative. References to statewide or Board-wide grant rates are derived from statistics published by the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles and represented by Fiscal Year.



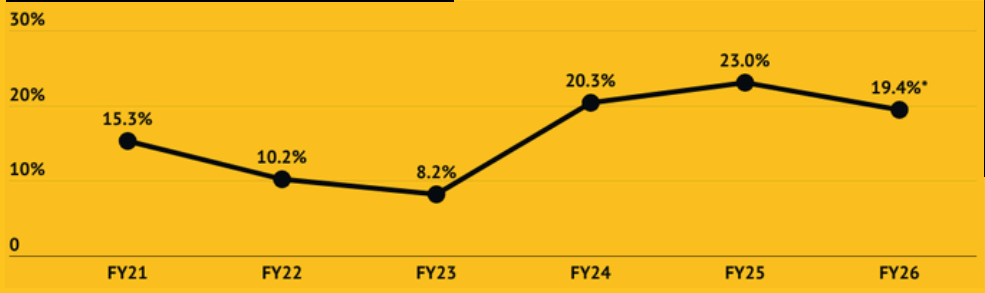
Trends Over Time

The number of hearing decisions issued by ABPP declined from 2020 to 2025. The grant rate sharply increased in 2024, after statewide scrutiny and changes to the Board composition.

Total Parole Decisions by Fiscal Year



Overall Parole Grant Rate



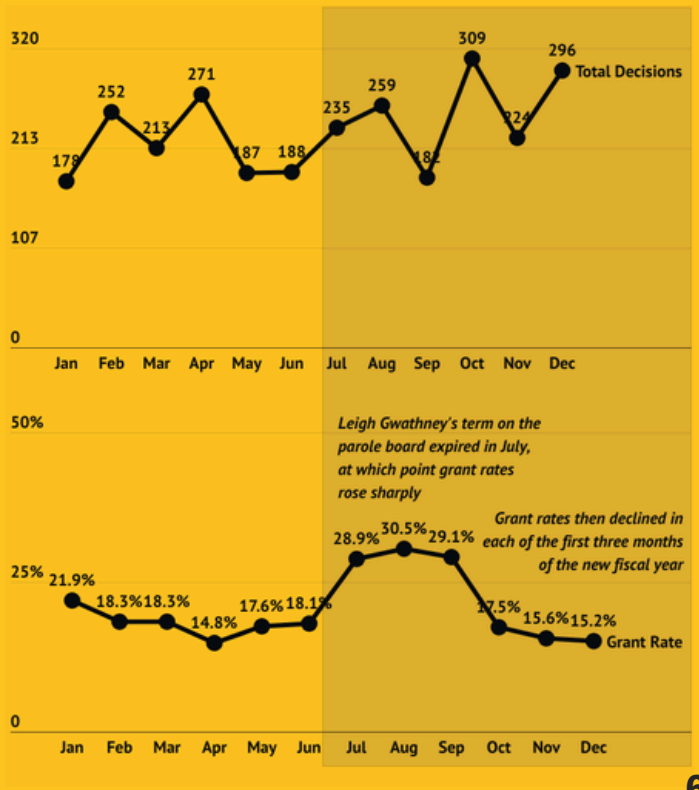
So far in 2026, ABPP is on pace to issue more than 3,200 decisions,

while the current parole grant rate is at its lowest level since 2023.

2025 Trends

The total number of hearings each month increased over the course of 2025.

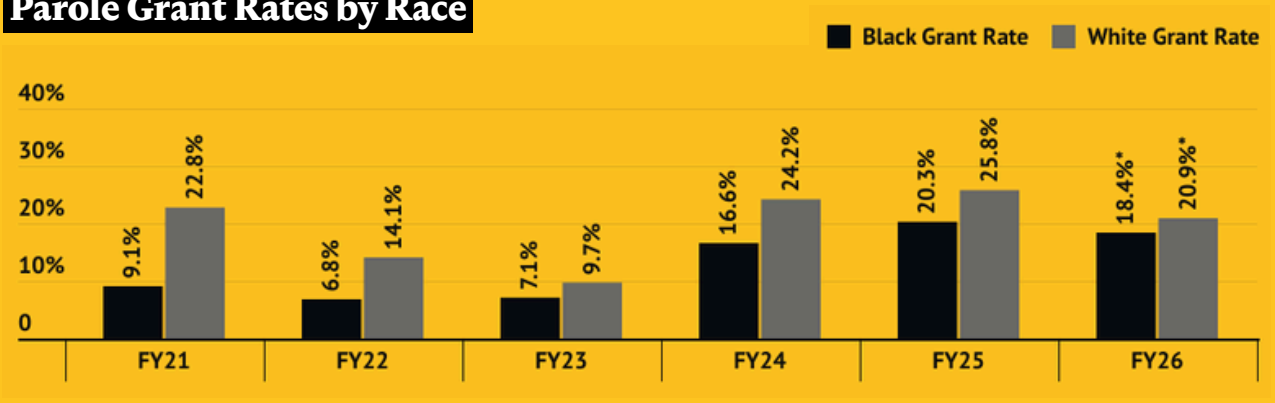
The Board's composition changed in July 2025 when Leigh Gwathney's term expired. Hal Nash was subsequently appointed to the vacant seat. The statewide parole grant rate rose substantially after Gwathney's departure, but declined again beginning in 2026.



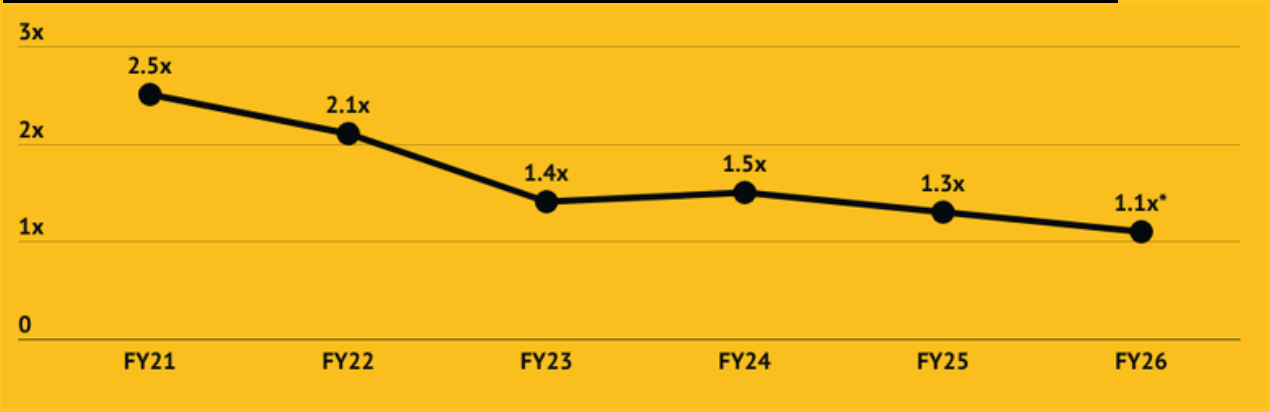
Racial Disparities Over Time

Parole is not granted equally. The charts below illustrate the percent of paroles granted by race, as well as the ratio between the white and Black grant rates. White people have consistently been granted parole at higher rates than Black people.

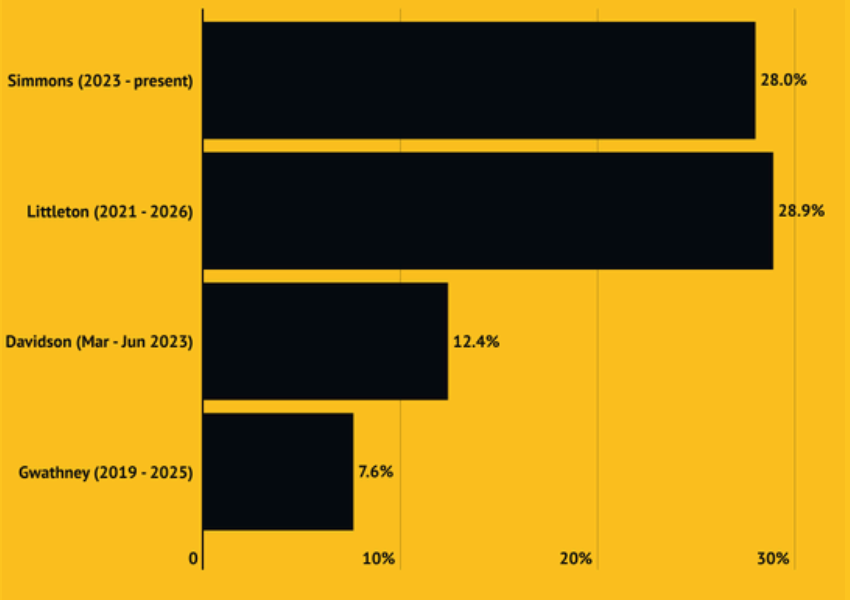
Parole Grant Rates by Race



Rate Ratio of White Parole Grant Rate to Black Parole Grant Rate



Voting Records of Each Board Member

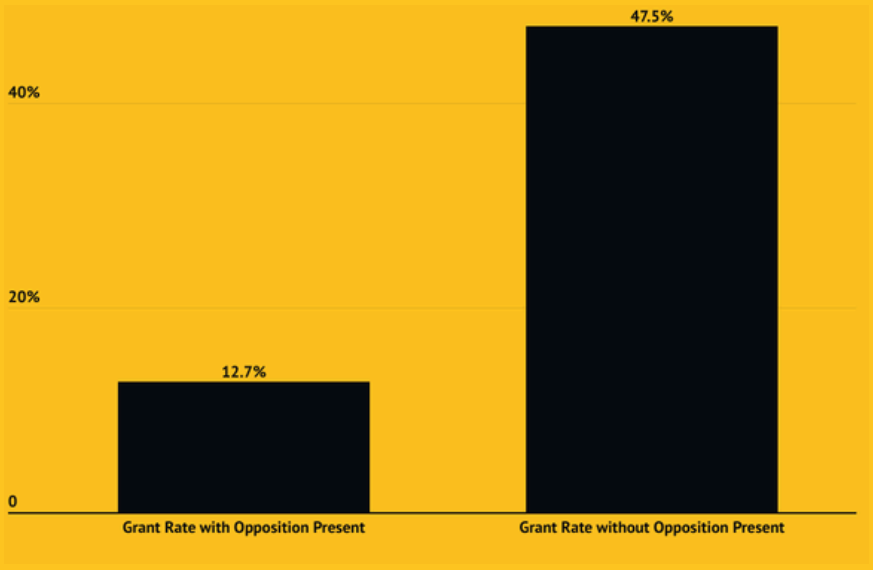


The summary reports provided by ABPP don't provide any information about the voting patterns of each member of the Parole Board. This chart illustrates the data collected by the ACLU of Alabama, which shows a wide range in how often each member of the Parole Board voted to grant parole.

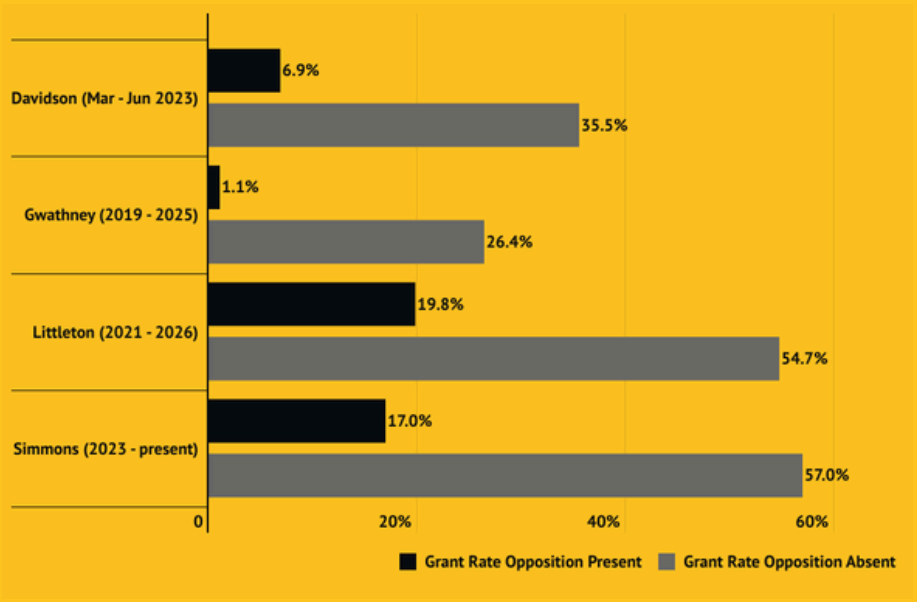
Impact of Opposition Testimony

ACLU of Alabama staff attended 892 parole hearings from June 2023 to November 2025, recording details that provide additional insights about the hearings. This chart shows the impact on grant rates of opposing testimony during parole hearings we observed.

Grant rates were nearly
4X higher
in hearings without opponent testimony than in hearings with it.



Impact of Opposition on Board Members

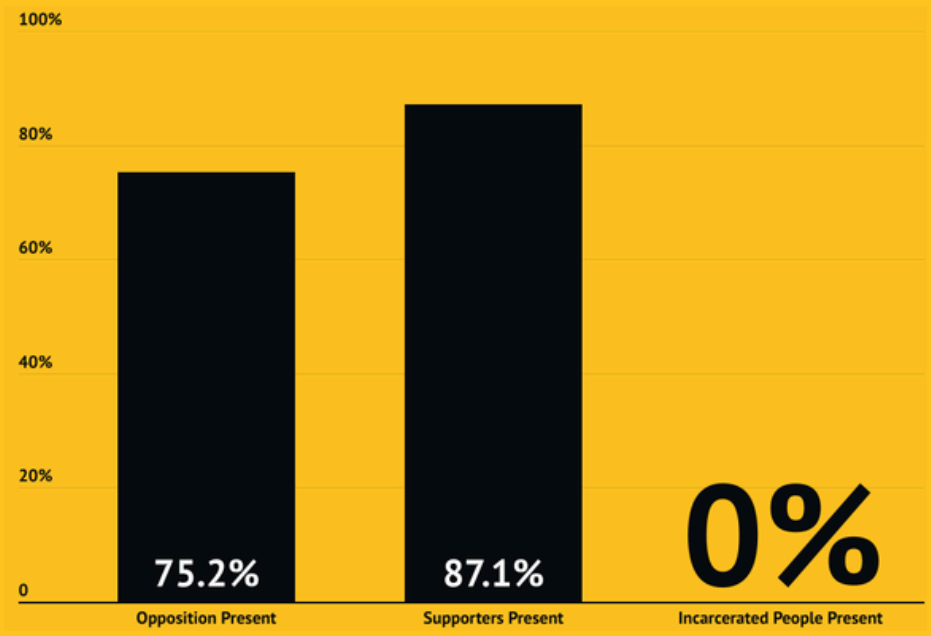


Gwathney granted parole more than
20X less
frequently when opponents were present compared to when they weren't.

The presence of supporters and opponents in a parole hearing affected the voting patterns of each Board member differently. These charts show the grant rate of each Board member based on the presence or absence of supporters or opponents. Leigh Gwathney demonstrated by far the largest disparity in her grant rate based on opposition presence.

Supporters, Opponents & Incarcerated People

Per Alabama state law, an incarcerated person is not allowed to attend their own parole hearing, and must rely on others to speak on their behalf.

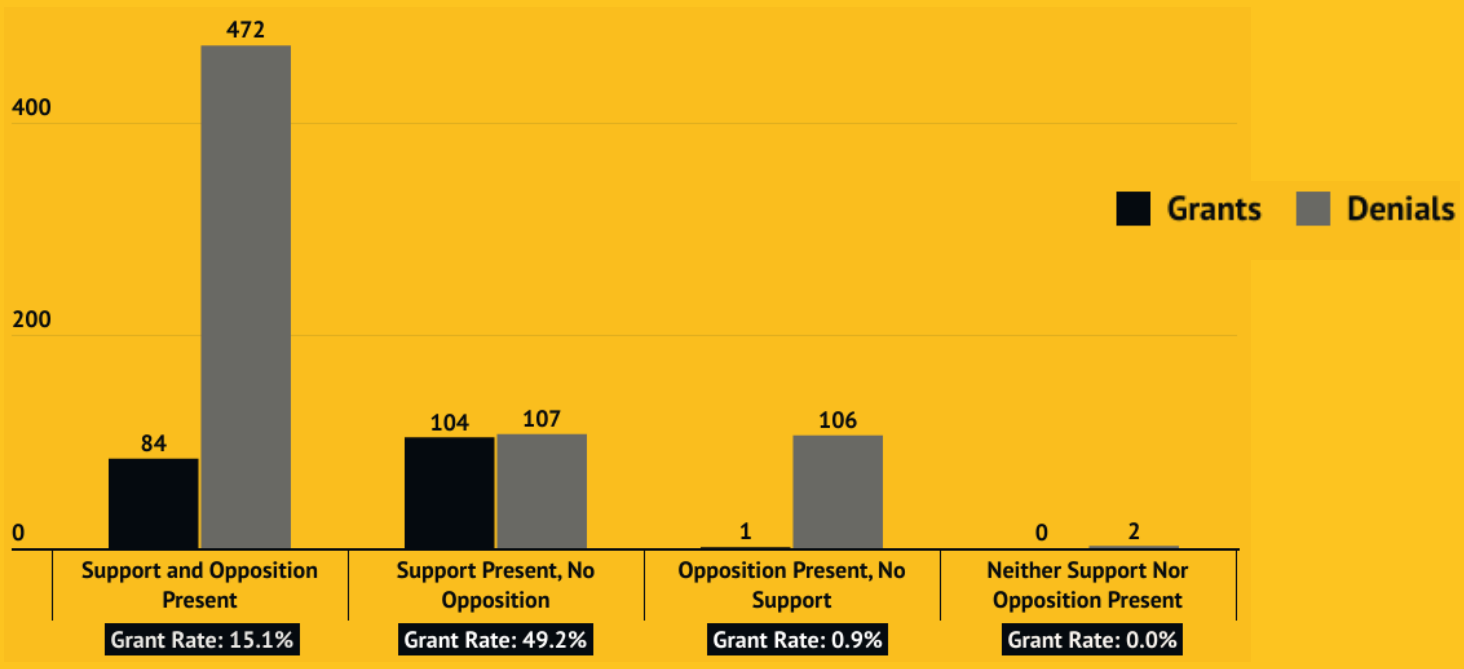


Of the 109 cases in which no supporters testified,

parole was granted just once.

Relationship Between Supporters and Opponents

Most hearings included testimony in support and opposition of the incarcerated person receiving parole. The presence of opponents drastically lowered the likelihood of parole being granted during a hearing, while the presence of supporters increased its likelihood.



RISK ASSESSMENTS & THE "PUBLIC SAFETY" MYTH

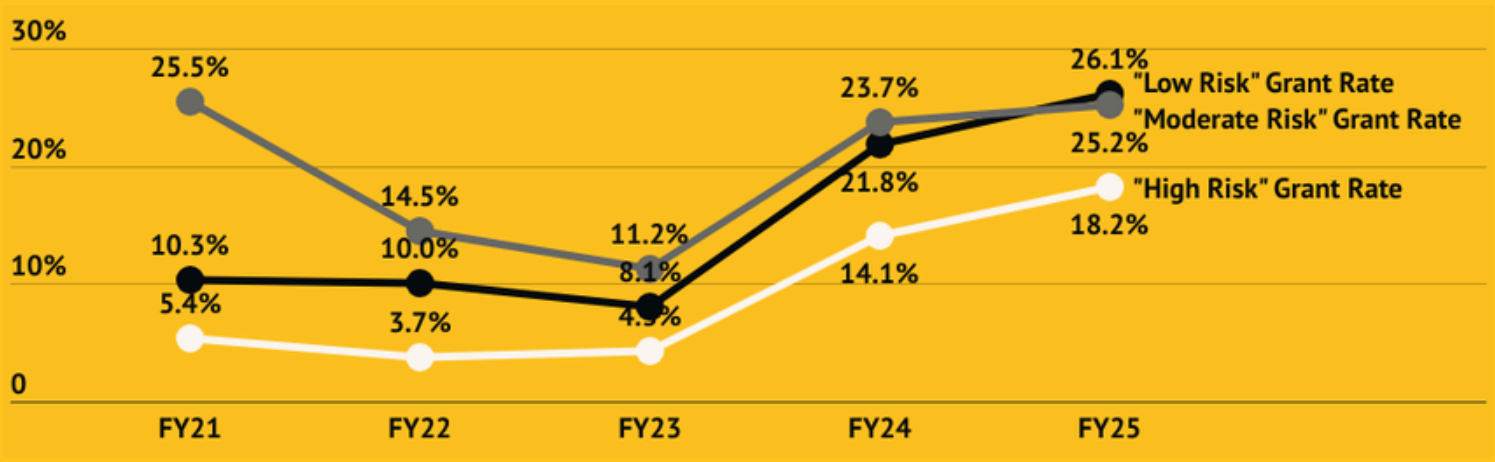
"Public safety" is often cited by ABPP, the Attorney General's Office, and Victims of Crime and Leniency ("VOCAL") as a primary consideration in parole decisions. Central to any determination of public safety is risk assessment data, which is designed to measure a person's likelihood of reoffending. ABPP is provided with that data for every person considered for parole.

However, the data we collected and reviewed since our 2023 Parole Watch Report demonstrates that parole outcomes do not consistently align with public safety concerns and risk assessment data.

In a troubling development, ABPP discontinued publishing risk assessment outcomes in its monthly statistical reports after 2025 so the public has even more limited access to data and there is less transparency going forward.



Grant Rate by Risk Assessment Status



The above graph demonstrates that there has not been a significant increase in the percentage of people with "low risk" classifications being granted parole from 2021 to 2025. In 2021, 25.5% of people with "low risk" calculations were granted parole and that percentage was only 0.6% higher in 2025.

Additionally, the gap between the parole grant rates for people class with "low risk" calculations and "high risk" calculations has only decreased over time, with the smallest gap occurring in 2025. In that year, people with "low risk" calculations were only granted parole at a rate of 26.1% whereas people with "high risk" calculations were granted parole at a rate of 18.2%. Thus, being classified as "low risk" only increased a person's chances of being granted parole by 7.9%.

ABPP uses a risk assessment matrix to measure the "risk of re-offending" for each hearing.



NEW GUIDELINES SAME PROBLEMS

Following increased scrutiny from the public and state legislators, ABPP was required to revise its parole guidelines and to consider input from stakeholders. Since our 2023 Parole Watch Report, the revised guidelines provide for adjusted weighted factors.

However, new guidelines have not solved the persistent problem that Board members are not required to follow ABPP guidelines when determining whether to grant or deny parole.

The information provided in this section was pulled directly from the Alabama Bureau of Pardons and Paroles website. To access the full guidelines, visit:
https://paroles.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/Chapter-640-X-A-2025.pdf

The weighted factors in the revised guidelines

Severity of offense of conviction (low, moderate, high, very high):

- Low = +1
- Moderate = +2
- High = +3
- Very High = +4

Risk Assessment (ORAS):

- Low Risk = +0
- Moderate Risk = +2
- High Risk = +3
- Very High Risk = +5

OR:

Sex Offender Risk Assessment (Static 99):

- Low Risk = +0
- Moderate Risk = +2
- High Risk = +3
- Very High Risk = +5

Institutional behavior:

- 0 disciplinaries within the last 12 months = +0
- 1 or 2 non-violent disciplinaries within the last 12 months = +1
- 3 or more non-violent disciplinaries within last 12 months = +2
- 1 disciplinary involving violence within last 12 months = +3
- Multiple disciplinaries involving violence within last 12 months = +5

Participation in risk-reducing programming/treatment:

- Completion Required Programs = +0
  Deficient Programming = +2
- Refusal/Unacceptable Compliance = +3

Completion of GED, Higher Education, or Trade:

- Completion = -1
- Must be obtained during current incarceration term.

Re-entry Plan:

- Complete/Acceptable Reentry Plan = +0
- Reentry Plan Submitted = +1
- No Reentry Plan = +2

Stakeholder and Community Input:

- Support Only, With No Opposition = +0
- Support And Opposition, Or No Input = +1
- Opposition Only = +2

Once the Board has calculated their total scores, the numbers below indicate if a grant or denial is recommended per the Board's guidelines. Ultimately, the Board makes the decision regardless of the guidelines.

- **0-5 points recommends a parole grant**
- **6-8 points is a neutral finding**
- **9+ points recommends a parole denial**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Virtual Presence

As of the publication of this report, Alabama and Georgia remain the only two states in the country that do not allow incarcerated people to attend or speak at their own parole hearings. Although SB240 would have brought Alabama in line with the rest of the country on this issue and was passed by both chambers of the Legislature, Governor Ivey pocket vetoed the bill, and it ultimately failed. SB240 is a bill with bi-partisan support and should be reintroduced and passed in the next legislative session.

"Low Risk" Parole Grants

In 2025, approximately three out of every four people with "low risk" classifications were denied parole. Many of these people are assigned to work release facilities and are safely working in our communities every day. With the passage of new guidelines, it is time for ABPP Board members to start voting in compliance with data and common sense. People with "low risk" classifications can safely and successfully reenter our communities, and more people with such classifications need to be granted parole to ease overcrowding in ADOC facilities.

Structured, Phased Reentry

State legislators should introduce legislation that would allow ADOC and ABPP to implement a structured, phased reentry model. States like Iowa and Texas have committed to data-driven and evidence-based approaches to parole that focus on assessment and pre-release programming, placement in highly structured step-down environments, and long-term stabilization during independent living. In Alabama, this could involve transferring more people with "low risk" classifications to day reporting centers and the PREP Center in Perry County. For people with "moderate risk" and "high risk" classifications, more in-prison programming and good behavior incentives would drive opportunities to transition to "low risk" classifications over time. Such a system would increase parole rates while lowering recidivism and promoting public safety.



ATONING ALABAMA

Atoning Alabama is the ACLU of Alabama's parole and pardon workshop initiative that transforms data into action. Atoning Alabama was designed to better equip directly impacted people and their loved ones with navigating the parole and pardon process. The initiative focuses on educating people on how to make the most of the limited two minutes that they are permitted for presentations during ABPP hearings and how to prepare strong parole and pardon packets.

To learn more about Atoning Alabama, please visit:
alabamasmartjustice.org/atoning-alabama







ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publication of Issue II of the ACLU of Alabama's Parole Watch Report reflects hundreds of hours of work by the ACLU of Alabama and ACLU National staff to observe parole hearings and synthesize data. Since our 2023 Parole Watch Report, we have seen an increase in the overall parole grant rate, but Issue II is designed to shine a light on the reality that there is more work to be done and there are practical reform measures that should be adopted to improve Alabama's still-broken parole system. While we may not always agree with one another, we appreciate ABPP for always welcoming our staff at hearings and we remain committed to working collaboratively and professionally with ABPP to promote fairness and justice.

Immense gratitude is owed to Nichelle Cunningham (Paralegal), for her dedication to the Parole Watch project and to her vision in developing Atoning Alabama. Nichelle personally attended hundreds of hours of parole and pardon hearings and spearheaded the development of Issue II. She epitomizes what it means to put passion into action. We hope you will join an Atoning Alabama session with us so you can learn from Nichelle and our team.

The following ACLU of Alabama staff members also made significant contributions to this project: Courtlyn McMeans (Smart Justice Fellow); Kayla Sloan (Communications Director); Justala Dean (Communications Strategist); Tyler Sesker (Legal Intern); Amelia Nettles (Communications Intern); and Kimberly Robinson (Chief of Staff).

We also extend our sincere gratitude to the ACLU National Data Analytics Team. Their partnership allowed us to analyze ABPP's own data and identify systemic trends in a way that was not possible with the original 2023 Parole Watch Report. Special thanks is due to Alexander Yurcaba for his leadership and vision, and to Molly Grapel and Lizzy Schick for their contributions.

Finally, we extend our deepest gratitude to the loved ones of incarcerated people and to the advocates who consistently attend parole and pardon hearings and vulnerably share their experiences. This work is dedicated to the people in our prisons who are waiting for an opportunity to come home to prove that they can meaningfully and safely contribute to our communities.

Alison Mollman
Legal Director
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