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Federal Civil Rights Statutes: A Primer

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Summary

Under federal law, an array of civil rights statutes are available to protect individuals from discrimination. This report provides a brief summary of selected federal civil rights statutes, including the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Pay Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the Fair Housing Act, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Rehabilitation Act, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act, the Age Discrimination Act, the Civil Service Reform Act, the Immigration and Nationality Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Congressional Accountability Act.

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Federal Civil Rights Statutes: A Primer

Introduction

Under federal law, an array of civil rights statutes are available to protect individuals from discrimination. Although these laws share similar features, the type of discrimination that they prohibit and the circumstances under which they operate vary from statute to statute. This report provides a brief overview of selected federal civil rights statutes,¹ as well as information about other CRS products that discuss these laws.² This report, however, is intended to provide an introductory overview and comparison of the selected statutes and therefore does not address additional civil rights protections that may be available under state statutes or constitutional law.

Federal Statutes

Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964 is perhaps the most prominent civil rights legislation enacted in modern times. The statute, which served as a model for subsequent anti-discrimination laws, greatly expanded civil rights protections in a wide variety of settings. Among other provisions:

- Title VII of the CRA prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex.³ In addition, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which was enacted in 1978 as an amendment to the sex discrimination provisions of Title VII, made it unlawful to discriminate on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions. Title VII applies to employers with 15 or more employees, including the federal government and state and local governments. Individuals who believe they are the victims of employment discrimination must file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which is responsible for enforcing individual Title VII claims against private employers. The Department of Justice (DOJ) enforces Title VII

¹ Other federal civil rights laws exist, but this report focuses on laws that protect individuals from specific types of discrimination.

² For general information on appropriations related to some of these civil rights laws, see CRS Report RS20418, *Funding for Major Civil Rights Enforcement Agencies*, by Garrine P. Laney.

³ 42 U.S.C. § 2000e.

against state and local governments, but may do so only after the EEOC has conducted an initial investigation.⁴

- Title VI of the CRA prohibits discrimination in federally funded programs or activities on the basis of race, color, or national origin.⁵ Individuals who believe they are victims of discrimination may file a complaint with the federal agency that provides funds to a recipient, or they may file a lawsuit in federal court. Each federal agency is responsible for enforcing Title VI compliance with respect to its funding recipients, but DOJ plays a role in coordinating federal Title VI activities.⁶
- Title II of the CRA prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin in public accommodations.⁷ Public accommodations, which are defined as establishments that serve the public and that have a connection to interstate commerce, include hotels and motels, restaurants and bars, and entertainment venues such as movie theaters or sports arenas. DOJ enforces Title II.⁸

For additional information on the CRA, see CRS Report RL30470, *Affirmative Action in Employment: A Legal Overview*, by Charles V. Dale; CRS Report 98-34A, *Sexual Harassment and Violence Against Women: Developments in Federal Law*, by Charles V. Dale; CRS Report RL30253, *Sex Discrimination and the United States Supreme Court: Recent Developments in the Law*, by Karen J. Lewis and John O. Shimabukuro; and CRS Report RL31077, *Private Actions to Sue for Civil Rights Violations in Federally Assisted Programs After Alexander v. Sandoval*, by Charles V. Dale.

Equal Pay Act of 1963. The Equal Pay Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex with regard to the compensation paid to men and women for substantially equal work performed in the same establishment.⁹ The act is enforced by the EEOC.¹⁰

For additional information on the Equal Pay Act, see CRS Report RL31867, *Pay Equity Legislation in the 109th Congress*, by Charles V. Dale and Linda Levine.

⁴ For more information on Title VII, see the EEOC website [<http://www.eeoc.gov/>] and the DOJ's Employment Litigation Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/emp/index.html>].

⁵ 42 U.S.C. § 2000d.

⁶ For more information on Title VI, see the DOJ's Coordination and Review Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/coord/titlevi.htm>].

⁷ 42 U.S.C. § 2000a.

⁸ For more information on Title II, see the DOJ's Housing and Civil Enforcement Section website [http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/housing_main.htm].

⁹ 29 U.S.C. § 206.

¹⁰ For more information on the Equal Pay Act, see the EEOC website [<http://www.eeoc.gov/>].

Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Voting Rights Act, which was enacted shortly after the CRA and which was designed to prevent the disenfranchisement of black voters in the South, prohibits voting practices that discriminate on the basis of race, color, or membership in a language minority group.¹¹ Specifically, the act prohibits the use of discriminatory redistricting plans or voter registration procedures and authorizes the use of federal voting observers to monitor elections. DOJ enforces the statute, but individuals can also sue in federal court.¹²

For additional information on the Voting Rights Act, see CRS Report RS21911; *The Voting Rights Act of 1965, As Amended: Provisions with Expiration Dates of 2007*, by Garrine P. Laney; CRS Report 95-896, *The Voting Rights Act of 1965, As Amended: Its History and Current Issues*, by Garrine P. Laney; CRS Report RS21593, *Redistricting and the Voting Rights Act: A Legal Analysis of Georgia v. Ashcroft*, by L. Paige Whitaker; and CRS Report 93-1060, *Congressional Redistricting: Federal Law Controls a State Process*, by David C. Huckabee.

Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967. Like Title VII of the CRA, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of age.¹³ The ADEA, which protects individuals who are age 40 or older, applies to employers with 20 or more employees and is enforced by the EEOC.¹⁴

For additional information on the ADEA, see CRS Report 97-479, *The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA): Overview and Current Legal Developments*, by Kimberly D. Jones; CRS Report RS22170, *The Age Discrimination in Employment Act and Disparate Impact Claims: An Analysis of the Supreme Court Ruling in Smith v. City of Jackson*, by Charles V. Dale and Jody Feder; CRS Report RS21845, *Final Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Rules on Retiree Health Plans and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act*, by Charles V. Dale; CRS Report RL33004, *Cash Balance Pension Plans and Claims of Age Discrimination*, by Erika Lunder and Jennifer Staman; and CRS Report RL30364, *Legal Issues Affecting the Right of State Employees to Bring Suit Under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and Other Federal Labor Laws*, by Kimberly D. Jones.

Fair Housing Act. The Fair Housing Act (FHA), which was originally enacted in 1968, prohibits discrimination in the sale or rental of housing on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, or familial status.¹⁵ The statute applies to both public and private housing and may be enforced by the Department

¹¹ 42 U.S.C. §§ 1973 et seq.

¹² For more information on the Voting Rights Act, see the DOJ Voting Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/index.htm>].

¹³ 29 U.S.C. §§ 621 et seq.

¹⁴ For more information on ADEA, see the EEOC website [<http://www.eeoc.gov/>].

¹⁵ 42 U.S.C. §§ 3601 et seq.

of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), DOJ, and individuals who file suit in federal court.¹⁶

For additional information on the FHA, see CRS Report 95-710, *The Fair Housing Act: A Legal Overview*, by Jody Feder.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Like Title VI of the CRA, Title IX's prohibition on discrimination is tied to federal funding. Specifically, Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded education programs or activities.¹⁷ Although the Title IX regulations bar recipients of federal financial assistance from discriminating on the basis of sex in a wide range of educational programs or activities, such as student admissions, scholarships, and access to courses, the statute is perhaps best known for prohibiting sex discrimination in intercollegiate athletics. Individuals who believe they are victims of discrimination may file a complaint with the federal agency that provides education funds to a recipient, or they may file a lawsuit in federal court. As with Title VI, each federal agency is responsible for enforcing Title IX compliance with respect to its funding recipients, but DOJ plays a role in coordinating federal Title IX activities.¹⁸

For additional information on Title IX, see CRS Report RL31709, *Title IX, Sex Discrimination, and Intercollegiate Athletics: A Legal Overview*, by Jody Feder; CRS Report 98-34, *Sexual Harassment and Violence Against Women: Developments in Federal Law*, by Charles V. Dale; CRS Report RL31619, *Agency Enforcement of the Prohibition Against Sex Discrimination Mandated by Title IX and EO 13160*, by Jody Feder; CRS Report RS20710, *Title IX and Sex Discrimination in Education: An Overview*, by Gary L. Galemore; CRS Report RS20460, *Title IX and Gender Bias in Sports: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Gary L. Galemore; and CRS Report RL30253, *Sex Discrimination and the United States Supreme Court: Recent Developments in the Law*, by Karen J. Lewis and Jon O. Shimabukuro.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in federally conducted and federally funded programs or activities, as well as in employment by the federal government and by federal contractors.¹⁹ In addition, the act authorizes an array of grant programs that support vocational rehabilitation services to assist individuals with physical or mental disabilities in achieving employment and social integration. DOJ is responsible for administering the provisions regarding discrimination in federally conducted and federally funded programs or activities, while the provisions regarding nondiscrimination in federal employment and nondiscrimination by federal

¹⁶ For more information on the FHA, see the HUD website [<http://www.hud.gov/offices/fheo/index.cfm>] and DOJ's Housing and Civil Enforcement Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/index.html>].

¹⁷ 20 U.S.C. §§ 1681 et seq.

¹⁸ For more information on Title IX, see DOJ's Coordination and Review Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/coord/titleix.htm>] and the Department of Education website [<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>].

¹⁹ 29 U.S.C. §§ 791, 793-94.

contractors are enforced by the EEOC and the Department of Labor (DOL), respectively.²⁰

There are several CRS products on the Rehabilitation Act, although these reports focus on the grant programs authorized under the statute, rather than the act's anti-discrimination provisions. For more information, see the CRS website.

Equal Credit Opportunity Act. The Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA), which was enacted in 1974, prohibits discrimination against credit applicants on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, or source of income.²¹ DOJ enforces the statute, but individuals may also file a complaint with the federal agency that oversees the creditor, or they may sue in federal court.²²

For more information on ECOA, see CRS Report RL30889, *The Consumer Credit Protection Act: An Overview of Its Major Components*, by Angie A. Welborn.

Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974. The Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) prohibits discrimination in educational opportunities on the basis of race, color, sex, or national origin.²³ Specifically, the statute prohibits school segregation, as well as the failure of a school to take appropriate action to overcome students' language barriers. The statute is enforced by DOJ.²⁴

Age Discrimination Act of 1975. The Age Discrimination Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of age in federally funded programs or activities.²⁵ Individuals who believe they are victims of discrimination may file a complaint with the federal agency that provides education funds to a recipient, or they may file a lawsuit in federal court. As with Title VI and Title IX, each federal agency is responsible for enforcing ADA compliance with respect to its funding recipients, but the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) plays a role in coordinating federal ADA activities.

Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. The Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) prohibits discrimination in federal employment on the basis of race, color, national

²⁰ For more information on the Rehabilitation Act, see the DOJ Disability Rights Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/drs/drshome.htm>], the EEOC website [<http://www.eeoc.gov>], and the Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs website [http://www.dol.gov/esa/regs/compliance/ofccp/ca_503.htm].

²¹ 15 U.S.C. §§ 1691 et seq.

²² For more information on ECOA, see DOJ's Housing and Civil Enforcement Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/index.html>].

²³ 20 U.S.C. §§ 1701 et seq.

²⁴ For more information on the EEOA, see the DOJ's Educational Opportunities Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/edo/index.html>].

²⁵ 42 U.S.C. §§ 6101 et seq.

origin, religion, sex, age, disability, marital status, or political affiliation.²⁶ Specifically, the statute prohibits discrimination in certain personnel practices, including, but not limited to, hiring, promotion, transfers, and pay and benefits. In addition, the statute prohibits discrimination on the basis of conduct that does not adversely affect the performance of an employee or job applicant.²⁷ This provision has been interpreted to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. The CSRA is enforced by both the Office of Special Counsel and the Merit Systems Protection Board.²⁸

For additional information on the CSRA, see CRS Report RL30795, *General Management Laws: A Compendium*, coordinated by Clinton T. Brass.

Immigration and Nationality Act. Under amendments adopted in 1986, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of national origin or citizenship status.²⁹ The act, which prohibits discrimination against U.S. citizens and legal immigrants but not unauthorized aliens, also protects individuals from unfair documentary practices relating to the employment eligibility verification process. The statute is enforced by DOJ.³⁰

There are several CRS products on the INA, although these reports do not focus on the act's anti-discrimination provisions. For more information, see the CRS website.

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which is the most recently enacted piece of major civil rights legislation in the nation, prohibits discrimination based on disability in employment, public services, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications.³¹ The ADA's employment discrimination provisions, which apply to employers with 15 or more employees, are enforced by the EEOC, while the public services and public accommodations provisions are administered by DOJ.³² Individuals may also

²⁶ 5 U.S.C. § 2302.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ For more information on the CSRA, see the Office of Special Counsel website [<http://www.osc.gov/>] and the Merit Systems Protection Board website [<http://www.mspb.gov/>].

²⁹ 8 U.S.C. § 1324b.

³⁰ For more information on the INA, see DOJ's Office of Special Counsel for Immigration-Related Unfair Employment Practices website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/osc/index.html>].

³¹ 42 U.S.C. §§ 12101 et seq.

³² For more information on the ADA, see the federal government's general ADA website [<http://www.ada.gov/>], the EEOC website [<http://www.eeoc.gov/>] DOJ's Disability Rights Section website [<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/drs/drshome.htm>], the Federal Communications Commission website [<http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/dro/>], and the Department of Transportation website [http://www.fta.dot.gov/initiatives_tech_assistance/customer_service/14524_ENG_HTML.htm].

sue in federal court for violations of the ADA, although they must receive a right-to-sue letter from the EEOC before filing an employment discrimination claim.

For more information on the ADA, see CRS Report 98-921, *The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): Statutory Language and Recent Issues*, by Nancy Lee Jones; and CRS Report RL31401, *The Americans with Disabilities Act: Supreme Court Decisions*, by Nancy Lee Jones. In addition, see the CRS website for multiple short reports on specific issues and cases that have arisen under the ADA.

Congressional Accountability Act of 1995. The Congressional Accountability Act (CAA) applies several existing civil rights, labor, and workplace laws to employees of the legislative branch of the federal government.³³ Specifically, with regard to civil rights laws, the act applies Title VII of the CRA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, and the Rehabilitation Act to the legislative branch. The act is administered by the Office of Compliance.³⁴

For additional information on the CAA, see CRS Report 95-557, *Congressional Accountability Act of 1995*, by Charles Dale, Robin Jeweler, Nancy Lee Jones, Jay R. Shampansky, Kathleen S. Swendiman, and Vincent Treacy.

³³ 2 U.S.C. §§ 1301 et seq.

³⁴ For more information on the CAA, see the Office of Compliance website [<http://www.compliance.gov/>].