THE ARIZONA INCARCERATION CRISIS

A Comprehensive Analysis of Mass Incarceration, Reentry Failures, Service Deserts, and the Path Forward

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April 2026

Executive Summary

Arizona does not have a crime problem. It has a policy problem. With an incarceration rate of 710 per 100,000 residents, higher than every independent democratic nation on earth, the state has constructed one of the most punitive carceral systems in the developed world. More than 35,500 people are held in state prisons, an additional 117,000 cycle through local jails every year, and a total of nearly 145,000 residents are under some form of correctional control at any given time. Arizona spends well over $1.3 billion annually on corrections, while simultaneously ranking among the lowest in the nation for per-pupil education funding and behavioral health investment.

The state's incarceration surge was not driven by rising crime but by policy choices: a 1993 truth-in-sentencing statute requiring all convicted individuals to serve at least 85 percent of their sentences regardless of behavior, rehabilitation, or risk level; mandatory minimums that strip judicial discretion; and a persistent over-reliance on incarceration for drug possession and low-level nonviolent offenses. Drug crimes account for more than 20 percent of Arizona's incarcerated population… people who need treatment, not prison.

The consequences fall hardest on communities of color. Black Arizonans are incarcerated at 4.9 times the rate of white residents. Latino men are imprisoned at the highest rate of any state in the nation. And yet crime rates in Arizona are comparable to neighboring states that incarcerate at far lower rates, dismantling the myth that more imprisonment produces more safety.

When people do come home, roughly 202,000 individuals released from Arizona prisons and jails each year, they return to a fragmented, underfunded reentry ecosystem. The most glaring gap is in the East Valley of Maricopa County, one of the fastest-growing regions in the country, where formerly incarcerated individuals face a near-total absence of dedicated transitional housing, walk-in service providers, and community-based case management.

This paper documents the depth of Arizona's incarceration crisis, quantifies the staggering costs versus the proven savings of alternatives, profiles the organizations doing meaningful reentry work in the state, and outlines a data-driven policy agenda to reduce incarceration, strengthen reentry, and close the East Valley service desert.

Section I: The Scale of Arizona's Incarceration Crisis

1.1 The Numbers in Context

As of December 2024, the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry (ADCRR) reported an average daily population of 35,517 individuals held in state-operated and privately contracted prisons. This figure represents a rebound from a pandemic-era low of approximately 37,731 in late 2020, itself a reduction from the historic peak of more than 50,000 in December 2017. After dipping to 33,326 in July 2022, the population climbed back to 34,547 by January 2024 and has continued to rise.

When county jails, immigration detention, and juvenile facilities are included, the total incarceration rate reaches 710 per 100,000 residents. A figure that exceeds every founding NATO member state and places Arizona above most of the world's non-democratic governments. For reference, the United Kingdom incarcerates at roughly 128 per 100,000; Germany at 78; Canada at 104. Mississippi and Louisiana, historically the most incarcerated U.S. states, now outpace Arizona only marginally.

710 per 100,000

Arizona's incarceration rate — higher than any independent democratic nation on Earth

Arizona's prison population composition as of late 2024 was approximately 90.8 percent male and 9.2 percent female. About 90 percent of the incarcerated population is housed in facilities concentrated in Maricopa County. Drug possession remains the single most frequent commitment offense in the state, consistent across years of ADCRR data. Assault accounts for 14.2 percent of the population, auto theft for 4.9 percent, and burglary for 4.3 percent, all categories for which robust non-incarcerative interventions exist.

1.2 A Policy-Driven Crisis

One of the most important points to establish in any analysis of Arizona's incarceration rate is that it is not explained by a disproportionately criminal population. Arizona's overall crime rate is comparable to neighboring states including Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico — none of which incarcerate at anywhere near Arizona's rate. The divergence is explained almost entirely by policy.

The pivotal legislative moment was 1993. Arizona passed a sweeping truth-in-sentencing statute requiring all convicted individuals, violent and nonviolent alike, to serve a minimum of 85 percent of their imposed sentence. At the same time, the law eliminated parole for anyone sentenced after January 1, 1994. The Federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 then incentivized states to adopt such laws through grants for prison construction, which Arizona received. Arizona took approximately $58 million in federal prison construction grants over the following years.

The results were immediate and compounding. In 1993, the year before truth-in-sentencing took effect, Arizona's incarceration rate was 438 per 100,000, already 22 percent above the national average. By 2014, it had reached 628 per 100,000. The prison population grew from under 15,000 in 1993 to a peak of more than 50,000 in 2017… more than nine times its 1980 level. All while crime rates followed national trends downward.

Arizona is now one of only two remaining states with an 85 percent mandatory minimum for a broad range of offenses. Mississippi and Texas, states not exactly known for leniency, have both reformed their truth-in-sentencing laws to allow for earlier release for nonviolent offenders. Arizona has not. The practical effect is that a person convicted of a nonviolent drug offense in Arizona must serve significantly more time than the same person convicted of the same offense

in Texas, and dramatically more than in states like Oregon, which allows up to 30 percent sentence reduction for program participation and good behavior.

> *"The argument that these people need to stay in prison longer, as if there's some public safety reason for that, is false... in terms of achieving our public safety goal, it does not do any good." — Caroline Isaacs, American Friends Service Committee Arizona*

1.3 Who Is Behind Bars: Race, Gender, and the Inequality of Incarceration

Arizona's incarcerated population reflects the same racial fault lines visible across American criminal justice. Black Arizonans are incarcerated at a rate 4.9 times higher than white residents. This disparity persists at every stage of the process; arrest, prosecution, conviction, and sentencing. Black men represent approximately 14 percent of the state's prison population while comprising roughly 4 percent of the overall population.

Arizona holds the highest rate of Latino imprisonment in the nation. As of the most recent data, approximately one in 40 Latino men in Arizona was in prison. The state's proximity to the border, aggressive immigration enforcement collaboration between state and local agencies, and the structural criminalization of poverty all contribute to this concentration.

The situation for women is equally alarming by global standards. Arizona incarcerates women at a rate of 154 per 100,000 residents, higher than nearly every country on the planet. The state's Perryville complex houses over 3,300 women and is consistently cited for inadequate medical care, failure to accommodate pregnancy, and lack of gender-responsive programming. The ACLU and other advocacy organizations have documented conditions that fall below constitutionally required standards.

Perhaps the most troubling segment of the incarcerated population is those who have not been convicted of anything. Approximately 80 percent of people in Arizona's county jails at any given time have not been convicted of a crime; they are legally innocent individuals detained pre-trial, primarily because they cannot afford bail. Each year, at least 117,000 individuals cycle through Arizona's local jails, the majority on relatively minor charges, with collateral consequences — job loss, housing instability, and family separation that often exceed whatever punishment a conviction would have carried.

80%

of people in Arizona jails have not been convicted of any crime; they are legally innocent, awaiting trial

1.4 The Population Rebound

Arizona's prison population declined during the COVID-19 pandemic as court proceedings slowed and some nonviolent individuals were transferred to home confinement. But the decline was modest compared to many peer states, and the population has rebounded. Data through

December 2024 shows the total institutional population, including private contract beds, back above 35,500, trending toward pre-pandemic levels. ADCRR's own data show that technical violations of probation and parole supervision conditions, rather than new felony convictions, account for a significant share of returns to custody. This is a system that is cycling people back in at high rates, not primarily because they are committing serious new crimes.

Section II: The True Cost of Incarceration

2.1 What Arizona Actually Spends

Arizona's state corrections budget has exceeded $1.1 billion annually since at least 2019, and legislative baseline documents from FY 2024 and FY 2025 show the department operating in the $1.3 to $1.5 billion range in total appropriated and other funds. The FY 2024 budget included $280 million for privately contracted healthcare services alone under an existing 5-year inmate health contract. Additional ongoing costs are driven by federal court compliance: the Jensen v. Thornell injunction, a landmark legal order requiring substantial improvements to healthcare, mental health services, housing conditions, staffing levels, and information technology infrastructure, has generated hundreds of millions in additional mandated spending, with rough FY 2024 estimates of required compliance funding at $56 million and rising.

The per-inmate cost in Arizona's state prisons is typically reported at roughly $60 to $65 per day, translating to approximately $22,000 to $24,000 per person per year. This figure, however, significantly understates the true cost to taxpayers. Research by the Vera Institute of Justice has consistently found that the true per-inmate cost, once employee pension obligations, capital costs, education services provided through other agencies, external hospital care, and administrative overhead are fully accounted for, exceeds what corrections budgets officially report. Nationally, the median annual cost per prisoner across all states was approximately $60,989 as of the most recent comprehensive analysis.

Arizona holds approximately 10,000 people in privately contracted prison beds, at a reported rate of roughly $38 to $45 per day, lower than state-run facilities on paper, but a figure that consistently fails to account for the downstream costs of poorer rehabilitation outcomes, higher recidivism rates, and the long-term fiscal burden of re-incarceration. Private prisons contractually exclude the most costly populations, those with high medical needs, serious mental illness, and complex classification, leaving taxpayer-funded state facilities to absorb the highest-cost cases.

2.2 What Alternatives Actually Cost

The cost differential between incarceration and evidence-based alternatives is not marginal, it is dramatic. The following comparison table illustrates the core figures, drawn from national research by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, RTI International, and others.

Intervention	Annual Cost Per Person	Recidivism Reduction
Arizona State Prison	$22,000–$24,000+	Baseline (36.3% return rate)
Community Drug Treatment (Outpatient)	$5,000–$8,000	Significant; 57% vs. 75%
Inpatient Rehabilitation	$10,000–$20,000	Significant; better than incarceration

Intervention	Annual Cost Per Person	Recidivism Reduction
Drug Court / Diversion	$4,000–$8,000	Reduces re-arrest 8–26%
Intensive Probation Supervision	$3,000–$6,000	Comparable to incarceration
Electronic Monitoring (Home Confinement)	$2,000–$4,000	Low-risk equivalent

The return-on-investment data for treatment alternatives is compelling. Research by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy found that every dollar spent on community-based drug treatment yields over $18 in cost savings related to reduced crime. By contrast, the same research found that prisons yield only $0.37 in public safety benefit per dollar spent. A study published in Crime & Delinquency estimated that diverting just 10 percent of eligible drug-involved offenders from state prison to community treatment would save the criminal justice system $4.8 billion nationally, while diverting 40 percent would yield $12.9 billion in savings.

Cost-benefit research on correctional treatment programs reviewed in Federal Probation found benefit-to-cost ratios ranging from 1.13:1 to 270:1 for programs with favorable outcomes. Even at the low end, the evidence is unambiguous: investment in alternatives is fiscally sound. Drug rehabilitation programs, which typically cost $5,000 to $20,000 for a complete course of treatment, address the underlying condition driving criminal behavior — substance use disorder — at a fraction of the cost of warehousing someone for years.

2.3 The ACLU's Projection and Its Implications

A widely cited analysis by the ACLU found that if Arizona had implemented a package of smart sentencing reforms, reclassifying drug and minor property offenses, modifying mandatory minimums, and reforming truth-in-sentencing, the state could have reduced its prison population by over 23,000 people and saved more than $1 billion that could be reinvested in schools, treatment, housing, and other community resources. That analysis was based on 2017 data. Given the trajectory since, the potential savings today are likely greater.

> *"Every dollar spent on community-based drug treatment yields over $18 in cost savings related to reduced crime. Prisons yield $0.37 per dollar spent." — Washington State Institute for Public Policy*

2.4 The Hidden Costs Nobody Counts

The fiscal analysis of incarceration is always incomplete when it stops at the prison gate. There are substantial downstream costs that fall on families, communities, and government agencies outside the corrections budget.

These include:

- Lost wages and tax revenue from the removed worker, often the primary earner in low-income households
- Increased reliance on public assistance, child welfare services, and foster care for families left behind

- Higher rates of intergenerational poverty and school disengagement among children of incarcerated parents
- Post-release health system costs, including emergency services, Medicaid-funded treatment, and mental health crisis intervention, driven by inadequate in-prison healthcare
- Law enforcement, prosecutorial, and court costs associated with the high rates of re-arrest and re-incarceration
- Community economic depression in high-incarceration ZIP codes, where labor market disruption, mass disenfranchisement, and family instability compound over decades

Arizona's SNAP benefit restriction for people on probation, unique among the western United States, adds another layer of economic harm to individuals already destabilized by incarceration, increasing food insecurity and reducing the probability of successful reintegration. Arizona's own data show that 11 percent of the prison population is over the age of 55, a cohort with an average recidivism rate of approximately 14 percent — yet the cost of incarcerating elderly individuals far exceeds the cost of supervised release, medical parole, or supported community placement.

Section III: Reentry in Arizona — What Exists and Who Is Doing the Work

3.1 The Scope of the Challenge

Arizona releases approximately 153,450 men and 48,964 women from its prisons and jails each year, a combined figure approaching 202,000 people annually entering or re-entering communities across the state. Each person released faces a predictable set of barriers: securing housing without a disqualifying criminal record, finding employment despite background checks, reconnecting with family systems often damaged by incarceration, navigating supervision conditions that criminalize ordinary social connections, and managing physical and behavioral health needs that went largely unmet behind bars.

Arizona's overall three-year recidivism rate, defined as return to ADCRR custody, stands at approximately 36.3 percent. When returns within the first year are isolated, the data show that young adults aged 18 to 24 return at the highest rates, reflecting the inadequacy of transition planning and the absence of community support during the most critical window post-release. The most significant predictor of successful reentry is not the length of incarceration. It is the quality of housing, employment, and behavioral health support in the first 90 days.

3.2 State-Level Infrastructure

ADCRR Community Reentry Bureau

The Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry operates a Community Reentry Bureau responsible for supervising approximately 5,500 active parolees at any given time through 22 field and support units across 12 field offices statewide. The Bureau operates two Community Reentry Centers and provides coordination for electronic monitoring, the Sex Offender Coordination Unit, and specialized supervision of individuals with serious mental illness. The Bureau also administers the Absconder Reduction Program, a Maricopa County pilot offering an alternative to incarceration for individuals who have absconded from supervision.

The Residential Substance Abuse Treatment program (RSAT) represents one of the ADCRR's strongest evidence-based accomplishments. Participants in the RSAT program, which combines intensive residential treatment inside prison with structured community aftercare, reoffend at a rate of approximately 13 percent, compared to the statewide average of 36.3 percent. This 64 percent reduction in recidivism translates to an estimated three-year ROI of $4.7 million per 235 program graduates, based on avoided re-incarceration costs alone. The program operates at all state-run complexes and includes medication-assisted treatment, counseling, discharge planning, connection to community services, and enrollment in AHCCCS (Arizona Medicaid) prior to release.

DES / ARIZONA@WORK Partnership

In 2017, the Arizona Department of Economic Security and ADCRR formalized a partnership to embed employment counselors within Second Chance Centers and Community-Based Reentry

Centers. ARIZONA@WORK workforce specialists provide job readiness services, resume assistance, interview preparation, connection to background-friendly employers, and navigation of the Work Opportunity Tax Credit and Federal Bonding programs for employers willing to hire formerly incarcerated individuals. The program additionally facilitates SNAP enrollment and Medicaid applications before release, a critical step in reducing the gap between release and access to services.

3.3 Nonprofit and Community-Based Organizations

Arouet Foundation

Arouet is one of Arizona's most established and respected nonprofit reentry organizations. Operating in the Phoenix metro area, Arouet provides transitional housing, employment support, behavioral health referrals, and life skills programming. Their reentry simulation program, conducted in partnership with U.S. Attorney's Offices and Episcopal Diocese of Arizona prison ministry, puts community members through immersive, first-person experiences of the barriers returning citizens face, building public empathy and organizational capacity across the state.

Bridges Reentry, Inc.

Bridges Reentry focuses specifically on women released from ASPC-Perryville, one of the most underfunded and overcrowded women's facilities in the country. Operating the Magdalene Houses, transitional residences that expanded from one to two locations in 2024 (the second in Goodyear). Bridges provides release-day transportation, clothing, hygiene items, mentoring, and structured community reintegration. Their Transitions to Success model, implemented in partnership with other community organizations, is a coaching-based framework for moving women from basic needs to living-wage employment and family stability.

New Freedom

New Freedom distinguishes itself through an inreach model, building relationships with incarcerated individuals while they are still inside, sometimes years before their release. Through a letter-writing program that reaches thousands of inmates across Arizona and a peer mentorship structure that prepares individuals for release and builds support systems in advance, New Freedom addresses the disconnection and isolation that are among the strongest predictors of failure. Their 90-day core reentry program fills weekdays with structured programming addressing mental health, physical wellness, and community integration.

American Friends Service Committee — Arizona

AFSC Arizona has been among the state's most consistent policy reform advocates, working to reduce the prison population through strategic legislative change. They have helped draft and pass several bills creating alternative sentencing pathways for individuals with mental health diagnoses and expanded eligibility for the Transition Program allowing early release with comprehensive wraparound services. AFSC-AZ's analysis of Arizona's truth-in-sentencing laws, habitual offender provisions, and mandatory minimums has provided a research foundation for reform advocates across the political spectrum.

Old Pueblo Community Services (Tucson)

OPCS provides a comprehensive transitional living program that explicitly rejects the halfway house model in favor of a structured community environment with robust supportive services. Operating in the Tucson area, OPCS also offers a homeownership pathway program. One of the few reentry organizations in the state addressing wealth-building and long-term housing stability rather than just short-term shelter. For individuals returning to southern Arizona, OPCS is a critical anchor organization.

Pinal County Sheriff's Office Reentry Program

In a promising development for the East Valley and surrounding region, Pinal County launched a formal Reentry Program with state funding in 2024. The program embeds reentry staff directly within the jail to screen and assess individuals at booking, develop individualized discharge plans, and provide warm handoffs to community service providers. Pinal County has also achieved a nationally recognized Trauma-Informed Certification through interagency collaboration, the first county in the nation to achieve this certification through multiple agencies simultaneously, creating a shared language and practice framework for trauma-responsive reentry.

Episcopal Diocese of Arizona / Prison Ministry

The Diocese's prison ministry coordinates mentoring programs, reentry simulations, and release-day support services through Bridges Reentry. The Mentoring Beyond the Gates program pairs released women with trained mentors for intensive support during the critical 90-day post-release period. Faith communities remain an under-utilized but often deeply committed sector of Arizona's reentry infrastructure, particularly in communities where formal nonprofit services are sparse.

3.4 What Is Not There: The Gaps in the System

Even with this landscape of organizations doing meaningful work, the structural inadequacies are significant. Arizona's reentry ecosystem is fragmented, underfunded, and geographically concentrated. Most services cluster in Phoenix proper, Tucson, and select parts of the Maricopa County urban core. The Yavapai Reentry Project serves the Prescott corridor. OPCS anchors Tucson. But for the roughly 60 percent of Arizona's incarcerated population that returns to Maricopa County upon release, and particularly for those returning to the East Valley, the service landscape is nearly empty.

Section IV: The East Valley Service Desert

4.1 Geography of a Gap

The East Valley of Maricopa County encompasses some of the fastest-growing cities in the United States: Mesa, Chandler, Gilbert, Tempe, Queen Creek, and portions of Scottsdale and Apache Junction. Combined, this corridor is home to over 1.5 million residents. It is also home to a significant and growing population of formerly incarcerated individuals, many of whom settle in the East Valley because of lower rents relative to central Phoenix, proximity to family, or housing placements arranged pre-release.

Yet the East Valley has no dedicated transitional housing for returning citizens, no walk-in reentry navigation centers, no community-based reentry case management infrastructure comparable to what exists in Phoenix proper, and limited public transit options that make accessing services in central Phoenix genuinely prohibitive for individuals without vehicles, which describes the majority of people leaving prison.

What does exist in the East Valley is a collection of faith communities, emergency food pantries, and general social services that are not equipped, nor funded, to address the specific, layered needs of people navigating reentry. Background check barriers to housing are even more pronounced in East Valley rental markets, where newer residential developments and landlord associations are particularly aggressive in screening applicants. Employment, while plentiful in the distribution, logistics, and service sectors that dominate the East Valley economy, remains difficult to access for those without reliable transportation, proper identification, and the navigational support to connect with fair-chance employers.

4.2 Why the East Valley Matters

Service deserts do not just create individual hardship, they produce measurable public safety and fiscal consequences. When people returning from incarceration cannot access housing, they cycle into homelessness, which in the East Valley means increased contact with law enforcement, higher rates of return to custody for technical violations, and use of emergency services at significant public cost. When they cannot access employment navigation, they rely on informal economies — some illegal — while the region's significant demand for workers in fair-chance-friendly sectors goes unmet.

The East Valley is not poor. It has significant philanthropic, faith, and business capacity that remains largely unmobilized around reentry. Mesa alone has a large network of faith communities, several major healthcare systems, a community college with workforce development infrastructure, and a growing social entrepreneurship sector. The absence of reentry services in this region is not an absence of resources. It is an absence of intentional infrastructure and the intermediary organizations that build it.

East Valley cities are also beginning to confront the visible consequences of this gap. Mesa, in particular, has seen significant growth in unhoused populations with justice involvement. The lack of transitional housing that can legally accept individuals on supervision has contributed to

a cycle where people leave prison, cannot secure housing, violate their supervision conditions, and return to custody at cost to the state and with zero rehabilitative benefit.

4.3 What a Functional East Valley Reentry Infrastructure Would Look Like

A minimum viable reentry ecosystem for the East Valley would include the following components, which are neither novel nor experimental; they exist and work in other jurisdictions:

- A reentry navigation hub with walk-in hours, ID recovery assistance, AHCCCS enrollment support, housing referral, and employment connection, co-located with existing anchor institutions such as a community college, faith campus, or social services center
- At least one transitional housing facility, ideally a structured apartment-style program rather than a dormitory model, capable of housing 20 to 50 individuals with behavioral health support services on-site or co-located
- A formal fair chance hiring coalition engaging the region's logistics, construction, hospitality, and manufacturing employers, supported by education on WOTC and Federal Bonding incentives that reduce employer risk
- Peer navigator infrastructure staffed by individuals with lived experience of incarceration, who carry unique credibility and relational capacity with returning citizens
- A mobile or outreach-based behavioral health team serving the East Valley's supervised release population, reducing reliance on emergency services and county systems not designed for this population
- Cross-agency coordination protocols between ADCRR community supervision officers, DES ARIZONA@WORK, Maricopa County's public health and behavioral health agencies, and community-based providers

None of these components requires inventing something new. Models exist in Phoenix, in Pinal County, in Tucson, and in dozens of cities nationally. What the East Valley requires is dedicated investment, sustained leadership, and the organizational infrastructure to knit existing resources into a functional system.

Section V: What Should Be Done — A Policy and Practice Agenda

5.1 Legislative Reforms: Reducing Incarceration at the Front End

Reform Truth-in-Sentencing

Arizona is one of the last states in the country to maintain an 85 percent mandatory minimum for virtually all felony offenses regardless of offense severity, rehabilitation participation, or risk level. Mississippi and Texas, both of which were historically comparable to Arizona in punitiveness, have reformed this policy, allowing earlier release for nonviolent offenders who complete programming and demonstrate low recidivism risk. Arizona should do the same. The Academy for Justice at ASU has recommended reducing the mandatory minimum to 60 percent for nonviolent and drug offenses, with discretion restored to corrections officials to assess individual risk and rehabilitation progress. Even a modest reduction would produce substantial savings and allow the system to prioritize housing violent, high-risk individuals.

Reclassify Drug Possession and Low-Level Property Offenses

Drug possession, particularly simple possession and low-level use charges should be treated as a public health matter, not a criminal justice matter. In 2020, Arizona voters passed Proposition 207, legalizing recreational cannabis, acknowledging that criminalization of marijuana possession had failed. A similar evidence-based reclassification of personal-use quantities of other substances or at minimum, the mandatory diversion of drug possession cases to treatment courts, would reduce prison admissions substantially. Drug crimes currently account for over 20 percent of Arizona's prison population, the majority of which are possession offenses.

Restore Judicial Discretion

Mandatory minimum sentencing statutes that remove judicial discretion do not reduce crime. Research consistently shows that certainty of punishment deters crime more than severity, and that sentence length beyond a moderate threshold produces diminishing returns on public safety. Restoring the ability of judges to consider individual circumstances, risk assessments, rehabilitation potential, and the appropriateness of non-incarcerative sanctions would allow the court system to operate with greater precision and justice.

Address Pretrial Detention and Cash Bail

The fact that 80 percent of Arizona's jail population consists of legally innocent individuals who have not been convicted is a crisis of justice and efficiency. Cash bail systems detain poor people while allowing wealthier individuals charged with the same offenses to go home. Arizona should expand the use of risk-based pretrial assessment tools, presumptive release for low-risk individuals, and supervised release alternatives to pretrial detention. Reducing unnecessary pretrial detention would immediately reduce jail populations, save county costs, and reduce the collateral damages like job loss, housing loss, family disruption inflicted by even brief incarceration.

Reform Supervision Conditions

Arizona's parole and probation supervision conditions are among the most restrictive in the nation. The prohibition on 'associating' with anyone else on supervision, even family members, is particularly counterproductive, severing the social support networks that are the strongest predictors of successful reentry. Supervision conditions should be individualized, evidence-based, and proportionate to actual public safety risk rather than maximally restrictive by default.

5.2 Reentry Investment: Building What Is Missing

Fund a Statewide Reentry Infrastructure Act

Arizona should establish dedicated, sustainable state funding for community-based reentry organizations, transitional housing, and employment support services. The current patchwork of federal Second Chance Act grants, county contracts, and philanthropic funding is insufficient for the scale of need. A modest reallocation of even 2 to 3 percent of the corrections budget, approximately $25 to $45 million annually, into evidence-based community reentry programs would produce net fiscal savings through reduced recidivism, reduced jail and prison utilization, and reduced downstream social service costs.

Expand RSAT and Medicaid Reentry Waivers

Arizona is well-positioned to benefit from the federal 1115 Medicaid reentry waiver, which allows states to begin Medicaid-funded treatment services for incarcerated individuals prior to release, eliminating the gap between prison discharge and benefits activation that currently contributes to relapse and recidivism. The RSAT program has already demonstrated a 64 percent reduction in recidivism compared to baseline. Scaling RSAT across more facilities and connecting graduates to the Success Care engagement model and community behavioral health services would multiply these outcomes.

Create an East Valley Reentry Pilot Zone

The state should designate the East Valley as a priority zone for reentry investment, convening ADCRR, DES, Maricopa County, and community-based stakeholders to develop a coordinated plan. Seed funding for an East Valley Reentry Navigation Hub, co-located with an existing anchor institution, staffed by peer navigators, and integrated with ARIZONA@WORK employment services, could be accomplished within existing infrastructure with approximately $500,000 to $1.5 million in first-year investment. Federal Justice Reinvestment Initiative and Second Chance Act funds should be pursued aggressively for this purpose.

Build Fair Chance Hiring Infrastructure in the East Valley

The East Valley's economic profile, heavy in logistics, distribution, construction, and service industries, makes it an ideal testing ground for a regional fair chance hiring initiative. Employers in these sectors face persistent labor shortages. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit provides federal tax incentives worth $2,400 to $9,600 per qualifying hire for employers who bring on formerly incarcerated individuals. Federal Bonding provides free fidelity bonds that mitigate employer liability concerns. A targeted business engagement campaign, anchored by a cross-sector coalition and supported by organizations like ARIZONA@WORK, can connect the region's employers to this talent pipeline while supporting reentry.

Remove SNAP Restrictions for People on Supervision

Arizona's restriction of SNAP benefits for individuals on probation is a self-defeating policy. Food insecurity is one of the most powerful destabilizing forces in reentry, increasing stress, impairing decision-making, and reducing the cognitive and physical bandwidth needed to navigate supervision requirements, employment, and family responsibilities. The research base for this is clear: basic needs stability is a foundation for rehabilitation, not a reward for completion. Removing this restriction would cost the state nothing in corrections terms and produce tangible public safety benefits.

5.3 Systemic Reforms for the Long Term

Invest in the Communities That Feed the Prison Pipeline

The same ZIP codes, the same schools, and often the same families cycle through Arizona's criminal justice system generation after generation. This is not coincidence. It is the predictable result of concentrated poverty, under-resourced schools, inadequate behavioral health infrastructure, and housing instability. A genuine long-term strategy to reduce incarceration must invest in these communities upstream: in early childhood education, in accessible mental health services, in affordable housing, and in economic opportunity. The ACLU's Smart Justice analysis estimated that the more than $1 billion in savings from sentencing reform could fund exactly these kinds of community investments.

Measure What Matters

Arizona should mandate comprehensive public reporting on reentry outcomes by program, by county, by demographic group, and by supervision type. Current data reporting by ADCRR is improving but remains incomplete, particularly at the community-based provider level. Outcome-based funding frameworks, where state contracts reward reduced recidivism, sustained employment, and housing stability rather than simply bed-days served, would align provider incentives with genuine rehabilitation goals.

Leverage Peer Expertise

One of the most underutilized assets in Arizona's reentry ecosystem is the expertise of people who have navigated the system and rebuilt their lives. Peer navigator programs, peer support specialists, and organizations led by formerly incarcerated people demonstrate consistently better engagement outcomes with returning citizens than traditional professional service models. Arizona should actively recruit, certify, and fund peer navigators as a core workforce component of the reentry system, not as a cost-saving substitute for professional services, but as a complementary and often more effective approach.

Conclusion: The Choice Arizona Has to Make

Arizona's incarceration crisis is self-inflicted, fiscally unsustainable, and disproportionately borne by communities of color. It was built through deliberate policy choices made over three decades and it can be dismantled through equally deliberate choices made now.

The evidence is not ambiguous. Community-based treatment is more effective than incarceration for drug offenses. Shorter sentences for nonviolent offenders do not increase crime. Evidence-based reentry support dramatically reduces recidivism. Pretrial reforms can reduce jail populations without sacrificing public safety. Other states, including states not typically associated with criminal justice reform, have demonstrated all of these things at scale.

What Arizona has failed to demonstrate, at least at the legislative level, is the political will to act on this evidence. The corrections budget has grown while the education budget has been cut. Sentencing reform bills have failed to receive floor votes. The East Valley, home to over a million residents and an untold number of returning citizens, remains without a single dedicated reentry navigation center.

The costs of inaction are real and compounding. Every year Arizona warehouses a person for a nonviolent drug offense at $22,000-plus, that is a year of treatment that was not provided, a job that was not held, a family that was not stabilized, and a community that was not made safer. Every year the East Valley goes without a reentry hub is another year of people cycling back into the system for want of a bus pass, an ID, or a housing referral.

Arizona can afford to do this differently. The state cannot afford not to.

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