



Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform

2025 Legislative Priorities for Criminal Justice Reform in Maryland

End unnecessary incarceration.
Build strong, safe communities.

You can make a difference!



Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform

The Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR) is a nonpartisan, all-volunteer organization of nearly 2,000 Marylanders who advocate for evidence-based legislative and policy changes in Maryland's correctional practices. MAJR is working to address the problems of mass incarceration in several ways:

- By fully supporting alternatives to incarceration where appropriate.
- By saving taxpayer dollars and reallocating the savings to build safer communities.
- By supporting families, helping people returning from jails and prisons to lead productive lives, and preventing crime.
- By ending inequities in our justice system.

Maryland has opportunities in 2025 to ameliorate serious problems with its criminal justice system while also reducing incarceration, saving taxpayer funds, and improving public safety. MAJR's priorities are informed by workgroups that address three major policy areas.

FRONT DOOR

"Front door" policies determine involvement in our criminal justice system. These include charging decisions, pretrial detention, and alternatives such as diversion to mental health programs, mediation, and other rehabilitative services short of incarceration. "Tough-on-crime" policies and inadequate resources can worsen public safety and cause inequities; "smart-on-crime" alternatives can reduce recidivism and promote justice.

BEHIND THE WALLS

"Behind the Walls" policies control what happens once a person is sentenced to prison or jail for a crime. We know that prison does not always make our communities safer, nor change prisoners for the better. Much needs to be done to remedy these defects.

BACK DOOR

"Back Door" policies determine what happens when citizens return from prison to our communities and whether they can access resources needed to live successful, law-abiding lives. Existing policies and practices often fall very short of this goal.

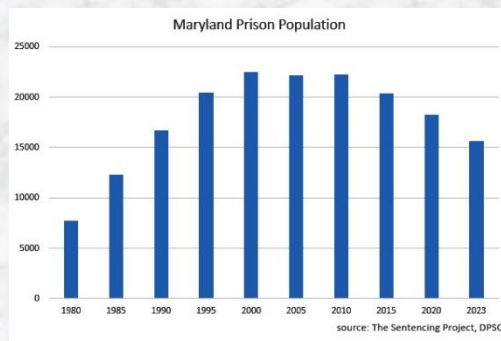
You can make a difference!

To learn how you can support these initiatives or to suggest other steps to reduce mass incarceration in Maryland and make our criminal justice more fair, more effective, and less costly, please contact us at www.ma4jr.org

Overview

Maryland's prison population, like that of other states in the U.S., [tripled](#) between 1980 and 2000—the result of a misguided national "tough-on-crime" movement. This made the U.S. rate of incarceration the highest in the world by far. At the same time, African Americans were arrested, convicted, and incarcerated at [much higher rates](#) than whites with similar profiles.

In recent years, Maryland and other states have begun to turn the tide of mass incarceration with "Justice Reinvestment" and other evidence-based strategies. Yet after an increase of more than 300%, Maryland's prison populations [declined](#) by only 25% between 2008 and 2018. Moreover, today “Maryland [leads the nation](#) in the incarceration of young Black men.”



A recent [national survey](#) found that “85 percent of respondents supported making rehabilitation the goal of the criminal justice system rather than punishment.” It is [universally recognized](#) that education and job-training during incarceration offer the most effective means of reducing future offenses. Yet in Maryland prisons, rehabilitative services, meaningful job-training, and education are too scarce.

MAJR urges legislators in 2025 to support studies to eliminate racial disparities in our criminal justice system and reform Maryland's felony murder doctrine; to address pretrial incarceration; to restrain police from lying to get confessions; to limit the use of solitary confinement; to permit a second look at sentencing; to treat our aged and infirm population with respect; to help returning citizens gain a clean slate, and alleviate their unfair tax penalties.

Forty years ago, U.S. Supreme Court [Chief Justice Warren Burger](#) argued that our prisons should become a place where incarcerated people become educated and productive citizens able to make positive contributions to their communities and their families upon release. The Chief Justice’s words have only become more salient today.



iStock.com/allanswart

The Front Door

Resources

Guyora Binder, [Felony Murder](#), 2012.

Nazgol Ghandnoosh et al., [Felony Murder: An On-Ramp for Extreme Sentencing](#), Sentencing Project, 2022.

The Marshall Project Asks: [Can It Be Murder If You Didn't Kill Anyone?](#), 2018.

Restore Justice, [Know More: Felony Murder](#)

Lila Meadows, [Abolish Felony Murder in Maryland](#), 2019.

[Why Did I Serve 16 Years for Murder When I Didn't Kill Anyone?](#), 2019.

National Institute of Justice, [Five Things About Deterrence](#), 2016

Lindsay Turner, [Task Force on Aiding and Abetting Felony Murder](#)

Guilt by Association

Can people be found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison even if the court knows they didn't kill anyone? In Maryland, the answer is yes, because of our state's longstanding policy known as the "felony-murder rule."

Maryland courts don't keep track of how often this rule is used. But up to 25% of murder convictions in other states are for killings the defendant did not commit. Hawaii, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Michigan have legislatively abolished the rule, as have most other countries. Pennsylvania has a similar bill under consideration. California and Illinois have substantially narrowed their felony-murder law.

Does the felony-murder rule deter crime? One survey found that fewer than 1% charged with felony murder knew of the rule before their arrest. Another study has found no difference in the crime rates of states with and without the felony-murder rule.

Yet approximately 50% of young men and 72% of young women received life sentences under this rule for killings they did not commit!

You can make a difference!

Work with MAJR to support a commission to determine how many people are unjustly incarcerated under this rule, and how to make Maryland law more just.

[Read more](#)



iStock.com/fcscafeine

The Front Door

Resources

Maya Szilak, [Maryland Needs to Keep Up the Momentum on Juvenile Justice Reforms](#), 2022.

Robert Hahn et.al. [“Effects on Violence of Laws and Policies Facilitating the Transfer of Youth from the Juvenile to the Adult Justice System,”](#) 2007.

Rutherford Hogan, [“Juveniles Charged as Adults in Maryland \(7/2019-12/2019\)”](#)

Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform, [A Plan to Fix “The Mess” in Maryland Prisons?](#), 2015.

[Restorative Schools Maryland](#)

Justice for Youth

Decades ago, Maryland joined a U.S. “tough-on-crime” movement that treats many minors as adults and increases their penalties. These policies have led to large youth prison populations that disproportionately impact poor children and children of color.

Police who interrogate youth currently are permitted to lie to them, seeking to induce confessions. This immoral practice leads to false convictions of juveniles at a rate three times higher than adults, according to one study. Such unreliable confessions should be inadmissible in court!

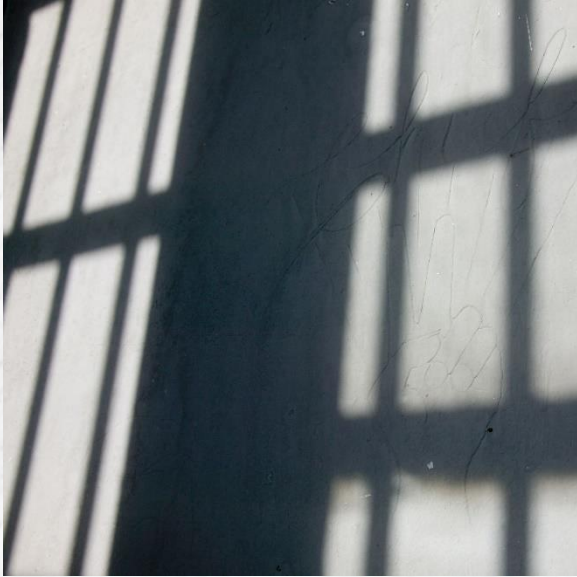
In addition, under current Maryland law, the default for youth accused of committing certain categories of crimes is to prosecute them in adult court. But Maryland's juvenile court system offers rehabilitative services tailored to the needs of juveniles.

The common-sense approach to address this problem is to start all juveniles charged with these serious crimes in the juvenile system, yet allow prosecutors to petition the juvenile court to move the case to adult court.

You can make a difference!

Please join MAJR in supporting legislation to implement both of these approaches in the 2025 Maryland General Assembly.

[**Read more**](#)



The Front Door

Resources

Christine Blumauer, *et al*, [Advancing Bail Reform In Maryland](#), 2018

Dobbie, *et al*, [The Effects of Pre-Trial Detention](#), 2016

National Institute of Corrections, [Pretrial](#), 2020

Innocence Project, [Why Do Innocent People Plead Guilty?](#), 2018

Pretrial Incarceration

It is the bedrock of the American criminal justice system that one accused of a crime is presumed innocent until proven guilty. But this is not the reality for a large number of Marylanders who experience pretrial incarceration. Especially those who are poor, Black, or Brown.

Anyone can be accused of a crime simply by someone signing a statement of charges before a District Court Commissioner, without any documentation or evidence whatsoever. In Maryland, a prosecutor may not have reviewed the merits of the accusation before a judge's decision to hold or release the accused person until the trial date -- which may be months away.

Defendants who find themselves in jail have difficulty planning their defense, contacting witnesses, and collecting evidence. Prosecutors may convince defendants to plead guilty, not necessarily because they are guilty, but because they need to get out of jail: the rent is due, they need their job, the children need to be cared for.

You can make a difference!

MAJR and Marylanders support a new commission to address pretrial incarceration: early screening of pretrial decisions; statistics on race and ethnicity of plea agreements; and investigation of policies on plea bargaining.

[**Read more**](#)



iStock.com/SlaterNick

Behind the Walls

Resources

Emily Widra, [The Aging Prison Population: Causes, Costs, and Consequences](#), 2023

ACLU of Maryland, [Still Blocking the Exit](#), 2015

Justice Policy Institute, [“Rethinking the Overincarceration of Black Young Adults in Maryland,”](#) 2019

Justice Policy Institute, [“Safe at Home: Improving Maryland’s Parole Release Decision-Making,”](#) 2023

Geriatric and Medical Parole

The issuance of long sentences has resulted in an older and increasingly unhealthy population of Marylanders behind bars. Incarcerating older people is expensive—as much as triple the cost of imprisoning a younger person—and serves no counterbalancing public safety benefit.

People age out of crime, for a variety of reasons: they become less impulsive or more risk-averse; they may be less up to the physical demands of criminal activity. Equally important, over 10 or 20 years, they also often undergo profound moral and emotional changes, rendering them both deserving and capable of integrating into the community.

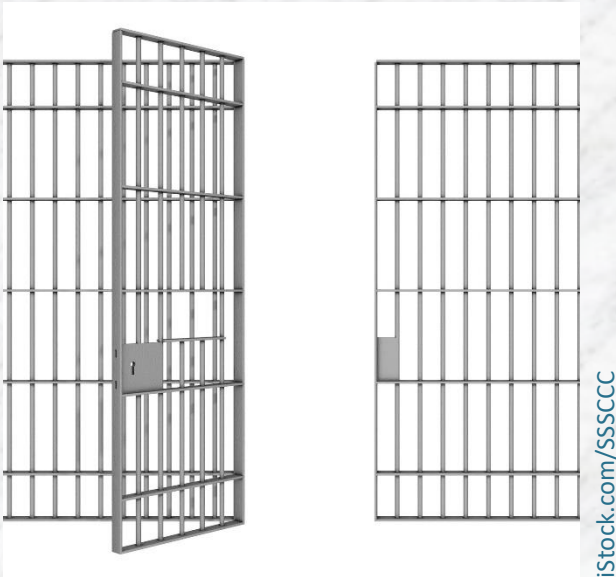
Older people make up five times more of the prison population than they did three decades ago. The Justice Policy Institute (JPI) estimates that Maryland imprisons approximately 3,000 people over age 50, and nearly 1,000 who are 60 or older. Geriatric and medical parole could have a huge impact on reducing our prison population and huge budget burden—safely.

Nearly every state allows people with certain serious medical conditions to be eligible for parole. Most states also have laws that allow for consideration for release when a person reaches a specified age. It’s time for Maryland to step up and pass such legislation as well.

You can make a difference!

Join with MAJR and Marylanders everywhere to achieve a more humane policy on parole.

[Read more](#)



Behind the Walls

Resources

Justice Policy Institute, "[The Ungers, 5 Years and Counting: A Case Study in Safely Reducing Long Prison Terms and Saving Taxpayer Dollars](#)", 2018

Marc Mauer and Ashley Nellis, [The Meaning of Life: the Case for Abolishing Life Sentences](#), 2018

Judith Lichtenberg, "[Abolish Life Sentences](#)," *Aeon*, 2022

ACLU, "[Life After a Second Chance](#),"

Second Look Act

Second Look legislation would ensure that people who have been rehabilitated and have transformed their lives after years in prison have a meaningful avenue for release.

Second Look laws provide a path through the courts that would allow prisoners who have served at least 20 years to request hearings for possible resentencing.

Maryland has strong evidence in support of such legislation. In 2012, 235 people in Maryland who had been convicted before 1981 became eligible for retrial when their sentences were found unconstitutional. Because so much time had passed since their convictions, retrials were impractical and prosecutors often negotiated releases with more supervision time on probation.

Nearly 90 percent of those inmates were Black; they had served an average of 39 years; none had been released on parole; their average age was 64. By 2018, 188 of them had been released. As of 2021, they had less than a 3% recidivism rate as compared to 40% for the general prison population.

You can make a difference!

Join with MAJR and the Second Look Coalition in supporting legislation that would allow incarcerated people who have served 20 years or more to request a hearing for resentencing.

[Read more](#)



iStock.com/tiero

Behind the Walls

Resources

Interfaith Action for Human Rights, [Torture Free MD Campaign: It's Time to End Long-Term Solitary Confinement in Maryland](#), 2024

United Nations, [Nelson Mandela Rules on Treatment of Prisoners](#), 2015

Atul Gawande, [Hellhole](#), 2009

Justin D. Strong et al., [The Body in Isolation: the Physical Health Impacts of Incarceration in Solitary Confinement](#), 2020

Tiana Herring, [The Research Is Clear: Solitary Confinement Causes Long-Lasting Harm](#), 2020

Solitary Confinement

Solitary confinement—generally known in Maryland as “restrictive housing”—was originally intended to separate dangerous prisoners from others, and to keep vulnerable prisoners safe temporarily.

But in Maryland solitary is used far more widely. Prisoners who have committed minor rule violations, many mentally ill, are often put in isolation, sometimes for long periods. They typically live in small cells for up to 22 or more hours a day—for weeks, months, or even years.

This practice often causes irreparable physical and mental harm, both to the individual and to others with whom they later have contact. Other, more positive alternatives could be used instead.

MAJR joins with Interfaith Action for Human Rights (IAHR) in supporting legislation to cap a single use of punitive solitary at 15 days; to prohibit it for vulnerable people; to severely limit the practice for juveniles; and to mandate that those involuntarily put in restrictive housing be allowed to contest their confinement.

You can make a difference!

Join with MAJR and IAHR to address inhumane punishments.

[Read more](#)



iStock.com/Hajohooos

The Back Door

Resources

Clean Slate Initiative, [Unlocking Opportunity](#), 2023

Restoration of Rights Project, [50 State Comparison on Expungement, Sealing, and Other Record Relief](#), 2021

Margaret Love and David Schlussel, [Waiting for Relief](#), 2022.

Clean Slate Initiative, [We All Deserve a Chance for Redemption](#), 2022.

National Expungement Data Center, [Is Your State Clean?](#), 2022.

National Conference of State Legislatures, [Automatic Expungement of Juvenile Records](#), 2021.

Clean Slate Initiative

Did you know that even after serving their time, many people face barriers to employment, housing, and education because old charges remain on their records? The current system requires individuals to petition for expungement even when:

- They were not found guilty,
- Charges were dismissed,
- They were not prosecuted,
- The conviction is no longer a crime,
- They were found not criminally responsible, or
- They were pardoned by the Governor.

These lingering records create significant obstacles for those striving to rebuild their lives. The Clean Slate Act of 2025 seeks to change that by introducing automatic sealing for eligible nonviolent misdemeanor and felony records, removing the need for individuals to navigate complex and costly petition processes.

Legislation is needed which would ensure a fairer pathway to second chances by automatically sealing records after set waiting periods, so Marylanders can move forward without unwarranted barriers.

You can make a difference!

Support the Clean Slate Act of 2025 and other expungement reforms to reduce waiting periods, eliminate barriers for mistaken identity cases, and promote the economic growth of our communities.

[**Read more**](#)



Raja Rc | Dreamstime.com

The Back Door

Resources

Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service, [Maryland Lawmakers Take Steps Toward Improving Resources for Returning Citizens](#), 2023.

American Bar Association, [Inmate Tax Assistance Project](#), 2023.

U.S. Department of Treasury, [Reentry Myth Busters: Federal Taxes](#), 2023.

Fair Taxation

Returning citizens with state tax debts in Maryland face mounting interest during their incarceration. These financial burdens can hinder their reintegration, making it harder to achieve economic stability and secure employment.

Under current law, returning citizens are subject to high-interest rates and penalties on unpaid state taxes even if:

- They were incarcerated and unable to earn income,
- The tax debt accrued entirely during their incarceration,
- They are committed to paying their debt post-release but face severe financial strain.

The **Maryland Fair Taxation for Returning Citizens Act** provides a structured approach to assist returning citizens in managing state tax debt by capping interest rates; waiving penalties; offering payment plans; and providing education and outreach.

These provisions enable returning citizens to address their financial obligations, gradually allowing them to focus on rebuilding their lives and contributing positively to their communities without the overwhelming burden of accumulated tax debt.

You can make a difference!

Give returning citizens a fair chance at economic independence! Help promote economic stability and support the successful reintegration of returning citizens by supporting the **Maryland Fair Taxation Act**.

[Read more](#)



istock.com/LOUOATES

“Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. . . .The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”

Brian Stevenson, *Just Mercy*

"Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings."

Angela Davis

Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform

Contact us:

Front-Door Workgroup

Behind the Walls Workgroup

Back-Door Workgroup