



Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform

# 2026 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 over 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.

In 2026 Maryland can improve on 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" 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.
- "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. Particularly, overuse of solitary confinement and limits on rehabilitative resources (education, job-training, counseling) must be addressed.
- "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.

**MAJR urges legislators in 2026 to accelerate efforts and provide the needed budget adjustments to fill staff vacancies, arrange studies to eliminate racial disparities in our criminal justice system, and address victims of abuse caught in the criminal justice system.**

You can make a difference! Visit <https://ma4jr.org> today!



# Overview: Prison concerns & budgets collide.

It is well-known that Maryland's prison population—like that of other states—[tripled](#) between 1980 and 2000 as a result of the misguided national “tough-on-crime” movement, with African Americans disproportionately impacted. There are simply too many people in prison.

As a result Maryland's prisons are today dysfunctional: a crying need for resources; an inability to provide adequate support.

Maryland's prison administrators report that they cannot hire correctional officers quickly enough to replace those leaving. As stated in Maryland's prisons' [FY26 budget overview](#), “**CO (Correctional Officer) vacancies are particularly troubling as low staffing rates contribute to inmate idleness, safety risks, and a reduced emphasis on rehabilitation.**” A short term solution, in part, must make these positions more attractive, which temporarily will require additional resources. But that alone will not solve the long term problem.

[Governor Moore's decision](#) in September 2025 to close the aging Maryland Correctional Institution–Jessup was very good news. The state's remaining prisons do not operate at full capacity, creating an opportunity to redistribute people and resources more efficiently. Doing so can ease staffing pressures while improving safety and operations across the system.

Many persons in Maryland's jails and prisons should be receiving mental health care rather than correctional supervision. Yet the state lacks sufficient treatment capacity, forcing correctional officers to fill roles they are not trained for. Expanding mental health resources is essential to addressing this mismatch.

Other budget mismatches contribute to still more problems in Maryland's prison environment. Returning citizens are required to wait years for their risk assessment and discharge plans to be completed.

The Second Look and Geriatric/Medical Parole acts would safely reduce the population while generating significant cost savings for the state, with no detriment to public safety if sufficient budget support is provided for their transitional housing. Along with more appropriate parole policies and diversion of people whose primary issues are substance use or mental health crises, these reforms can move Maryland toward a smaller, more rational, humane and cost-effective incarceration system.

## **You can make a difference.**

Maryland needs your help now to work for smaller prisons, for a sensible budget, for financially supporting a more complete and professional correctional officer staff, for ensuring more equitable and humane treatment of Maryland's prison population.



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# Racial Disparities in Maryland's Criminal Justice System

The Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services' Division of Correction reports that out of the 17,586 incarcerated individuals in Maryland as of January 1, 2025, Black individuals comprise approximately 12,675, or 72%, of that total. [This data shows](#) that Black individuals are more than twice as likely to be incarcerated in Maryland compared to their proportion of the State's population (29%) and are more than five times as likely to be incarcerated compared to white individuals.

The Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy recommends the Maryland General Assembly fund a comprehensive study focusing on data regarding arrest, pretrial detention, and prosecution charging decisions.

By comparison, a [July 2020 Wisconsin report](#) found Blacks' rate of incarceration on violations of probation especially disproportionate; a prior local Wisconsin study found that white defendants were 74% more likely to receive a plea agreement without incarceration than Black defendants.

From such a study Maryland could identify our trouble points and devise policies to eliminate sources of racial discrimination in our systems.

## Resources

Badger Institute, [Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System in Wisconsin, 2020](#)

Harvard Law School, [A Major Disparity in Massachusetts Criminal Justice, 2020](#)

Univ. South Carolina, [Prosecutor Seeks to Document, Eliminate Racial Disparities in Justice System, 2021](#)

Univ. South Carolina, [Disparities in the Criminal Justice System, 2023](#)

Jenia I. Turner, [Transparency in Plea Bargaining, 2021](#)

Rafael Regales, [Racial equity impact note to Second Look Act in Maryland legislature 2025. Feb 2025](#)



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# Maryland PATH Act

## Providing Alternatives Through Healing

The PATH Act ensures Maryland takes a trauma-informed approach to justice by recognizing that many incarcerated individuals—especially women and LGBTQ+ people—are survivors of domestic violence whose offenses are directly tied to abuse, coercion, and trauma.

Too often, these criminalized survivors are unable to present evidence of abuse during trial or sentencing and are punished instead of protected. The PATH Act allows courts to consider domestic violence as a mitigating factor, depart from mandatory minimums, and modify sentences when appropriate, aligning Maryland with national efforts in states like New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Louisiana to deliver fair, compassionate, and survivor-centered justice.

Many individuals who are victims of domestic abuse share troubling stories of their experience with the criminal legal system. They express being treated as if they were the problem instead of survivors of coercion and abuse. Dismissive responses to trauma and abuse merely compound the hurt when survivors need compassion the most.

### You can make a difference!

Now is the time for Maryland to take a giant step forward, actively listen to the voices of criminalized survivors, credit their histories of trauma and abuse as mitigation as they are funneled through the criminal legal system.

## Resources

The New York State Senate, [Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act \(DVSJA\)](#), 2019

Battered Women's Justice Project, [Myths and Misconceptions: Criminalized Survivors](#), 2023

[The Louisiana Justice for Survivors Act](#), 2023

[The Oklahoma Survivors Act](#), 2024

Sentencing Project [Sentencing Reform for Criminalized Survivors Learning from New York's Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act](#), 2024

[Oregon Survivors Act](#), 2025



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## Charging Children as Adults

Under current Maryland law, youth accused of committing certain categories of crimes are prosecuted in adult court, with the defense able to petition the adult court to return the case to juvenile court.

In November 2025, Maryland's Commission on Juvenile Justice Reform concluded that this approach is both ineffective and harmful, urging that all youth cases begin in the juvenile system with judges retaining discretion to waive cases upward when appropriate.

The study notes that "85% of these cases are eventually dismissed or sent back to juvenile court after youth have spent weeks or months in adult detention without access to rehabilitative services shown to reduce reoffending." This practice disproportionately impacts children of color and places children in dangerous environments that more often result in subsequent criminal behavior.

The commission estimated that adopting a policy to begin all youth cases in the juvenile system could save the state \$17 million annually.

**You can make a difference!**

Please join MAJR in supporting legislation to implement common sense policies with respect to juvenile charging procedures in the 2026 Maryland General Assembly.

## The Front Door

### Resources

Maryland Commission on Juvenile Justice and Emerging Best Practices, "[Maryland's JJDA Compliance Crisis: Children in Adult Detention](#)", 2025

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 GOCPP, [Maryland's JJDA Compliance Crisis: Children in Adult Detention](#), 2025.

Ian Round, [Maryland commission recommends ending automatic charging of kids as adults](#), November 2025

Sentencing Project, [Automatically Charging Youth as Adults](#), Dec 2025



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## The Front Door

# Juvenile Interrogation

When questioning a juvenile suspect, police in Maryland – and most U.S. states – are allowed to lie in an attempt to trick the suspect into a confession or admitting to a lesser charge.

For example, a seemingly friendly policeman may falsely promise leniency in exchange for a confession; or, he may falsely report that another juvenile has implicated the others being questioned.

Children are especially vulnerable to such tactics. Neurobiological and psychological studies repeatedly cited by the Supreme Court highlight the way in which minors are less competent decision-makers and are “more vulnerable . . . to the influence of coercive circumstances . . . such as provocation, duress, or threat.” They are deferential to authority figures and significantly more likely to falsely confess to crimes.

In 2021, Illinois became the first state to ban police deception in juvenile interrogations, making confessions inadmissible if they were obtained through deceptive practices. Other states such as Oregon, Delaware, Utah, Indiana, and Colorado have followed with similar laws.

### You can make a difference!

Please join MAJR in supporting legislation to limit the use of confessions obtained by deception in the 2026 Maryland General Assembly!

### Resources

Kate Bryan, "[Recent State Laws Strengthen Rights of Juveniles During Interrogations](#)", NCSL, 2024.

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

Innocence Project: [Five Facts About Police Deception and Youth You Should Know](#), 2022

Gross, [et.al. Exonerations in the United States 1989-2003](#)



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# Solitary Confinement

- Solitary confinement—known in Maryland as “restrictive housing”—was originally intended to separate the most dangerous prisoners from others, and to keep vulnerable prisoners safe temporarily.
- But in Maryland and elsewhere, solitary is used far more widely. Prisoners who have committed minor rule violations, many of whom are mentally ill, are often put in isolation, sometimes for long periods.
- Prisoners in solitary typically live in cells about the size of a parking space for more than 22 hours a day—for weeks, months, or even years.
- When protracted, solitary causes irreparable physical and mental harm, both to the individual and to others with whom they later have contact.

## You can make a difference!

MAJR joins with [Interfaith Action for Human Rights](#) in supporting the Mandela Act. It would cap the use of solitary to 15 days; prohibit it for vulnerable people; severely limit the practice for juveniles; and require that those put in restrictive housing be allowed to contest their confinement.

In addition, it would require that staff involved with restrictive housing undergo training, and that correctional facilities create and publish a monthly report with information about individuals in restrictive housing.

## Behind the Walls

### Resources

Resolution adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on [17 December 2015, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners \(“the Nelson Mandela Rules”\)](#).

Tiana Herring, “The research is clear: Solitary confinement causes long-lasting harm,” [Prison Policy Initiative](#), 2020.

Andrea Fenster, “New data: Solitary confinement increases the risk of premature death after release,” [Prison Policy Initiative](#), 2020.

Kayla James and Elena Vanko, “The Impacts of Solitary Confinement,” [Vera Institute of Justice](#), 2021.

Hernandez D. Strout, “Reforming Solitary Confinement Without the High Court,” [Brennan Center for Justice](#), 2024.

Solitary Confinement in the United States: The Facts. [Solitary Watch](#). 2023

[Unlock the Box](#): The National Campaign to End Solitary Confinement.



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# Prison Education

The Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission (PEDRC) was created by [SB 0623](#) in 2024 to develop recommendations to improve education in prisons and jails. It arises out of the recognition that **education is essential to helping incarcerated people prepare for reentry** into the community and that educational opportunities (including GED preparation, college education, and vocational training) have declined in the last decades.

PEDRC has voted to support the following pieces of legislation, which will be introduced in the 2026 Session of the Maryland House of Delegates:

- A school board to oversee adult correctional education. Members would include the Departments of Public Safety and Correctional Services, Labor, Higher Education, and Correctional Enterprises, as well as related nonprofit and returning citizen organizations.
- Access to certain state grants and scholarships for incarcerated college students.
- Access to tuition waiver programs for incarcerated students like those available to homeless and foster care students.
- Official state certificate recognition of the Certified Peer Recovery Specialist program within prisons and during parole.
- Change in the requirement to obtain a GED high school diploma by expanding options for a regular high school diploma and a Certificate of Completion for certain students with disabilities.

## Behind the Walls

### Resources

[Prison Education Delivery Commission; 2025 Report](#)

[Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission](#)

Prison Education: Maximizing the Potential for Employment and Successful Community Reintegration, [Abell Foundation](#), 2017

Are Schools in Prison Worth It? The Effects of and Economic Returns to Prison Education, [Steven Sprick Schuster & Ben Stickle](#), 2023

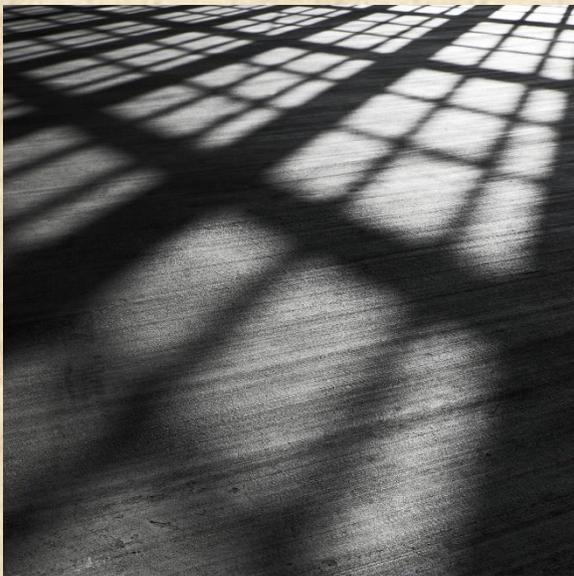
Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education [Lois M. Davis et al.](#), 2013

Ensuring Educational Technology Access for Incarcerated Students [Ford School of Public Policy](#), 2025

State Ranking of Prison Education Programs [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#), 2024



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## 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 Schlüssel, [Waiting for Relief](#), 2022.

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

National Expungement Data Center, [Is Your Slate 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 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.

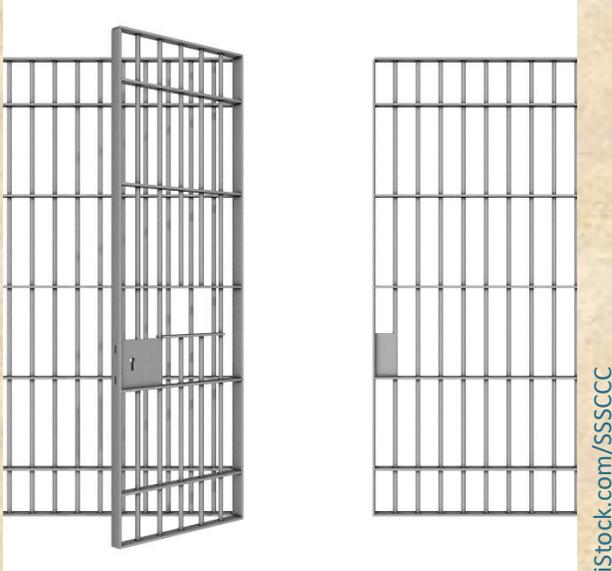
Legislation is needed which would ensure a fairer pathway to second chances by automatically sealing records after set waiting periods, so Marylanders can move forward without unwarranted barriers.

### You can make a difference!

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



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## Fair Housing

Access to safe, stable housing is one of the most powerful predictors of successful reintegration, economic stability, and community safety. Yet thousands of Marylanders with past justice system involvement are routinely denied housing based solely on their records—often before their ability to pay rent, employment status, or personal references are even considered.

Fair housing screening policies that delay criminal background inquiries and require individualized assessments create a more just and effective approach to housing access. These reforms promote personal accountability while recognizing rehabilitation, reduce costly cycles of incarceration, and address long-standing racial inequities in housing and the justice system. By removing unnecessary barriers to housing, Maryland can strengthen families, stabilize neighborhoods, and ensure that a past mistake does not become a permanent sentence to instability and exclusion.

### You Can Make a Difference

Supporting fair chance housing policies advances racial equity, economic mobility, and community safety by ensuring that a past conviction does not become a lifelong sentence to housing instability. When people have access to stable housing, entire communities benefit through reduced recidivism, stronger families, and safer neighborhoods.

## The Back Door

### Resources

Vera Institute, [“Advocates Urge Passage of the Maryland Fair Chance Housing Act”](#) 2025

Housing Coalition, [Maryland Fair Chance Housing Act: Frequently Asked Questions](#), 2025

Jocelyn Fontaine and Jennifer Biess, [Housing as a Platform for Formerly Incarcerated Persons](#), 2012

Phillippa Carnemolla and Vivienne Skinner, [“Outcomes Associated with Providing Secure, Stable, and Permanent Housing for People Who Have Been Homeless,”](#)2011

Leah A. Jacobs and Aaron Gottlieb, [“The Effect of Housing Circumstances on Recidivism”](#), 2020

Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs, [The Collateral Consequences of Arrests and Convictions under D.C., Maryland, and Virginia Law](#), 2014



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"A democracy cannot thrive where power remains unchecked, and justice is reserved for a select few"  
John Lewis

"A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones"  
Nelson Mandela

"True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice"  
Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform

Contact us:

[Front-Door Workgroup](#)

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[Back-Door Workgroup](#)