

Inside / Outside

INSIDE ARIZONA'S PUNISHMENT SYSTEM:

Part 4: The Post-Release Life Tail

DRAPETOMANIA COLLECTIVE 2021





Dragnetomania

COLLECTIVE

in collaboration with the Reframing
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AUTHOR NOTE

The Drapetomania Collective is an Arizona-based, inside-out, underground formation of formerly and currently incarcerated women and their impacted comrades on the outside. The following research series is the first public presentation since its formation in 2018.

Artwork by various artists currently and formerly incarcerated in Perryville and Lewis prisons.

Please visit drapetomaniacollective.org to learn more.

***And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.***

Introduction

Our series thus far has unveiled patterns of criminalization, contradictions of the criminal legal system, the hypocrisy of rehabilitation, and the abuse we face inside. Collectively this series makes clear that, despite its name change, the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry does not help people heal nor prepare them for reentry.

In fact, according to AZDCRR's own data, 50.8% of people currently incarcerated have a history of a prior term of incarceration.¹ Arizona ranks as having the fourth highest incarceration rate in the United States. It is also the only state that mandates our population serve at least 85% of their time before being released, with scarce opportunities for earned release credit, no parole board, and an effectively non-functioning clemency process.²

The size of Arizona's female imprisoned population has grown 20 times over, from 180 in 1978 to 3,720 in 2017, and doubling since 2000 alone.^{3,4} Statistics show that our female population is contributing to mass incarceration at a high rate and is exacerbated by Arizona's lack of release options. Out of the thousands of women who have been admitted to Arizona's prisons, approximately 66% have a prior felony conviction – surpassing the overall average. As a result of

these alarming statistics, we are concluding this four-part series with an examination of what we understand to be the barriers to successful re-integration post-incarceration.

The vast majority of people currently incarcerated will be released. In fact, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that over 600,000 people are released from federal and state prisons each year. Any one of us could potentially be your neighbor one day. Our friend Winter asked a question we are all plagued with: “Even after climbing the mountain and getting out, how well am I going to be received?” (Winter interview, 2019). **Will we be welcome in the community? Will we be able to find a job that allows us to support ourselves? Will we be able to attend school? Will we be able to secure housing? Will we be able to see our children?** Amid so many unknowns, what we do know, as we have spoken directly about throughout this series, is that we have not received meaningful support, and in fact face leaving prison with more damage than we started with. While ADCRR has failed to prepare us for release, we discuss in the following report the ways the prison's ideologies of punishment have extended into the public: discriminatory policy and practices guarantee that our sentence is anything but over.

1. <https://corrections.az.gov/sites/default/files/REPORTS/CAG/2021/cagjune-21.pdf>

2. See our second report for an in-depth discussion of the process and outcomes of Arizona's Board of Executive Clemency.

3. <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-arizona.pdf>

4. <https://36shgf3jsufe2xojr925ehv6-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/PART-3-The-Harm-to-Women-and-Families.pdf>; Significantly, during the same time period, the national incarcerated female population only grew 19% compared to Arizona's 104%.

Recidivism is built into Arizona's method of punishment. The conditions placed on post-incarcerated women are so excessive that meeting the requirements is nearly unattainable. Moreover, these requirements directly impede our ability to find adequate work, housing, healthcare, and other services necessary to survive, rebuild our lives – or even stay free. As with the previous reports in this four-part series, the present report reflects in-depth interviews with over 30 women in the Arizona Department of Corrections, Perryville Complex. Through our conversations, we found common concerns surrounding release, including: release conditions, support systems, resources, societal acceptance/discrimination, trauma and emotional health. The following report focuses on the obstacles we face when preparing to re-integrate back into society. We conclude with recommendations for a different pathway forward.



Landing on Our Feet

The anxiety all of us share about release lies largely in the uncertainty of it all. *Where will we live? Will anyone hire us? Will we ever feel accepted? How will we heal? Is it safe for us to dream about our futures?* From those anticipating release soon to those treading the delicate tightrope of hope for relief from life sentences, we struggle to know what we can plan for. As one of our participants put it: “When you say, I’m preparing for release, how do you prepare when you don’t even know what you’re going to? We don’t know what we’re walking into” (Zumaya interview, 2019).

Every woman we spoke to for this project shared that trying to prepare for release felt overwhelming – not because they were concerned about their own capabilities, but because we know the world we enter after years of separation and now with felony convictions will be an entirely new place. The emotional toll of imagining release is even harder on those whose release is still years away. Marlee, who still has 12 years left, shared: “We don’t really like to think about the going home time. It’s still really far off” (Marlee interview, 2019). We don’t know so much about what is possible for us after prison. We are confronted with enormous obstacles without the benefit of preparation to meet them.

All of the women with whom we spoke have or will experience struggles with the most basic of release conditions: housing, transportation, and employment. Upon release, society demands that we immediately rise to the occasion of being a productive member of the society from which we have been isolated. The brutal reality of spending years of our lives trying to prepare from behind bars and reintegrate back into the community with nothing to show for it sets the stage for the

first step backwards. As one woman put it,

I have to start over with everything – clothes, shelter, food, a job, and it’s overwhelming to think of even now.

(Anonymous interview, 2019)

Starting over is hard enough. If you have a felony record, there are significant obstacles to overcome just to meet basic needs around housing and employment. These two imperatives are also frequently part of our release conditions. This means if we are unable to meet them, and urgently, our release will be revoked and we will be sent back to prison.

Although not everyone meets the requirement, the average Arizona prisoner walks out with only a \$50 “gate fee” – this is the amount that is set aside to supply us with the things we need to leave prison. The financial burden for just basic survival for the first few days home creates a huge stressor because we know the \$50 is going to quickly run out.

The First 72 Hours

[The Marshall Project](#) reports that “the first 72 hours after release are critical to determining whether a former inmate’s path will lead away from prison or make a sharp U-turn.”

Things as small as paying the fee to obtain a state issued ID or driver's license, a few clothing items, and food for a few days becomes a huge burden and leaves us wondering how we are going to be able to make it to the next day. If we don't have our housing already arranged, we must put our \$50 toward a hotel lest we end up on the street. Being able to land at a halfway house or a rental of our own requires substantial financial support, which not everyone has. **After subsidizing our own incarceration at great financial detriment to our families for years, we have had no opportunity to save for our futures.**⁵

Housing

A good portion of our population must provide an approved housing accommodation prior to being processed for release. This is an extremely difficult task to accomplish from behind bars, especially with ambivalent officers assigned as our "counselors." **Denial of housing due to criminal background is not illegal in Arizona, or nationally.** While fair housing laws prohibit discrimination based on "race, color, religion, sex, national origin, familial status or physical or mental disability," past felony conviction status is not a protected class.⁶ **As such, landlords and property managers have ample opportunity to automatically reject applications for housing from formerly incarcerated people – and they do.**

Discrimination and Homelessness

As [Prison Policy Initiative](#) research demonstrates, "The use of credit checks, exorbitant security deposits, and other housing application requirements – such as professional references – can also act as systemic barriers for people who have spent extended periods of time away from the community and out of the labor market." It is not surprising, then, as they report, that "formerly incarcerated people are almost 10 times more likely to be homeless than the general public" (Id.). Further, this impact is gendered: formerly incarcerated women have been reported to be twice as likely as men to experience homelessness upon their release.⁷

The threat of homelessness if we are unable to secure housing is compounded by the larger housing crisis. Patricia McKernan (2017), writing for the Journal of Community Corrections, points out that "Homelessness, housing instability, and the lack of affordable housing are inextricably linked."⁸ And this "lack of affordable housing leaves ex-offenders competing for the same limited resources with others who have no criminal history" (Id.). In Arizona, with its particular thirst for conservative tough-on-crime dead ends, "the appetite for restricting benefits to ex-offenders is strong" (Id.). This mentality seeps out through lack of legal protections and generally applauded efforts to keep neighborhoods "crime free." By appeasing this pattern, the state perpetuates its own crisis while averting the public gaze; McKernan (2017) notes: "Making individuals and families ineligible for services reduces the appearance of a demand for social entitlements and therefore reduces the obligation of the public entity to provide such services." Because ex-prisoners are not a protected class and their discrimination is normalized, it is hard to account for the sheer numbers of formerly incarcerated people affected by housing instability or inaccessibility. Meanwhile, the state is absolved of all social duty.

5. See our third report for more on prison labor, fees, and the costs of hygiene, food, and medical care for our population.

6. <https://www.azag.gov/civil-rights/fair-housing/what-is-fair-housing>

7. <https://www.voa.org/homelessness-and-prisoner-reentry>, citing Fries, Fedock, and Kubiak (2014, p. 112).

8. <https://www.voa.org/homelessness-and-prisoner-reentry>

Demand for housing is so high and the resources are so scarce that our assigned COIII cannot even assist us with finding a location that will accept us. **For some of us, this can cause our release date to be delayed, forcing us to stay in prison longer.** Often these concerns are ignored by prison staff, who represent our only consistent access to re-entry planning until our actual release. In a recent situation, one of our peers narrowly avoided an extension of her sentence due to a lack of housing – and assistance. Nine months before her release date, she went to her counselor to inquire about a halfway house or a faith-based community housing program because she fears going back to the same conditions. The counselor told her that she did not have time for her and to come back another time. Her repeated attempts got her no further than where she started. Finally, 60 days to the gate she was able to get help from the COIII and get a few addresses to contact to obtain applications for possible housing options. Thirty days later, she found out that she was still on a waiting list and may or may not be accepted to get a bed. This uncertainty left her with no guarantee of a release at all, much less a place to live. If we cannot find housing, depending on our release stipulations, we may be released as “transient.” The options for shelter that we find available to us lead us to feel utterly hopeless. As the research above indicates, this situation is dire and common.

Having shelter is a basic human necessity. We face high opposition to a universal need, which enhances the emotional and financial burden. **Several women with whom we spoke shared that they did not anticipate any support from family with housing upon their release. Some did, but worried that their release stipulations would bar their families from hosting them, especially when doing so might violate their lease.** Housing alone or with family demands

compliance with crime free community barriers. Several participants shared that they felt forced to live in areas that they did not feel safe in, due to their backgrounds. Marlee encountered this discrimination when she applied to live in a community in Scottsdale; “I was denied to parole to my family’s home because they lived in a ‘crime-free community.’ I was ultimately forced to reside in a neighborhood where I did not feel safe” (Marlee interview, 2019). Such regulations relegate us to more heavily policed neighborhoods with fewer resources and less housing stability.

Other women have lost their support due to the length of their incarceration. [The Urban Institute reports](#) that the amount of time people are serving in prison has increased since 2000 in every state. And according to [Fwd.us](#), women incarcerated in Arizona serve significantly more time than in other states for comparable charges. Marlee, who still has 12 years remaining of her 20-year-sentence for a non-dangerous offense, recently lost her mother to cancer. “My mom was all that I had. She was my everything. Now where will I go?” (Marlee interview, 2019). Sadly, the loss of loved ones is common among our population. Without other support, many women walk out with only the clothes on their back and \$50 in their pocket.

Transportation

Transportation is an often-overlooked necessity for our population. Few of us can obtain a vehicle due to a lack of financial resources. The other alternatives to buying a vehicle are to utilize public transportation, ride a bicycle, walk, or, most often, rely on the support of others. **A lack of transportation can jeopardize our already precarious employment, as well as obstruct our compliance with any required parole and/or probation appointments.**

Dixie shared her experience;

I was mandated to appear at TASC to provide a drug screening analysis by 5pm on a Wednesday... My sister was late picking me up and the office was closed by the time I got there... I was fearful of being violated for non-compliance. (Dixie interview, 2019)

This obstacle has been variably recognized, including by Arizona Governor Doug Ducey's office, who in 2017 noted that "lack of transportation has been identified as a significant hurdle for many individuals looking to re-enter society in Arizona."⁹

Several of the women we spoke with shared the challenges they anticipate with acquiring transportation upon release. Some of us came to prison as juveniles or young adults without ever having had the opportunity to drive a vehicle, presenting an immediately pressing learning curve. Valentina was sentenced to life without parole at the age of 14. Due to the Supreme Court ruling in *Miller v. Alabama* declaring "life without parole" an unconstitutional sentence for a juvenile, Valentina will now be released, two and a half decades later. Among her many challenges will be figuring out how to even operate a vehicle. Valentina explained, "I am a forty-year-old woman

and barely know anything about technology, let alone how to drive a car or find someone to teach me" (Valentina interview, 2019). **Reliable transportation can mean the difference between remaining free or being sent back to prison for failure to sustain ourselves and meet the demands of our release stipulations**, which are extensive for Valentina.

To own and operate a vehicle – especially while on probation or parole – we must provide proof of a valid driver's license, current registration, and insurance, all the while being able to afford the fuel and maintenance. This can be an overwhelming burden to anyone newly released.

Additionally, those of us with any unpaid fines and fees with the MVD that accrued during the course of our incarceration may be denied the opportunity to obtain a driver's license based on these debts alone.¹⁰ Research by the Justice Department surveying 1,000 formerly incarcerated people demonstrated that 83% lacked a valid driver's license.¹¹ Meanwhile, roughly 70% of people in Phoenix, where Perryville is located, drive to work.¹² In cities like Phoenix where the light rail runs primarily through developed and expensive city centers, commuters must often take multiple buses to reach the line or their destination. Without a vehicle, the delays of public transportation can be significant to our ability to maintain steady work and otherwise meet the requirements of parole.

9. <https://azgovernor.gov/governor/news/2017/11/arizona-partners-uber-second-chance-rides-program>

10. See https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/youre-out-of-prison-now-you-have-to-get-your-drivers-license-back/2019/04/04/9e8325f8-5651-11e9-8ef3-fbd41a2ce4d5_story.html

11. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/major-study-examines-prisoners-and-their-reentry-needs>

12. <http://zipatlas.com/us/az/city-comparison/percentage-population-drive-to-work.2.htm>

Employment

We all face the dreaded question of “Have you ever been convicted of a felony?” For most, this is the biggest hindrance, particularly around employment. Employment is often mandatory to avoid revocation and being sent back into prison. Survival for all of us is dependent upon money to pay bills and the financial obligations set by the court. Yet, with limited opportunities for employment and more legal discrimination, the cards are stacked against us. As discussed above, **formerly incarcerated people are not a legally protected class, making most forms of discrimination against us as job applicants perfectly legal.**

Legalized Discrimination

Working for the state is not prohibited based on felony status alone, as per A.R.S. § 13-904(E), but we may be denied employment for reasoning that our felony status relates to our ability to perform the functions of the job.¹³ Because we have no legal recourse, we have no capacity to question such determinations. This discretion extends to acquiring professional licenses for work in particular fields. According to the Maricopa County government website, state “licensing agencies have enormous discretion to deny ex-offenders from obtaining licenses based on a finding or reasonable relationship” between our sought-out work and our convictions.¹⁴ The state boards for cosmetology, real estate, and even pest control all expressly prohibit the licensing of formerly incarcerated people. Beyond licensed or state employment, there are “no analogous provisions governing private employment” in Arizona.¹⁵ [Governor Doug Ducey recently signed HB 2067](#) into law, set to go into effect in August of 2021, which allows “Second Chance” certificates for certain offenses to be set aside during employment consideration. The majority of our population will not be affected by this change, however. HB 2067 applies to state employment and licensing, but significantly – not private companies. While Ducey’s order encourages similar procedures for private businesses, none are legally enforced. Across the board, employers can and likely will still opt not to hire us once a background check occurs later in the hiring process.

Zumaya encountered this normalized exclusion when seeking employment. She explained:

I submitted 23 job applications before I was offered a position. My felony conviction was definitely a huge obstacle... no one wanted to give me an opportunity. (Zumaya interview, 2019)

13. https://ccresourcecenter.org/state-restoration-profiles/arizona-restoration-of-rights-pardon-expungement-sealing/#IV_Criminal_record_in_licensing_employment

14. <https://www.maricopa.gov/930/Consequences-for-a-Felony>

15. https://ccresourcecenter.org/state-restoration-profiles/arizona-restoration-of-rights-pardon-expungement-sealing/#IV_Criminal_record_in_licensing_employment

This happens far too often when we are simply looking for gainful employment like the rest of the community. Discrimination also occurs based on particular charges. Sofia shared her experience with this barrier; “I went to a job interview and once I shared my background of having been incarcerated for a drug charge, I was told that they do not hire individuals with drug offenses. They said that they are required to comply with The Federal Crime Bill” (Sofia interview, 2019). **Both state and federal laws promote our exclusion from the workforce.**

Although measures have been implemented with the “Ban the Box” initiatives and companies are starting to hire a more diverse workforce, we still have a long way to go. We have barely begun to peel back the labels we carry with us. There is so much opportunity among us, and our economy is also suffering because of status-based discrimination.

Vastly Disproportionate Unemployment and Poverty Wages

Prison Policy Initiative reports that “formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27%—higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression.” Compared to the national average, this means formerly incarcerated people are five times more likely to be unemployed (Id.). Notably, their research also shows that this unemployment is due to structural barriers, rather than lack of motivation, skills, or education. This pattern is racialized and gendered, too; Black women experience the most severe levels of unemployment, while white men experience the least (Id.). The threat of unemployment is also greatest during the period following release; researchers found that “of those most recently released from prison (that is, within two years of the survey date), **over 30% were unemployed**” (Id.). If we are able to secure employment, IRS data from the Brookings Institute suggests that “the majority of employed people recently released from prison receive an income that puts them well below the poverty line” (Id.).¹⁶ The repercussion of our population having a second-class status has a ripple effect that not only impacts self-survival and our state economy, but our family and communities attached to us. PPI research reaches the same conclusion: “This perpetual labor market punishment creates a counterproductive system of release and poverty, hurting everyone involved: employers, the taxpayers, and certainly formerly incarcerated people looking to break the cycle” (Id.).

16. Prison Policy Initiative cites the following for this conclusion: Gretchen Purser. 2012. “Still Doin’ Time:” Clamoring for Work in the Day Labor Industry. *The Journal of Labor & Society*; Adam Looney and Nicholas Turner. 2018. *Work and opportunity before and after incarceration*. The Brookings Institution.

During our research, most of our participants had not yet experienced release from prison but shared with us their fears and considerations as they look ahead toward that time. We spoke with one woman who has been incarcerated since she was a teenager, and therefore has no work experience outside of manual labor for the Department of Corrections;

My biggest concern would be how I would market myself, if I'm employable and my age. The fact that I'll be 40 when I get out and I have no job history. My next concern would be who is going to want to hire a felon with no job skills. I feel like it's a setup for failure. (Anonymous interview, 2019)

For those of us serving lengthy sentences, disclosure of our felony status is often accompanied by disclosure of our lack of work history and training, disempowering us on multiple levels in a competitive labor market.¹⁷

In addition to the mandate to disclose our incarceration history, so many of us who have become system-involved by virtue of circumstances of survival have no way of explaining this context when being judged for our charges by potential employers. Winter, who was held at gunpoint in a separate room while a murder was committed at her abuser's apartment, is now serving a sentence of 25-to-life for first-degree felony murder. In her sentencing, the judge instructed the jury that duress was not a viable defense even as he acknowledged she was incapable of escaping the situation without risking her life.

Winter reflected upon her future employment prospects given this first-degree murder charge;

Well, I have an excellent support group and I know that I am employable, and I know that I'm skilled. I just don't know if companies are willing to hire me... I'm certain I would be terrified of me if I looked at my convictions. But I think the sad thing is, is that whatever those charges are doesn't describe what I've just described here... Are there people who are willing to give me an opportunity to show them who I am so that I can support myself financially? (Winter interview, 2019)

Disclosure of felony status is a continuation of our assessment by ADCRR, in which the facts of our case or our histories are overwritten by the single category of our criminal charge. This means we continue to be judged not for who we are or what we offer, but as another number.

Many of us are also hindered in our search for employment by the damage incurred while subject to the conditions of the Department of Corrections. **Increasingly long sentences result in years of our lives spent without access to adequate medical, mental healthcare, and nutrition, leaving us debilitated by the time we return to society.** Access to health insurance is also difficult to acquire without steady employment.

17. See our third report for more on prison labor and programming, and the lack thereof.

Withers, whose Raynaud's disease has worsened due to years of manual prison labor and medical neglect, worries about her future employment prospects when she gets released 16 years from now. She shared with us:

I hate to say that I'll probably be on disability, but according to the United States government I'm 100% disabled, that's pretty much what I'm going to have to work with because of the time I'm doing. I'll be, what, 58 years old? But you know, I don't know what my body's gonna look like. I have no idea what my health is going to be like. I have no idea what I have to look forward to.

(Withers interview, 2019)

Another woman we spoke with shared her concerns regarding her felony status, age, and disability with which she will hope to enter the workforce one day;

Due to the length of my sentence and my age when I am released, I am very concerned about being able to become employed at something which I can actually build a life with. Many employers hire felons but the ones that do usually do not hire violent offenders, which is what my label is. I have rheumatoid arthritis and my medicine is very expensive. However, without that medicine I am crippled to the extent of not being able to walk. (Anonymous interview, 2019)

After surviving criminalization, years of incarceration, and the completion of our sentences, employment becomes an immense challenge. When we are able to finally meet that expectation, it is chilling that the opportunity may be ripped away from us. Legal protections against discrimination and retaliation are nonexistent. We are left helpless and desperate. For the formerly incarcerated, our struggles to work for our own livelihood are precarious at best, no matter how much education or skill we have, or how long it has been since our incarceration. **Our sentences never truly end.**

Additional Barriers

Most of us will face strict stipulations to our freedom on top of the inborn social obstacles of finding housing, transportation, and employment with a felony record. However, those of us who exit will have a term of community supervision or a probation tail, which carry with them their own set of obligations and fees.

Beyond the struggle to survive we are saddled with oversight from officers – who like the prison guards before them – frequently do not care to help us successfully reintegrate into our communities. **This counterproductive approach triggers the constant threat of returning to prison by virtue of a mountain of technicalities we must navigate lest our conditional freedom be revoked.** The idea that the system might prevent future crime by requiring harsh conditions that oftentimes make us visible social pariahs, is bizarre.

At a moment where we are ready to be liberated from the walls of confinement, we are slapped with the reality that we are also returning to a community that no longer wants us. We have served our sentence, have suffered the consequences—more than most know—and are now ready for a new start. But we recognize that upon release, our lives are not yet free, not since we have been numbered and processed by ADCRR. [Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law \(2020\)](#) explain: “From unremitting ‘treatment’ requirements to the stifling protocols of the sex offender registry, many of the structures outside of prison bore uncanny resemblances to the prison itself: control, punishment, and a constant reminder that your body is not your own—that once the system has you in its clutches, you are the state’s to manipulate” (p. 6).

Picture your mother, daughter, sister, preparing to come home after serving 15 years in prison. The thought she carries with her should be of excitement to be reunited with her family. Instead, her head is filled with the stress and uncertainty of strict requirements that could send her back to prison.

Being brought back is a fear most of us have as we draw closer to the gate. By the time we finally start our journey to freedom, we are already overwhelmed by the release conditions that have been looming over us since sentencing. The conditions that concern us the most are financial burdens, probation and parole stipulations, and sex offender registry and mandated programming. Most of the women with whom we spoke shared that they feel unprepared for the parameters of their release conditions. Fears and stressors are already ingrained in us about meeting the standard conditions of release. We understand that we will be judged and locked out of many opportunities and that that will impact our ability to provide for ourselves. We understand that we will face continued marginalization and abuse. From substance abuse testing and geographic and career limitations to mandatory polygraph tests and lack of access to technology, the additional stipulations of our release violate the most intimate parts of our lives while continuing to force us to live in fear of re-capture.

Monthly Fees and Restitution

As the old adage says, freedom isn't free. **The standard community supervision fee in the state of Arizona is \$65.00 a month.** This fee is designated to cover the costs associated with being supervised while on release, even when our conditions are reduced to unsupervised probation/parole and we no longer have to report on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis. Standard financial responsibilities associated with release conditions are: probation/parole fees, restitution, registration fees, mandated program costs, substance abuse testing, and polygraph expenses. Additionally, fees mandated by the court may be up to \$150,000, before surcharges which can add up to an additional 78% of the original fee.¹⁸ **Payment of all of these fees is also filtered through third-party for-profit corporations like Global Tech Link, JPay, and Keefe – all of which charge additional fees for transactions, and also monopolize privatized resource contracts in Arizona prisons.**¹⁹ These fees are required as part of the insurmountable set of expectations we must comply with to retain our freedom.

Zumaya struggled to meet all of these fee requirements upon her previous release; "I felt so overwhelmed by all of the money I had to pay just to be free... \$65.00 for a supervision fee on top of an additional \$80.00 for restitution [per month]. I was set up for failure right from the beginning" (Zumaya interview, 2019). These fees become an additional punishment on top of the sentence just served, and we are indebted whether or not we have yet been able to secure steady employment.

Sometimes fees like restitution are so hefty that one has to choose between paying that fee and paying for necessities such as a car payment, food, rent, etc. As Sofia experienced:

Rent was due on the 1st of December and so was my monthly restitution payment. I had to choose between keeping a roof over my children's head for the holiday or paying my monthly restitution. What weighed heavy on my mind was the nagging threat of being snatched up and thrown back into a concrete cell for simply not paying.

(Sofia interview, 2019)

Sofia's fears of violating parole for failure to pay fees are warranted, especially when employment as a person with a felony record is unstable.

The "Criminal Justice Debt"

Research by [Fwd.us](https://www.fwd.us) states that this "criminal justice debt" ("large amounts of victim restitution, monthly supervision fees, and other obligations that must be met in order to remain in compliance with parole requirements") is "essentially transferred to families, who may forgo basic needs because failure to pay can result in the family member being returned to jail or prison."

18. <https://www.criminaldefenselawyer.com/resources/criminal-defense/felony-offense/arizona-felony-class.htm>

19. See our third report for more on these companies and their privatization of food, hygiene, and phone and video visitation services inside Perryville.

Other fees associated with release come in the form of sex offender registration fees. These fees can vary in obligation. Donna's probation judgment and order reflect a sex offender monitoring fund assessment that mandates a fee of \$250/month. Donna explained:

The judgment and order form shows two different monthly payment expectations. It's so confusing and I have no idea where to begin. The fees are so overwhelming that I have no idea how I am going to pay them. I am scared of failure and I am not even released yet. (Donna interview, 2019)

This fear is not uncommon among our peers.

Mandatory programming also exists for certain charges, including drug and sex related crimes. Although the programs are mandated by the court and the probation/parole stipulations, we have to bear the burden of the costs to remain in compliance with these release conditions. Through the various programs that are mandated, the fees vary in range. What is also troubling is that the duration that we are mandated to attend a program is solely at the discretion of the program facilitator and/or probation/parole supervisor. This adds to the growing list of fees that are owed each month. For example, one woman's journey to stay free depended on going to a mandated sex offender therapy class that cost \$45 per week and continued for four years, totaling \$9,360. These fees could have funded her additional education to promote employment

opportunities she would not otherwise have. We are indebted to numerous agencies with the costs associated with being "free." **The daunting task of ensuring success is completely dependent on our ability to pay for our freedom.** Our poverty becomes criminalized when steady employment is already illusive.

Back to Prison for Failure to Pay

Inability to pay mandatory fees has amounted to a total "criminal justice debt" of over \$50 billion nationally – money that remains outside of the economy and further marginalizes us, our families, and communities and ultimately accounts for a significant proportion of technical violations that comprise rates of recidivism.²⁰

Parole and Probation

Parole and probation "supervision" are the most ubiquitous forms of post-release conditions, following needs for housing, transportation, employment, and financial security to cover extensive monthly fees. According to Truth in Sentencing laws held over from the 1990s, Arizona mandates that we serve at least 85% of sentences prior to conditional release. **If granted, we will complete the remainder of our sentences under "community corrections," a name indicative of the reach of the punishment system into our communities.** Standard conditions for parole and probation are similar in Arizona, and entail rules such as permitting random visits from officers, only leaving the city with express permission, submitting frequent urine analysis tests, maintaining employment, and making all requisite

20. <https://everysecond.fwd.us/downloads/EverySecond.FWD.us.pdf>

fee payments.²¹ In addition to these stipulations, the courts have discretion to impose additional requirements, from driver's license revocations to community service, to GPS monitoring.²² **Failure to meet these requirements will result in arrest.**

Arizona's "community corrections" website boasts that its program "facilitates the swift return to custody of those offenders who violate conditions of supervision and who represent a serious threat to the safety of the community."²³ **These swift returns constitute roughly 23% of Arizona's imprisoned population.**²⁴ Parole and probation violations overwhelmingly make up the state's recidivism rate, indicating that **a quarter of Arizona's prison population is incarcerated solely due to their failure to meet the stipulations of release.** Given the enormous barriers to our re-entry success, total lack of preparation by ADCRR, and legalized discrimination in employment and housing, these numbers are no surprise to us.

Additionally, recidivism via parole and probation violations creates high stakes for the most vulnerable among us. A [recent Prison Policy Initiative report](#) notes that "Nationwide, two-thirds (66%) of people on probation make less than \$20,000 per year. Nearly 2 in 5 people on probation (38%) make less than \$10,000 per year, well below the poverty line." The costs of such poverty are

high when we can be re-arrested and returned to prison for failure to pay requisite fees.

If we violate the conditions of our release, whether by failure to maintain employment or missing a meeting with a parole officer, we will be re-arrested and subject to a hearing with the Arizona Executive Board of Clemency. **Between 2019-2021, the board conducted over 4,000 community corrections revocation hearings; of these, fewer than 50 individuals were able to remain free, while the rest were re-captured into ADCRR custody.**²⁵ It is no wonder, then, that [2018 research by the Brookings Institution](#) found that "intensive supervision actually increases, rather than decreases, the chance that someone will be rearrested and reconvicted" (Schenwar and Law 2020, p. 35). Parole and probation stipulations create often unattainable standards, given the other existing barriers to our success post-release; **revocations of our freedom then sustain the revolving door of ADCRR's prisons.**

Registry

Sex offenders are among the most hated groups of formerly incarcerated individuals and undergo the most draconian forms of post-release stipulations. Adding yet another layer of governing, the SORNA (Sex Offender Registration

21. <https://www.shouselaw.com/az/defense/laws/parole/arizona-parole-rules/>

22. <https://www.azleg.gov/jlbc/psjudprobation.pdf>

23. <https://corrections.az.gov/community-corrections>

24. <https://azcapitoltimes.com/news/2020/02/15/arizonas-parole-merry-go-round/>; citing a recent Council of State Governments study, *Confined and Costly: How Supervision Violations are Filling Prisons*: <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/confined-costly/>

25. <https://boec.az.gov/sites/default/files/documents/files/FY2019%20Annual%20Report%20Signed.pdf>; <https://boec.az.gov/sites/default/files/documents/files/Annual%20Report%202020%20FINAL.pdf>

and Notification Act) laws affect not just our everyday life, but our families and communities we return home to. The life altering sex offender registry is a tool that demands address changes, updated yearly photos, publicized personal demographic and crime details, neighborhood notifications and continuous public and private monitoring. Failure to register as a sex offender is a Class 4 felony in Arizona.²⁶ **The burdens we carry being convicted as a sex offender not only produce punitive consequences but bring about even less economic opportunity and increased discrimination and stigmatization.**

Harassment

Research has demonstrated that “42.7% of registered sex offenders reported losing a job, 45.3% reported losing or being denied a place to live, 47% reported being harassed in person, and 16.2% reported being physically assaulted” (Lave 2021).²⁷ The collateral consequences of the registry on families has also been studied, revealing that “85.8% [of surveyed family members] reported that sex offender registration and notification (SORN) had caused stress in their life... 77.2% said they felt alone and isolated... 49.9% said they had lost friends or a close relationship... and 48.8% said they were afraid for their safety because of SORN” (Id.).²⁸ These numbers help to illustrate the psychological damage that is central to the function of the sex offender registry.

Unfounded Fears

Moreover, the registry performatively functions to appease the unsubstantiated fears of the public. In her [research published in the Arizona State Law Journal](#), Tamara Rice Lave (2021) concludes that “Arizonians are scared of sex offenders.” She cites research conducted by Katz and Webb (2006), which focused on Phoenix residents’ attitudes toward released sex offenders; 78% of those interviewed responded that they believe sex offenders will likely commit more sex crimes in the future.²⁹ This conclusion is disconnected from reality, however; other research confirmed that among 2,416 female sex offenders studied, the average recidivism rate over the course of six and a half years was 1.34%.³⁰ Finally, Lave (2021) points out that Arizona’s sex offender notification laws are quite expensive; “In 2019–2020, the budget for the Sex Offender Notification Unit in the Phoenix Police Department was \$1,980,332, and the projected budget for 2020–2021 increased by \$234,421 to \$2,214,753.” This money might be better used toward public services our communities desperately need.



26. <https://www.azleg.gov/Briefs/Senate/ARIZONA%20SEX%20OFFENDER%20REGISTRATION%20AND%20NOTIFICATION%202018.pdf>

27. Citing: Richard Tewksbury, Collateral Consequences of Sex Offender Registration, 21 J. Contemp. Crim. Just. 67, 71 (2005)

28. Citing: Richard Tewksbury & Jill Levenson, Stress Experiences of Family Members of Registered Sex Offenders, 27 Behav. Scis. & L. 611, 613 (2009)

29. Citing: Charles M. Katz & Vincent Webb, Citizen Attitudes About Sex Offenders and Sex-Offender Housing Policy in Phoenix, in Where Do We Go from Here? A Report on Sex Offenders and Sex Offender Housing in Phoenix, Arizona 78 (2006), <https://cvpcs.asu.edu/sites/default/files/content/products/Katz%20Phoenix%20sex%20offender%20study%20with%20cover.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/9SAK-R578>].

30. *Id.*, citing: Franca Cortoni, R. Karl Hanson & Marie-Ève Coache, The Recidivism Rates of Female Sexual Offenders Are Low: A Meta-Analysis, 22 Sexual Abuse 387, 390, 394 (2010)

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We spoke with several women who will face sex offender release conditions including lifetime probation and placement on the sex offender registry. **Donna and Rae reflected on the ways being on the registry is a distinctly precarious condition for women in that it increases their vulnerability to certain kinds of violence.** And as Donna points out, “With women only making up 8% of the sex offender registry, we’re already marginalized on there” (Donna interview, 2019). The public dissemination of personal information, including photos, birth date, home address and phone number unfortunately attract predatory attention, and our participants said that this fear gives them great anxiety about how safe they will be in their future home.

There’s a very modern-day torches and pitchforks type of mindset with sex offenders. And so that is very scary. And then try being a female on top of it, we don’t know who could be peeping or lurking outside of our door.

(Donna interview, 2019)

Rae explained further:

This is the thing, this is the misconception. Just because a woman’s on the sex offender registry, it doesn’t mean that she is easy and I think men find that like, ‘Oh, you’re a sex offender, so you must be easy, let me try to abuse you sexually.’ Right? Try to take advantage of you, whatever that is. (Rae interview, 2019)

This treatment largely goes unmitigated, they both argued, because women on the registry are considered to be both sexually promiscuous and receiving punishment, making them easy targets and unlikely victims. Donna added:

It just further puts you into a position where again, like you say, boys will be boys, that you need to be like, you need to be held to a higher standard, you need to not allow them to do that. Again, in that circumstance where it’s okay for a man to seek a woman out because she’s on the registry and make these assumptions and exert this power over her and because you’re on the registry, it’s on you too still, that they would be this predatory. It’s on you.

(Donna interview, 2019)

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The anticipation and fear of being objectified on the sex offender registry and being publicly shamed upon release compounds the mental battery of coping with re-integration. **Having to deal with struggles of being connected to someone who is ostracized in the community, our families are forced to share that burden and societal condemnation just to be a part of our lives.** Sex offender probation regulations limit housing, employment, and movement in general. Donna and Rae described:

We have to follow very strong stipulations imposed by the probation officer, which could be, you can't go to the grocery store at certain times because there could be children. You have to get approval to go to the movie theater. There are certain things that we have to abide by because we are treated as if we are predators and that we're going to prey on small children. And so those things I'm very concerned about because we cannot live a very normal life. We have to get approval for everything that we do. (Donna interview, 2019)

At this point, I can't see my grandchildren. When I get home I can't have any contact. All my kids are over 18 so I don't have that worry. But my grandkids, I won't be able to. However, with probation, they do offer a chaperone program which all my children can take, therefore they can be my chaperone when I'm around the kids. So that's what I intend to do. And I'm hoping that program is still around when I get home... But let's say that you lived down the street from me and you have a daycare certified, then therefore I can't live there because you decided to have a daycare – now I have to move... (Rae interview, 2019)

The labels that we are branded with become our scarlet letters that never go away. We are bound by society's idea of the price we should forever pay. Essentially, every one of us is serving a life sentence. As Rae said,

If the justice system is supposed to be there for us to pay for so called mistakes, right? To enter back into society like a new person is never meant for us, for the sex offenders. (Rae interview, 2019)

Support System

Navigating the mountain of obstacles upon our release requires help. Having a support system while incarcerated can increase the chances of a successful re-entry. However, the lack thereof can be devastating. Our main support systems include family, friends, and the community as a whole, as well as our chosen family inside. Being apart from our support system causes grief, burden, stress, and emptiness. Returning to various relationships is frightening to face because we have to learn how to reunite, restore, heal, and grieve from the pain of the separation. Simultaneously, we face the loss of friendships that have supported us throughout incarceration when we get out and leave people behind. Zumaya shared:

I started going back to school and then working, and again, it's that appearance of everything on the outside being okay. Well, on the inside, it's not.

(Zumaya interview, 2019)

Those of us who are not fortunate enough to have any type of support upon re-entry face a different type of fear because we have to build an entire support system from an unforgiving community, as well as heal from damaged relationships that did not have the opportunity to be mended during incarceration and are now unfortunately non-existent.

Family

Having family support within the walls of confinement that carries through to release helps us endure incarceration as well as supports the process of family reunification. Donna shared with us how fortunate she feels to have a strong support system while being incarcerated. Her family comes to visit her on weekends and takes her calls regularly. She would feel lost and isolated if she did not have the love, strength, and financial means to help get through her ten year sentence. Having family support is not only helpful to surviving a prison term but it is even more critical to the success of re-entry, to help navigate the barriers that we encounter upon returning home. Nicole, who is serving a lengthy sentence, has been able to draw great strength from her supportive family over the last 25 years, and she knows they will be central to her resilience upon her release. She was adamant saying, "As long as I have the strength and love of my family, nothing else matters" (Nicole interview, 2019).

Throughout our sentence, our families support our release in many ways. **For those of us preparing for parole or clemency boards, family financial support is often the only way we can access education and programming necessary to fight for and maintain our freedom.** Winter explains that due to her lack of a release date, she is

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excluded from programming by the priority ranking system. The only way around this policy is, of course, to pay more money. And yet a lack of programming is penalized by the Arizona Board of Executive Clemency. Winter considers herself lucky because of her family's capacity to financially help; "I take multiple distance learning classes at a time in order to be able to have a degree or several degrees when I go to this board so that I can say that I've done something with my time. But that's been all family support" (Winter interview, 2019). Additionally, having completed this programming while incarcerated helps us prove our determination to succeed once released. Valentina was recently released to house arrest; when she went before the Clemency Board to appeal for graduation to standard parole, the Board members again referenced her efforts to educate herself inside as evidence that she will stick to her path if granted more mobility. Had she been financially incapable of completing said programs, the Board would have depicted her as unmotivated – rather than limited by discriminatory policies like priority ranking.

Being forced to remain separated from our parents, children, spouses, and others produces an additional punishment on top of our time: the loss of relationships. Unfortunately, many of us experience alienation from our families. The structures of this place hinder our efforts as well as our families'. Once we enter into prison, we are in a position where the family unit is at risk. The family that we once knew is now torn apart and struggling to keep united. Maintaining relationships helps sustain growth on so many levels. Working to nurture such relationships is extremely difficult with the restraints that come along with incarceration. For our families, navigating the prison structure can be disorienting and frustrating.

Lanae explained:

I think that we have to remember, as much as we need the help and the assistance, I think our families do as well – from the beginning, because they go through a lot of emotions in this process and a lot of families don't know, you know, what do I need to do to write? How do I open up an account for you to call me? How do I come to see you? They're flying blind in addition to all of the emotion of the situation – there's anger, there's resentment, abandonment.

(Lanae interview, 2019)

Brief 15-minute phone calls or occasional weekend visits are not enough to foster relationships from behind the walls. Children no longer have the daily interaction with their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. When we are released many years later, we are confronted with reuniting with family only trying to pick up where we left off. Only this time, our family and children are no longer the individuals we had to leave behind. They sometimes feel like complete strangers and we have to get to know them all over again. We enter their homes feeling like we no longer belong in the family unit because there was no way to continue building the bonds or provisions of a reunification process afforded to us. We are now aliens to our own family members and children.

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For Zumaya, her reunification with her family was one of the most difficult parts of her transition home. When she came to prison her child was young. After serving seven and a half years, she returned home to a teenager. The child that she once knew was no longer there.

I returned home to a young man entering his own adulthood. It was very difficult at times to communicate because I often felt like my opinions had no place in his life anymore.

(Zumaya interview, 2019)

Kristen, who still has several years left in her sentence, anticipates a warm return with her grandchildren but feels the loss of these years inside; "I'm closest to my granddaughter because I was there with her for the longest, you know? And it breaks my heart because by the time I get out, they're going to be 8, 10 and 12. Like I'm grateful that they're going to be that young still, but so sad that I'm not there being a part of it right now" (Kristen interview, 2019).

For those of us serving 25 or more years like Lanae, Nicole, and Winter, we are only able to parent from behind bars and are at an extreme disadvantage for reunification because of such harsh sentences.

In all cases, family reunification, or lack thereof, causes another barrier to our successful re-entry. There is so much grief and healing that needs to occur, but with no one offering space for it, we stay stagnant and are not able to begin that process until our release.

Family support in both directions when surviving this system is vital – and difficult. **Time itself contributes greatly to the damage to families, as kids and parents age during the years we spend here.** One woman shared:

I'm also concerned about my family. Most of them are getting older and may require specific care. Am I going to be able to provide that and care for my family? I'm concerned about my relationship with my daughter. She'll be 16 when I get out and I'm sure it's going to be strained, if she is willing to work on one. Her father is a concern also, that he would even allow it and what has been said about me to her.

(Anonymous interview, 2019)

The main concern we heard from our participants with children, like the women above, was that their children will have grown up without their presence, perhaps resenting them, missing them, or having moved on from them completely. This was Nephritides' worry:

That's the only thing that really worries me is really about my kids, because I don't know how some of them is gonna receive me because I haven't been.. I haven't bonded with them. Just one of them, my oldest, you know, but other than that...

(Nephritides interview, 2019)

This is also the case with parents; too many of us have lost them since being imprisoned. Myra's mom and daughter live across the country, and Myra carries the anxiety of her mother's illness with her every day. Still she tries to remain positive regarding her support when she goes home;

I'm not supposed to know about it, but my mom told me my grandma's got a little nest egg set aside. My little brother told me I could come home to him, which is amazing because I didn't think he'd ever forgive me. Hopefully my mom is still alive. My kids will teach me the technology that's out there. I'll flip burgers, I don't care. (Myra interview, 2019)

Where our relationships remain, we must dedicate ourselves to healing and forgiveness, even when this is a struggle for us or our families. **We must resist the prison's capacity to inflict this damage, and we have to figure out how to recover ourselves.**

This was difficult for Zumaya after her release, and she battled feeling like she and her family were too alienated from each other's processes to push through.

So I immediately got home and jumped right back into life, which that's kind of a big mistake because you become so overwhelmed and you're just trying to navigate life all over again on top of figuring out how to make people feel like everything's fine. And then on top of it, my family was like, 'let's never talk about it again. It's under the rug. Brush it under the rug. Let's just not, let's not talk about it again...' But then you have to go through all those things again, things you've already worked through and dealt with and that they never have, because in their minds, 'you went to prison - I didn't.' So therefore nothing's wrong with me. I'm still the same person' - But that's a problem because when you go home, you're not the same person anymore. And there's nothing out there to help mend, and you know, keep working on that. (Zumaya interview, 2019)

Lanae has a long way to go before reuniting with her family, but she sees the opportunity to have that mending which has been suspended while she is stuck inside. She maintains loving relationships with her father and daughter but longs for the day they can be together again, especially after all she has been through.

There's a lot with my family and just being able to do some of the things that we used to do before that would be a complete recovery from it all. Like a treatment to put some balm over those wounds. (Lanae interview, 2019)

After years of painful isolation and psychological trauma in prison, reuniting with family upon release is both vital and nerve-wracking.

Friends

Especially for those of us who have lost family members due to death, abandonment, or the pitfalls of this system, we rely on friends for support. **There is a certain culture within a female prison that relies heavily upon the strength of one another that serves, at times, as a pseudo family unit.** As time goes on, the relationships become a blur and we no longer are able to distinguish the difference because we become emotionally and mentally enmeshed. Because of this strong bond, the support circle continues even when one or another returns home. However, these relationships are severed, under threat of re-capture, upon release.

It is difficult to comprehend that when we go home, the state dictates that we can no longer interact with this family we created and held close for years. Angie emotionally spoke of losing access to her best friend with whom she has spent the last 26 years, anticipating the unpredictability of her current appeals; "She's my go-to person in here for support – I lose that once I'm free?" (Angie interview, 2019). **For decades, we establish a support system but are no longer allowed to continue these relationships because this too can cause us to get violated and be forced to return to prison.** This risk forcefully alienates us from the only people who really understand what we have just been through and are about to go through, as Rae, Donna, and Zumaya all described.

You want to know how their experience was. And it's scary to like say, okay, we don't know what's happening. But then you're in fear of communicating too, so all our friends and support people that left, they are afraid to even say anything because they know they're not supposed to. (Rae interview, 2019)

We're not allowed to talk to people who are sex offenders. So my friends who are dealing with the same challenges are getting out and they're felons so I can't reach out to them. I have to solely rely on my probation officer. I have to solely rely on my family who has not been through this experience and nor would I ever wish this upon them. And so that's a very scary thing. (Donna interview, 2019)

I lost it all, you know, and it would have been helpful to have a group of people behind me that knew what I had already gone through and basically survived from – because it's about surviving. (Zumaya interview, 2019)

At least for the time we are inside together, we look out for one another as best we can and help each other prepare for what's next. Our bonds will not be broken by the state, despite its efforts to alienate and further dehumanize us in this way. We know that we are part of a movement of formerly incarcerated people, and we know that we have each other in mind and spirit. As Valentina said,

It is a community of people, but society is going to see you one way. But guess what? You're not standing alone and you have all of us right here standing with you." (Valentina interview, 2019)

Social Stigma and Community Re-Integration

Upon release into the outside community, ADCRR washes their hands clean of the responsibility for us unless it has to violate our release and send us back to prison. We feel like discarded trash, as we become the responsibility of the community we return home to, whether or not it is one we know or feel supported in. Zumaya summarized this feeling and the frustration it carries:

Society is going to make you feel that way, like you don't fit in. I mean now I think it's a little bit better than years ago because more people, which is sad, but it's because more people are getting arrested and having felony convictions. But why can't we just be humans? Why can't we just be human beings and accept people? If you say our sentence is done, our sentence is done, you know, but it's not and it never will be.

(Zumaya interview, 2019)

Community support is contingent upon the label we have received. More concerns among our peers reflect this. Specifically, the lack of resources, acceptance, and fair opportunity we experience in housing and employment hinders individuals, families, and communities. These barriers affect everyone, but not equally.

Rae reflected on the social stigma associated with sex offenders' re-entry, even in communities invested in criminal justice reform;

[They] talk a lot about prison reform, but people still dance around sex offenders, afraid to use the term. (Rae interview, 2019)

Rae, who had less than one year remaining in her 10-year sentence when we spoke, was having to confront what she was about to encounter when she returns home. "I think a sex offender needs more support on the outside, whether it's with housing, jobs, advocacy, etc." (Id.). Zumaya navigated similar fears, which were confirmed when she was previously released; "I didn't feel like I fit into society anymore. Society was not accepting. Here you go, [we'll] kick you out, and *you* figure it out" (Zumaya interview, 2019). We as individuals shoulder the responsibility to "figure it out" in the midst of social and economic limitations and societal stigma.

Release stipulations, public judgment, and institutional hurdles to access basic necessities set us up for re-capture by the punishment system, and we carry that weight without much social support. And as we discussed in our previous report, the environment of prison disallows us from making decisions for ourselves. We are disempowered for years, even decades, and then dropped into an unwelcome world to fend for ourselves. As Marlee put it, "We're completely reliant on people to take care of us. So how are we supposed to take care of ourselves when come out?" (Marlee interview, 2019). This systematic conditioning – that we are broken down, every step of our movement is controlled, and we are punished for standing up for ourselves – amplifies the disconnect we must navigate upon release. And on top of these social, psychological, and institutional barriers to re-integration, we find ourselves released to a state of **organized abandonment** once again. We discussed in our first report the ways prisons have come to stand in place of social resources, and our experiences with both demonstrate the consequences of this pattern.

Resources are very limited when we are released. Taxpayer dollars are being distributed to fund the cost of incarceration instead of funding to support our freedom; lest we forget, recidivism only reproduces this profitable system. It costs \$25k annually to incarcerate one person in Arizona, and the state budget allocated to corrections exceeds \$1 billion.³¹

Imagine putting those taxpayer dollars to better use by providing education, subsidized programs, counseling, and more. What might our communities look like if we prioritized safety by prioritizing livelihood?

Zumaya has spent years dedicated to helping other women understand what to expect upon release, but she pointed out that none of this preparation will absolve the fact that the society we are preparing to enter needs its own rehabilitation.

Knowing what I need to do to make the best use of this time now and just standing up for myself and for others, it's just... Things have to change out there, they really do, or it's very limited, our success. It's a lot and it's really difficult to explain to people too, what we're returning to. It's very difficult. It's not the same. It's like being in here but harder because in a lot of ways— we don't like it here, but we know we have a roof over our head. We know there's food here, we know we have water, whether it's cold or hot, we know that. So it's just difficult in that, you know, navigating and preparing, making sure we're going to have jobs and the jobs are limited, the housing is limited. So for me right now it's all about fighting to try to get those things in place for myself and other people, because even though I didn't get the life sentence on paper, like in here, I received a life sentence and have been serving it since my first incarceration because it has never ended. (Zumaya interview, 2019)

Throughout this report, we have highlighted areas in which discrimination serves as an obstacle to social and economic opportunities. The resources that are available to us are very limited and based on classification and crimes committed. The Maricopa County website states that “felony convictions can affect public benefits such as housing, food stamps, educational assistance and worker’s compensation. The denial of benefits may be for a year to lifetime depending on the charge and the city where the person resides.”³² For instance, someone who has a drug conviction is unlikely to ever be approved for food

31. <https://www.arizonaindicators.org/annual-cost-per-inmate-2/>

32. <https://www.maricopa.gov/930/Consequences-for-a-Felony>

stamps.³³ **This denial of basic social welfare further hinders our ability to sustain ourselves and our children.** The ideas of our society have been the strongest weapons for discrimination. There is a lack of effort to change and educate the community about truths behind the walls and our system. These weapons leave us feeling less accepted in our very own community, thus pushing us closer towards that revolving door. Zumaya reflected on the ways social and institutional forms of discrimination crushed her spirit prior to her becoming incarcerated for a second time;

Of course I was sad about it, but then in the other sense of it, it was like I was tired of fighting, tired of fighting out there. I wasn't free just because I was out the gate. I wasn't free by any sense of the meaning... How are we supposed to not come back after not really knowing or fitting into a society that has completely passed us by, that we don't belong to anymore? (Zumaya interview, 2019)

Rae also shared her feelings about her behavior being under a microscope when released, and the ways being held to this standard is unsustainable. She hopes to find acceptance even if she must struggle. She said:

I think that's how the society has to see that we're not perfect and we make stupid mistakes and we are all weak sometimes. We can't always be strong and not every decision we make is going to be sound and is going to be right, and that makes us human and that's why I think all we can do is try to be better from the day before and strive to be better each day. But I'm gonna fall. I've got to be very honest. I'm not going to be perfect. I'm gonna fall. I'm going to be a bad mom one week, a bad friend, a bad worker, and not take responsibilities for whatever reason, but acknowledging it and understanding it and have a goal to continue to strive to be better. I think that's going to help. I'm going to surround myself with people who will support me. I might have people come to my door and say some stupid things to me, or that'll be marching in front of my house, I might need to move, whatever it might be. I'm just going to be understanding and move on to where I would feel accepted. That's all I can do.

(Rae interview, 2019)

33. <https://prisonlaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/AZ-Parole-Benefits-Info-Oct-2017.pdf>

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The barriers to the needs of basic livelihood, compounded by fees and regulatory stipulations are exacerbated by the often not discussed psychological damages re-entry can cause. While legal forms of discrimination abound, the pressures to succeed *or else* further gaslight us into believing that we are the source of our own inability to meet unattainable standards of release. When public sentiment desires our continued punishment, we have limited places to turn for refuge.



Trauma and Healing

Healing should be afforded to everyone, no matter what class we fall into. Every human being deserves the opportunity to resolve pain and trauma. Unfortunately, it has become the norm that those entering a state of incarceration are not allotted that opportunity. For most, there is a layer of unaddressed trauma that brought us to this point in our lives. This includes the often overlooked trauma of the incident for which we were arrested. Secondly, the layer of trauma experienced directly from incarceration compounds the struggle. During incarceration, opportunities are limited to begin the healing process with those we left behind. Upon release, we are entering back into a trauma-filled world while still carrying the anchor of years of unresolved wounds. Angie described the painful process we are shuffled through, arguing that the healing process must address all of these parts in total:

It needs to start at the beginning. Because the trauma starts at the beginning. The trauma starts at the moment that whatever happens that leads you up to your arrest, that event was traumatic. When you're ripped out of your life and you're thrown into county jail, that event is traumatic. When you're ripped out of county jail after a year, two years, three years, five years of sitting there waiting for a plea bargain that you may or may not want to sign, and being ripped out of there and slapped into RNA in prison, it's traumatic. To be ripped from RNA and put onto a yard and having to adjust again - it's traumatic. And then whatever turmoil we go through from A to Z, whether we start at Lumley to medium to minimum, to out the door, that rip is traumatic. And the more time that you do in, the more traumatic it is. (Angie interview, 2019)

As we discussed in detail in our first report, so many of us were gravely impacted by histories of poverty and abuse. These conditions not only traumatized us, but often also meant that we lived in heavily policed neighborhoods with limited social resources.

When we talk about vulnerability to criminalization, this is what we mean. These community conditions don't disappear by virtue of us spending years and years behind bars. And our traumas and feelings of disposability only worsen, having been discarded here.

When asked what our participants felt they would need upon release, in addition to the topics above, many responded like Myra did: "I definitely want to seek some counseling for all of it, from when I was a kid to serving the time that I'm serving" (Myra interview,

2019). And yet while therapy is something most of us will seek out after what we have survived, Zumaya's experience was that even this resource can be alienating given that most professionals have no real references for the very specific forms of trauma we endure. She said:

I couldn't deal with it. There wasn't anything. There was one point, when I got health insurance and I started going to a therapist, and it was just kinda like they didn't really understand. If it's somebody that you go to, if they've never been incarcerated or they won't understand what I went through or the traumatic experiences, like having a baby and then like I literally did not get to see him until he was three months old and that was because DOC made me wait to put him through the visitation process. I didn't even get to hold him at that point in time. I never even held him for a moment. I saw him, that was it. So you have all these things and how do you explain it to a counselor? They don't have a clue what that was like. (Zumaya interview, 2019)

Weaver ended up in Perryville due to the self-medicating she used to cope with her shattered childhood. Valentina found family among neighborhood gangs to avoid an abusive home. Winter, Louise, Angie, and so many others ended up here by force at the hands of an abuser. For Donna, it was a matter of seeking comfort following trauma and deep depression. Eventually, most of the women here will be released back into their communities with a grab bag of potential pitfalls that leave them open to the cycle of old

surroundings and survival tactics. And they and their families will be even more policed because of a felony conviction.

The transition to independence is fraught with the lessons we wish we didn't have to learn while surviving ADCRR custody. As we discussed in our previous report, the more we grow and become self-empowered while inside, the more we have to remember to remain docile and submissive, repeating old response patterns based in fear with officers. Winter explained:

Because, you know, they'll come at us with typical abuse language... they use the f word, you know, I'm sick and tired of you fucking bitches... So typically a woman, especially an abused woman, who's been in a bad power dynamic and not knowing how to regain their own power or empower themselves and being in this type of a position.. It's really difficult to empower yourself, but then keep it to yourself!

(Winter interview, 2019)

For years, the governing body who ultimately decides how we get to heal, grow, and measure our humanity controls our lives. **Upon release, not only were our initial traumatic experiences not dealt with, but now we will be forced to leave with scars from the oppression suffered at the hands of those in authoritative positions.** Donna expanded on how these scars demand better healing resources: "We need help for people in the reentry process. The trauma from the infrastructure of the damage and the violence and everything that comes along under that umbrella. People are not getting the help that they need

when they get out. Mental, emotional, or otherwise" (Donna interview, 2019).

ADCRR is not equipped to address healing because they focus purely on punitive practices while claiming "rehabilitation." Being in this place has little to nothing to do with achieving the healing we need to move forward with our lives. Lanae expressed that her healing has been withheld and unaddressed by her lengthy sentence;

...so many things I haven't been able to deal with in here. I couldn't say goodbye to [my boyfriend]. He died in front of me... You can never have a complete healing without the therapy that you need as well as being able to have conversations and certain comforts with your family... There's a lot of things I'm missing closure on. (Lanae interview, 2019)

As we are released and get our so-called "second chance" in the community, we transition back to our lives with what brought us to prison, and an additional layer of trauma related to what we have had to navigate and witness during our incarceration. With all of this baggage we face the hard work of trying to mend and heal while simultaneously being socially rejected.

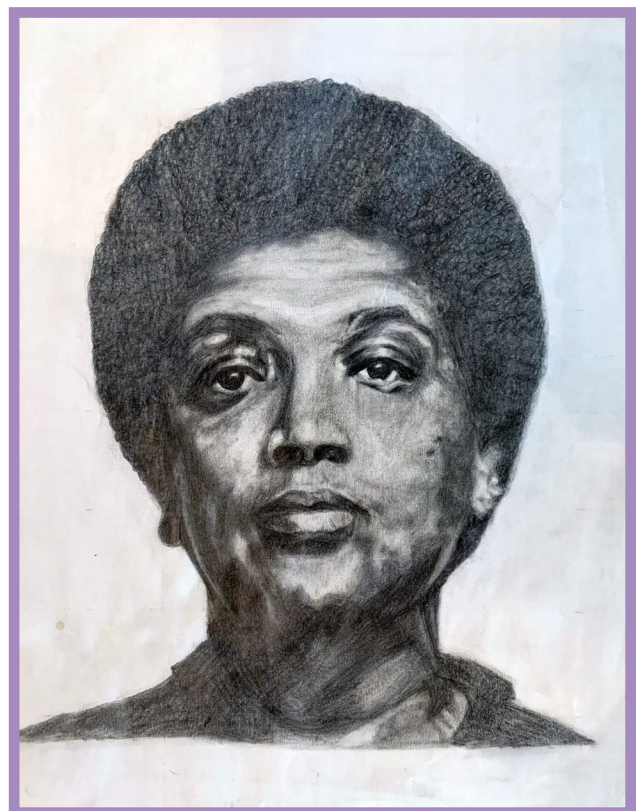
Conclusion: Beauty and Refusal

The mountain of obstacles we must overcome to remain free and craft livable lives is brutal, sometimes pushing us to resignation and withdrawal. We face discrimination at every turn – from housing to employment, to the expectation that we can sustain the constant debt of release and parole associated fees. We are left to fend for ourselves after years of abuse, rather than preparation. The trauma of being criminalized, often since childhood, through to extreme sentencing and cruel conditions of confinement, are compounded with the trauma of release barriers that leave us feeling indefinitely subject to the will of the state that could care less if we make it or not. We know that our “recidivism” is tantamount to the same criminalization of our conditions of survival that brought us here to begin with. And we know that upon release, in many ways, our ability to evade further surveillance and capture by the punishment system is made even more difficult.

Our research reported in this series found patterns related to experiences of trauma, discrimination, exploitation, and egregious state violence from police, court officials, prison staff, and community resource agents – from entry to the system to its “release.” The Arizona Punishment System overwhelmingly entraps individuals with histories of physical, sexual, and emotional trauma, and then subjects them to compounding trauma and disempowerment at every stage of interaction with its institutions and agents while espousing rhetoric of reform and rehabilitation. Communities already disproportionately affected by “organized abandonment” are targeted through policing, harsher sentencing, imprisonment patterns, separation of families, and lifelong

marginalization. The Arizona Punishment System is driven by a combination of vast public spending and extreme private profit, while those entrapped in it subsidize its ability to persist at the expense of their dignity and livelihood. Finally, officials in virtually every segment of the system enforce surveillance and control by physical, psychological, and sexual abuse—feeding their arrest and incarceration rates through manipulation and intimidation; “securing” prison environments through restraints, assaults, and bodily violations; and structurally denying adequate shelter and employment post-release while maintaining the omnipresent threat of re-incarceration.

Our first-hand knowledge of this process is difficult to bear, but we know from our shared struggle that we cannot remain silent, that as Audre Lorde (1978) writes: “It is better to speak, remembering we were never meant to survive.”



We propose this as a call to greater action: that we all contain the capacity to shape change, to draw from another insurgent author, Octavia Butler. Whether we sit idly by while our neighborhood gets designated as “crime free,” whether we interject when our loved ones disparage “criminals” getting what they deserve, whether we push for reforms that do more to expand the reach of this system than contract it. **This structure and its ideologies were made, and can be unmade.** In order to see real change, we must hold ourselves and each other radically accountable – not retributively, not punitively, but transformatively. We must imagine that we DO belong together in community, and envision the ways we can enact care as an antidote to violence. So long as we must constantly fight for our own humanity and dignity to be respected, our liberation is bound with one another. We are all only ever one arrest away from this fate, one lost job or house, one bad relationship, one struggle with mental health. **We are all inextricably linked** in our vulnerability to this system.

Valentina reminds us that our task is also embedded in love; “On a basic level, we are given everything and all we’re asked is to love. That’s it. Just love. And that is the hardest thing in the world for us to do, right? Because no one is better

than the next person, although the system would like you to believe that” (Valentina interview, 2019). We ground our stories in the perspective that no one deserves to have suffered what we have, that if our society were motivated by healing and support, we might understand what is needed for real justice, real safety. The women who shared with us their dreams for the future model the resilience we could all learn from – the ones who risk it all to take care of one another. They hold onto beauty in the most trying of circumstances. Together we take up the charge to share ourselves, as Rae said at the start of this project; **“We’re gonna write our story. We’re gonna let these stories be heard. We’re going to humanize every – every – single number that’s in here”** (Rae interview, 2019). We have shared our *testimonio*, our refusal to be dehumanized, our acutely shared struggle. And we’re going to keep honoring each other long after this project. We hope you will, too.

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