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ARIZONA OPINION

Arizona opinion: As violent crime skyrockets, Pima County plans to set more criminals free

Austin VanDerHeyden Special to the Arizona Daily Star

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The Following is the opinion and analysis of the writer:

Violent crime is skyrocketing in Pima County, but officials are too busy planning to release lawbreakers onto the streets to actually do anything about it.

With the county jail falling into disrepair, the Pima County Board of Supervisors' grand solution is to establish a commission that will study how officials can reduce the facility's population — i.e. by setting criminals free. “There are too many people in the jail,” Supervisor Matt Heinz has said, suggesting the county should aim to cut the detention center's population in half by 2030.



Austin VanDerHeyden

It couldn't be happening at a worse time. In 2023, Tucson police reported a 75% spike in violent crime, with aggravated assaults rising 88 percent, homicides rising 107%, and sexual assaults rising a whopping 188%. In fact, violent crime rates in Tucson are 95% higher than the national average, the latest statistics show, making Tucson more dangerous than all but 8% percent of U.S. cities.

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Knowing all of this, elected officials are still siding with criminals over law-abiding constituents, effectively doubling down on the policies that put Tucson in this position in the first place.

One possible reason for this decision? That would be money. A report last year from the Goldwater Institute, where I work, revealed Pima County has raked in nearly \$4 million from the left-leaning MacArthur Foundation, contingent on the county working to reduce its jail population. If incarcerations were decreasing because crime was decreasing, that would be laudable. But county officials want to reduce the incarcerated population by simply ignoring crimes and letting those culpable back on the street, no matter the consequences. The county is selling out to leftwing special interests—trading its citizens' safety for money.

Compounding the problem, county prosecutors seem unable — or unwilling — to meet the justice standards set forth by the state by resolving cases within a reasonable timeframe. The Arizona Judicial Branch says that “justice delayed is justice denied” — yet while Arizona case processing standards say 65% of cases should be resolved within three months, just 11% were resolved in Pima County within that timeframe in 2022 (the last year for which statistics are available). Similarly, state standards say 85% of cases should be resolved within six months and 96% within a year, but in 2022, Pima County only resolved 38% of cases within six months and 73% within a year.

Pima County Attorney Laura Conover has said from day one that she wanted to “revolutionize” operations at the county attorney’s office. And Conover, who was recently forced into a mandatory diversion program by the Arizona State Bar amid allegations of unethical behavior, has certainly done that, using “prosecutorial discretion” as an excuse not to enforce the laws voters entrusted her with upholding. The result: criminals go free, leaving law-abiding citizens to fend for themselves.

By all objective standards, Pima County’s criminal justice system is a complete failure. County prosecutors are unable to resolve cases at a proper rate to meet the justice standards set forth by the state. Meanwhile, the Pima County Board of Supervisors wants to put criminals back on the streets when Tucson is already more dangerous than 92% of the cities in America.

Sadly, Pima County officials seemingly have no intention of changing the way things operate, leaving the citizens of Old Pueblo to wonder who their public servants really work for.

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