



'Modern day slavery': Lawmakers, advocates seek change after Republic prison labor investigation

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Reacting to [an investigation by The Arizona Republic and KJZZ](#), lawmakers and advocates are calling for a review of the state's use of prison labor.

"Forced prison labor is nothing more than modern day slavery, and our state's growing reliance on this workforce is irresponsible, immoral and inexcusable," said state Sen. Martin Quezada, D-Glendale. "Any public official with the duty to protect taxpayer dollars should be rethinking the way we appropriate money and the accountability standards that are in place."

After 15 months of gathering and analyzing more than 11,000 documents and building a computer program that downloaded tens of thousands of public profiles about prisoners that the Arizona Department of Corrections refused to provide, reporters at The Arizona Republic and KJZZ News found that prison labor — during the past 20 years — has become ubiquitous across the state.

By law, Arizona forces men and women incarcerated in its public and privately operated prisons to work. While the vast majority work inside the prison making 10 to 35 cents an hour, there is also an elite force of about 2,000 prisoners who work for Arizona Correctional Industries, which sells their cheap labor to private companies.

The Republic and KJZZ's five-part series revealed the detrimental effects of what happens when a state exploits some of its poorest people.

[The investigation also challenged some of the Department of Corrections' core statements about prison labor in the state](#), including how the jobs it offers through ACI work programs are the state's best tools to reduce recidivism.

Raúl Grijalva, a congressman representing Arizona's 3rd District, said the investigation showed the state prison system was working against its own mission.

"Their focus is to keep recidivism rates high and maintain the mass incarceration crisis that disproportionately impacts communities of color and immigrants to meet prison bed quotas," Grijalva said. "This egregiously inhumane system must be completely overhauled. Instead of giving corporations taxpayer dollars to push mass incarceration, we should be investing these funds in education, job training and community programs that reduce recidivism."

Pima County Attorney Laura Conover said the reporting showed that prison system had become “profit driven.”

“We must acknowledge it and remain focused on our goal of providing opportunities for the rehabilitated, not the corporations,” Conover said. “This kind of reporting sheds light on the challenges we face.”

The Arizona Republic reached out to several Republican legislators for reactions, including House Speaker Rusty Bowers and Senate President Karen Fann. The newspaper tried to contact other Republican lawmakers with prisons in their districts, and state Rep. Walt Blackman, who has been a critic of the Arizona prison system, and sponsored bills that would provide greater oversight of the Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry. None of them responded.

Maricopa County Attorney Rachel Mitchell also did not respond to requests for comment. Nor did the Rand Corporation, Goldwater Institute or the Cato Institute.

While the scope of Arizona’s reliance on prison labor was not news to Jessica MacTurk, she said the investigation validated what incarcerated people have known for years.

“I spent 7 years in the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry,” MacTurk said in an email. “During that time, I witnessed firsthand the exploitation, degradation, and abuse of prisoners working for Arizona Correctional Industries. I can attest that many prisoners are lured by the opportunity to earn more than \$0.50/hour, and are willing to put up with the mental and physical cost of the jobs in order to be able to buy the bare necessities.”

MacTurk said she knew prisoners who were permanently disfigured at their prison jobs, leaving them to navigate a medical system [recently found to provide an unconstitutionally inadequate level of care](#).

Now working as policy coordinator for [Arizonans for Transparency and Accountability in Corrections](#), MacTurk is calling for independent oversight of the prison system.

“The lack of independent, external oversight had led directly to the exploitation and inhumane treatment of prisoners exposed in this investigation,” she said.

Molly Gill, [vice president of policy for FAMM](#), a criminal justice reform advocacy group that challenges mandatory minimum laws, echoed MacTurk’s call for greater oversight. “This prison system lacks transparency and accountability,” she said. “An audit here or there is not enough to make sure the state’s prisons are keeping people safe, both in and outside of prison.”

[Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee](#) organizer Courtney Montoya likened the system operated by Arizona Correctional Industries to convict leasing.

“This goes beyond exploitation into the realm of cruel and unusual punishment,” she said. “The Arizona Republic has found that training and rehabilitation are difficult to obtain and that incarcerated workers are punished for not participating in jobs that are often dangerous.”

Montoya noted that prisoners employed by ACI were not found to have significantly lower recidivism rates than incarcerated people who were not part of the program.

“And with dangerous working conditions paired with systemic medical neglect and abuse seen in U.S. prisons and jails all over the country, participation comes at a hefty cost,” she said. “We stand

against the exploitation of our communities and demand that incarcerated workers be provided adequate pay, adequate health care, vocational training, resources to help place them into jobs and housing, medical and mental health services, and basic human dignity.”

After reading the investigation, the state Senate Democratic leader, Sen. Rebecca Rios, D-Phoenix, said the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry was not living up to its name.

“The focus here seems to be not on investing in a true ‘rehabilitation and reentry’ system that helps Arizonans so they can return to their communities and families and successfully reintegrate after their incarceration,” Rios said. She cited “limited opportunities for substance abuse treatment” as an example of the department’s flawed priorities.

[Just Communities Arizona](#) Executive Director Caroline Isaacs said the investigation's findings are “further proof that incarceration in Arizona is not really designed or intended for rehabilitation.”

“What's more concerning is that it appears to be the opposite — that recidivism is actually incentivized,” Isaacs said. “Companies, institutions, and even small towns are dependent on this cheap labor source. This raises the frightening notion that the state's proclivity for long sentences for relatively minor offenses may be motivated in part by sheer greed. At the very least, it may explain why the state is so resistant to the sensible sentencing reform efforts that have been adopted in many other states, including those with conservative leadership.

“The blatant commodification of human beings revealed in this investigation is deeply disturbing,” she said. “This report reveals another shift in the perception of incarcerated people from human being to 'profit generator' or even a 'product' themselves, to be traded or leased out to the highest bidder.”

Isaacs joined the calls for greater oversight of the Arizona prison labor system from state lawmakers.

“The fact that journalists had to go to such lengths to uncover the truth about these practices makes it clear that state leadership is asleep at the wheel,” she said. “The misuse of tax dollars, possible violation of state and federal laws and regulations, and abuse of human rights laid bare through this investigation is an indictment of the callous and irresponsible attitudes at the executive and legislative levels and should be corrected immediately.”

American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona Legal Director Jared Keenan said the reporting confirmed that Arizona Correctional Industries “exploits individuals and communities.”

“The Arizona Department of Corrections has continued its long and troubling history of mistreatment of persons in prison from failing to provide constitutionally adequate medical and mental health care to its unnecessary and abusive use of solitary confinement,” Keenan said. “While Arizona continues to be a leader in mass incarceration, this exploitative system will continue to reap profits for private industry at the expense of everyday workers and those incarcerated and powerless to push back.”

State Rep. Domingo DeGrazia, D-Tucson, said the reporting substantiated his skepticism of the Arizona prison system.

"Our prison population is declining, but the costs are going up," he said. "The only way that makes sense is that there are folks making money off our prison system.

"And now to know that inmate labor is actually an industry to itself is incredibly offensive," DeGrazia said. "After reading this reporting, it is clear that slavery and indentured servitude is alive and well in Arizona."