

Crimmigration and the carceral fix in Arizona

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Stefano Bloch¹ , Daniel E. Martínez²,
Enrique Olivares-Pelayo³, Ufuoma Ovienmhada³,
Ryan Fatica (Seal)³, and Justin D. Strong⁴

Abstract

This paper centers Arizona as a critical site in the racialized criminalization of immigrants—a practice known as “crimmigration”—and the associated adaptive reuse of prison infrastructure. Focusing on a closed prison facility in the Town of Marana that is slated to reopen as an immigration detention center, we propose the concept of a “carceral fix,” wherein declining incarceration rates are offset by expanded civil immigration detention. Expanding Gilmore’s theory of the “prison fix,” we show how political and legal adaptations enable private and public actors to repurpose existing prison space for immigrant confinement amid unprecedented federal investment and intensified racialized enforcement. “Carcerality” names this expansive system of cordoning, confinement, control of which immigrant detention is part. In doing so, we situate Marana within Southern Arizona’s long history of punitive prison politics and anti-Mexican social and legal sentiment, demonstrating how criminalization, racialization, and gang labeling continue to generate and profit from imprisoned populations in a state that has long served as a model for punishment.

Keywords

crimmigration, carceral geography, Arizona, immigrant detention, carceral fix

¹School of Geography, Development, and Environment and the Graduate Interdisciplinary Program in Social, Cultural, and Critical Theory, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

²School of Sociology and the Binational Migration Institute in the Department of Mexican American Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

³School of Geography, Development, and Environment, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

⁴School of Sociology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

Corresponding author:

Stefano Bloch, ENR2 Building, 1064 E Lowell St., Tucson, AZ 85719, USA.

Email: blochs@arizona.edu

Introduction

The main route between Arizona's two largest cities, Phoenix and Tucson, consists of a 100-mile stretch of Interstate 10 that runs straight through the wide-open Sonoran Desert. I-10 muscles past the 1500-foot volcanic outcrop of Picacho Peak, scattered 40-foot-tall saguaro cacti with their cartoonishly upturned arms, and a brightly lit cluster of prison yards in the town of Eloy, located halfway between the two larger destinations. Outside of Eloy, there are another dozen such facilities situated even further from the freeway, including in the towns of Buckeye and Florence, as well as the juvenile, jail, state, and federal facilities located in Tucson, and another half-dozen in and around Phoenix proper. Combined, Arizona's southwestern detention facilities comprise one of the hottest, driest, deadliest, and most privatized carceral landscapes in the nation (Ovienmhada et al., 2024, Skarha et al., 2023).

Part of this desert carceral archipelago is the prison facility in Marana. The town of Marana (Spanish for *thicket*) is located just north of Tucson, and it is easy to miss. Known more for its outdoor paintball facilities than anything else, it is better described as a dot on the map than a destination. Marana's temperature rarely dips below the triple digits during the long summer season, and its leading employer is the town itself. The land was actively used for agriculture by the Hohokam and their descendants for over 4000 years and was later part of Mexico until the Gadsden Purchase of 1854. Marana was not incorporated as a town until 1977, and it was not until 1994 that the majority of the town's commercial and would-be residential territory was obtained through a court-contested annexation of land along I-10. That is the same year Marana got its prison, thereby contributing to Arizona's legacy as a territory and state built on carceral logics and infrastructures.

The euphemistically named Marana Community Correctional Treatment Facility was opened by Management & Training Corporation (MTC) as the state's first private, for-profit prison. MTC later sold the prison in 2013 to the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry (ADCRR) for \$150,000. ADCRR then closed the facility in 2023 at Governor Katie Hobbs' behest due to a steadily declining prisoner population. In 2025, MTC repurchased the facility from the state for \$15 million with the intention of reopening it as an immigrant detention facility (Kunichoff, 2025). This buy-back was completed soon after President Donald Trump signed the so-called One Big Beautiful Bill Act into law on July 4. The bill allocates \$45 billion to increase immigrant detention capacity: a 13-fold increase in the \$3.5 billion allocated just the previous year.

This enormous increase in federal spending on immigrant detention, coupled with heightened immigrant criminalization, created the perfect opportunity for MTC to reinvest in the prison, this time under contract with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). With detention, prison, reentry, drug treatment, and job training facilities located across the USA, as well as in Egypt, Australia, the island nation of Nauru, and the United Kingdom, MTC's official motto is "Believe It Or Not I Care," or "BIONIC" for short. Its Marana location is set to become the sixth BIONIC detention facility in MTC's real estate and business portfolio, and one of the state's first prison-to-detention-center conversion needed to provide beds for those

immigrants who are increasingly subject to criminalization. If MTC opens with its estimated 500 to a possible 1000 beds filled (Kunichoff and Washington, 2025), it would be the second-largest immigration detention facility in the state, behind the Eloy Federal Contract Facility. It would also increase the state's average daily population in ICE detention anywhere from 18% to 35%.¹

In this paper, we center Arizona as a major contributor to the contemporary legal confluence of immigration and criminalization approaches known as “crimmigration” (Martínez and Slack, 2013; Stumpf, 2006). Specifically, we discuss the closing, rebranding, and planned reopening of the Marana detention facility as a prime example of what we term Arizona's “carceral fix”: the conversion of emptied prisons into immigration detention centers and increased interior immigration enforcement to fill them amidst declining undocumented border-crossings. Expanding Gilmore's (2007) conceptualization of the “prison fix,” we argue that demonstrably declining crime and incarceration rates have been offset by increased crimmigration practices (Stumpf, 2006) that transform civil immigration violations into quasi-criminal offenses warranting detention. The planned transition of the Marana facility from prison complex to “detention facility” reveals efforts to keep carceral facilities operational as well as profitable on the backs of immigrant communities.

As we argue, this transition exemplifies an expanding and legally adaptive carceral landscape that extends across and well beyond prisons proper (Bloch, 2024). Our use of “carceral” derives from Foucault's (1977) foundational metaphor of the “carceral archipelago” and as elaborated upon by geographers who conceptualize the carceral as an assortment of geographical engagements with spaces, practices, and experiences of confinement and coercive control (Gill et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2018). This fix includes prisons, immigration detention facilities, as well as a whole host of legal, logistical, and infrastructural materialities, ideologies, and technologies.

We discuss how heightened racialization, including the related rhetoric of criminal gang labeling, has been advanced by the current administration and federal law enforcement agencies to justify the detention of immigrants—undocumented and documented alike—as “bad hombres” deserving of carceral state sanction and punitive captivity. Though distinct processes, racialization and criminalization operate similarly in that they serve to create and maintain social boundaries between a deserving “us” and an undeserving “them” (Martínez et al., Forthcoming). Arizona, we show, has long been a pioneer of carceral innovations and remains at the forefront of this expanding carceral geography of immigration detention that has been adopted nationwide.

Methods

As mentioned above, we are interested in contouring the historical and institutional processes that underlie the repurposing of the Marana Community Correctional Treatment Facility as an immigrant detention center. To do so, we conduct a theoretically driven case study of Arizona's carceral capacity and the criminalization of immigration in the state. To build our argument, we draw widely from social scientific and legal geographies literatures, including a historical account of racialized penalty in Arizona, publicly

available prison and Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention data, and media reporting. We also incorporate our collective experiences as Arizona-based researchers, organizers, and prison educators, as well as the lived experiences of those of us who have recently served jail time with immigrant detainees in the context of local ICE operations, and a formerly incarcerated scholar who has been imprisoned in the very facility at the center of our discussion. Insofar as Arizona presents both deeply punitive and anti-immigrant sentiments, these two distinct features of the state have yet to be theorized together. Occasioned by the recent expansion of immigration enforcement and detention nationally, our theoretical case study of Arizona offers new interpretive accounts of the emergent prison-to-detention transformation taking place across the USA (Figure 1)

Southern Arizona's carceral history

Arizona has served as a model for siting, operating, promoting, and populating prisons for over 150 years. The territory and later state was an innovator in situating prisons in isolated locations to prevent escape, emphasizing “bed space” rather than square footage when selling prisons to urban communities in the 1980s, selling places as profitable “Prison Cities” that lobbied for prison construction by the 1990s, and pioneering the cheap and efficient “warehousing model” of confinement by the end of the twentieth century (Lynch, 2009b). In this way, the state has long served as a proving ground for imprisonment strategies now playing a significant role in the prison-to-detention transformations of the twenty-first century. None of this could be possible without Arizona's concomitant legal targeting of non-White communities, particularly those of Mexican origin and Latin American lineage. Understanding crimmigration's contemporary contours requires recognizing this as racialized punishment, which has become increasingly southward-looking over the past quarter century.

Just over a decade after Arizona was a Confederate Territory and home to the Civil War's westernmost skirmish at Picacho Peak, it built its first territorial prison in 1876. From its inception, the territorial legal apparatus was oriented toward the White supremacist subordination of populations deemed racially incompatible with American citizenship. The establishment of its territorial prison in Yuma served as a model for other governing institutions that contributed to ongoing projects of westward expansion, conquest, and racial conflict between white settlers, Indigenous tribes, and Mexican communities across the borderlands (Jeffrey, 1968; Knepper, 1989; Lockard, 2020).

The Yuma territorial prison also inaugurated Arizona's enduring use of prison labor throughout the growth and expansion of its prisons to this day, aligning Arizona with Southern penal practices developed in the context of Black subjugation and racial violence (Perkinson, 2010). As Lynch (2009b, 106) makes clear, beyond the sheer number of incarcerated bodies held captive within its borders, Arizona has been key in reframing what prison life should be: “austere, unpleasant, and as economically self-sufficient as feasible.” Understanding Arizona's pioneering role in racialized punitive practices requires attending to this longue durée of its territorial and state history.

Since statehood in 1912, Arizona prison policies and practices have occupied an increasingly troubling position in the genealogy of American carceral expansion.

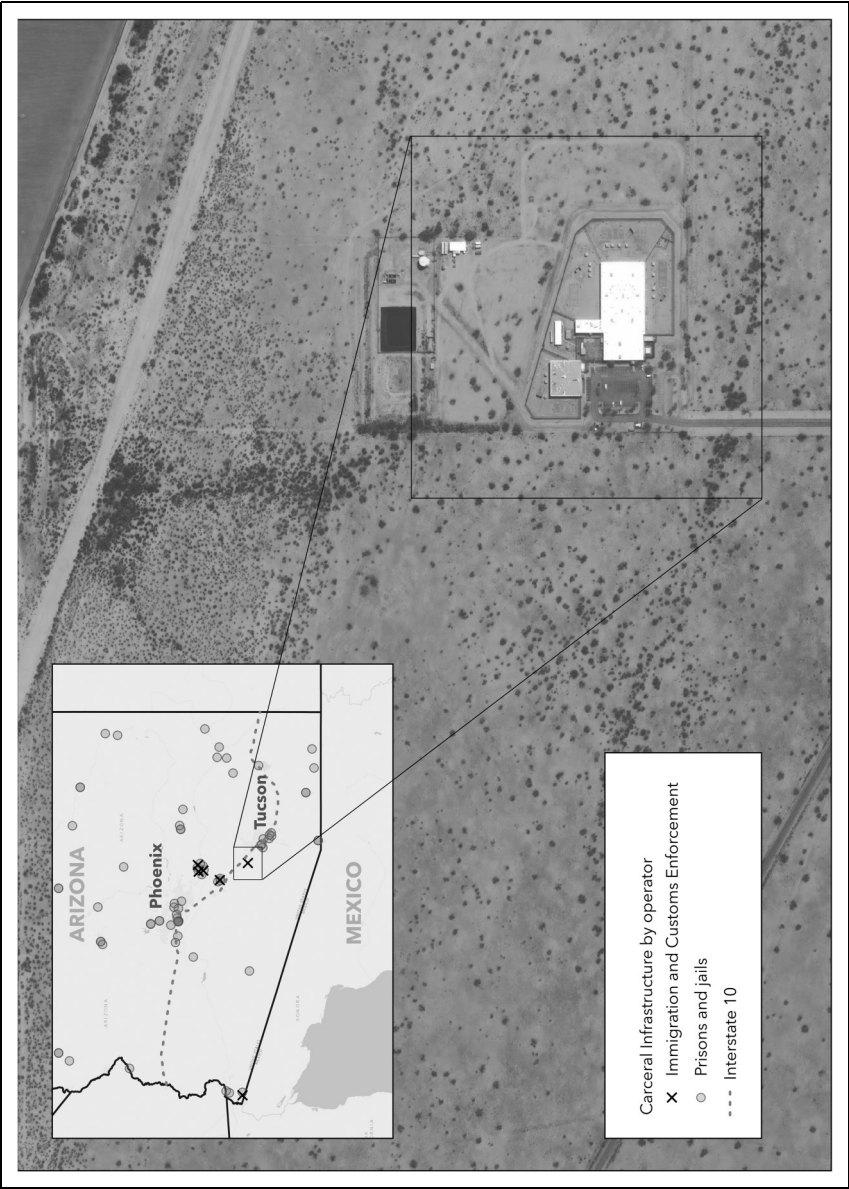


Figure 1. Aerial image of the MTC-owned Marana facility (source: ESRI satellite), proposed for use by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Inset map shows carceral facilities along and near Interstate 10, what the authors term Arizona’s “criminal corridor.” Data on location of carceral infrastructure obtained from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Homeland Infrastructure Foundation-Level Data on August 20, 2025, and plotted using centroids. Facilities with near overlapping centroids were manually moved to create more visibility of dense clusters.

Arizona has functioned as a laboratory of racialized punishment, a site where legal strategies and techniques of exclusion, criminalization, and confinement have been developed, refined, and exported to other jurisdictions. The state's proximity to Mexico and its reliance on Mexican labor for mining, railroad construction, and agriculture created conditions where Mexican workers were recruited during periods of labor demand and expelled or criminalized during economic contractions (Goodman, 2020; Ngai, 2014). This cyclical dynamic established patterns of "crimmigration" that were later formalized at the federal level.

As Lynch (2009a) captures in her study of the modernization of the Arizona Department of Corrections, the state emerged as a national trend-setter in post-rehabilitative punishment heralded in the late twentieth century. A combination of Arizona's libertarian brand of fiscal conservatism and legal battles over prison conditions ultimately suffocated commitments to reform and rehabilitation that were gaining some political traction during the 1970s. As the state struggled to fund, site, and make its facilities compliant in politically expedient ways, it relied on increasing capacity while maintaining the barest living conditions (Lynch, 2009a). This is why much of Arizona's prison landscape consists of large complexes dispersed across the state. Currently, in addition to immigrant detention, Arizona incarcerates about 35,000 people across thirteen complexes; seven are state-run, and six are privatized (ADCRR, 2025). By comparison, Michigan and New York imprison roughly the same number of people but operate considerably more facilities—27 and 42, respectively. This difference may help explain why Arizona experienced fewer prison closures relative to its hyper-incarcerating cohort of states in recent years (Harris et al., 2024).

Arizona would come to define carceral practices as punitive cost-cutting, or, as Lynch (2009a) describes, a cheap and mean penal regime. Not only would Arizona prisons rely upon coerced and exploited labor in building its new complexes, but it was also one of the first states to impose upon incarcerated people a range of housing and utility fees, as well as challenge significant prisoners' rights legislation and reform of the penal health care regime (Strong, 2023). As part of this approach, Arizona has long intertwined its carceral practices with the private sector. Six prisons are operated by the for-profit Geo Group and CoreCivic, which together hold close to a third of the state's prison population. Both corporations also hold upwards of 90% of immigration detainees nationwide (Anderson, 2025). MTC's Marana facility is slated to increase this percentage, and it sits squarely within a crimmigration corridor, equidistant between the border with Mexico and the City of Phoenix.

Marana, Arizona

Marana is a town of 60,000 residents located just outside the City of Tucson and within the 100-mile border zone.² The larger Tucson Metropolitan Statistical Area, of which Marana is part, has a population of just over 1,000,000 residents who share their desert home with Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, major military contractors such as Raytheon, and the University of Arizona, which conducts military research and maintains immigration-enforcement partnerships (Miller, 2012).

Marana is also situated in ICE's "Arizona Area of Responsibility," less than 100 miles from the agency's Enforcement and Removal Field Office in Phoenix, and inside the U.S. Border Patrol's Tucson Sector. The Tucson Sector also encompasses the San Xavier and Pascua Yaqui Reservations, Gila River Indian Community, the Tohono O'odham Nation, and 262 miles of international border with Mexico. It is from within this region that Border Patrol operates much of the nation's array of surveillance technologies and apprehension techniques that extend well into the U.S. interior (Muñiz, 2020). This area is likewise part of a broader landscape shaped by Border Patrol's inhumane "Prevention Through Deterrence" strategy. Initiated in 1994, the strategy sought to funnel undocumented migrants into remote areas of the Sonoran Desert, where they faced substantially increased risk of death (Boyce, 2016; Boyce et al., 2025; Jones, 2023; Rubio-Goldsmith et al., 2006). Over the next two decades, the remains of more than 4000 migrants were recovered from southern Arizona, many of which have been reduced to skeletal remains found bleached by the unyielding sun after dying of dehydration (Martínez et al., 2024).

Arizona's legal legacy of racialized crimmigration

Arizona pioneered the convergence of criminal and immigration enforcement that has become characteristic of contemporary American penalty. This convergence accelerated dramatically in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, notably in the wake of 9–11 (Miller, 2003), but its roots extend much deeper. Arizona's participation in Operation Wetback in 1954, its aggressive pursuit of undocumented residents, and its development of county-level immigration enforcement all established templates later adopted nationally.

SB 1070 and 287(g): Formalizing racialized suspicion and federal enforcement

Senate Bill (SB)1070, enacted in 2010, represented the apotheosis of the trend toward racialized crimmigration discussed in this paper. By requiring state law enforcement agencies to determine immigration status during lawful stops, and by criminalizing the failure to carry immigration documents, SB 1070 formalized the racialized suspicion that had long characterized Arizona policing. The law's "show me your papers" provision made explicit what had been implicit: that certain bodies, brown bodies, Spanish-speaking bodies, bodies marked as Mexican, existed under perpetual suspicion of criminality. Such suspicion is not only part of operationalizing broader borderlands policing but also contributes to the creation and maintenance of inland and internal social boundaries (Franko, 2025; Martinez et al., Forthcoming).

Arizona's immigration enforcement ethos became most well-known under Sheriff Joe Arpaio (in office 1993–2016). Arizona's Maricopa County functioned as a national showcase for punitive excess and racialized enforcement. His tent city jail, his institutionally issued pink underwear, his chain gangs, and his aggressive 287(g) agreement with ICE were not aberrations but rather intensifications of logics deeply embedded in Arizona's carceral history (see also Armenta, 2017). The 287(g) provision, added to the Immigration and Nationality Act by the 1996 IIRIRA, deputizes local police and jails

to perform federal immigration enforcement. The performative cruelty of Arpaio's regime served a dual function: it satisfied the punitive desires of an Anglo electorate anxious about demographic change while terrorizing immigrant communities into quiescence or departure.

The federal courts' repeated findings of racial profiling against Arpaio's department confirmed what community members had long known, that enforcement was targeted not at criminality per se but at Mexicanness as such (Martínez, 2022; Martínez et al., Forthcoming). Arpaio's eventual criminal contempt conviction for defying court orders to cease discriminatory practices represented a rare moment of accountability, though his subsequent pardon by President Trump underscored the political constituency for racialized punishment. Although many of the provisions in Arizona's SB1070 were struck down as unconstitutional in 2012 (*Arizona v. United States*, 2012), its main provision that law enforcement must make a reasonable attempt to determine the immigration status of lawfully stopped or detained individuals remains in effect. Arpaio's brand of anti-Mexican frontier justice thus became institutionalized as a function of the enduring effects of SB1070 coupled with the neoliberalization of incarceration. In short, using race/ethnicity in the criminalization and punishment process has become more, not less, pervasive.

Judicial legitimization: From "Kavanaugh stops" to gang labels

More recently, in 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that using ethnicity is legally sufficient to generate reasonable suspicion. In his concurrence, Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote that ethnicity can be used as a "'relevant factor' when considered along with other salient factors" such as language usage and location of an immigration stop, arguing that when "taken together [such circumstances and characteristics] can constitute at least reasonable suspicion of illegal presence in the United States" (*Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo*, 2025, 6).

In addition to blatant racial profiling now permissible by law—what are now being called "Kavanaugh Stops"—framing immigrants as gang members represents another mechanism through which civil immigration violations are transformed into quasi-criminal designations warranting indefinite detention and fast-tracked deportation. Gang databases maintained by local, state and federal law enforcement agencies, including explicitly racialized gang databases that operate within Arizona prisons (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2024a), allow individuals to be labeled as gang members based on criteria as vague as neighborhood of residence, clothing choices, possessing tattoos, association with others already in the database—94% of whom are Black and Latino men and boys (Bloch, 2020)—or even geographical identifiers such as one's address (Bloch, 2022; Muñiz, 2022). Once entered into a gang database, an immigrant faces dramatically heightened enforcement priority, mandatory detention, and near-certain deportation, all without ever being charged, let alone convicted of, a crime.

The way that gang membership allegations impact immigration proceedings despite their evidentiary thinness reveals how crimmigration operates through affective registers of fear and racialized suspicion as much as through formal legal categories. The rhetoric of gang involvement coming from the Trump administration has provided a criminological frame for non-criminal immigrants whose detention is justified by linking them

to so-called transnational gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and, more recently, Tren de Aragua.³ In addition to initiating arrests based on the violation of civil gang injunctions (Bloch and Meyer, 2019), and being a main factor for being cordoned in the most austere of penological conditions—that is, solitary confinement (Tublitz et al., 2025)—the gang label, like other markers of race and ethnicity, fortify the criminalization-to-deportation pipeline based on politicized and paranoid public perception of Latinos (Infante, 2025; Tosh et al., 2024).

Criminology of the other and racialized governance

Such labeling and racialization inherent to immigration enforcement operates through what Garland (2001a) has termed the “criminology of the Other.” It is a mode of governance that constructs certain populations as fundamentally different from, and threatening to, the law-abiding majority. This criminology of the Other finds its most explicit expression in the rhetoric of “rapists,” “bad hombres,” “vagrants,” “gang members,” and “criminal aliens” that has characterized immigration discourse since the mid-nineteenth century on, and including in the 1855 “Greaser Act,” and in public debates surrounding the 1937 Marihuana Stamp Act, 1954 “Operation Wetback,” and California’s 1994 Proposition 187, reaching a fever pitch in the late modern era during both the 2016 and 2025 presidential campaigns (Martínez et al., Forthcoming).

This rhetoric performs foundational ideological work: it transforms minor immigration violations into imagined criminal threats, justifying punitive responses that would be constitutionally impermissible if applied to citizens or even to criminal defendants (Martínez and Slack, 2013).

The intersection of criminalization and racialization functions as organized exclusion through punishment (Ryo et al., 2025), which requires a reliable geography of containment (Valdez, 2016). Immigration enforcement operates not merely to control borders or manage migration flows, but to produce and maintain a racial hierarchy that can be cordoned in place. The detention facility becomes a site where this hierarchy is materially enacted; where brown bodies are confined, counted, processed, and later expelled in ways that reinforce categorical otherness. Arizona’s carceral landscape, with its sprawling detention facilities visible from the interstate, its tent cities baking in triple-digit heat, and its converted prisons awaiting the next population of detainees, materializes this racial project in concrete, steel, and razor wire that mimic the architecture and design of the border wall, and vice versa.

The expansion of crimmigration thus represents not merely a legal or policy development but a spatial strategy of racialized governance. As Kurwa and Gurusami (2022) argue in their reframing of carceral migrations, understanding the movement of racialized bodies through carceral space requires attending to the racial logics that determine who gets moved, where they get moved, and under what conditions. The Marana facility’s transition from state prison to ICE detention center exemplifies these dynamics: the same physical infrastructure that once housed convicted state prisoners will now confine almost exclusively Hispanic immigrant detainees, demonstrating the fungibility of criminalized and racialized bodies within carceral capitalism’s spatial calculus.

Federal legal architecture and experiencing the detention/incarceration Nexus

Increased duration and severity of detention for non-criminals is not a flaw in the system but a design feature (Boyce, 2020; Lopez, 2019). Like geographical research that highlights specific spatial and temporal logics that bring detention into the realm of the carceral (Mountz et al., 2013), Stumpf (2013) argues that the blurring and blending of civil immigration enforcement and criminal law has rendered the non-criminal civil procedure indistinguishable from formal carceral punishment. Enduring an administrative process that is punishment in and of itself, both unauthorized migrants and those convicted of violent crimes come to inhabit the same carceral spaces as they move through the same justice system as prisoners.

Olivares-Pelayo (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2025) has been able to personally navigate the immigrant detainee experience, not as immigrant detainees, but as prisoners in the Arizona State prison and jail systems, which overlap with the immigrant detention ecosystem in scale, scope, and effect. As Olivares-Pelayo (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2024b) has experienced firsthand in more than one jail and racially segregated prison facility in Arizona, the only thing distinguishing someone suspected of violating a procedural immigration rule from someone awaiting sentencing for a felony-level violent crime is the color of their wristband: non-criminal detainees wear green; accused felons or those sentenced to jail time for misdemeanors wear pink, blue, or red depending on their custody level. The austere conditions of captivity endured by those convicted of a crime and those not even charged with a crime are otherwise identical.⁴ The people in jail on immigration holds were predominantly monolingual Spanish speakers who had been arrested on the southern border with Sonora. “Mala suerte,” bad luck, they called it.

But more than a stroke of luck, immigrant detention relies on a sophisticated reinterpretation and blending of criminal and civil law that continues to contribute to increased constitutional circumvention. As previously noted, central to this legal architecture is the category of “aggravated felony,” established by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 and dramatically expanded by the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 (García Hernández, 2014; Macías-Rojas, 2018). This immigration-specific designation applies to non-citizens and encompasses offenses that may not qualify as felonies under criminal law, including misdemeanor theft, simple battery, and even some paperwork violations. The designation triggers mandatory detention and bars nearly all forms of relief from deportation, regardless of how long someone has lived in the United States or their ties to U.S. citizen family members. Crucially, the aggravated felony designation operates retroactively, meaning that conduct that was legal or carried minimal consequences at the time it occurred can later become grounds for mandatory detention and deportation.

The proliferation of 287(g) agreements—a fivefold increase since 2024 (Anderson, 2025)—coupled with misinformation from the Trump administration on “Sanctuary Cities,” continues to create pipelines for moving bodies into detention. These agreements effectively expand the catchment areas and infrastructural corridors for detention facilities like Marana by transforming local law enforcement agencies across the country into de facto immigration enforcement arms.

Arizona's carceral fix

Arizona was undoubtedly a party to, if not a key player in, the U.S.'s prison boom and corresponding era of mass imprisonment (Garland, 2001b; Lynch, 2009a), but the state has barely experienced prison closures during the recent period of "prison bust," in which prison closures have eclipsed prison openings (Harris et al., 2024). Yet, Arizona's resistance to the national prison bust is striking. Between 2000 and the early 2020s, the state experienced minimal prison closures while states like North Carolina closed 27 facilities. Even Marana's 2023 closure proved temporary, as the facility was swiftly repurposed rather than permanently shuttered.⁵ We are less intent on addressing widespread prison closure or statewide loss of capacity, per se, than on speaking to the contours of, and the carceral fixes inherent to, prison-to-detention transformation.

Moreover, the shift from criminal punishment via incarceration to civil detention does not signal a reduction in carceral environments or practices (Bosworth, 2019); rather, increased detention often depends on the malleability of existing carceral infrastructures and the legal capacity to expand administrative and civil immigrant control (Romero, 2023). As Romero (2023) argues, tangible prison infrastructure has facilitated non-criminal immigrant detention being made more punitive through its use of former and current carceral spaces of confinement. Lopez (2019), like Moran et al. (2016), similarly highlights how the re-design and new-build architecture of detention facilities contributes to an outsized and increasingly punitive detention experience, writing:

Once in place, buildings have inertias of their own. Unlike other aspects of immigration enforcement that might change from administration to administration, the buildings, building contracts, and building industry shape immigration enforcement and detention practices for years to come. There is a temporal disjuncture between immigration policy and detention facility longevity. It is through architecture that private influences on immigration policy institutionalize punitive enforcement for future generations. (Lopez, 107)

In addition to building a new or transforming existing sites for heightened detention through design alterations and manipulation of affective atmospheres of incarceration (Turner et al., 2022), policy must enable such transformations to bypass permitting processes or public approval, as occurred with Marana's transition from prison to detention facility. Our concept of the carceral fix responds to these dynamics.

To conceptualize this, we turn to theoretical frameworks linking space, capital, and incarceration. Harvey's (1982) concept of the "spatial fix" examines capital's tendency toward over accumulation and its temporary resolution through geographical expansion and infrastructural development. Gilmore (2007) adapts this framework to California's prison boom of the 1990s, describing the "prison fix" as a response to multiple surpluses: financial capital seeking stable returns post-deindustrialization, surplus land rendered devalued by shifts in federal water policy, surplus labor composed of displaced rural workers, and surplus state capacity seeking new functions amid neoliberal retrenchment. Prisons simultaneously absorb devalued land, employ surplus labor, provide investors

with stable returns through population warehousing, and extend state capacity via carceral mechanisms (see also Eason et al., 2024). Locking people up, increasingly migrants, is, as Hiemstra and Conlon (2025) show, “big business.”

The “carceral fix” extends Gilmore’s prison fix beyond the confines of criminal incarceration to encompass the broader apparatus of detention, surveillance, and immigration control. Where Gilmore analyzed how prisons absorbed multiple surpluses during California’s construction boom, the carceral fix addresses a different crisis: what happens when declining crime rates and prison populations render existing carceral infrastructure surplus itself. In addition to emphasizing the procurement of new detention spaces—most recently empty warehouse spaces in places like Surprise, Arizona being converted into detention facilities (Dolinar, 2026; Ngo et al., 2026)—the carceral fix describes the adaptive reuse and legal transformation of existing prison facilities to absorb populations criminalized through a flexible system of immigration enforcement. While some immigrants convicted of unlawful entry are sent to existing federal prisons, the fix includes the physical conversion of underused state prisons into ICE detention centers, the legal infrastructure that rebrands civil immigration violations as quasi-criminal offenses warranting detention, and the ideological work of constructing immigrants as threats deserving of carceral control. The carceral fix thus operates simultaneously at material, legal, and ideological registers: repurposing devalued prison infrastructure, expanding administrative detention authority, and deploying racialized narratives of criminality to justify the continued operation of facilities like Marana. It reveals how carceral capitalism adapts to changing enforcement priorities not by dismantling its infrastructure, but by finding new populations to fill it.

Mike Davis’s (1995) naming of the “prison-industrial complex,” like Golash-Boza’s (2009) “immigration industrial complex,” situates such carceral fixes within a broader apparatus of social control and private profit, giving rise to the concept of carceral capitalism (Story, 2019; Wang, 2018). From this analytical position, policing, sentencing, and incarceration function as infrastructures necessary to manage populations deemed surplus to the economy, while ideological justifications facilitate the forms of captivity that generate profits (Wacquant, 2009; A. Davis, 2011). As Gilmore (2007) describes, filling these prisons, built on once-agricultural Central Valley lands, relied upon legislation ranging from the War on Drugs to the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act, codifying “three strikes,” sentence enhancements, anti-gang task forces, and pervasive “tough on crime” ideologies that supplied criminalized bodies to a profit-driven system.

Prisons, like other elements of the built environment, are fixed assets rooted in place, notwithstanding the wide reach of carceral technologies of captivity and the rise of prisoner transfers in response to the underfilling and overcrowding crises (Brooks and Best, 2021). As Gilmore again notes, “surplus land” is never empty; it includes “devalued residential, retail, manufacturing, and other built improvements.” The Marana facility exemplifies this dynamic. As criminal incarceration rates declined, the formerly lucrative carceral compound became surplus infrastructure in need of “fixing.” Expanded immigration policies and practices are, we argue, buttressing that ideological, legal, and logistical fix.

The transition to crimmigration detention

Immigration law has historically been treated as a civil administrative matter in the USA, not a criminal one. Nevertheless, a series of legislative changes throughout the 1990s blurred the distinction between immigration law and criminal law, with profound impacts on immigrants' lives in the subsequent decades (Armenta, 2017; Martínez et al., Forthcoming; Stumpf, 2006). Changes stemming from the so-called "1996 laws" include the expansion of crimes deemed "aggravated felonies," the creation of the 287(g) provision, and the establishment of the expedited removal process, among other notable transformations (Abrego et al., 2017; Armenta, 2017). Stumpf's (2006) conceptualization of "crimmigration" (a portmanteau of criminalization and immigration) more broadly relies on a coordinated legal infrastructure that rhetorically and legally rebrands immigrants and thereby punishes them as criminals. It is a system dependent on the active dismantling of the crucial distinction between criminal and civil law, or as Stumpf (2006, 376) puts it, the punitive process by which "criminal law is poised to swallow immigration law."

The crimmigration literature has expanded substantially since the 1990s, featuring research conducted at the regional and global scales (Ballesteros-Pena et al., 2024; Bosworth et al., 2018; Zilberg, 2011) as well as in specific country contexts such as Australia (Rivas, 2023), Canada (Wallace, 2024), Germany (Axster, 2024), the Netherlands (Brouwer, 2020), New Zealand (McHardy, 2022), Spain (Güerri, 2024), and in the USA (Armenta, 2017; Brotherton and Kretsedemas 2017; Chacón, 2012; Chacón et al., 2024; Coleman, 2007; Dowling and Inda, 2013; Macias-Rojas, 2016; Martinez and Slack 2013). An examination of the USA is particularly important, as (1) this country has exported and imposed many of its draconian neoliberal logics surrounding immigration enforcement and crime control to other parts of the world (Brotherton and Kretsedemas, 2017; Zilberg, 2011), and (2) it is in this country that the vagaries of changing political leadership allow for increasingly harsh immigration politicization.

For example, in the USA, being "undocumented," or what the law identifies as "unlawfully present," is a civil administrative violation, not a crime under criminal law. Unlike "illegal entry" and "illegal re-entry," or being found to have reentered after deportation—which are federal misdemeanor and felony offenses, respectively (Martínez et al., 2018)—"unlawful presence" is not punishable under the Immigration and Nationality Act. While deportation is a possible consequence, other legal penalties are not within the scope of immigration enforcement. Nevertheless, under the current Trump Administration, residents of the U.S. who are present without proper documentation but have not committed a crime are being cordoned in carceral complexes at some of the highest rates in history.

In fact, among the historically high 68,289 "average daily population" in ICE detention as of February of FY2026 (see Figure 2), 73% did not have a criminal conviction, with 47% of all detainees being held on other non-criminal immigration violations (ICE, 2026). Moreover, two factors make the current era of immigration enforcement distinct from earlier ones. First, 80% of those currently detained were arrested by ICE, rather than being apprehended as border crossers by U.S. Customs and Border Protection near the U.S.–Mexico border (ICE, 2025). Historically, these proportions have been inverted,

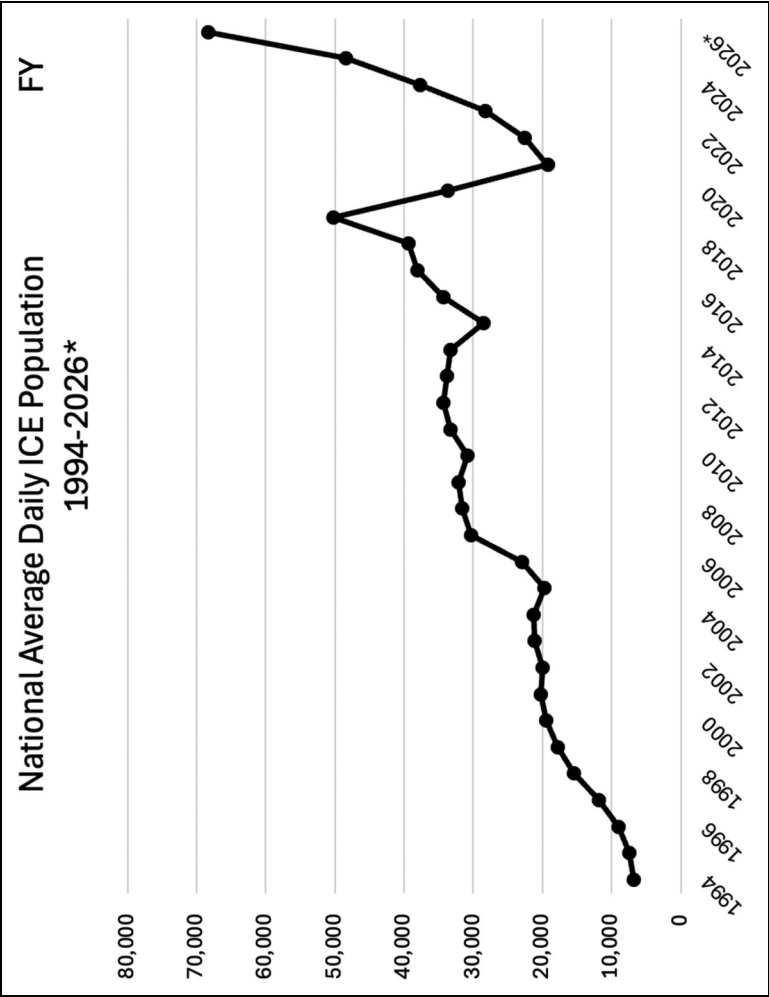


Figure 2. Data sources: Ryo, Emily and Ian Peacock. 2018. "The Landscape of Immigration Detention." American Immigration Council Report. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/wpcontent/uploads/2025/01/the_landscape_of_immigration_detention_in_the_united_states.pdf. Data obtained via Freedom of Information Act request by the Immigrant Legal Resource Center available via National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC): <https://immigrantjustice.org/ice-detention-facilities-as-of-november-2017>. Publicly available ICE data from Year-End reports: <https://www.ice.gov/detain/detention-management>. For 1994–2000, see: https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/wpcontent/uploads/2025/01/the_landscape_of_immigration_detention_in_the_united_states.pdf. For FY 2018, see: <https://immigrantjustice.org/ice-detention-facilities-as-of-november-2017/>. For FY 2019–2026, see: <https://www.ice.gov/detain/detention-management>.

which suggests interior immigration enforcement has reached unprecedented levels. And second, detainees today include not just recent border-crossers and undocumented immigrants, but legal permanent residents, student visa holders, those with Temporary Protected Status, and others with some form of documentation, including at least 170 U.S. citizens (Foy and Maney, 2025). The rise and expansion of interior immigration enforcement, which serve to justify the repurposing of prisons and warehouses for immigrant detention in the wake of historical declines in border apprehensions, represent another fundamental aspect of the “carceral fix” reminiscent of Gilmore’s (2007) “prison fix” (Figure 2).

When it comes to formal removals from the country, deportation procedures that do occur are supposed to be “reasonably brief,” with expediency being stipulated in the Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) then has 90 days to remove or release a detainee suspected of being unlawfully present. Those suspected of unlawful entry, including those who have returned after deportation, even in the absence of other criminal charges, can be held indefinitely.⁶ Yet within those 90 days, the physical detention of undocumented immigrants within a system predicated on maximizing punishment and profit becomes elongated despite such constitutional expectations and protections.

Conclusion

The myth of immigrant criminality—a persistent belief that undocumented migrants pose heightened criminal threats despite findings to the contrary (Ewing et al., 2015; Ousey and Kubrin, 2018; Zatz and Smith, 2012)—provides the ideological impetus for crimmigration’s expansion. This myth circulates through media representations, political rhetoric, and bureaucratic categories, producing the expansion of crimmigration through mass detention and deportation predicated on haunting images of racialized others (Menjívar et al., 2018; Muñiz, 2022; see also Ramachandran and Wright, 2026). Images of each ICE raid, each detention facility opening, and each deportation flight reinforce and extend the imagined link between immigration and criminality, thereby actively constructing and cultivating the “criminology of the Other” and justifying further investment in the carceral apparatus as a form of racialized social control (Martínez et al., Forthcoming).

This brief story about Arizona and Marana makes clear that the carceral fix is not a new logic or politics, but a process that is over a century in the making. From the Yuma territorial prison in 1876 to the warehousing model of the 1990s to today’s detention conversions, Arizona has consistently pioneered methods of racialized confinement that transform surplus populations into captive labor and profitable assets. What is new, however, is the unabashedly profit-motivated pivot toward the increased criminalization of immigrants and the repurposing of existing carceral infrastructures and logics to accommodate it. Where previous eras relied on building new prisons to absorb criminalized populations, the current moment reveals carceral capitalism’s adaptive capacity: when crime rates decline and prison beds sit empty, the system does not contract, but pivots and expands in new directions. The same facilities, the same surveillance

technologies, the same punitive practices, and even the same personnel simply shift targets from convicted criminals to civil and administrative immigration violators. This continuity of carceral infrastructure masked by rhetorical shifts about who “deserves” detention exposes the fundamentally racialized nature of American punishment. The Marana facility’s transformation thus represents both an end and a beginning: the culmination of Arizona’s long experiment in profitable punishment and the blueprint for crimmigration’s carceral future.

The rapidity with which these conversions are occurring reveals the preexisting compatibility between prison and detention infrastructure. The physical requirements of secure perimeters, controlled movement zones, surveillance systems, and medical facilities translate readily between criminal punishment and civil detention. More significantly, the labor force trained in managing incarcerated populations requires minimal retraining to manage detained immigrants, though this human capital dimension of the carceral fix has yet to receive sufficient scholarly attention. However, Blakinger (2025) recently reported that the prison-to-detention transition is being supported by an increasing number of correctional officers leaving prisons for detention centers. Such correctional officers, administrators, and support staff represent sunk investments in punitive human resources and facilitate a smooth transition to detention, thereby enabling continued returns on investment.

As we have argued in this paper, the Marana facility’s slated transformation from state prison to for-profit immigrant detention center exposes these fixes, as well as these entrenched racial and economic logics that have long sustained Arizona’s carceral apparatus. The Marana case demonstrates that the carceral fix is not merely about adapting and reusing prisons or filling existing beds, but about playing the long game in normalizing the use of race-conscious criminalization and carcerality when dealing with what are in reality non-criminal identities and activities. Just as the very concept of “crimmigration” speaks to how immigration enforcement is conceptually and practically filtered through criminological logics, procedures, and infrastructures, we have sought to bring together interdisciplinary insights from criminology, sociology, legal studies, and geography to advance the notion of the “carceral fix” in Arizona.

Moving forward, we contend that the carceral fix will remain the systemic solution that capital, the state, and carceral actors rely on to resolve crises of surplus capacity and to sustain a manufactured criminalized immigrant population. Part of this entails further identifying the entrenched geographical fixes that comprise crimmigration corridors in the USA and elsewhere.

ORCID iD

Stefano Bloch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4021-4391>

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Notes

1. The average daily population in Arizona ICE facilities was 2865 as of February 5, 2026 (ICE, 2026).
2. As per federal law, Border Patrol can, without a warrant, board vehicles and vessels to conduct searches for people suspected of being in the country without documentation “within a reasonable distance from any external boundary of the United States.” The Supreme Court has stipulated “reasonable distance” to be 100 air miles from any international border (see Boyce, 2024).
3. In 2025, a Presidential Proclamation designated Tren de Aragua as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under the Enemy Aliens Act and as part of the Department of Homeland Security’s heightened and constitutionally questionable detention and deportation proceeding. See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/invocation-of-the-alien-enemies-act-regarding-the-invasion-of-the-united-states-by-tren-de-aragua/>.
4. In 2017, Bosworth argued that academics have “written surprisingly little about everyday life in immigration removal centres” (2017, 52). This remains true almost a decade later. This is not a criticism of existing scholarly experience or methods; rather, it reveals the opacity of the detention system and the fact that immigration detention functions to capture, punish, and deport the poorest and least formally educated members of our immigrant community.
5. Harris et al.’s (2024) published work on the “prison bust” predates the closure of the Marana facility. They also make explicit that they exclude immigrant detention facilities in their research.
6. Such indefinite detention of particular detainees is outlined in Section 236(c) of the Immigration and Nationality Act and codified in 8 U.S.C. § 1226(c).

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Stefano Bloch is an associate professor of geography, author of *Going All City* (University of Chicago Press), and teaches, writes, and conducts research on theories of crime, criminality, and criminalization, with a focus on gangs, graffiti, and cultural dynamics of neighborhood change.

Daniel E. Martínez is a distinguished scholar and professor of sociology and serves as co-director of the Binational Migration Institute. His research and teaching interests include race and ethnicity, undocumented immigration, and criminology.

Enrique Olivares-Pelayo is a doctoral candidate who conducts research on prison identity and carceral geographies.

Ufuoma Ovienmhada is an engineer by education and geographer by training, generating data-driven actionable insights about the environmental burdens experienced by

marginalized identities in the United States. She is an assistant professor in the School of Geography, Development, and Environment at the University of Arizona (Fall 2026).

Ryan Fatica (Seal) is an MA student at the University of Arizona whose research focuses on radical social movements, policing, imprisonment, and repression.

Justin D. Strong is faculty in the School of Sociology at the University of Arizona. His work critically interrogates the intersection of punishment and social suffering with special focus given to the legal status and rights of incarcerated people.