



FACT-CHECK: DEMOCRATIC MARICOPA COUNTY ATTORNEY CANDIDATE SAYS ARIZONA HAS WORLD'S EIGHTH- HIGHEST INCARCERATION - CRONKITE NEWS

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IF YOUR TIME IS SHORT

- The Prison Policy Initiative reported, based on data from 2020 and 2021, that Arizona would have the eighth highest incarceration rate in the world if it were evaluated as an independent nation. The state incarcerates 868 people per 100,000 residents. Other measures also rank Arizona high for incarceration rates.
- Other agencies measure incarceration rates across different times and with different methodologies. Therefore, finding any one definitive number is difficult.

In a recent debate, Arizona Democratic candidate [Julie Gunnigle](#) claimed that the Maricopa County Attorney's Office needs criminal justice reform and said its incarceration rate is "out of step with the national norm."

"If Arizona were a country, it'd be the eighth largest incarcerator in the world," Gunnigle said in the Sept. 15 debate that was televised on [Arizona PBS](#).

So, does Arizona rank No. 8 for the highest incarceration rates in the U.S. and the world? By one measure, yes.

PolitiFact reached out to Gunnigle, and she pointed us to [data](#) from the Prison Policy Initiative, a criminal justice-oriented public policy think tank. It shows that Arizona incarcerated 868 people per 100,000 residents in state prisons, local jails, federal prisons and other systems of confinement, making it eighth highest of all 50 states and the world combined.

By many measures, the U.S. leads the world in incarceration rates. But because methodologies differ, comparing the numbers is complicated. Nations set prison and jail sentencing in different ways. When countries have similar sentencing terms, experts say it's OK to compare incarceration rates.

“As long as the border between prison and jail terms is consistent, there is nothing grossly misleading about comparing state level and national level incarceration rates trans-nationally,” University of California at Berkeley legal professor [Franklin Zimring](#) said.

The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics defines an [incarceration rate](#) as the number of inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents held in state or federal prisons or local jails.

We’re familiar with incarceration rates. In August 2015, PolitiFact Virginia rated [Mostly True](#) a claim that the U.S. has the world’s highest incarceration rate, with the greatest share of its population behind bars compared with other countries. In 2013, the International Centre for Prison Studies at the University of London, which looks at prison populations in more than 200 countries and territories, reported that the U.S. prison population rate of 716 inmates per 100,000 people was No. 1 in the world. In 2015, the group ranked the U.S. second in the world with 698 prisoners per 100,000 residents.

The Prison Policy Initiative used a 2018 [report](#) when it compiled U.S. data. At that time, federal statistics collected from the World Prison Brief stated that 642 people per 100,000 population were imprisoned, ranking above all other countries in the world.

According to current estimates based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020 estimates, the U.S. has a prison population rate of 505 people per 100,000 of the national population.

But Arizona is not an outlier among U.S. states. If every U.S. state were evaluated as an independent nation, 24 states would have higher incarceration rates than every other country in the world.

“Arizona is simply one among many other U.S. states,” said [Alfred Blumstein](#), a Carnegie Mellon professor who researches criminal justice policy.

U.S. is way ahead of the rest of the world

Prison Policy Initiative data makes it clear that “the U.S. is way ahead of the rest of the world and its incarceration rate,” Blumstein said. “Thus, it seems silly to compare Arizona to the rest of the world; it would be much more meaningful to compare Arizona to the rest of the states — it would still be No. 8 — and the U.S. would be out of range of the rest of the world.”

Prison Policy Initiative spokesperson [Wanda Bertram](#) said the organization’s research methodology is more comprehensive than other reports on criminal justice statistics.

“When we put together our incarceration rates, it’s not just prisons,” Bertram said. “We also count detention in local jails, the detention rate of people from states in federal prison. And, then, we also count juvenile incarceration and immigrant detention.”

When compared with founding NATO countries, Arizona’s incarceration rate per capita is No. 8 in the world.

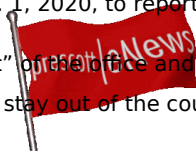
“Eighth highest is like if every U.S. state was a country and the U.S. was still a country, it would have the eighth highest incarceration rate in the world,” Bertram said. “If it was like Arizona seceded from the U.S. today, it would have the highest incarceration rate in the world, even higher than the U.S.”

Compared with other stable democracies, such as European Union member states and Canada, Arizona is an outlier when it comes to incarceration rates per 100,000 population.

According to the Justice Department’s [Office of Justice Programs](#) 2019 statistics of U.S. correctional populations, Arizona had 760 people in local prisons and jails per 100,000 U.S. residents of all ages. The government agency used information from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Annual Probation Survey, Annual Parole Survey, National Prisoner Statistics program, 2019 Census of Jails and U.S. Census

Bureau, postcensal estimated resident population for Jan. 1, 2020, to report those findings.

Gunnigle pledged to conduct what she called a “full audit” of the office and to expand diversion programs. (Diversion programs let people who have committed minor, nonviolent criminal offenses stay out of the courts and avoid prison time. The programs often include rehabilitation.)



Gunnigle’s opponent, incumbent County Attorney Rachel Mitchell, whom Gov. Doug Ducey appointed in April, did not directly address Gunnigle’s claim.

“I’m willing to look at cases with an open mind,” Mitchell said in the debate. “But the vast majority of the cases in the office are not overcharged; they’re handled appropriately.”

Our ruling

Gunnigle said, “If Arizona was a country it’d be the eighth largest incarcerator in the world.”

The numbers back her up. Arizona incarcerated 868 people per 100,000 residents in state prisons, local jails, federal prisons and other systems of confinement, making it eighth of all U.S. states and the world. Although Arizona is eighth in the world by Prison Policy Initiative, other agencies measure incarcerations rates across different times and with different methodologies. Therefore, finding any one definitive number is difficult.

We rate this claim Mostly True.

OUR SOURCES

- Arizona PBS at Arizona State University, [Horizon Maricopa County attorney debate](#), Sept. 15, 2022
- Phone interview with [Julie Gunnigle](#), Oct. 20, 2022
- Bureau of Justice Statistics [Glossary](#)
- PolitiFact Virginia, “[Webb says the U.S. has the world’s highest incarceration rate](#),” Aug. 10, 2015
- Email interview with Carnegie Mellon professor [Alfred Blumstein](#), Nov. 1, 2022
- Prison Policy Initiative, [States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2021](#), September 2021
- Phone interview with Prison Policy Initiative spokesperson [Wanda Bertram](#), Nov. 3
- Institute for Crime and Justice Policy at the University of London-Bierbeck, [World Prison Brief on the United States of America](#)
- Bureau of Justice Statistics [Prisoners in 2020 – Statistics Table](#), December 2021
- Email interview with University of California-Berkeley Professor [Franklin Zimring](#), Oct. 26, 2022