



OKLAHOMANS *for*  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Investing in Justice:  
**The Promise  
and Progress of  
Oklahoma's SQ781  
Community  
Safety Fund**

**2025**

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# **\$37.5 million invested**

which represents the largest investment in local community mental health and substance abuse services in Oklahoma's history.

## **1 in 5**

Oklahomans experience a mental illness, while 1 out of every 10 adults has an active substance abuse disorder, two of the highest rates in the country.

## **15%**

Only 15% of individuals needing mental health treatment receive it, and less than 10% of individuals needing substance abuse.

**Only 44 out of 77 counties have applied and received funding to bolster mental health and substance abuse treatment in their communities.**

# 1. Note from the Editor and Introduction to the Issue at Hand

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**"When Oklahomans passed SQ780 and SQ781, they chose a smarter, fairer approach to justice. SQ780 reduced incarceration for low-level offenses; SQ781 committed to reinvesting those savings into treatment, housing, and services. This report shows how those reforms are breaking harmful cycles and building stronger communities across our state."**

**- Michael Olson**

Policy Counsel for Oklahomans for Criminal Justice Reform

Data for this report was provided by The Data Works.

[The DataWorks](#) takes messy, fragmented public data and transforms it into clear, reliable datasets and practical tools anyone can use immediately—whether it's pulling key data from stubborn PDFs or tracking events across counties in real-time. The DataWorks Commons platform is live, trusted, and free to use. We are proud to have supported this important work alongside OCJR, and we're excited to continue to partner with other groups doing meaningful policy, legislative, or community-driven work.

## Introduction

State Question 780 (SQ780) and State Question 781 (SQ781) were passed by Oklahoma voters in 2016 as a broad criminal justice reform initiative aimed at reducing incarceration rates and shifting resources toward rehabilitation. SQ780 reclassified certain low-level drug and property offenses from felonies to misdemeanors, reducing the number of individuals eligible for lengthy prison sentences. SQ781 created the Community Safety Investment Fund, which was designed to complement this reform by directing the cost savings from reduced incarceration into county-level mental health, substance use treatment, and rehabilitation programs. The intent behind these measures was to address the root causes of criminal behavior—economic hardship, untreated mental illness, and substance use—while alleviating the financial and social burdens associated with high incarceration rates.

This report evaluates the efficacy of SQ780 and the Community Safety Investment Fund, focusing on their impact on the cycle of incarceration and overall crime rates in Oklahoma. Incarceration cycling — or the pattern wherein individuals are repeatedly imprisoned due to structural barriers that hinder successful reintegration — reflects a failure to address the underlying social and economic drivers of criminal behavior. Specifically, this report examines three key predicates of crime:

1. Employment and Economic Disadvantage
2. Access to Substance use and Mental Health Treatment
3. Housing Stability

Incarceration tends to destabilize each of these areas, creating a system where incarceration creates more crime instead of preventing it. The Oklahoma voters intuitively realized this phenomena and crafted reforms to break this cycle, and Oklahoma was able to reduce incarceration at the same time that it reduced crime.



# 1.2 Estimating the Impact of SQ780 for the Community Safety Investment Fund

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**The following section was provided by [Oklahoma Policy Institute](#). The Oklahoma Policy Institute is a 501(c)3 that seeks to create a more equitable Oklahoma through its nonpartisan policy research, analysis, and advocacy. OK Policy encourages critical conversations through data-driven research and outreach regarding state policy so that every Oklahoman has equitable opportunities to thrive.**

**Thank you to Brancen Gregory, Senior Data Engineer & Architect, and Andrew Bell, Senior Data Analyst for compiling this section.**

In the seven state budget cycles following the passage of SQ 780, Oklahoma lawmakers did not direct the savings into the County Community Safety Investment Fund as directed by Oklahoma voters via SQ 781. A primary reason for this inaction was lawmakers' inability to achieve consensus about accurately measuring the savings created by reduced incarceration rates for simple drug possession and many low-level property crimes.

In 2023, Oklahoma lawmakers passed SB 844, which transferred stewardship of the County Community Safety Investment Fund from the Office of Management and Enterprise Services (OMES) to the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS). Additionally, that bill moved the savings calculation from OMES to the Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency (LOFT).

To effectively calculate the savings, LOFT partnered with the Oklahoma Policy Institute; the organizations used data from the Oklahoma State Court Network (OSCN) and the Department of Corrections (DOC) to determine the resulting savings from SQ 780's reforms. This section outlines the methodology used to calculate this estimate and provides the most recent estimates of what those savings have been.

The analysis by OK Policy and LOFT began with court case data sourced from OSCN, which encompassed nearly two million criminal felony and misdemeanor cases filed between January 2001 and July 2025.

However, a significant challenge arose from the data

landscape itself. Detailed case information, including charge dispositions (outcomes), was accessible for only 13 of 77 counties; these counties represented 42.9% of criminal cases between January 2001 and July 2025. OSCN included data from the following 13 counties: Adair, Canadian, Cleveland, Comanche, Ellis, Garfield, Logan, Oklahoma, Payne, Pushmataha, Roger Mills, Rogers, and Tulsa. Statewide estimates were extrapolated from this data set. Additionally, the analysis included our analysts standardizing the charge descriptions across all counties acquired from OSCN. This allowed for accurate identification of offenses affected by SQ780.

A multi-step methodology was used to estimate statewide impact. First, within the rich data from the 13 OSCN counties, our analysts identified all cases filed between 2001 and mid-2025 that involved only charges amended by SQ 780 (see appendix in [full technical report](#)). It was then determined how many individuals were ultimately convicted in these specific cases. This provided a clear picture of the direct impact within the sample counties, which showed 77,361 individuals had been convicted in the 334,733 cases that involved only SQ 780-related charges in this period.

With reliable data from 13 counties, our analysts used an extrapolation technique to estimate statewide figures. For each fiscal year, they compared how many felony and misdemeanor cases were filed in those 13 OSCN counties compared to the rest of Oklahoma. Those yearly proportions for each case type were compared to the conviction counts in the 13 counties. These results were then scaled to produce a reasonable estimate of SQ 780-only convictions across the

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**\$202.3  
million in  
savings**

entire state.

The final step translated these estimated statewide convictions into potential savings. Using average length-of-stay data provided by the Department of Corrections (DOC) for relevant offenses, analysts multiplied the estimated number of people diverted from felony sentences each fiscal year by the average days they might have served. This yielded an estimate of total days diverted from incarceration. The monetary value of these days diverted is based on a cost-per-day of \$51.24, which LOFT derived from DOC's reported costs per facility. The facility costs were averaged across only the minimum-security facilities appropriate for the types of offenses SQ 780 addresses.

It is important to acknowledge that, like any estimation method, this approach has inherent limitations, which are detailed comprehensively in the full technical report. One specific point to note is the time lag inherent in court data; conviction numbers for the most recent years (roughly 2021 to 2025) are likely underestimated in this analysis, as many cases filed during that period are still progressing through the judicial system.

These figures are expected to rise as more cases reach final disposition. However, since SB 844, prior estimates cannot be adjusted. So in the future, ideally this method would take this into account to be more accurate.

The results of this analysis provide a sense of the immense scale of SQ 780's impact since its implementation. The table below presents the estimated number of individuals potentially diverted from DOC incarceration and the corresponding days of detention saved statewide for each fiscal year, representing the resources available for the County Community Safety Investment Fund.

Fiscal Year	Est. People Diverted from Prison	Est. Days Diverted from Prison	Est. State Savings (\$51.24/per day)
2018	500	59,916	\$3,070,096
2019	1,578	318,495	\$16,319,684
2020	2,486	546,452	\$28,000,200
2021	2,829	660,953	\$33,867,232
2022	2,746	657,958	\$33,713,768
2023	2,547	623,451	\$31,945,629
2024	2,335	586,241	\$30,038,989
2025	1,946	495,212	\$25,374,663

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## 2. The Cycle of Incarceration and Crime

# 2.1 Incarceration is Not Spread Evenly

The phrase “mass incarceration” obscures an important reality: Oklahoma’s incarceration crisis is not experienced uniformly across the state. Rather than affecting all communities equally, the burden of incarceration falls disproportionately on specific populations. Jails and prisons consistently overrepresent certain demographic groups, meaning that the negative consequences of the criminal justice system—whether economic, social, or psychological—are concentrated within a relatively small segment of the population. Factors such as economic attainment, education level, age, gender, and race all play a significant role in shaping an individual’s likelihood of incarceration, with systemic disparities reinforcing cycles of disadvantage. Understanding these inequities is essential for crafting policies that address the root causes of incarceration rather than perpetuating its disproportionate impact.

## Economic Attainment & Education

Prisons and jails overwhelmingly house those with few economic resources. The median average income of those incarcerated prior to their incarceration was \$19,650 compared to an average of \$41,250 for those who have never been incarcerated.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, economically disadvantaged youth are more likely to be incarcerated than their affluent peers.<sup>2</sup> In another study, “[t]wo years prior to the year they entered prison, 56 percent of individuals have essentially no annual earnings.”<sup>3</sup>

These same individuals lack the human capital of their neighbors as well. While overall educational attainment has increased in the United States since 1980, the percentage of those incarcerated without a high school diploma has increased as well.<sup>4</sup> Nationwide, the median education for incarcerated individuals aged 27 to 42 is a junior in high school.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in Oklahoma, almost half of all prison admissions do not have a high school diploma, compared to just 11% of the general population.<sup>6</sup> This disparity in human capital extends to employment, when those currently incarcerated have less work experience before their incarceration period than their non-incarcerated peers.<sup>7</sup>

## Age, Gender, and Race

Oklahoma incarcerates women at one of the highest rates in the Country. The rate of female incarceration in this state has grown over 17-fold since 1978.<sup>8</sup> However, women still only make up 15% of the jail population and 12% of the prison population.<sup>9</sup> Young men make up the majority of those incarcerated. The “age-imprisonment” curve shows that there is a curvature relationship between age and imprisonment decisions. Those younger than 20 years of age receive comparatively lenient treatment, while those in their 20s receive the harshest sentences, and there is a fairly steady decline in punitiveness starting in the 30s.<sup>10</sup> As sentence lengths have increased, so has the age of the prison population, with the median age of those incarcerated rising from 27 years old to 34 years old.<sup>11</sup> Oklahoma has seen the elderly prison population rise at an astonishing rate, and it now incarcerates people over the age of 65 at a rate 72% higher than the national average.<sup>12</sup> However, still, the vast majority of those entering prisons and jails are in their late 20s to early 30s. As the carceral system removes prime wage-earning men from the economy, those left behind in their communities suffer.

There are massive disparities in the rates in which Oklahoma incarcerates Black citizens compared to their White neighbors. In 2015, Black Oklahomans made up 25% of the prison population but only 8% of the total population.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Native Americans are also overrepresented and are incarcerated at a rate 150% greater than their White neighbors.<sup>14</sup> According to one study, Black males have a 28.5% chance of being imprisoned before the age of 34.<sup>15</sup> Another study showed that Black men in the United States are 10x more likely to be behind bars than in labor unions or on public assistance.<sup>16</sup>

## Substance Use

Research has consistently shown that one of the most important modifiable risk factors for incarceration is having

1 Rabuy, Bernadette, and Daniel Kopf. “Prisons of poverty: Uncovering the pre-incarceration incomes of the imprisoned.” Prison Policy Initiative 9 (2015).

2 Rodriguez, N. (2013). Concentrated disadvantage and the incarceration of youth: Examining how context affects juvenile justice. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 50(2), 189-215.

3 Looney, A., Busette, C., Zvobgo, K., Gotbaum, J., & Hanna Love, A. L. (2023, June 20). *Work and opportunity before and after incarceration*. Brookings Institute.

4 Becky Pettit, *Invisible Men: Mass Incarceration and the Myth of Black Progress* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2012), p 16.

5 Rabuy, Bernadette, and Daniel Kopf. “Prisons of poverty: Uncovering the pre-incarceration incomes of the imprisoned.” Prison Policy Initiative 9 (2015).

6 Rose, Felicity and Sankofa, Jasmine, et al. “Turning the Page: Oklahoma’s Criminal Justice Reform Story” FWD.us. <https://turningthepage.fwd.us/pdf/report-digital-compressed.pdf>.

7 Curtis, Rebecca S., et al. “Work History and Educational Characteristics of Incarcerated Males.” *Journal of Correctional Education* (1974-), vol. 64, no. 1, 2013, pp. 36-49.

8 Vera Institute of Justice, “Incarceration Trends in Oklahoma” (Dec. 2019). <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-oklahoma.pdf>.

9 Id.

10 Steffensmeier Darryl, Kramer John, Ulmer Jeffrey. Age differences in sentencing. *Justice Quarterly*. 1995;12:583-602.

11 Porter, Lauren C et al. “HOW THE U.S. PRISON BOOM HAS CHANGED THE AGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE PRISON POPULATION.” *Criminology : an interdisciplinary journal* vol. 54,1 (2016): 30-55.

12 Skarupski, Kimberly A et al. “The Health of America’s Aging Prison Population.” *Epidemiologic reviews* vol. 40,1 (2018): 157-165.

13 Vera Institute of Justice, “Incarceration Trends in Oklahoma” (Dec. 2019).

14 Id.

15 Roehrkasse, Alexander F, and Wildeman, Christopher. “Lifetime risk of imprisonment in the United States remains high and starkly unequal.” *Science Advances* vol. 8, 48 (2022).

16 Uggen, Christopher, Sara Wake Weld, and Bruce Western. 2005. *Work and family perspectives on reentry*. In Jeremy Travis and Christy Visser, eds., *Prisoner Reentry and Crime in America*, 209. New York: Cambridge University Press.



a substance use disorder.<sup>17</sup> A systematic international review of studies reported that among male adults in prisons, 18%–30% have alcohol use disorders, and 10–48% have drug use disorders; among female adults in prisons, 10–24% have alcohol use disorders, and 30–60% have drug use disorders.<sup>18</sup> According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in the United States, 58% of adults who have been in state prisons and 63% of people who have been sentenced to jail have drug use disorders compared to 5% of the general adult population.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, prisons and jails do not consistently treat underlying substance use issues. A national review of treatment in state prisons finds that while substance use treatment utilization rates are higher among those with a history of incarceration, these rates are still a small minority, when “37% had used any alcohol use disorder treatment and 18% had used any drug use disorder treatment.”<sup>20</sup> In Oklahoma, less than 10 percent of jails reported having substance use, alcohol abuse, or mental health/psychiatric treatment.<sup>21</sup> These factors lead one researcher to conclude that the “penetration of effective treatment models into the target population of drug-involved offenders is low.”<sup>22</sup>

## Geography

Both economic and racial segregation of housing causes these demographic factors to concentrate mass incarceration within particular neighborhoods. For example, a study of New York community districts found that some neighborhoods had an incarceration rate 60x higher than others.<sup>23</sup> While some neighborhoods in Cleveland and Baltimore have an estimated 18% of males missing while behind bars.<sup>24</sup> In Nebraska, roughly 10 percent of all 30-year-old prisoners come from a single neighborhood in Omaha.<sup>25</sup> This is far from an urban-only problem. In Massachusetts, 15% of neighborhoods accounted for over half of all prison admissions, with a majority of those neighborhoods existing in tertiary cities or suburbs.<sup>26</sup> In Oklahoma, the per capita rural imprisonment rate is consistently higher than that of Tulsa or Oklahoma City.

These demographic patterns illustrate how mass incarceration is not merely an individual outcome but an entrenched structural issue shaped by geography, policy, and socioeconomic conditions. When economic and racial segregation limit access to quality education, stable employment, and community resources, entire neighborhoods become pipelines to the criminal legal system. High incarceration rates in these areas further destabilize communities, perpetuating cycles of poverty, family disruption, and reduced economic mobility. Addressing mass incarceration requires recognizing these geographic and demographic disparities and investing in solutions that break these cycles rather than reinforce them.

17 Mukku, V. K., Benson, T. G., Alam, F., Richie, W. D., & Bailey, R. K. (2012). Overview of substance use disorders and incarceration of African American males. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 3, 98.

18 Fazel S, Bains P, Doll H. Substance abuse and dependence in prisoners: A systematic review. *Addiction*. 2006;101:181–91.

19 Bronon J, Stroop J, Zimmer S, Berzofsky M. Drug use, dependence, and abuse among state prisoners and jail inmates, 2007–2009. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice; 2017.

20 Tsai, J., & Gu, X. (2019). Utilization of addiction treatment among US adults with history of incarceration and substance use disorders. *Addiction Science & Clinical Practice*, 14, 1–9.

21 Modern Justice Taskforce. (2023). State of Oklahoma.

22 Belenko, S., Hiller, M., & Hamilton, L. (2013). Treating substance use disorders in the criminal justice system. *Current psychiatry reports*, 15(11), 414.

23 Swartz, Charles. 2007. New York City Criminal Justice Maps. Justice Mapping Center, Columbia University.

24 Lynch, James P. and William J. Sabol. 2004. Assessing the effects of Mass Incarceration on Informal Social Control. *Criminology and Public Policy* 3(4).

25 Looney, A., Busette, C., Zvobgo, K., Gotbaum, J., & Hanna Love, A. L. (2023, June 20). Work and opportunity before and after incarceration. Brookings Institute.

26 Simes, Jessica T. "Place and Punishment: The Spatial Context of Mass Incarceration." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2018, pp. 513–533.

## 2.2 The Carceral System Perpetuates Disadvantage

Disadvantage refers to the clustering of poverty, unemployment, low education, and other signs of economic hardship within a specific area or neighborhood. Rather than being spread out, these challenges are stacked on top of each other in the same communities, creating environments where opportunity is scarce and hardship is deeply entrenched.

Individuals from disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to be incarcerated, and that incarceration can have a large negative impact on the already precarious financial situation of this population. Importantly, this effect is not limited to the individual incarcerated but deeply affects the future of their children and their entire community, which has a negative impact on future crime rates.

### Economic Effects of Incarceration

Those with a criminal conviction face substantial barriers to employment. Most businesses express reluctance to hire those who were formerly incarcerated.<sup>27</sup> A majority of individuals released from prison have little to no earnings, with one study finding, “[i]n the first full year after release, about 49 percent of ex-prisoners earn less than \$500—as reported on a W2 or tax return.”<sup>28</sup> Even if these individuals do wind up employed, they face an earnings penalty between 10% and 30%.<sup>29</sup> The cost of foregone wages while people are incarcerated, combined with the lifetime reduction in earnings after their release, is estimated at more than \$300 billion annually.<sup>30</sup> This effect isn’t limited to state prisons, with each stay in jail reducing the chances of formal sector employment upon release, and those effects are magnified the longer an individual is detained.<sup>31</sup>

The economic effects of incarceration are not limited to the individuals who are cycling in and out of prison. The entire community feels the effects, including most acutely, the children of those incarcerated. Mass incarceration significantly increases the child poverty rate at the county level.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, 10 percent of incarcerated people’s children do not finish high school or attend college (nearly

double the national high school dropout rate of 5.4 percent), often choosing to leave school and enter the labor force early in order to make up for the lost wages of their parents.<sup>33</sup> When a parent is incarcerated, it profoundly affects their children, creating serious challenges as they face the loss of financial support and the difficult changes in their home life. These hardships can be particularly tough for young ones who may already be struggling to understand the situation.<sup>34</sup> All of these pressures create more juvenile crime. There exists a significant, positive, and accelerating relationship between adult imprisonment and juvenile arrest rates.<sup>35</sup>

Children of incarcerated mothers are 70% more likely to experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including seeing domestic violence in the home or living with someone who has an active mental health issue or substance use disorder.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, those with a high number of ACEs during their own childhood are more likely to go to prison. 59.9% of female prisoners reported experiencing 4 or more ACEs during their own childhood compared to just 8.4% of the general population.<sup>37</sup> These intergenerational effects mean that the children growing up in incarceration-heavy areas are both victims of concentrated disadvantage caused by mass incarceration and also much more likely to join that cycle through criminal justice system contact.

### Housing Effects of Incarceration

The effect of incarceration is not limited to economic prospects but affects housing as well. A recent meta-analysis found that the percentage of prisoners who were homeless after release was just under 30%.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, in Tulsa, 56% of survey respondents experiencing homelessness mentioned a personal history of incarceration.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, as individuals cycle through the revolving door of incarceration, the problem intensifies. The Prison Policy Institute finds, “people who have been incarcerated multiple times are

27 Pager, Devah (2003) “The Mark of a Criminal Record,” 108 *American J. of Sociology* 937-75.

28 Looney, A. (2023).

29 Western, Bruce, et al. (2001) “The Labor Market Consequences of Incarceration,” 47 *Crime and Delinquency* 410-27.

30 McLaughlin, M., et al. (2016). (working paper). The Economic Burden of Incarceration in the United States.

31 Dobbie, W., Goldin, J., & Yang, C. S. (2018). The effects of pre-trial detention on conviction, future crime, and employment: Evidence from randomly assigned judges. *American Economic Review*, 108(2), 201-240.

32 DeFina, R., & Hannon, L. (2010). The impact of adult incarceration on child poverty: a county-level analysis, 1995-2007. *The Prison Journal*, 90(4), 377-396.

33 The NCES Fast Facts Tool provides quick answers to many education questions (National Center for Education Statistics). National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a part of the U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>

34 Geller, A., Garfinkel, I., & Western, B. (2011). Paternal incarceration and support for children in fragile families. *Demography*, 48(1), 254-7.

35 Hannon, Lance, and Robert Defina. “Sowing the Seeds: How Adult Incarceration Promotes Juvenile Delinquency,” *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 57, no. 5, 2012, pp. 475-491.

36 Turney, Kristin. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences among children of incarcerated parents. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 89.

37 Melissa S. Jones, Meredith G.F. Worthen, Susan F. Sharp, David A. McLeod, Life as she knows it: The effects of adverse childhood experiences on intimate partner violence among women prisoners, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Volume 85, 2018, 68-79.

38 Bashir, A. Y., Moloney, N., Elzain, M. E., Delaunois, I., Sheikh, A., O'Donnell, P., ... & Gulati, G. (2021). From nowhere to nowhere. Homelessness and incarceration: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 17(4), 452-461.

39 Point in Time Count Data. Housing Solutions Tulsa. (2024, August 26). <https://www.housingsolutionstulsa.org/reports-data/pit-data/>

twice as likely to be homeless as those who are returning from their first prison term."<sup>40</sup> These effects are not limited to prison incarceration. Nationally, researchers have found that someone in jail is "between 7.5 and 11.3 times more likely to have been homeless than someone with no history of jail incarceration."<sup>41</sup>

Beyond homelessness, residential mobility, or how often an individual moves homes, is also related to incarceration. One study of moving patterns finds that individuals with "a history of incarceration are more mobile both before prison . . . and after prison."<sup>42</sup> The study further adds that this mobility is primarily in one direction. The results show "incarceration is a strong predictor of downward residential mobility into poor neighborhoods."<sup>43</sup> In other words, "the likelihood that a respondent will leave a non-poor area for a poor area is nearly quadrupled if that respondent has a history of incarceration."<sup>44</sup> Finally, incarceration sets off a trajectory of life-long residential mobility when "the difference in total mobility between respondents with and without a history of incarceration gets progressively larger across time."<sup>45</sup>

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40 Couloute, L. (n.d.). Nowhere to go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>

41 Breaking the links between housing instability and jail incarceration through the just home project | urban institute. (n.d.-b). <https://www.urban.org/projects/breaking-links-between-housing-instability-and-jail-incarceration-through-just-home>

42 Warner, C. (2016). The effect of incarceration on residential mobility between poor and nonpoor neighborhoods. *City & Community*, 15(4), 423-443.

43 Id.

44 Id.

45 Warner, C. W. (2013). Home again, home again: Incarceration, residential mobility, and neighborhood destinations

## 2.3 Completing the Cycle: Increased Disadvantage Creates More Crime

Crime does not occur in isolation; it is deeply intertwined with economic hardship, educational opportunity, housing stability, and substance use. Research consistently shows that deficits in these areas are both a cause and consequence of crime, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that undermines public safety and economic mobility. This section explores how key factors—economic inequality, education, housing instability, and substance use—contribute to crime rates and how breaking these patterns is essential for sustaining the benefits of SQ780 and the Community Safety Investment Fund.

### Economic Disadvantage & Crime

Study after study has confirmed the link between concentrated disadvantage and violent crime. For example, in Chicago, one standard deviation increase in disadvantage is associated with a 40% increase in homicide rate.<sup>46</sup> Another study of over 150 American cities found that “the strongest indicator of violent crime rates across cities was concentrated disadvantage.”<sup>47</sup> While another clarified, “[t]he effect of disadvantage on homicide is somewhat mitigated when poverty is less spatially concentrated.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, cities with more concentrated disadvantages experience significantly more violent crime. Crucially, the problem feeds into itself - with a longitudinal study finding “higher levels of concentrated disadvantage had one of the strongest relationships with violence at later time points . . . [b]ut at the same time . . . higher levels of violence were the strongest predictor of increased concentrated disadvantage at the next time point.”<sup>49</sup>

The effect that disadvantage has on property crime is slightly different in nature but equally impactful. Studies show that relative economic deprivation, or how much more disadvantaged one neighborhood is compared to those close by, is a more robust predictor of property crime.<sup>50</sup> Another study finds that “income inequality across block

groups plays a key role in determining the level of property crime.”<sup>51</sup> Further, a study finds that “shocks,” or events that increase economic inequality dramatically, are linked to both violent and property crimes.<sup>52</sup> This relationship makes intuitive sense, with scholars arguing that “areas of high inequality place poor individuals who have low returns from market activity next to high-income individuals who have goods worth taking.”<sup>53</sup>

### Education & Crime

A large study of every city reporting crimes in the United States found “an overall average of 2.35% decrease in property crime for every \$1000 more a school district spends per pupil on education.”<sup>54</sup> Likewise, school attendance rates for juveniles reduce property crime rates.<sup>55</sup> Beyond the high school level, research shows “that compared to those with a high school diploma, attaining a bachelor’s degree is negatively associated with crime,” even after accounting for background characteristics that predict both completing college and engaging in crime.<sup>56</sup> Finally, a study in St. Louis finds “neighborhoods with more college degrees in more recent time periods are generally associated with reductions in violent crime.”<sup>57</sup>

### Housing Instability & Crime

Research has consistently confirmed that housing instability leads to more crime. For example, one study finds that the “rent burden is directly related to homicide.”<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, in Phoenix, researchers find “a direct effect of foreclosures on intimate partner violence.”<sup>59</sup> A neighborhood analysis shows that increased homelessness is related to higher crime, even when controlling for other macroeconomic correlates.<sup>60</sup> Finally, a large study of American metro areas finds “that

46 Morenoff JD, Sampson RJ, Raudenbush SW (2001) Neighborhood inequality, collective efficacy and the spatial dynamics of urban violence. *Criminology* 39:517–560.

47 Mcgarrell, Edmund F, Nicholas Corsaro, Natalie Kroovand Hipple, and Timothy S. Bynum. “Project Safe Neighborhoods and Violent Crime Trends in US Cities: Assessing Violent Crime Impact.” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 26, no. 2 (06, 2010): 165-190

48 Hannon, Lance E. “Extremely Poor Neighborhoods and Homicide.” *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 86, 2005, pp. 1418–34. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42956043>. Accessed 23 May 2023.

49 Hipp, John R. and Rebecca Wickes. “Violence in Urban Neighborhoods: A Longitudinal Study of Collective Efficacy and Violent Crime.” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 33, no. 4 (12, 2017): 783-808.

50 Chamberlain, A. W., & Hipp, J. R. (2015). It’s all relative: Concentrated disadvantage within and across neighborhoods and communities, and the consequences for neighborhood crime. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43(6), 431-443.

51 Metz, N., & Burdina, M. (2018). Neighbourhood income inequality and property crime. *Urban Studies*, 55(1), 133-150.

52 Atems, B. (2020). Identifying the dynamic effects of income inequality on crime. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 82(4), 751-782.

53 Kelly, M. (2000). Inequality and crime. *Review of economics and Statistics*, 82(4), 530-539.

54 Ades, J., & Mishra, J. (2021). Education and crime across America: Inequity’s cost. *Social Sciences*, 10(8), 283.

55 Lochner, L. (2020). Education and crime. In *The economics of education* (pp. 109-117). Academic Press.

56 Dennison, C. R. (2019). The crime-reducing benefits of a college degree: evidence from a nationally representative US sample. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 32(4), 297-316.

57 Boessen, A., Omori, M., & Greene, C. (2021). Long-term dynamics of neighborhoods and crime: The role of education over 40 years. *Journal of quantitative criminology*, 1-63.

58 Gray, A. C., & Parker, K. F. (2023). Housing instability and homicide: Exploring variation in housing indicators on homicide and rates of urban crime. *Homicide Studies*, 10887679231212400.

59 Wallace, D., Chamberlain, A., & Pfeiffer, D. (2021). The relationship between foreclosures and intimate partner violence during the US housing crisis. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 36(13-14), 6247-6273.

60 Ee, M., & Zhang, Y. (2024). Homelessness and crime in neighborhoods. *Crime & delinquency*, 70(8), 2195-2218.



increasing rates of home vacancy . . . were significantly associated with burglary rates.”<sup>61</sup>

frequency of drug use,” meaning that more frequent drug use creates more criminal activity.”<sup>72</sup>

Residential mobility has also been shown to increase crime. One study of American residences finds that “housing turnover is a transition that independently increases the risk that a dwelling will experience a crime.”<sup>62</sup> Another study from the United Kingdom shows that housing tenure, or how long an individual has lived in that house, plays a part in influencing local crime rates.<sup>63</sup> This phenomenon can create a feedback loop because just as residential mobility increases crime, upward changes in crime rates tend to increase residential mobility, as individuals attempt to escape high crime neighborhoods.<sup>64</sup>

### Substance Use & Crime

The literature on substance use and crime is quite clear. One study found that alcohol use disorder accounted for approximately 4.6% to 9.3% of reported violent offenses.<sup>65</sup> While another study found that abuse of psychoactive substances was one of three credible predictors of violence.<sup>66</sup> Finally, in a self-reported survey, substance use was by far the most prevalent diagnosis among survey respondents reporting past violent acts.<sup>67</sup> This applies not only to perpetrators but to victims as well. A meta-analysis of medical examiner studies estimated that 32 percent of homicide victims were intoxicated when they were killed.<sup>68</sup> In a more recent study, heavy drinkers were 2.67 times more likely to be shot during an assault than nondrinkers.<sup>69</sup>

The same holds true for property crimes. A study of prescription opioid use finds a “large, positive association between nonmedical use of pain relievers and property crime.”<sup>70</sup> Another study finds that increased substance use treatment creates an “economically meaningful reduction in the rates of . . . larceny theft.”<sup>71</sup> Finally, researchers find “a significant linear relationship between criminal activity and

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61 Jones, R. W., & Pridemore, W. A. (2016). A longitudinal study of the impact of home vacancy on robbery and burglary rates during the US housing crisis, 2005-2009. *Crime & Delinquency*, 62(9), 1159-1179.

62 Xie, M., & McDowall, D. (2008). The effects of residential turnover on household victimization. *Criminology*, 46(3), 539-575.

63 Livingston, M., Kearns, A., & Bannister, J. (2014). Neighbourhood structures and crime: The influence of tenure mix and other structural factors upon local crime rates. *Housing Studies*, 29(1), 1-25.

64 Xie, M., & McDowall, D. (2010). The reproduction of racial inequality: How crime affects housing turnover. *Criminology*, 48(3), 865-896.

65 Boden, J. M., Fergusson, D. M., & Horwood, L. J. (2012). Alcohol misuse and violent behavior: findings from a 30-year longitudinal study. *Drug and alcohol dependence*, 122(1-2), 135-141.

66 Blomhoff, S., Seim, S., & Friis, S. (1990). Can prediction of violence among psychiatric inpatients be improved?. *Psychiatric services*, 41(7), 771-775.

67 Id.

68 Smith, G. S., Branas, C. C., & Miller, T. R. (1999). Fatal nontraffic injuries involving alcohol: a metaanalysis. *Annals of emergency medicine*, 33(6), 659-668.

69 Branas, C. C., Elliott, M. R., Richmond, T. S., Culhane, D. P., & Wiebe, D. J. (2009). Alcohol consumption, alcohol outlets, and the risk of being assaulted with a gun. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 33(5), 906-915.

70 Giles, M., & Malcolm, M. (2021). Prescription opioid misuse and property crime. *Social Science Quarterly*, 102(2), 663-682.

71 Wen, H., Hockenberry, J. M., & Cummings, J. R. (2014). The effect of substance use disorder treatment use on crime: Evidence from public insurance expansions and health insurance parity mandates (No. w20537). National Bureau of Economic Research.

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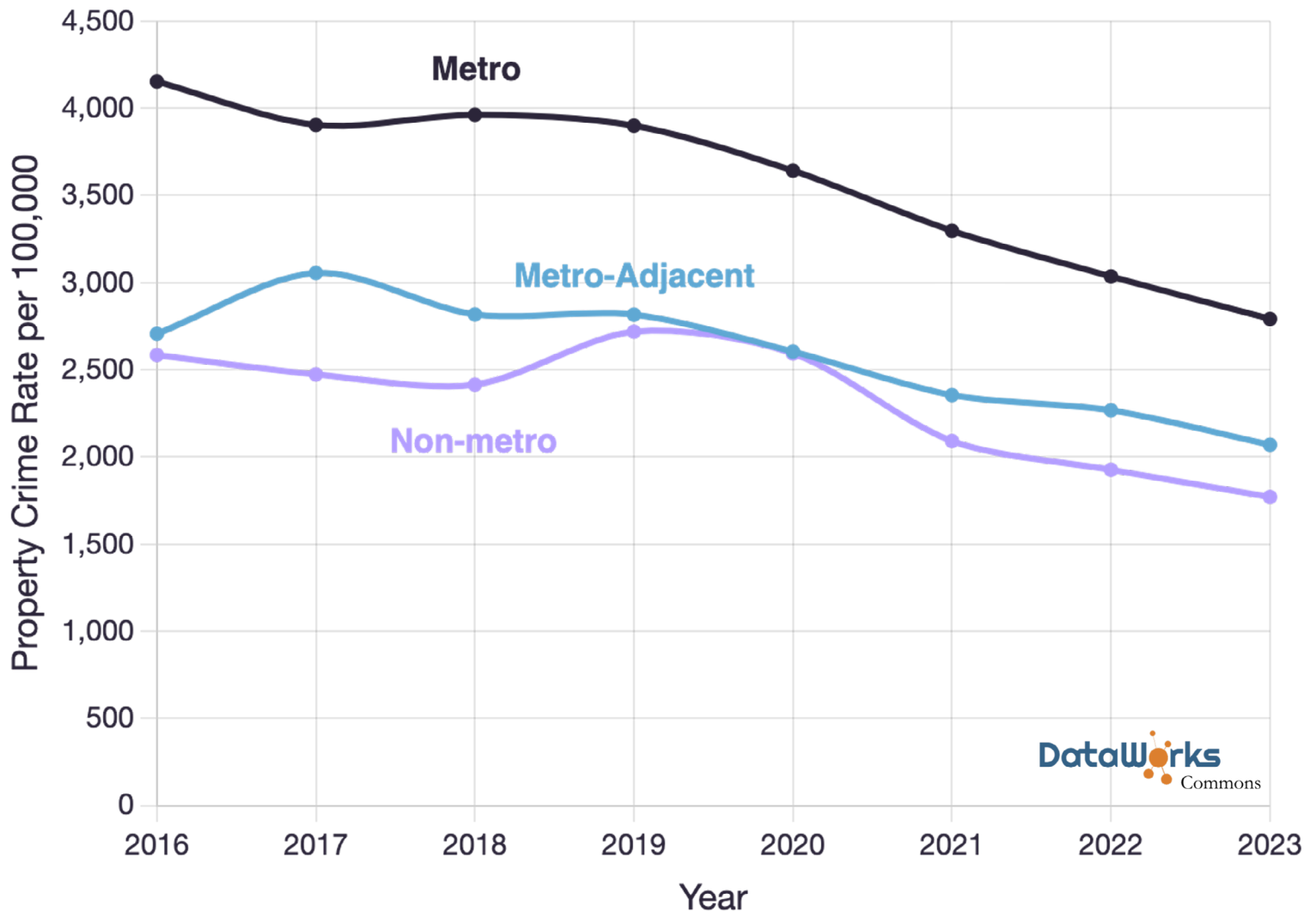
72 French, M. T., McGeary, K. A., Chitwood, D. D., McCoy, C. B., Inciardi, J. A., & McBride, D. (2000). Chronic drug use and crime. *Substance abuse*, 21, 95-109.

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# 3. SQ780: A Cycle Breaking Reform with Data

## Average Property Crime Rate by County Type

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics



Unnecessary incarceration helps create a cycle of disadvantage and housing instability into crime and back into incarceration, which further exacerbates those issues. This cycle of incarceration and contact with the criminal justice system reinforces existing disparities in education, health, and family income, potentially leading to an escalation of crime.

In 2016, Oklahoma voters realized this phenomenon and decided to take matters into their own hands. Through the passage of State Questions 780 and 781, they sought to reform the state's criminal justice system by reclassifying

certain low-level drug and property offenses from felonies to misdemeanors (SQ780) and redirecting the savings from reduced incarceration toward local mental health and substance use treatment services (SQ781). These measures aimed to break the incarceration cycle by shifting the focus from punishment to rehabilitation, reducing barriers to employment and housing for those with criminal records, and addressing the root causes of crime.

The result has been a dramatic drop in crime. In every county category, there has been a large decrease in property crimes since the passage of SQ781. As the cycle is broken,

eliminating lengthy prison sentences for low-level drug and property crimes, the individuals are removed from the cycle and have a chance to recover economically.

This decline in crime is not merely a statistical illusion caused by reclassification. Oklahoma has seen felony filings decline by 45% since the passage of SQ780 and a nearly 28% reduction in misdemeanor filings, indicating that the drop in reported crime is genuine rather than a shift in classification. If the reforms had simply downgraded offenses without addressing the over-incarceration of our state, one would expect felony charges to decrease while misdemeanor filings increased. Instead, the overall decline suggests that fewer people are entering the justice system in the first place, reinforcing the idea that providing alternatives to incarceration—such as treatment and economic opportunity—reduces criminal behavior rather than merely reshuffling it into a different legal category.

Further, this drop is unlikely to be due to changes in crime reporting. The National Crime Victimization Survey has seen a rise of 8% of those unwilling to report property crime to police since 2016, a rate much smaller than the documented crime decrease in Oklahoma.<sup>73</sup> Over the same period, the rate of individuals choosing not to report violent crimes has decreased.<sup>74</sup> Further, while the crime decrease in Oklahoma is consistent with national trends, the magnitude is much larger. For example, the National Crime Victimization Survey shows a close to 14% drop in property crime victimizations across the United States.<sup>75</sup>

A key goal of SQ780 was to reduce Oklahoma's incarceration rate, which had long been among the highest in the nation, by eliminating excessive prison sentences for low-level, nonviolent offenses. The data now confirms that this objective has been largely achieved. Since the passage of SQ780, the number of new prison sentences has dropped by 47%, contributing to an overall decline in the state's prison population. The effect of these reforms is even more clear when looking at specific types of sentences. The amount of new drug sentences resulting in prison has declined by an astounding 77%, while new sentences for property crimes have declined by 52%.

By eliminating the chance of a lengthy prison term for an addiction-based crime, SQ780 has successfully disrupted the cycle of incarceration. This reduction in prison admissions not only saves taxpayer dollars but also helps to prevent the collateral consequences of incarceration—such as unemployment, housing instability, and family

separation—that often contribute to recidivism. These results demonstrate that a smarter approach to criminal justice can lower incarceration rates without compromising public safety.

### Economic Effects of Lower Incarceration

Incarceration has a large negative impact on our state's economy, and reducing that footprint will help the population and the State budget for generations to come. Nationwide, the estimated impact of lost wages due to incarceration is above 70 billion dollars.<sup>76</sup> This creates a drain on the State's GDP. Individuals who are incarcerated have a much higher premature mortality rate, with one study finding "for every 100,000 persons there are 777 deaths among formerly incarcerated persons compared to 222 for the rest of the population."<sup>77</sup> This high mortality rate is expensive to the State, with a national estimate at over 60 billion dollars.<sup>78</sup> These figures are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the downstream costs of incarceration. Others include reduced future economic mobility for children, increased divorce rates, and more hospital visits, ultimately adding together to create nationally an "aggregate burden of incarceration . . . [of] \$1.014 trillion, which is nearly 6% of GDP and eleven times the size of corrections spending."<sup>79</sup>

The success of SQ780 in reducing crime, lowering incarceration rates, and mitigating the economic costs of mass incarceration underscores the broader benefits of smart justice reform. By shifting the focus from punitive measures to rehabilitation and economic reintegration, Oklahoma has not only broken the costly cycle of incarceration but also positioned itself for long-term economic and social stability. Fewer people cycling through the criminal justice system means more individuals contributing to their communities, securing stable employment, and maintaining family connections—key factors in reducing recidivism and strengthening the state's workforce. The financial savings from reduced incarceration, coupled with future investments in treatment and rehabilitation, create a positive feedback loop that benefits both individuals and the state economy. This reform demonstrates that reducing incarceration is not just a matter of justice but a sound economic strategy, proving that a more balanced approach to public safety can yield lasting benefits for all Oklahomans.

<sup>73</sup> NCVS dashboard. (n.d.). <https://ncvs.bjs.ojp.gov/quick-graphics#quickgraphicstop>

<sup>74</sup> Id.

<sup>75</sup> Id.

<sup>76</sup> Pettus-Davis, C., Brown, D., Veeh, C., & Renn, T. (2016). The economic burden of incarceration in the US. St. Louis, MO: Institute for Advancing Justice Research and Innovation, Washington University in St. Louis.

<sup>77</sup> Binswanger, I. A., Stern, M. F., Deyo, R. A., Heagerty, P. J., Cheadle, A., Elmore, J. G., & Koepsell, T. D. (2007). Release from prison—a high risk of death for former inmates. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 356(2), 157–165.

<sup>78</sup> Pettus-Davis, C., Brown, D., Veeh, C., & Renn, T. (2016)

<sup>79</sup> Id.



# Takeaways & Implications

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32%

**Property Crime Drop by 32% in Metro Areas; nearly 24% in Non-Metro Adjacent to Metro; and 31.5% in rural counties.**

This decline in crime is not merely a statistical illusion caused by reclassification. Oklahoma has seen felony filings decline by 45% since the passage of SQ780 and a nearly 28% reduction in misdemeanor filings.

The National Crime Victimization Survey has seen a rise of 8% of those unwilling to report property crime to police since 2016, a rate much smaller than the documented crime decrease in Oklahoma.

Further, while the crime decrease in Oklahoma is consistent with national trends, the magnitude is much larger. For example, the National Crime Victimization Survey shows a close to 14% drop in property crime victimizations across the United States.

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47%  
**decline in prison sentences**

**Since the passage of SQ780, the number of new prison sentences has dropped by 47%, contributing to an overall decline in the state's prison population. The effect of these reforms is even more clear when looking at specific types of sentences. The amount of new drug sentences resulting in prison has declined by an astounding 77%, while new sentences for property crimes have declined by 52%.**

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# **4. SQ781: The Promise of Investment in Crime Prevention**

Despite the passage of SQ780 and SQ781 in 2016, which created the Community Safety Investment Fund, the State legislature had not appropriated the money as required until 2023, when SB844 was passed.<sup>80</sup> The Legislature has ultimately appropriated almost \$25 million to the fund over two years, and counties were required to send in their Request for Proposal (RFP) by February of 2025.<sup>81</sup> This timeline means that SQ780 and the associated reduction of incarceration has been fully implemented, but the off-ramp of the incarceration cycle, in the form of housing support, reentry services, and substance use and mental health services, has not been fully implemented until now.

This new money has created several opportunities for our county governments that should further reduce crime and raise economic well-being. County governments and their subcontractors receiving Community Safety Investment Fund dollars will hire a total of 34 new full time employees in order to serve at least 4,500 new Oklahomans who have criminal justice contact.<sup>82</sup> These programs will provide mental health and substance use treatment, housing support, and reentry services at an average cost of \$1,424 per participant,<sup>83</sup> a rate much lower than average yearly jail costs of approximately \$19,000 per inmate.<sup>84</sup> The money will be spent targeting the areas most effective at reducing future crime and creating economic impacts.

### Substance Use and Mental Health Treatment Expansions

Twenty-four percent of the collected county applications are expanding treatment courts.<sup>85</sup> Research shows that addiction treatment is cheaper and leads to better outcomes when compared to incarceration.<sup>86</sup> Treatment courts are especially effective; the Oklahoma average recidivism rate for drug courts was “6.5% for graduates compared to 23.4% for released inmates.”<sup>87</sup> According to the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS), 1,058 drug court graduates earned nearly \$35 million in total wages over a three-year period and put more than \$2 million in total tax revenue back into the economy. Had these same individuals instead been incarcerated during that period, it would have cost Oklahoma taxpayers \$60.3 million.<sup>88</sup> This is a vital opportunity for Oklahoma to expand treatment access, lower recidivism, and create money for the State and County governments.

80 Bill information for SB 844 - Oklahoma Legislature. <https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=S-B844&Session=2300>

81 OK.gov - Oklahoma's Official Website: <https://www.ok.gov>. (n.d.). Community Safety Investment Fund RFP. Central Purchasing: Division of Office of Management and Enterprise Services (OMES) - Solicitations. <https://www.ok.gov/dcs/solicit/app/solicitationDetail.php?solID=4648>

82 Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. (2023). Summary of statistics from 25 RFPs. Unpublished internal document.

83 Id.

84 Id.

85 Id.

86 McCollister, K. E., French, M. T., Prendergast, M. L., Hall, E., & Sacks, S. (2004). Long-term cost effectiveness of addiction treatment for criminal offenders. *Justice Quarterly*, 21(3), 659–679.

87 OKLAHOMA TREATMENT COURT PROGRAMS HONORED FOR ACHIEVEMENTS. Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. (n.d.). <https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/odmhsas/documents/a0002/drugcourtwards.pdf>

88 White, T. (n.d.). FY2017 Budget and Performance Presentation. Oklahoma State Government - Documents. <https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/odmhsas/documents/a0001/house-hearing-february-2-2016-2.pdf>

Beyond treatment courts, every county (100%) that applied is utilizing new money to expand mental health and substance use treatment options generally. These services are often filling in the gaps for the pre-trial jail population and providing Peer Support Recovery Specialists for those reentering from incarceration. In Oklahoma, 1 out of every 5 adults experiences a mental illness, while 1 out of every 10 adults has an active substance use disorder, two of the highest rates in the country.<sup>89</sup> According to ODMHSAS, counties that applied for Community Safety Investment Funds have, on average, only 15% of individuals needing mental health treatment receive it, and less than 10% of individuals needing substance use treatment receive it.<sup>90</sup> Ending the cycle of mental health and substance use in local jails and prisons will further lower crime rates and make the workforce more resilient.

### Housing

Twenty percent of collected county applications create specific programs and employees to offer housing assistance to those with criminal legal system involvement.<sup>91</sup> Stabilizing the housing needs of this population can go a long way towards lowering recidivism and further help individuals get the treatment and job training they need. For example, an experiment in Maryland that gave free housing to exiting prisoners found a significant drop in recidivism.<sup>92</sup> Another study found that “housing insecurity . . . is associated with an increased risk of recidivism among people on probation, above and beyond an array of other recidivism risk factors.”<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile, studies consistently show that stable housing is key to successfully undergoing substance use treatment.<sup>94</sup> Finally, 57% of chronically homeless individuals who were supplied stable housing found employment, indicating the importance of housing for other areas of recidivism reduction.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the advancements of SQ780 and the future impact of the Community Safety Investment Fund, housing instability and the ensuing residential mobility it causes are still an issue in Oklahoma, and they tend to create more property crime. Figure 2 plots every county in Oklahoma on a graph showing the percentage of individuals who moved in the past year and the corresponding county property crime rate.

89 Modern Justice Taskforce. (2023). State of Oklahoma. <https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/governor/documents/MODERN%20Justice%20TF%20RI%20Report.pdf>

90 Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. (n.d.). Percent Untreated in Oklahoma. ODMHSAS Online Query System (OOnQues). <http://www.odmhsas.org/eda/prevalence.html>

91 Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. (2023). Summary of statistics from 25 RFPs. Unpublished internal document.

92 Kirk, D. S., Barnes, G. C., Hyatt, J. M., & Kearley, B. W. (2018). The impact of residential change and housing stability on recidivism: pilot results from the Maryland Opportunities through Vouchers Experiment (MOVE). *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14, 213–226.

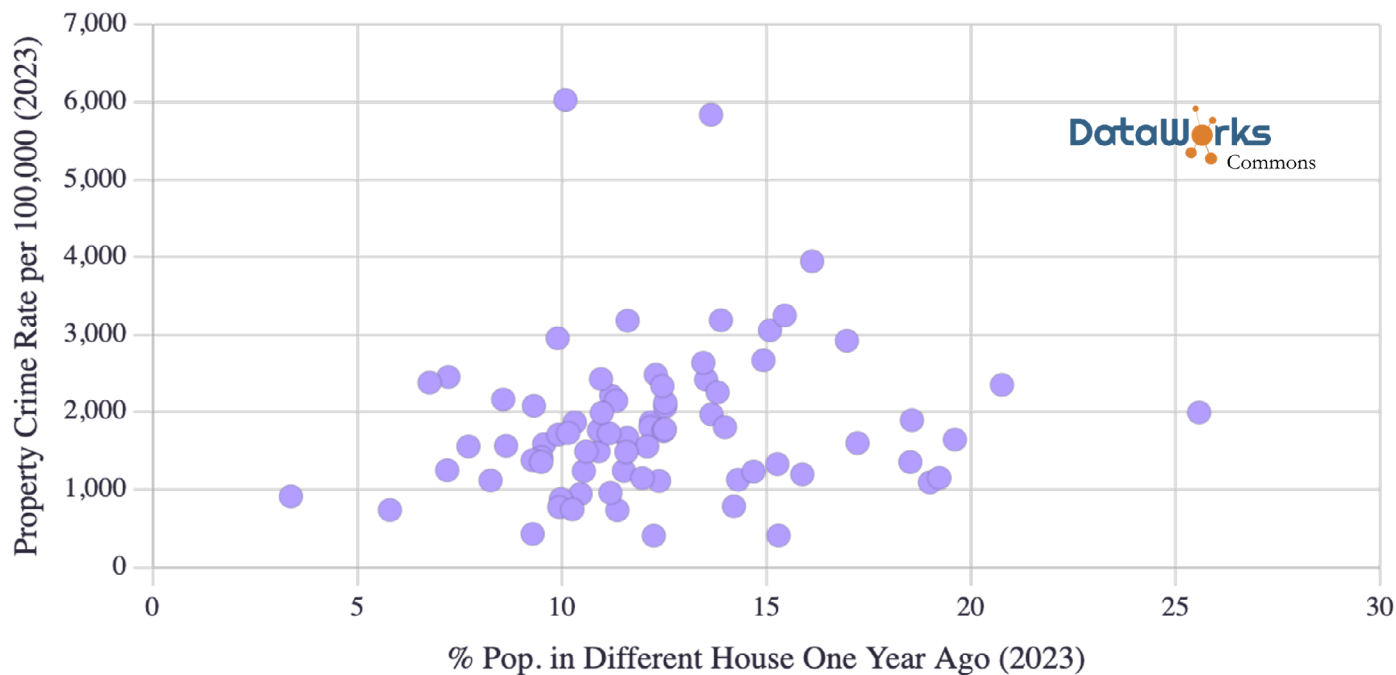
93 Jacobs, L. A., & Gottlieb, A. (2020). The effect of housing circumstances on recidivism: Evidence from a sample of people on probation in San Francisco. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 47(9), 1097–1115.

94 Polcin, D. L., & Korcha, R. (2017). Housing status, psychiatric symptoms, and substance abuse outcomes among sober living house residents over 18 months. *Addictive disorders & their treatment*, 16(3), 138–150.

95 Burt, M. R. (2012). Impact of housing and work supports on outcomes for chronically homeless adults with mental illness: LA's HOPE. *Psychiatric Services*, 63(3), 209–215.

# Property Crime Rate vs. % Pop. in Different House One Year Ago

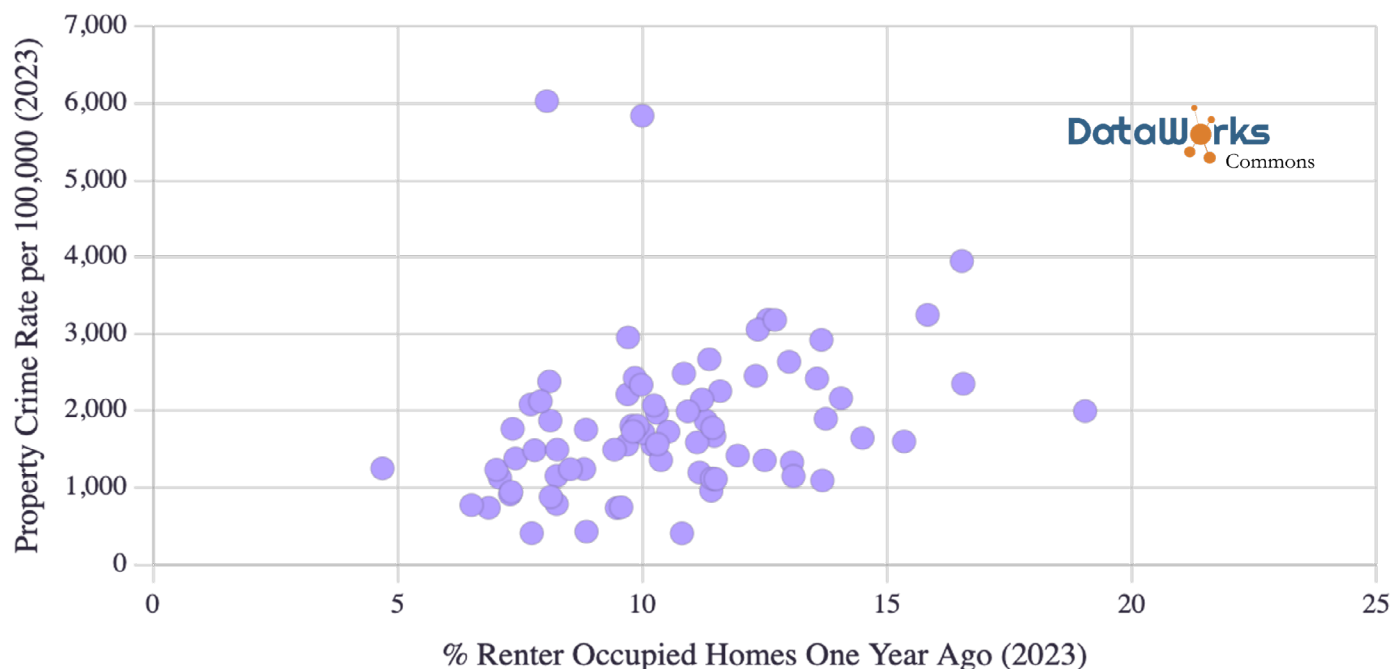
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau



Another commonly used indicator of residential instability is the percentage of individuals who are renting. This visualization is not intended to suggest a direct causal or correlative relationship, but rather to surface potential patterns that may warrant closer investigation.

# Property Crime Rate vs. % Renter Occupied Homes One Year Ago

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau





Creating a more stable housing environment for those with criminal legal involvement is an effective way to intervene with a population that has an elevated risk of homelessness. Reducing homelessness also reduces crime, with one study finding that providing supportive housing to those experiencing homelessness reduces their chance of committing a crime by 80%.<sup>96</sup> Homelessness also has significant downstream costs for our State in the healthcare, criminal legal, and even our municipal fire departments.<sup>97</sup> The Community Safety Investment Fund offers a lifeline to this at-risk population and should make a significant contribution to further lowering crime and helping governmental budgets.

### Reentry, Employment, and Education

Several counties (28%) have chosen to spend at least some of the Community Safety Investment Fund money on reentry services from local jails. Studies have shown that jail reentry services reduce recidivism, with one recent study finding, “By providing transition planning services, jails and community-based services . . . reduce the risk and frequency of rearrest.”<sup>98</sup> These effects go beyond crime rates and should make a significant impact on public health. One study finds “reentering citizens experience higher rates of overdose, suicide, disabilities and physical disorders, homelessness, and death compared with the general population.”<sup>99</sup> This also includes elevated risk for serious health problems, including “cardiovascular disease disproportionately affects formerly incarcerated people, with stroke and myocardial infarction contributing to a high risk for death post-release.”<sup>100</sup> Providing reentry services from jails should continue to reduce crime and further stabilize the public health of these counties.

Another group of counties (24%) have decided to focus on education and employment opportunities for those with criminal legal involvement, often in tandem with mental health services. The academic literature suggests that education has a strong crime-reducing effect. A natural experiment involving changing state law dropout ages finds that more high school graduates create a significant crime-reducing effect.<sup>101</sup> Another finds that education spending can lower property and violent crime rates.<sup>102</sup> Even behind

bars, receiving education has a positive effect, with one study finding that “recidivism is lower for adults participating in basic correctional education than for incarcerated adults overall.”<sup>103</sup> In a similar vein, another graph looks at the relationship between educational and economic disadvantage by plotting the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in each county against the county’s property crime rate. While research has shown that economic instability and educational disparities can intersect with justice system outcomes, this figure is included only to visualize possible patterns, not to assert any causal or correlative claim.

Employment is another key to successfully reducing crime. For example, in a natural experiment, mass layoffs in manufacturing caused an estimated 6% increase in the crime rate.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, in North Carolina, “neighborhoods . . . with higher economic participation rates among its residents have significantly lower crime rates.”<sup>105</sup> For the specific criminal legal involvement population, an Ohio study “provides new evidence that employment stability reduces recidivism irrespective of pre-prison employment stability or extensive criminal history.”<sup>106</sup> The same holds true for jail recidivism.<sup>107</sup> Employment also influences economic disadvantage, which also tends to create crime.<sup>108</sup> A chart displaying every county in Oklahoma and the relationship between public school student disadvantage and property crime shows how family poverty influences crime.

96 Cohen, E. (2024). Housing the homeless: the effect of placing single adults experiencing homelessness in housing programs on future homelessness and socioeconomic outcomes. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 16(2), 130-175.

97 Chimowitz, H., & Ruege, A. (2023, December 19). The costs and harms of homelessness. *Community Solutions*. <https://community.solutions/research-posts/the-costs-and-harms-of-homelessness/>

98 Hicks, D. L., Comartin, E. B., & Kubiak, S. (2022). Transition planning from jail; treatment engagement, continuity of care, and rearrest. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 58(2), 288-299.

99 Russ, E. N., Puglisi, L., Eber, G. B., Morse, D. S., Taxman, F., Dupuis, M., ... & Ferguson, W. J. (2021). Prison and jail reentry and health. *Health Affairs*. October, 28.

100 Id.

101 Bell, B., Costa, R., & Machin, S. (2022). Why does education reduce crime?. *Journal of political economy*, 130(3), 732-765.

102 Hazra, D., & Aranzazu, J. (2022). Crime, correction, education and welfare in the US—What role does the government play?. *Journal of policy modeling*, 44(2), 474-491.

103 Patterson, M. B. (2022). Basic Correctional Education and Recidivism: Findings from PIAAC and NRS. *Adult Literacy Education*, 4(2), 18-35.

104 Rollins, A. Mass Layoffs and the Dynamics of Local Crime Rates.

105 Blizard, Z. D., & Sheetz, A. G. (2024). Working to Reduce Crime: Exploring the Link Between Economic Participation and Crime Rates in Forsyth County, NC Neighborhoods. *Crime & Delinquency*, 70(11), 2986-3015.

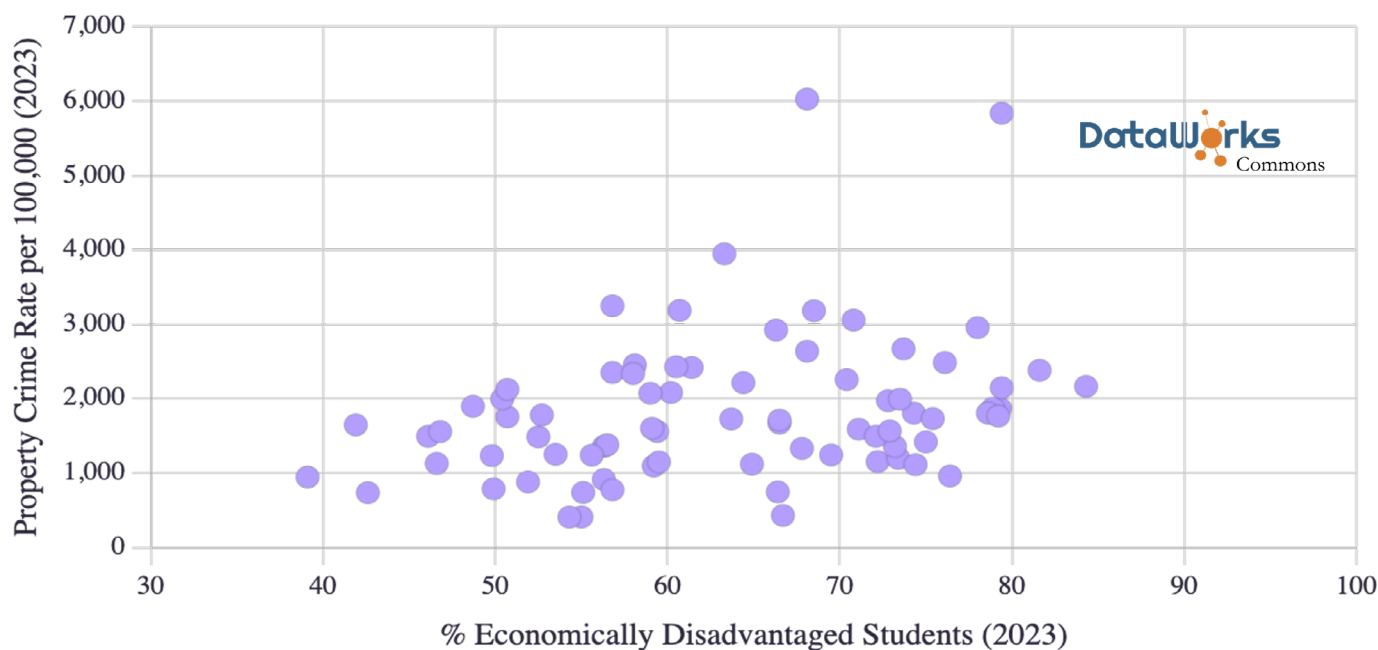
106 Kolbeck, S., Lopez, S., & Bellair, P. (2024). Does stable employment after prison reduce recidivism irrespective of prior employment and offending?. *Justice Quarterly*, 41(1), 38-61.

107 Richmond, K., & Schwartz, J. (2024). Gender and the Release from Jail: Predicting the Likelihood of a Probation Violation versus a New Offense. *Corrections*, 9(3), 468-483.

108 Wenger, M. R. (2023). The multilevel effects of changes in disadvantage on changes in crime. *Crime & Delinquency*, 69(11), 2102-2123.

# Property Crime Rate vs. % Economically Disadvantaged Students

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, OEQA



## Diversion Programs

Finally, 24% of county applications were planning to use at least some of the money offered by the Community Safety Investment Fund to create and expand diversion opportunities. These new programs vary in the methods of diversion, but all have the same goal: keep individuals from going behind bars while receiving needed services and treatment. For example, Beckham County and Roger Mills County have teamed up to create a pretrial diversion program, which should have a downstream effect on crime. One study finds that prosecutor-led pre-trial diversion "yielded a significant decrease in instant case conviction and use of jail sentences. There was also a trend toward reduced re-arrest at 2 years."<sup>109</sup> Pretrial detention can have a disastrous effect on county finances, with one study estimating that increasing pretrial detention increases the poverty rate, decreases the employment rate, and reduces economic mobility for children.<sup>110</sup>

Adair County has chosen to create a new Misdemeanor Community Sentencing program, which will allow

misdemeanor defendants to serve their sentences within their communities. This will allow for a more stable economic base within the county, which will translate to reduced recidivism and crime generally. For instance, an international meta-analysis shows that community sentencing is an effective way to reduce recidivism.<sup>111</sup> Serving a sentence in the community allows an individual to keep closer ties with their family, maintain employment, and access community resources, all of which are factors influencing crime rates. As SQ780 reclassified many low-level crimes to misdemeanors, focusing on misdemeanor community sentencing should help catch more individuals with mental health and substance use issues and help them get the treatment they need.

The implementation of the Community Safety Investment Fund marks a critical step in fully realizing the goals of SQ780 and SQ781. While the reduction in incarceration rates has already contributed to a decline in crime, the expansion of treatment courts, mental health and substance use services, housing assistance, reentry programs, education, employment support, and diversion programs will provide the long-needed infrastructure to sustain these gains. By addressing the root causes of criminal justice

<sup>109</sup> Davis, R. C., Reich, W. A., Rempel, M., & Labriola, M. (2021). A multisite evaluation of prosecutor-led pretrial diversion: Effects on conviction, incarceration, and recidivism. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 32(8), 890-909.

<sup>110</sup> Dobbie, W., & Yang, C. (2021). The economic costs of pretrial detention. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2021(1), 251-291.

<sup>111</sup> Yukhnenko, D., Wolf, A., Blackwood, N., & Fazel, S. (2019). Recidivism rates in individuals receiving community sentences: A systematic review. *Plos one*, 14(9), e0222495.

involvement—rather than merely punishing its symptoms—these county-level initiatives will further reduce recidivism, improve economic stability, and strengthen public health outcomes. The long-term impact of these investments will extend beyond the justice system, fostering safer communities, a stronger workforce, and a more resilient state economy. As counties implement these programs, Oklahoma has the opportunity to serve as a model for how data-driven, community-based approaches can create lasting public safety improvements without relying on mass incarceration.

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# 97%

**Nearly all clients engaged in the Justice Navigation program were not re-arrested in Oklahoma County while active in the program—demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted legal support and accountability.**

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## **Intervention works.**

**The Diversion Hub was able to serve 5,529 clients across all programs in 2024.**

**They provided life-stabilizing support to thousands of justice-involved individuals, helping them avoid further system entanglement and move toward self-sufficiency.**

In fact, Diversion Hub staff created 6,515 personalized service plans to address client needs, including ID recovery, housing, employment, mental health care, and transportation—demonstrating a holistic approach to justice reform.

**The numbers speak for themselves; More than two-thirds of clients in the misdemeanor diversion program successfully engaged and had their charges dismissed—many of whom had prior offenses—proving that second chances can work.**

## 5. Opportunities to Further the Community Safety Investment Fund

While Oklahoma has made significant strides in criminal justice reform, incarceration and crime trends across the state remain uneven. Some counties continue to rely heavily on incarceration despite declining crime rates, while others struggle with persistent property and violent crime. Additionally, the deployment of state-funded substance use and mental health treatment has been inconsistent, leaving critical gaps in service delivery, particularly for individuals with criminal legal system involvement. Understanding these disparities is crucial to ensuring that the benefits of reform are fully realized across all counties.

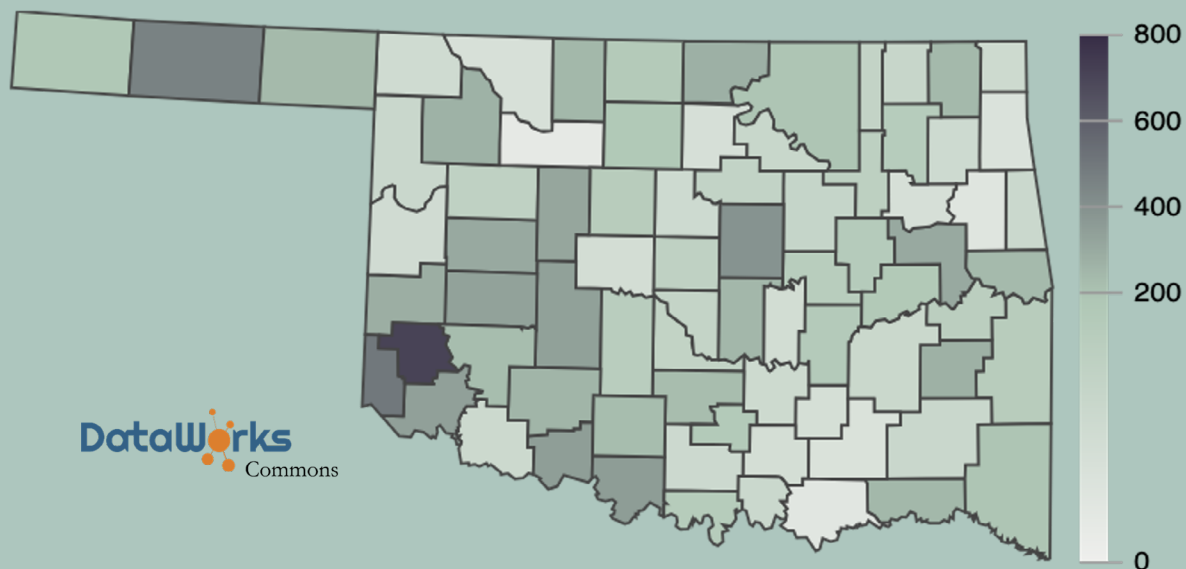
### Incarceration Rates

Despite this historic investment in local crime prevention and the crime reductions, both achieved and anticipated, there are still significant gaps within our State. For example, when it comes to incarceration rates, there are several counties that have extremely elevated rates. The following map shows each county and its per capita state prison sentence rates.

Counties such as Greer, Harmon, and Texas have elevated

### Prison Sentences Rate per 100K

Source: *Oklahoma Department of Corrections*



incarceration rates, in some cases over 4x higher than Oklahoma County. These incarceration rates are not necessarily responsive to crime rates. For example, Greer County ranks 1st in prison sentences per 100,000 people but 60th in property crime rate and 17th in violent crime rate. Similar disparities exist in counties across the State. Despite the increased utilization of incarceration in these counties, the rate of individuals receiving state-funded mental health and substance use treatment remains well below

the Oklahoma average. Even with the continued reliance on incarceration in these counties, since the passage of SQ780, the average incarceration rate in these counties has dropped by nearly 27%. It is important to note that none of these counties, Greer, Harmon, or Texas, have applied for Community Safety Investment Funds.

## Substance Use Treatment Deployment

Statewide, Oklahoma has had difficulty successfully employing state-funded substance use treatment resources to its needy population segments. Since the passage of SQ780 and SQ781, the per capita rate usage of substance use treatment has actually declined by 16%. The following graph shows this phenomena statewide and within different county categories. This is partially due to a significant decrease in court-ordered referrals to substance use treatment.

While court-ordered referrals to substance use treatment have declined since the passage of SQ780, this highlights a broader issue: Oklahoma has taken only half-measures in addressing substance use disorders. If the criminal legal system is expected to serve as the primary means of connecting people to treatment, then it must be properly funded and structured to ensure that access is consistent and effective. Otherwise, the costs of legal entanglement—such as economic instability, housing insecurity, and recidivism—may outweigh any potential benefits. At the same time, alternatives such as community-based and jail-based treatment programs can serve as viable options, ensuring that individuals receive support without unnecessary reliance on incarceration. A more comprehensive and well-funded approach is needed to bridge the gap between criminal justice involvement and meaningful treatment access. Thankfully, the Community Safety Investment Fund, which up to this point has not been fully deployed, offers such an approach.

## Mental Health Treatment Deployment

Meanwhile, the State has done a better job at deploying mental health treatment resources. The per capita mental health treatment rates have risen by 8% since 2016. This rise is a great step towards lowering incarceration and crime, however, the specific deployment has missed a critical population segment. While the percentage of clients receiving mental health treatment with full-time employment has risen in all county types, the percentage of individuals who are unemployed has stagnated, and the percentage of individuals receiving treatment who are not in the labor force has declined dramatically.

This decline in treatment access for those not in the labor force is particularly concerning given its overlap with the formerly incarcerated population. Individuals returning from incarceration often face significant barriers to employment, including stigma, lack of job training, and restrictive hiring practices. As a result, many remain unemployed or leave the labor force entirely, making them less likely to access critical mental health services. Employment not only provides financial stability but also increases access to healthcare, including employer-sponsored insurance and the ability to afford out-of-pocket treatment costs. Without targeted efforts to connect unemployed and formerly incarcerated individuals to both jobs and mental health care, this population remains at high risk for re-offending, perpetuating the cycle of incarceration.

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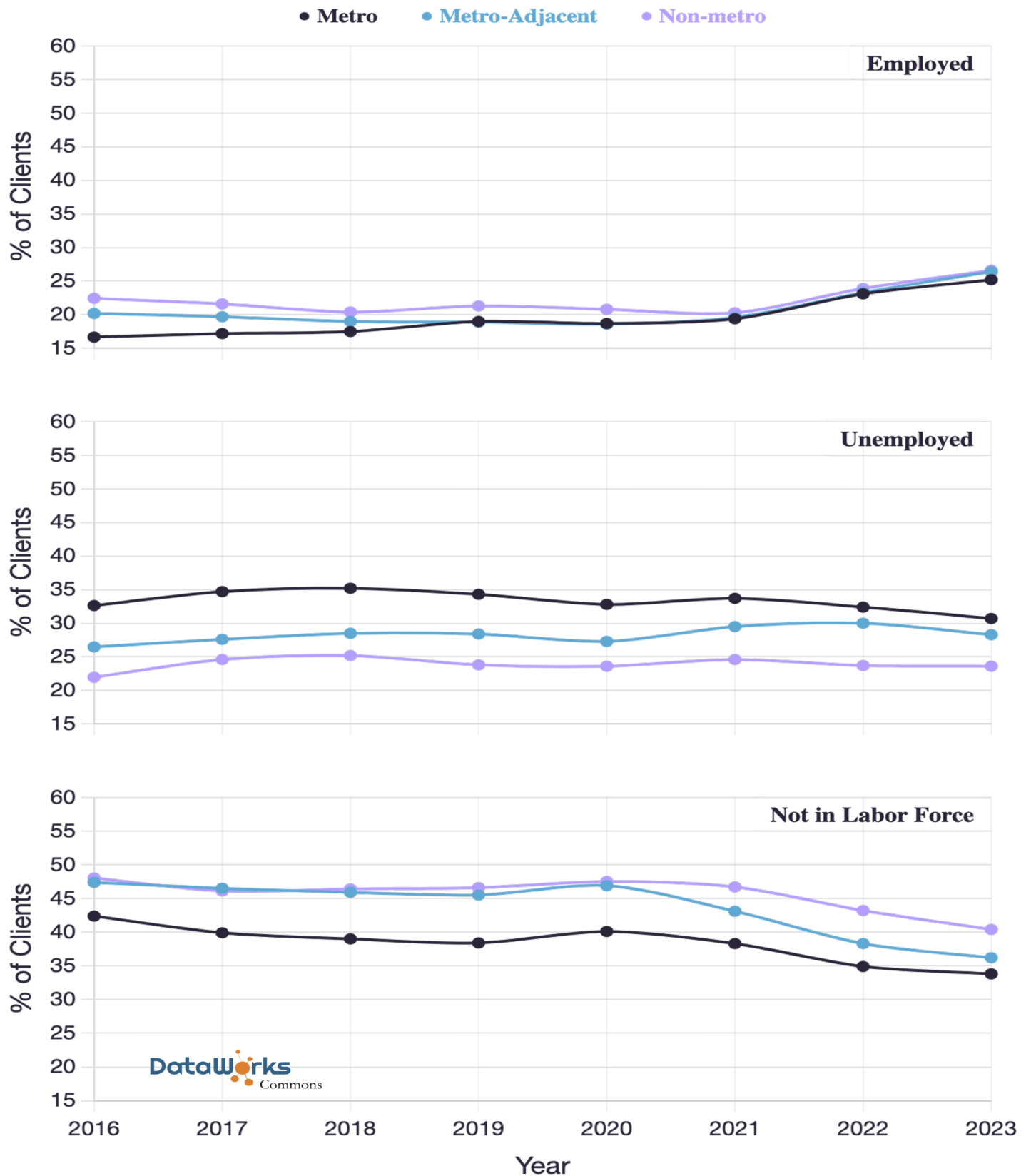
# 25%

## drop in referrals

**Court ordered referrals to substance abuse treatment have declined since 2016, further highlighting the low penetration of effective treatment into this needy population segment.**

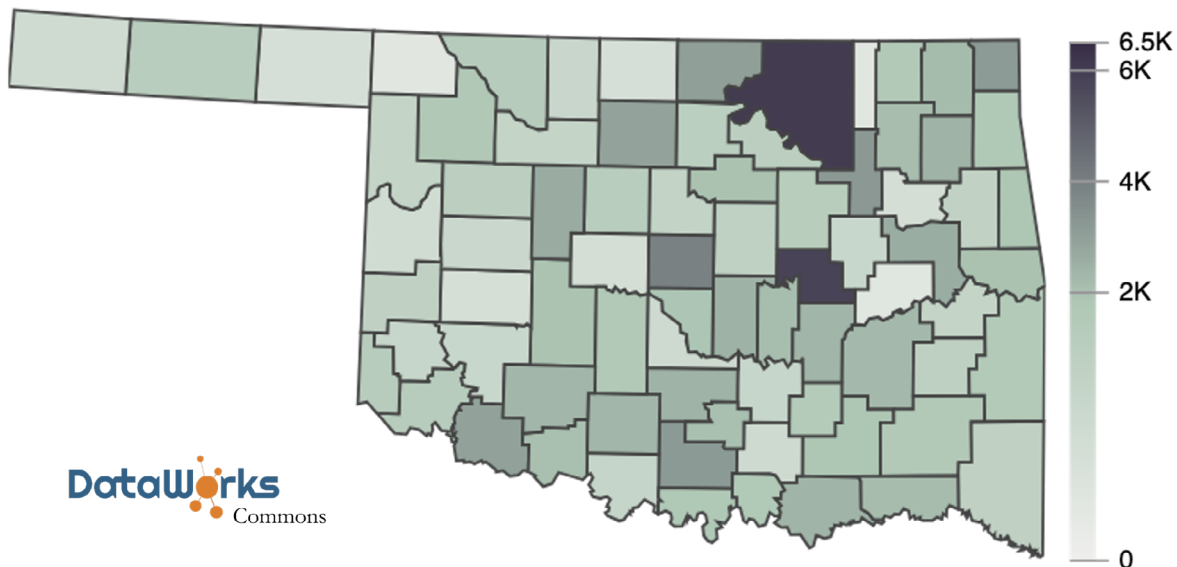


# Employment Status of ODMHSAS Funded Service Clients



# Property Crime Rate per 100K

Source: *Bureau of Justice Statistics*



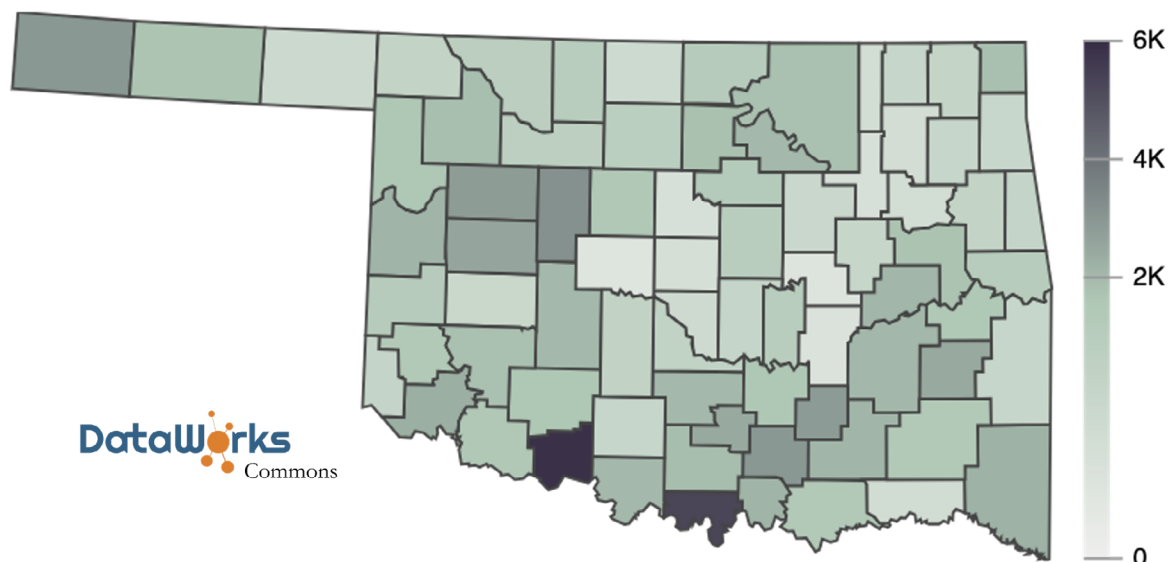
## Crime\_Rates

Some counties, like Osage and Okfuskee, are clear outliers with some of the highest crime rates in the State. For example, the property crime rate for Osage County is nearly 3x larger than Tulsa County and is the state leader in violent crime rates as well. Even as it remains the highest rate in the State, the property crime rate in Osage has decreased

since 2016 by a whopping 31%, and the violent crime rate has decreased by nearly 11%. Interestingly, these high crime rates do not necessarily translate into increased court filings. For example, Osage ranks 1st in crime rate but 51st in felony filings rate and 26th in misdemeanor filings rate. A similar story is found in Okfuskee. As our data concerns State filings only, this may be a consequence of the McGirt decision but nonetheless warrants further study.

# Misdemeanor Cases Filed Rate per 100K

Source: *Oklahoma Administrative Office of the Courts*



## Misdemeanor Filings

The map of misdemeanor filings shows some areas that utilize the misdemeanor court system more than others. Unfortunately, the vast majority of high misdemeanor utilization counties do not have any form of misdemeanor diversion programs. In fact, of the ten counties that have the highest misdemeanor filing rate, only 1 (Love County) has an active misdemeanor diversion program.

Of those ten counties with the highest misdemeanor filing rates, only three—Cotton, Custer, and Blaine Counties—applied for Community Safety Investment funding. These funds were specifically designed to reinvest savings from reduced incarceration into local treatment and rehabilitation programs, providing an alternative to punitive approaches. If more high-utilization counties applied for and effectively

used these funds, they could bridge the gap between frequent misdemeanor filings and the services necessary to reduce recidivism and improve long-term outcomes.

The data highlights the progress made in our state but also underscores the need for targeted investments and policy adjustments. Counties that have embraced alternatives to incarceration and expanded treatment services are seeing promising outcomes, while others lag behind due to a lack of participation in available funding programs. Moving forward, greater engagement with the Community Safety Investment Fund, coupled with a more equitable distribution of treatment resources, could help address these disparities and further reduce incarceration and crime across the state.

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## Takeaways & Implications

County governments and their subcontractors receiving Community Safety Investment Fund dollars will hire a total of 34 new full time employees in order to serve at least 4,500 new Oklahomans who have criminal justice contact.

These programs will provide mental health and substance abuse treatment, housing support, and reentry services at an average cost of \$1,424 per participant, a rate much lower than average yearly jail costs of approximately \$19,000 per inmate.

**24%**

**of the collected county applications are expanding treatment courts.**

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**Several counties (28%) have chosen to spend at least some of the Community Safety Investment Fund money on reentry services from local jails.**

**20%**

**of collected county applications create specific programs and employees to offer housing assistance to those with criminal legal system involvement.**

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# 6. Conclusion

The implementation of SQ780 and the Community Safety Investment Fund has resulted in significant shifts in Oklahoma's criminal justice landscape, reducing felony convictions for low-level offenses and reallocating resources toward rehabilitation initiatives. However, the effectiveness of these reforms remains contingent on the successful allocation and utilization of funds intended for treatment and support services. While reductions in incarceration rates indicate progress, challenges persist in ensuring that individuals receive adequate employment opportunities, mental health care, and stable housing—critical factors in breaking cycles of recidivism and crime.

Moving forward, targeted investments in geographic areas with high rates of economic disadvantage and insufficient support services will be necessary to maximize the benefits of SQ781. Additionally, continued assessment of the relationship between these reforms and crime rates will be essential in refining policy approaches. By addressing

these structural challenges, Oklahoma can build upon the foundation set by SQ780 and the Community Safety Investment Fund to create a more effective and equitable criminal justice system.

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**Reform needs followthrough. SQ780 set the stage for smarter justice, but real change depends on funding mental health care, housing, and job support. Let's invest where it matters because policy alone doesn't build safer communities.**

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**"The 781 funds have been transformational for Oklahoma County Treatment Courts. For the first time, we've been able to properly staff our program to best practice standards. This has helped us strengthen and expand access to treatment."**

- Oklahoma County Judge Kenneth Stoner



# 6.1 A Smarter Path Forward for Behavioral Health and Justice Reform in Oklahoma

**Healthy Minds Policy Initiative** contributed this section of the report. Healthy Minds is a non-profit, non-partisan policy organization that publishes research and analysis on mental health and substance use issues in Oklahoma, advocates for policy solutions that increase Oklahomans' access to care, and convenes community partners to build stronger local mental health systems. The organization was founded in 2019 by The Anne and Henry Zarrow Foundation and has offices and staff members in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

Oklahoma stands to significantly improve both public health outcomes and fiscal efficiency by scaling up its mental health diversion services. This report from Healthy Minds Policy Initiative outlines how expanding community-based crisis response systems and treatment court programs can reduce unnecessary involvement in the criminal legal system for people experiencing behavioral health crises. Oklahoma could save an estimated \$427 million annually in health care costs by moving away from a reliance on emergency rooms and jails toward more specialized responses like mobile crisis teams, urgent recovery centers, and short-term crisis beds. Additionally, expanding access to adult treatment courts for people with substance use disorders, mental illness, or co-occurring conditions could generate \$87 million in net savings while reducing recidivism and promoting stability.

The report finds that despite recent progress, significant unmet need remains, particularly in rural areas and in capacity for 988 call handling, mobile response, and crisis center access. Investments in Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs) and strategic use of opioid abatement and County Community Safety Investment Fund dollars are key to sustaining and expanding these services. Finally, the report emphasizes the need for statewide infrastructure to track outcomes and guide future improvements—recommending stronger 988 and 911 coordination, universal jail intake screenings, and standardized data systems to better identify diversion opportunities and measure success.

Find the full Healthy Minds report and explore the data and recommendations in more detail [here](#).



**Over 147,000 calls to 911 each year could be diverted to 988, reducing police involvement in mental health crises.**



**More than 20,000 statewide jail bookings and 45,000 ER visits could be prevented through access to crisis services.**



**Expanding treatment courts could serve at least 19,000 more Oklahomans each year—meeting demand and improving public safety.**



**\$24 million investment in treatment court expansion could generate \$111 million in savings, resulting in a net taxpayer savings of \$87 million.**

# Thank you

**This work wouldn't be possible without the support of our funders, including Arnold Ventures, and the many Oklahomans who believe in a fairer justice system. We are grateful to our partners such as DataWorks, Healthy Minds Policy Initiative, Oklahoma Policy Institute, and the many advocates and community leaders who continue this fight.**

**We also thank the legislators and reform champions who made SQ780 and the Community Safety Investment Fund possible. Your leadership sparked real change. Together we are building a safer and more just Oklahoma.**

