

Oregon's misplaced priorities harm crime victims

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Oregonians, it's time to talk about sex. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, a time for Oregonians to talk about sexual violence, the needs of survivors, and ways to prevent sexual violence. This year's theme, "It's time ... to talk about it," encourages people to have conversations about sex that promote healthy behaviors and encourage safe relationships.

PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY and JUSTICE

Naivasha Dean is the membership coordinator for Partnership for Safety and Justice. PSJ is a statewide, non-profit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and more just.

In honor of Sexual Assault Awareness Month, we thought it would be useful to demystify the topic as well as talk about some structural changes Oregon needs to make in order to get more serious about violence prevention.

Most sexual experiences are consensual and safe. Unfortunately, not all are – last fall, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a broad-scale report on sexual violence. The researchers found that more than 27 percent of Oregon women have been raped at some point in their lives (that's one in four Oregon women). Only Alaska had higher rates of sexual violence than Oregon.

When looking at the CDC's research results nationally, there are a number of findings that can help guide strategies to better prevent sexual violence and help survivors thrive. Most survivors of rape are young at the time that they are harmed – approximately 80 percent of female victims were assaulted before the age of 25 and almost half were raped before age 18. While popular crime TV shows may portray sexual violence as committed by a stranger lurking in a dark corner, most survivors know the person who harmed them – more than half of female rape victims were harmed by an intimate partner and 40 percent were harmed by an acquaintance.

These findings may seem startling compared to how sexual violence is usually

portrayed on TV and in the media. Most of the high-profile cases involve a young, white child who is assaulted by a stranger. These high-profile cases catch the public's attention and often sound a call for action, usually for a new law that increases the penalty for offenders. Accountability for offenders is an important part of a comprehensive response to sexual violence. But increased penalties alone don't get to the heart of the problem of sexual violence. And the more that the system focuses on increasing prison sentences, the less likely the system is able to focus on the other important parts of a comprehensive response.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the majority of sexual assaults – approximately 63 percent – are never reported to the police. Not all of these reports will lead to a case that is prosecuted and even fewer of those cases will result in a conviction. The majority of sexual violence survivors won't see the person who harmed them spend a day in jail or prison. But in Oregon, most of our public safety dollars – over 60 percent – are spent on corrections. This out-of-balance spending leaves little for other vital parts of our public safety response, such as victims' services, law enforcement, drug and alcohol treatment, and the courts.

Consider this: Oregon is spending over \$1.3 billion on prisons this biennium, but dedicated state funding for domestic and sexual violence services is less than \$5 million. This is a stark contrast and a grim picture in regard to how we are prioritizing our public safety spending. To be clear, our misplaced priorities have a very serious impact on the lives of real Oregonians. Life-saving programs are not getting the resources they need.

In 2010 alone, Oregon's domestic and sexual violence programs answered more than 169,000 calls for help related to sexual violence, domestic violence and stalking. In response to these calls, programs sheltered more than 5,000 people. Tragically, nearly 23,000 requests for shelter from violence

went unmet because programs were under-funded.

Many survivors and victim advocates are calling for a change to Oregon's out-of-balance approach to public safety. These survivors and victim advocates want to see an increased investment in programs better equipped to build safe and healthy communities like increasing access to victims' services and creating a system more focused on prevention than punishment.

Survivors deserve greater access to services. Many survivors have to deal with physical, psychological, and financial consequences, and ripple effects are often felt throughout the survivor's family, friends, and community. Some crime survivors need outside assistance to rebuild their lives; unfortunately, not all will be able to access services. Survivors who are unable to access the help they need are at increased risk of further victimization, mental health issues, poor school or work performance and suicide.

Thankfully, Oregon has a network of domestic and sexual violence programs across the state that provides lifelines to victims of sexual violence and their loved ones. These programs provide victims with the tools necessary to become survivors – shelter, safety planning, counseling, medical accompaniment and legal advocacy. This infrastructure needs to be strengthened.

So, Oregonians, let's talk about sex this month and how sexual violence affects us all. Let's also talk about the need for Oregon to invest more state resources that help protect and support survivors.

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Survivors can call the statewide crisis line at 888-235-5333 for free, confidential support.



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