

Victims: Prioritize prevention, treatment, not more incarceration

BY TALIA GAD
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Crime survivors have a seat at the public safety table, but to ensure that criminal justice policy solutions reflect victims' needs, advocates should always seek more ways to elevate those voices. So at this public safety crossroads, while Oregon lawmakers debate whether to open a second prison for women, it's fortuitous that a first-of-its-kind study has emerged to shed light on survivors' perspectives on criminal justice policies.

The National Survey on Victims' Views confirms that there's no unified victims' voice and that people impacted by crime are as diverse a group as any. The survey does reveal some general preferences among survivors, though. In the broad-reaching paper, findings include identifying the groups that are most vulnerable to crime, assessing how incidents impact victims, asking whether the criminal justice system is meeting survivors' needs, and inquiring about victims' perspectives of the criminal justice system and public safety policies.

This last set of responses is one that merits Oregon's attention right now, and there we find that "the overwhelming majority of crime victims believe that the criminal justice system relies too heavily on incarceration, and strongly prefer investments in prevention and treatment to more spending on prisons and jails." This preference is true for survivors across the demographic board: for women and men; white, black and Latino people; rural, suburban and urban residents; and Democrats, Republicans and Independents. A majority or plurality in each group of survivors wants policies that rely less on incarceration and more on solutions.

Victims views are also consistent between survivors of different types of crime. When asked whether there should be more focus on punishing people who commit crimes or on

rehabilitating people who commit crimes, the data aligns: 61 percent of property crime victims and 60 percent of violent crime survivors prefer rehabilitation.

This finding should not be surprising. While responses to crime vary among people and evolve over time, one thing is overwhelmingly consistent: survivors of crime want to ensure that the person who harmed them doesn't do it again and doesn't harm anyone else.

One Oregonian's personal story is a case in point. A woman and her sister were struck at 70 mph by driver who'd been drinking too much and chose to drive. The crash paralyzed the woman, and she's since lived with a significant spinal cord injury; her sister sustained mild traumatic brain injury. Between her wheelchair costs, medical supplies, and other expenses resulting from the accident, she knew what accountability meant for her: the driver should receive addiction treatment to lower the risk that he'd harm others in the future, and she felt that he should be mandated to work and generate income that could pay restitution toward some of her costs incurred from the crash. In line with the overall preference of survivors in the National Survey on Victims' Views, she wanted for the person who harmed her to receive addiction treatment, not a long-prison sentence.

It's important to reiterate that the findings aren't homogeneous. Some survivors do want a prison sentence, but by a margin of 3 to 1, "victims prefer holding people accountable through options beyond prison, such as rehabilitation, mental health treatment, drug treatment, community supervision or community service."

Among those who participated in the survey, survivors prefer:

- Shorter sentences with treatment as opposed to longer sentences (61 percent)
 - Increased investments in drug treatment rather than longer sentences and more prisons (80 percent)
 - More mental health services rather than longer sentences and more prisons (88 percent)
- Coincidentally, or perhaps as a result of

research and evidence-based approaches to public safety, Oregon legislators are now considering a bill that exactly reflects these preferences. The Safety and Savings Act (HB 3078) proposes

- Shorter sentences with treatment as opposed to longer sentences
- Increased investments in drug treatment rather than longer sentences and more prisons
- More mental health services rather than longer sentences and more prisons

The Safety and Savings Act is perhaps reflective of this report's findings because its legislative champions have firsthand experience working with crime victims, people who've caused harm and the families of both. Leading HB 3078 are Reps. Carla Piluso (a former police chief), Tawna Sanchez (a volunteer who works with women in prison) and Ann Lininger (a public defender). And support broadens from there.

Business leaders, women's victim/survivor advocates, union groups, faith leaders, children's advocacy groups, civil rights organizations and addiction treatment associations are all working on behalf of this bill because they share the same priority: to achieve the greatest public safety impact by holding people accountable for crime while also interrupting the cycles that sometimes include harming others.

Oregon is at a critical juncture. We can open a second prison for yet more women who are primarily serving longer sentences for addiction-driven drug and property crimes. Or we can continue progress that began in 2013 with reforms that achieve accountability yet reduce incarceration by reinvesting in local services for solutions-based responses to crime. At this juncture, it's valuable to know what the majority of survivors want.

And as for the woman who survived the crash, she went on to start an advocacy organization to promote criminal justice policies centered on crime victims' needs. Her little shop grew in size and stature, merged with another organization and became Partnership for Safety and Justice.

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