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## **First-Ever Survey of IL Crime Victims Finds Majority Support Prison Reform to Spend More on Prevention and Less on Lengthy Sentences**

*Results reflect the views of a broad and representative cross section of the state*

A new, first-of-its-kind statewide survey released by the [Alliance for Safety and Justice](#) (ASJ) bucks conventional wisdom regarding the views of crime victims on incarceration. Despite popular assumptions that victims support long sentences and prison expansion, [the Survey of Illinois Victims' Views](#) finds that seven in 10 victims prefer a more balanced approach to public safety – shorter prison sentences and greater investments in prevention, rehabilitation and trauma recovery for victims to stop the cycle of crime.

By a margin of nearly 3 to 1, crime victims believe that time in prison makes people more likely to commit another crime rather than less likely. **These views cut across demographic groups, with wide support across race, age, gender, and political party affiliation.**

**Nine in 10 crime victims prefer that Illinois invest more in schools and education rather than investing in more prisons and jails.** The vast majority of victims also prefer investments in rehabilitation, mental health treatment, and drug treatment to more spending on prisons and jails.

“The communities that have been most harmed by crime and violence have also frequently been left out of the debate on safety and justice policy,” said Lenore Anderson, President, Alliance for Safety and Justice. “It’s more important than ever to examine the views of victims in Illinois and develop policy responses to crime that incorporate the perspective of crime survivors. Designing policies that make communities safer means understanding who victims are, how crime impacts them, and what experiences they have with the criminal justice system.”

For the past 30 years, Illinois prison populations have swelled—driven by increasingly long sentences, limited incentives for rehabilitation during incarceration and barriers to successful reentry. The result has been overcrowded prisons, high recidivism rates and too little support for victims of crime. With 48,278 people imprisoned at the end of 2014, the Illinois prison population has more than quadrupled since 1980.

Perhaps to the surprise of some, support for reform and a new approach to safety is strong even among victims of violent crimes. The survey included both victims of nonviolent crime and

victims of violent crime, including the most serious crimes of rape or murder of a family member. More than 60 percent of those surveyed have been victims of a violent crime. Nearly one in three state residents have been victimized in the past 10 years, with more than half of these crime survivors experiencing violence, but that impact is not evenly felt across the state. The study finds that residents of Chicago are 23 percent more likely to be victims of violent crime and 41 percent more likely to be victims of serious violent crime than the rest of the state.

"Too many victims in Illinois are not supported by the criminal justice system. My family suffered in the wake of my brother's murder and we did not receive the help we needed to heal and recover," said Diana Cervantes, a crime survivor from Chicago. "The communities most harmed by crime and violence need trauma recovery services and investments in treatment and prevention, not more incarceration and prison spending."

The survey also finds that victims of crime experience significant challenges in recovery and healing—seven in 10 report experiencing at least one symptom of trauma. The survey found fewer than half of victims receive help from the police and only two in 10 receive help from the district attorney.

"These findings are consistent with what we see across the country. Crime victims want to stop the cycle of violence through change at the community level," said Aqeela Sherrills, who lost his son to gun violence and is a national expert on crime prevention. "To achieve real safety, states like Illinois need to shift spending from prisons to treatment and rehabilitation and develop more balanced strategies for addressing trauma and supporting victim recovery."

As state leaders debate the future of justice policy in Illinois, the perspective of diverse victims can help guide the conversation and offer a balanced approach to public safety policy. Findings from this survey point to several recommendations that align with crime victims' views:

- 1. Conduct regular victimization studies in Illinois.** More data and research is needed to advance policies that are responsive to and effectively meet victims' needs. By regularly surveying victims, the state can best identify the policies and practices that will best protect victims, stop the cycle of crime, and help survivors recover from victimization.
- 2. Invest in evidence-based services that protect victims and stop the cycle of crime, such as those provided by trauma recovery centers.** A growing body of research demonstrates that untreated trauma, especially among those who experience repeat victimization, can contribute to substance abuse, mental health issues, housing instability, and other problems that increase risky behaviors and lead to further victimization or crime itself. Trauma recovery centers, and other programs that provide wraparound services, can stop this cycle by providing access to treatment, referrals, and other forms of assistance.
- 3. Target victims' services funding for the communities that have been most harmed by crime and least supported by the criminal justice system.** Illinois received \$88 million in Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding from the federal government in 2016. These

dollars should go to programs that provide services to vulnerable populations and communities experiencing concentrated crime and violence.

- 4. Advance sentencing and corrections policies that more closely align with crime victims' priorities.** Many of the failed “tough-on-crime” policies that led to Illinois’ massive prison expansion were adopted under the premise that victims wanted prison-first policies. These survey results paint a much different picture and show overwhelming victim support for policies that replace over-incarceration with a balanced approach to public safety and investments in new safety priorities that work better to stop the cycle of crime.

The full report is at [www.allianceforsafetyandjustice.org](http://www.allianceforsafetyandjustice.org).

Methodology: These findings reflect the opinions of a broad and diverse Illinois, including a representative sample of all ages; racial and ethnic groups; and geographic locations. Respondents self identified as victims and provided the types of crimes they have experienced in the past ten years. The survey was conducted by David Binder Research in July 2016 and was administered by telephone – landlines and mobile phones – and online. This methodology was designed to ensure the inclusion of harder-to-reach demographic groups. As part of this research, focus groups were also conducted with victims from diverse backgrounds, ages and genders in Chicago and Peoria. To learn more about the research design, please see the methodology section of the report.

*Alliance for Safety and Justice is a national organization that aims to win new safety priorities in states across the country. We partner with state leaders, advocates and crime survivors to advance policies to replace prison waste with new safety priorities that will help the communities most harmed by crime and violence. For more information visit <https://www.allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/> or follow us on twitter [@SafeandJustUSA](https://twitter.com/SafeandJustUSA)*

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