

# ▶ CRIME SURVIVORS SPEAK: FLORIDA VICTIMS' VIEWS ON SAFETY AND JUSTICE

## ALLIANCE FOR SAFETY AND JUSTICE BRIEF

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There has never been a better time to consider the experiences and perspective of Florida's crime victims. For the first time in a generation, Florida leaders and lawmakers are rethinking the direction of the state's public safety and criminal justice policies.

Despite sharp increases in corrections expenditures and incarceration rates in the last few decades<sup>1</sup>, Florida, like many states, has lacked representative data on the experiences and needs of those most negatively impacted by crime and violence: victims.

With growing research demonstrating the ineffectiveness of long prison sentences<sup>2</sup>, and increased concerns about the associated costs, more and more leaders are seeking to change the laws and policies that led to bloated prisons with limited impact on recidivism.

To fill the gap in knowledge about victims' experiences and needs, the Alliance for Safety and Justice in January 2018 conducted the first-ever survey of Florida crime survivors. The results demonstrate the importance of listening to the first-hand experiences of these key public safety stakeholders.



Floridians have been victimized in the past 10 years



of victims describe their experience as traumatic,

yet only **16%** felt very supported by the criminal justice system



By a margin of



crime survivors prefer shorter prison sentences and more spending on prevention and rehabilitation to longer sentences that keep people in prison for as long as possible

Nearly one in three state residents (31 percent) have been victimized in the past 10 years and, despite the fact that seven in 10 (67 percent) crime survivors describe the experience as traumatic, only 16 percent felt very supported by the criminal justice system.

Perhaps to the surprise of some people, the survey findings also shatter the conventional wisdom on victims' views. Crime victims want accountability, but they also believe prison makes people more likely to commit crimes and prefer options beyond just incarceration. Contrary to the common portrayal of victims in the media and state capitol, the vast majority of crime survivors in Florida believe the criminal justice

system focuses too much on punishment, and spends too little on rehabilitation and treatment.

These views are consistent across demographic groups, and hold up even among victims who have experienced the most serious violent crimes. Republican and Democratic victims alike support policy changes that will shorten prison sentences and invest in drug and mental health treatment, education, and other proven public safety solutions. In fact, by a margin of 3 to 1, crime survivors prefer shorter prison sentences and more spending on prevention and rehabilitation to long prison sentences.

## VICTIMS' EXPERIENCES AND THE IMPACT OF CRIME

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Crime impacts people from all walks of life in Florida. According to the survey results, one in three (31 percent) Floridians has been victimized in the past 10 years. Virtually all victims have experienced property crime (97 percent) and 57 percent experienced violent crime.

While victimization affects every demographic group, research has shown that violence is concentrated and its impact unequal.<sup>3</sup> The communities most harmed by crime are often also the least supported by the criminal justice system.

In Florida, black and Latino people are 24 percent more likely than white, non-Hispanic people to be a victim of violent crime. Floridians who are female, young, and low-income are also much more likely to experience violence.

In addition, repeat victimization is most common among victims of violent crime. Nearly one in three (30

percent) victims of violent crime have been victimized four or more times, and they are more than twice as likely (117 percent) than victims of property crime alone to have been repeatedly victimized.

### CRIME IS A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE FOR VICTIMS

Victimization takes a heavy toll on crime survivors and is a traumatic experience for most victims. The effects of trauma can be devastating, and research shows that unaddressed trauma increases the risk for mental health issues, substance abuse, and other challenges that ultimately lead to employment, housing, and income insecurity.<sup>4</sup>

Trauma is compounded for people who experience repeat victimization, and can even contribute to the cycle of crime by increasing the likelihood that victims engage in risky behaviors including becoming a perpetrator of violence themselves.<sup>5</sup>

In Florida, nearly seven out of 10 (67 percent) victims overall and three out of four (74 percent) victims of violent crime describe their experience as traumatic. When asked about the specific ways in which victimization has impacted them, crime survivors responded that:

- 8 in 10 felt stress as a result of the incident
- 7 in 10 felt anxiety
- 9 in 10 felt anger
- 6 in 10 (55 percent) felt fear
- 1 in 2 experienced trouble sleeping
- 1 in 4 experienced trouble with work or school
- 1 in 4 experienced physical or medical issues

All told, 96 percent of crime survivors experienced at least one of the negative impacts identified above.

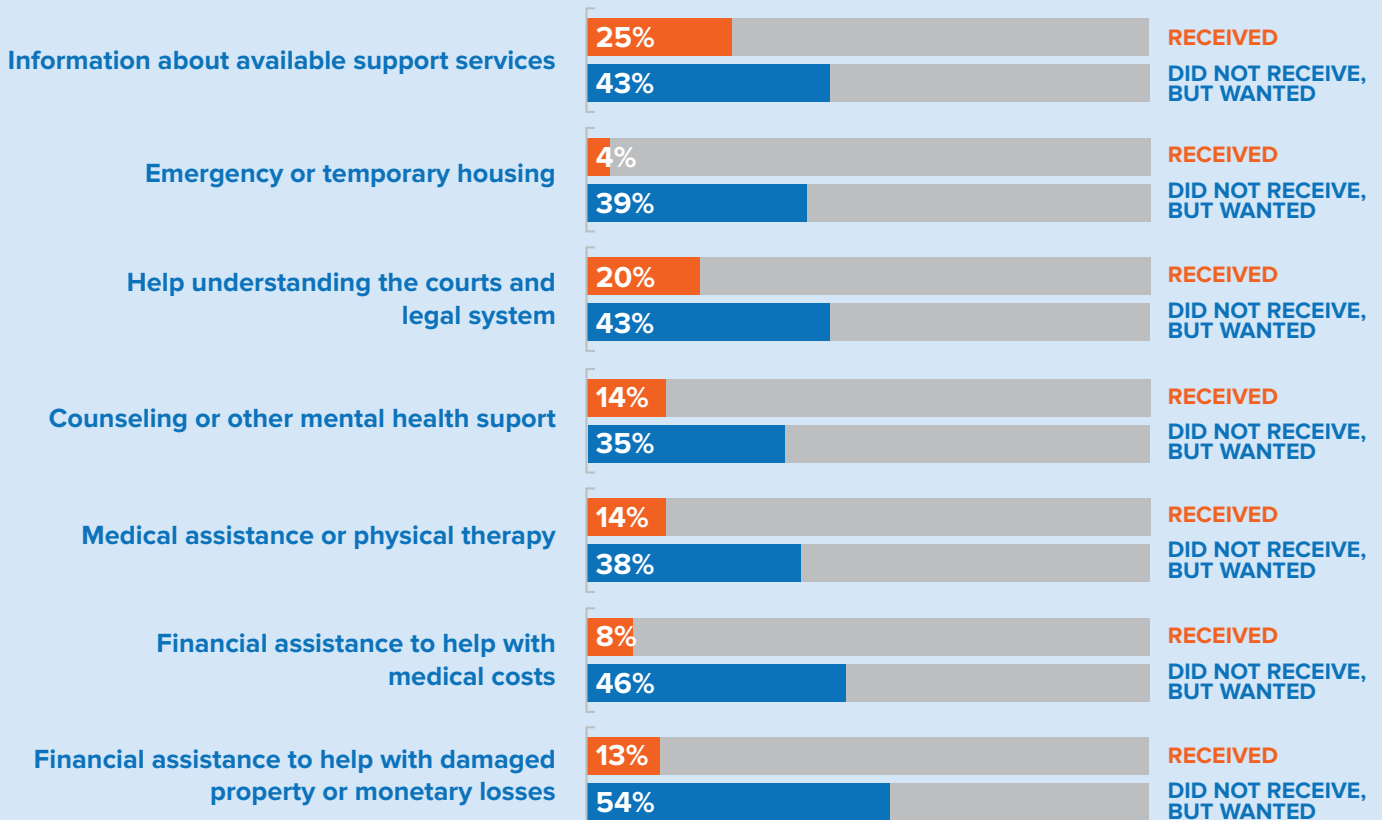
Despite the immediate and long-lasting impact of trauma on crime victims' lives, most victims do not receive the help or support they need.

## THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IS NOT MEETING VICTIMS' NEEDS

There is no more important role of our justice system than protecting victims of crime and facilitating their medical, emotional, and financial recovery. Yet most victims in Florida indicate that the criminal justice system provided little support in their time of need.

According to survey results, 29 percent of crime survivors felt "not at all supported" by the criminal justice system and only 16 percent felt "very supported."

## LARGE GAP BETWEEN VICTIMS' NEEDS AND ACCESS TO SUPPORT



This lack of support has serious consequences for the wellbeing of crime survivors and public safety in our communities.

While nearly all crime survivors report symptoms of trauma or other negative impacts on their life, most do not access services to help them recover. This large gap between victims' needs and the treatment they receive

creates a vicious cycle of behavioral health problems, repeat victimization, and crime.

For most crime survivors, basic needs such as medical assistance or mental health support, temporary housing, help understanding the courts and legal system or information on available services, are unmet.

## VICTIMS' VIEWS ON SAFETY AND JUSTICE POLICY

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After decades of unprecedented growth in incarceration rates and prison spending, Florida policymakers are reexamining safety and justice policy and considering new approaches to public safety. Since 1980, the Florida prison population has grown seven fold (602 percent), with more than 99,000 people imprisoned at the end of 2016.<sup>6</sup> In turn, corrections spending has grown 276 percent since 1985, a rate of growth more than four times that of education.<sup>7</sup>

This massive prison expansion was not due to rising crime rates, but because of changes in state policy that increased the number of people sent to prison and the amount of time they spend there. From mandatory minimum sentences for even minor crimes to “truth in sentencing” policies that restrict opportunities for rehabilitation, Florida has adopted some of the most stringent sentencing and release laws in the country.

With expert and public opinion now favoring smarter approaches to criminal justice policy, Florida is joining a growing number of states that are rethinking crime and incarceration policies. In this era of changes, it is critical to reconsider the underlying assumptions that contributed to today's incarceration rates.

In the public safety debate, victims of crime are often understood as a constituency that wants tough sentencing laws and harsh prison sentences for people convicted of crimes.

This study provides detail on a comprehensive and representative group of crime victims. The results demonstrate that most crime survivors want a more balanced approach to public safety and prefer investing more in rehabilitation than punishment.

Among the key findings:

- **By a margin of 4 to 1, victims think prison makes people more likely to commit crimes than to help rehabilitate them into better citizens;**
- **By a margin of 3 to 1, victims prefer shorter sentences and more spending on prevention and rehabilitation programs to longer sentences that keep people in prison for as long as possible;**
- **7 in 10 (69 percent), think rehabilitation, drug treatment, and mental health treatment is a better way to prevent future crimes than punishment through incarceration;**
- **8 in 10 (78 percent) prefer that prosecutors focus on solving neighborhood problems and stopping repeat crimes through rehabilitation, even if it means fewer prison convictions**



**88%**

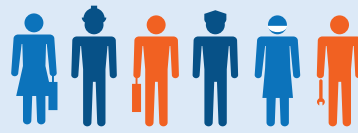
of Floridians support investing more in education and the health of neighborhoods



**8%**



support investing more in prisons and jails



**83%**

of Floridians support investing more in job training and workforce development



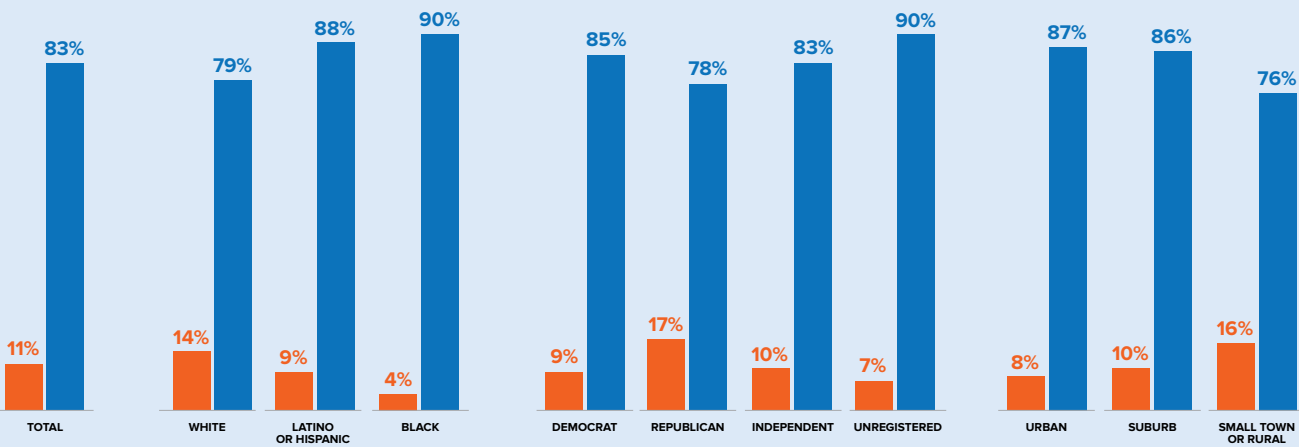
**11%**



support investing more in prisons and jails

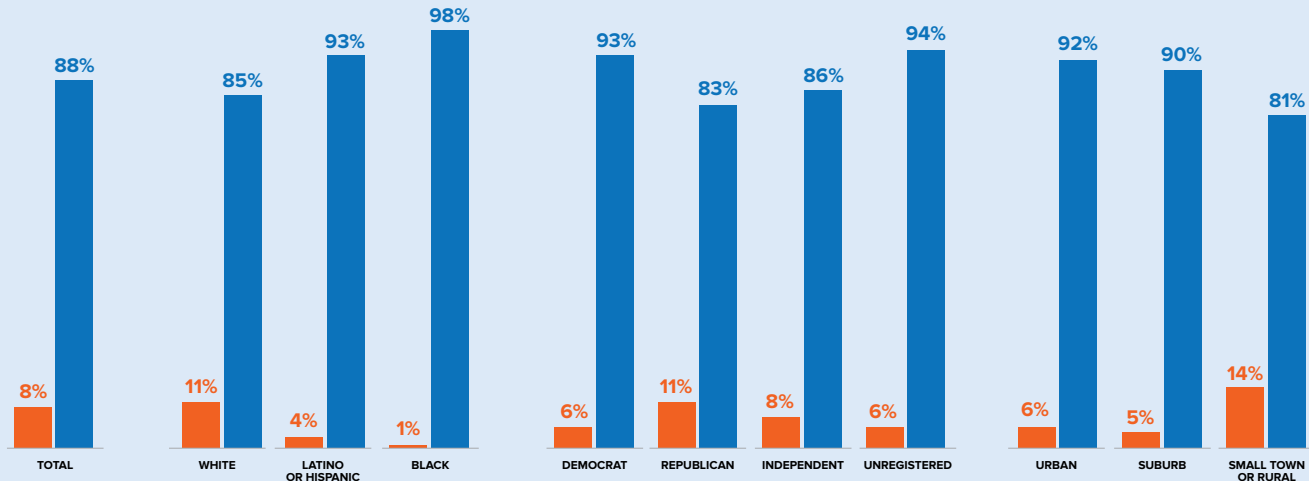
**DO YOU THINK FLORIDA SHOULD...**

- Invest more in prisons and jails
- Invest more in job training and workforce development



**DO YOU THINK FLORIDA SHOULD...**

- Invest more in prisons and jails
- Invest more in education and the health of neighborhoods



These views hold true across all demographic groups, including race, gender, age, income, and political party affiliation. They also hold true for victims of violent crime, including the most serious offenses such as rape and murder of a family member.

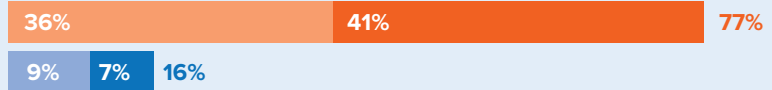
In addition to surveying crime victims about their broad priorities, the Alliance for Safety and Justice also asked about reforms that have been raised as policy reform options in Florida.

Overwhelmingly, victims support policy changes that restore judicial discretion, incentivize participation in rehabilitation and risk-reduction programs, and reduce the use of prison for less serious crimes such as drug possession and petty theft. These findings can help policymakers develop public safety solutions that better align with victims' views and invest in what they know works to prevent crime and support their recovery.

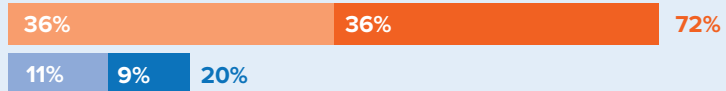
## VICTIMS PREFER A WIDE RANGE OF NEW SAFETY PRIORITIES IN FLORIDA

**SOMEWHAT SUPPORT** **STRONGLY SUPPORT**  
**SOMEWHAT OPPOSE** **STRONGLY OPPOSE**

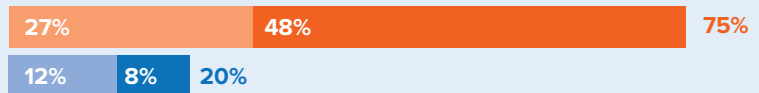
Limiting the amount of time that people can spend in prison for noncriminal probation violations such as missing a probation meeting, failing a drug test, or staying out past curfew



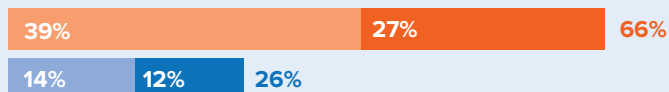
Reducing most sentence lengths for people in prison that are going to be released, and reallocating these funds to crime prevention and rehabilitation



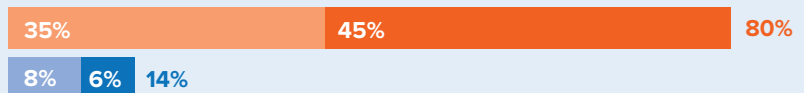
Requiring misdemeanor convictions instead of felony convictions for simple drug possession



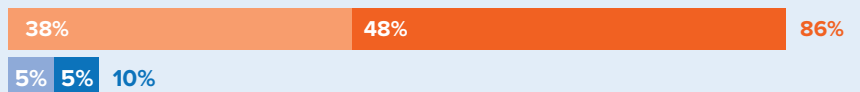
Requiring misdemeanor convictions instead of felony convictions for theft of amounts less than \$1,500



Transferring medically frail inmates from prison to appropriate medical treatment if they are incapacitated as a result of their condition and require long-term care



Providing earned time credits toward release for people in prison who participate in rehabilitation, educational or vocational programs and maintain good behavior



# METHODOLOGY

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The Alliance for Safety and Justice commissioned this survey to help policymakers better understand who crime victims are, what their experiences are with the criminal justice system, and their views on public policy. This study builds on the first-ever national survey of victims' views, commissioned by Alliance for Safety and Justice in April 2016.

David Binder Research conducted the survey in English and Spanish in January 2018. The poll was administered both by telephone—landlines and mobile phones—

and online. Respondents self identified as victims and provided the types of crimes they have experienced in the past 10 years.

Floridians of all ages 18+, all racial and ethnic groups, and all geographic locations are represented in these findings. The overall margin of error for the Florida Survey of Victims' Views is 2.2 percent, while the margin of error for crime victims is 3.9 percent.

# ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Project on Accountable Justice. Florida Criminal Justice Reform: Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities. 2017. Available online: <https://accountablejustice.github.io/report/>

<sup>2</sup> National Research Council. The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences. April 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Truman, Jennifer L., Ph.D.; Morgan, Rachel E. Ph.D. Criminal Victimization, 2015. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. August 2015 (National Crime Victimization Survey)

<sup>4</sup> Kilpatrick, Dean G.; Acierno, Ron. Mental Health Needs of Crime Victims: Epidemiology and Outcomes. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 16. November 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Warnken, Heather. Untold Stories of California Crime Victims: Research and Recommendations on Repeat Victimization and Rebuilding Lives. Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, University of California, Berkeley School of Law. April 2014.

<sup>6</sup> E. Ann Carson. Prisoners in 2016. United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. January 2018. Available online: <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p16.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> National Association of State Budget Officers' State Expenditure Reports. Available online: <https://www.nasbo.org/publications-data/state-expenditure-report/archives>



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