

Sheriffs, Victims Unite for Justice Reinvestment

Safer Communities, Lower Costs Among Benefits

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Over the past 30 years, sheriffs and crime victims have forged a mutually fruitful partnership, developing victims' assistance programs and working with state legislatures to expand and strengthen victims' rights.

Now these allies are finding new common ground in support of a crimefighting initiative taking hold across the country – justice reinvestment.

Justice reinvestment is a data-driven approach to improve public safety and reduce corrections spending; it reinvests savings in strategies that can decrease crime. While there is no one-size-fits-all model, justice reinvestment is designed to hold offenders accountable, control taxpayer costs, and keep communities safe – goals that sheriffs and victims heartily endorse.

Beginning with the gathering of data to identify problems in the criminal justice system, justice reinvestment engages all branches of government and outside stakeholders to develop practical, evidence-based policies that reduce corrections spending and direct savings into programs proven to improve public safety. In the last year alone, Alabama, Nebraska, Utah and Washington launched justice reinvestment initiatives joining a long list of states that have embraced this approach with bipartisan support.

For sheriffs, who operate the majority of America's jails, justice reinvestment makes good sense. People expect their sheriffs to be resourceful and fiscally responsible and, above all, to keep them safe. Justice reinvestment helps us meet those expectations by decreasing taxpayers' investment in our criminal justice system and by producing positive results – reducing recidivism and helping former offenders become productive, law-abiding citizens.

Victims also have ample reason to endorse justice reinvestment. Many victims say that while they may be powerless to change what happened to them, they are determined to support efforts that prevent crime from happening to anyone else. That's the essence of justice reinvestment: reducing crime, thereby resulting in fewer victims.

More specifically, victims and sheriffs believe that justice reinvestment wisely helps states focus incarceration on serious and violent offenders while strengthening less expensive and more effective alternatives for lower level, nonviolent offenders.

These alternative sanctions are anchored in research about what works and are carefully tailored for the specific risk level and treatment needs of each offender, ensuring accountability and a higher likelihood the offender will remain crime-free.

Another unique and important feature of justice reinvestment is its proactive engagement of crime victims as policy reforms are developed. Historically, most changes in the criminal justice system have been enacted with very limited involvement from crime victims and those who serve them. This ignores the insights of crime survivors and has led to gaps in services for victims as well as policies that are not always victim-sensitive.

In several states, the "reinvestment" of money saved through correctional reforms has funded victim advocates; direct services for victims of child abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault; statewide automated victim information and notification programs; and automated restitution management programs. At a time when budget cuts have devastated many community-based and government victim programs, this financial infusion has been vital, validating the importance of efforts to support crime survivors and reduce victimization.

As members of the National Sheriffs' Association Crime Victim Services Committee, we believe justice reinvestment can create a productive structure to help law enforcement better meet the diverse needs of crime victims. Victims must be fully involved in all criminal justice processes and recognized as people who have been harmed by crime and have a strong personal interest in justice outcomes. Establishing victims' fundamental rights to information, notification, safety, restitution, and participation can be essential to survivors' recovery process. Moreover, many victims need help with basic needs, including housing, transportation, medical and mental health services and legal assistance, and savings generated by justice reinvestment can be directed to help address those needs.

Justice reinvestment can also enhance sheriffs' efforts to aid victims in rural, remote and tribal communities where access to services is often limited or non-existent and where an understanding of cultural norms is essential to effectively meet victims' needs. Through justice reinvestment, leaders in such jurisdictions have successfully reached out to victim advocates to increase crime reporting and improve victim safety and access

to services. In addition, the adoption of innovative technologies, such as reliable geography-based monitoring instruments and remote alcohol testing, has strengthened offender supervision and improved public safety in these jurisdictions.

We have made great progress on behalf of victims during the last three decades. Justice reinvestment can help us build on that momentum, holding offenders accountable and making American communities safer for all.

In today's world where facts, figures and data are driving our work, justice reinvestment makes good common sense - for law enforcement, victims and taxpayers.

For more information, see <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/projects/public-safety-performance-project/about> and <http://csgjusticecenter.org/jc/category/jr/>. ★



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