

Federal Advocacy BRIEF

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Safety, Resiliency, and Hope:

Four recommendations on how the Biden-Harris Administration, Congress, and state and local government leaders can reduce violence and help victims recover from trauma

As federal, state, and local policymakers look for effective ways to reduce the severe increases in gun violence associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is **time to rethink and reform how our policies support victims of crime and address trauma**. Recent actions by the Biden-Harris Administration and Congress provide promising resources for this work. They include the [American Rescue Plan](#), changes to existing [federal grant programs](#), and pending legislation, such as the [Break the Cycle of Violence Act](#). What is important about these actions is that they point away from America's ineffective overreliance on the criminal justice system and point toward a more balanced approach that aims to address violence and other social disadvantages through investments in improving the social determinants of health and community-based violence interventions.

In this brief, the **Alliance for Safety and Justice (ASJ)** outlines **four recommendations** for the Biden-Harris administration, Congress, and state and local government leaders to further strengthen violence reduction efforts by supporting victims and trauma recovery:

1. [Prioritize community-based victim services in the planning and implementation of violence reduction initiatives;](#)
2. [Support trauma recovery and community-based victim services providers in the communities that are most impacted by violence—including a federal investment of \\$700 million to scale up Trauma Recovery Centers;](#)
3. [Expand victim services' eligibility to all victims of crime and violence; and](#)
4. [Provide victims with help getting housing, employment, and cash assistance.](#)

While violence can trap people in cycles of trauma, the resiliency of victims represents an underdeveloped resource for policymaking. By prioritizing the policies and resources that victims need to heal, **policymakers can develop a framework for safety that combines violence reduction and trauma recovery to engender the basic trust and hope for renewal America needs.**

America's long war on violence has failed to sufficiently reduce violence and help victims recover from trauma.

Since the early 1960s, American policymakers have fought a “long war” on violence and crime that tends to be concentrated in low-income and disproportionately Black communities.¹ This framework has led American policymakers to overinvest in the criminal justice system and build the largest system of incarceration in world history.² Yet a growing body of evidence has shown that America’s overreliance on the criminal justice system has backfired. It has not only **failed to sufficiently protect Americans from violence**. It has also **eroded the basic trust** that people in America’s most victimized communities need to have in their government for it to be legitimate and promote safety.³

America’s overreliance on the criminal justice system has ignored the needs of victims to recover from trauma.

In response to the evidence that America’s overreliance on incarceration has not proportionally improved public safety outcomes, policymakers have begun to take important steps to establish a more balanced and effective approach to criminal justice and violence reduction. State policymakers from both parties across the country have championed bipartisan criminal justice reforms. At the federal level, President Trump in 2018 signed the First Step Act into law. This reform shortened lengthy federal mandatory sentences for non-violent drug offenses and increased rehabilitative programming for people incarcerated in the federal prison system. And as the country recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Biden-Harris Administration and Congress have made and proposed unprecedented investments in the infrastructure that communities need to reduce violence. This includes measures in the [American Rescue Plan](#)

that use a public health framework to support efforts to decrease violence and other harms associated with the pandemic; recent [changes](#) to existing federal grant programs; White House-led efforts to implement [comprehensive strategies](#) to promote safety in cities that have experienced severe spikes in gun violence; and the legislative proposal, [Break the Cycle of Violence Act](#), which would invest in community-based violence intervention programs through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

These reforms are necessary and important achievements that will support more effective interventions and just responses to crime. At the same time, they are not sufficient to provide the assistance victims often need to recover from the effects of violence. The core problem is that the policymaking that has supported America’s long war on crime has not simply over-relied on the criminal justice system; it has prioritized the processes of the criminal justice system over the people criminal justice agencies are intended to serve.

¹ Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Harvard University Press: 2016), pg. 4. In this magisterial study, Hinton argues that a “long War on Crime” has defined America’s approach to concentrated disadvantage, a framework that was first crafted to address poverty in low-income Black communities.

² See Jeremy Travis, Bruce Western, and Steve Redburn (eds.), *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2014).

³ See David S. Kirk and Mauri Matsuda, “Legal Cynicism, Collective Efficacy, and the Ecology of Arrests,” *Criminology* 49 (2011): 443-472. On the importance of legitimacy, see Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Tom R Tyler and Yuen J Huo, *Trust in the Law: Encouraging Public Cooperation with the Police and the Courts* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2002).

Over the past several decades, policymaking has assumed that the primary purpose of victim services is to help criminal justice agencies arrest, prosecute, and punish people. This assumption has led policymaking to ignore the different kinds of support that victims need outside of the criminal justice system, thus obscuring the vision that policymakers need to address the complex realities of American violence and the trauma it causes.

Americans suffer from higher levels of violence than any comparable advanced industrial country, with severe concentrations of violence associated with poverty and race.

As a nation, America experiences a distinct and higher level of violence, particularly gun-related violence, than any comparable industrial nation. This unique level of violence is strongly associated with poverty, and it disparately impacts people of color, particularly Black Americans.⁴ While victims are diverse and have different needs, this kind of violence imposes a significant toll on almost all of them. It often entails exorbitant financial costs, from lost work to healthcare to funeral expenses. Research also shows that the **vast majority of victims of violence, especially repeat violence, experience one or more symptoms of trauma.**⁵ Common symptoms include anxiety, sleeplessness, depression, avoidance, and feeling as if it is necessary to remain hyper vigilant to future threats. Left unaddressed, trauma can injure the basic trust we all need to live in the world and attack the hope that enables us to believe that our lives can improve in the future. This suffering can lead to a lifetime of debilitating outcomes for people's physical health, mental health, and economic stability. It can also lead people to engage in destructive behavior, like substance abuse. It is not surprising that past victimization is also strongly associated with future victimization, or that while most victims do not become involved in the criminal justice system, most justice-involved people have histories of victimization.⁶

The most victimized people in America are often the least helped by government-supported victim services.

Despite violence's devastating impact, research has consistently shown that existing services fail to provide a significant number of victims with the assistance they need, and that America's most victimized people are persistently the least helped.⁷ Research has documented, for instance, that while young Black men who live in urban areas are at higher risk of violent victimization than any other population in the United States, they

⁴ See Elliott Currie, *A Peculiar Indifference: The Neglected Toll of Violence in Black America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), especially pages 19-77.

⁵ See Maureen Outlaw, Barry Ruback, Chester Britt., "Repeat and multiple victimizations: The role of individual and contextual factors. Violence and Victims," (National Criminal Justice Reference Services, March 2002). Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/35SHQJ6>.

⁶ See J Fagan, "Contributions of victimization to delinquency in inner cities," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 78, 586-613.; C. Farrell; G.M. Zimmerman. "Is exposure to violence a persistent risk factor for offending across the life course? Examining the contemporaneous, acute, enduring, and long-term consequences of exposure to violence on property crime, violent offending, and substance use," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* (2018). 55(6), 725-765.

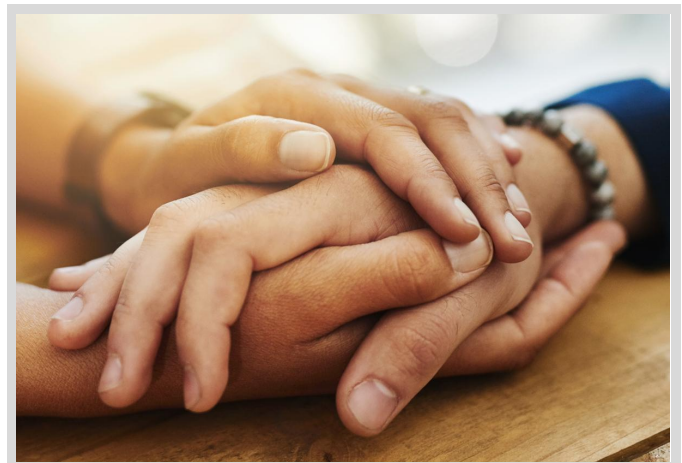
⁷ See "Crime Survivors Speak: The First-Ever National Survey of Victims' Views on Safety and Justice" (Alliance for Safety and Justice, 2016), especially pg. 11. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3j9suWI>

are also the least likely group to have access to services.⁸ **The barriers to services for victims are long-standing and well known.** They include the lack of investments required to meet victims' needs, the failure to support culturally appropriate, community-based, and trauma-informed services for repeatedly victimized communities and populations, and the overreliance on the criminal justice system to deliver and connect victims to services. State and local criminal justice systems' entanglement with victim assistance is especially problematic. On the one hand, as most violent crime is never reported to law enforcement, services that require engagement with law enforcement are effectively inaccessible to a large percentage of victims. And on the other hand, most states have laws, policies, and practices that either expressly prohibit or discourage victims with histories of criminal justice involvement, a group that has severe rates of victimization, from accessing government-funded services.⁹ Thus, at a structural level, America's overreliance on the criminal justice system results in a **substantial number of victims being systematically excluded from receiving the help they need.**

The overreliance on the criminal justice system to connect victims to services creates other issues that can undermine recovery and safety. Standard criminal justice procedures, like requiring victims to repeatedly go over their victimization experience or to cooperate with law enforcement, can compound symptoms of trauma, leading victims to blame themselves for their own victimization or feel unworthy of help. The nearly universal requirement of cooperation is particularly counterproductive. **There is no research that suggests trying to force victims to work with law enforcement can improve cooperation.** At a conceptual level, it is obvious that coercion can never produce trust and is more likely to cultivate distrust and contempt. It is therefore unsurprising that victims often describe these coercive practices as another form of violence and source of trauma.¹⁰ This kind of negative experience can frustrate victims' recovery and exacerbate the trauma caused by the harm they have suffered.

Victims are resilient, particularly when they have access to resources they need, like trauma recovery services.

While unresolved trauma can perpetuate victimization, victims are resilient, especially if they are treated with compassion and dignity and have access to the resources they need. There is a growing body of evidence that shows evidence-informed trauma recovery services, like school-based trauma recovery services and the



⁸ See Heather Warnken and Janet Lauritsen, "Who Experiences Violent Victimization and Who Access Services: Findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey" (Washington, DC: National Center for Crime Victims, 2019).

⁹ On the overlap between victimization and perpetration, see Caitlin Delong and Jessica Reichert, "The Victim-Offender Overlap: Examining the Relationship Between Victimization and Offending" (Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 2019). Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2WEBYBA>; "The Victim-Offender Overlap: One Class of Crime Victim Rarely Seeks or Receives Available Services" (National Institute of Justice, March 11, 2021). Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3A3Lih2>

¹⁰ See John Maki, "Trauma, dignity, and restoration: How the State of Illinois' Crime Victim Compensation Program Can Help Heal Crime Survivors and Communities," (Advocates and Survivors For Crime Victim Compensation Reform, 2019), pgs. 16-17. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3fIY6XX>

[Trauma Recovery Center \(TRC\)](#) model, can substantially improve outcomes for victims, but they are not widely available or accessible, particularly in the very communities that suffer from the highest levels of violence. The TRC is an evidence-based program that is particularly effective at helping the most victimized people who are often unable to access existing services. With 39 programs in nine states, TRCs provide wrap-around mental health services and other essential assistance to victims. While most victim services are dedicated to serving victims of specific types of violence, like domestic violence or sexual assault, the TRC serves all victims. The model is built around a framework of cultural humility, meeting victims where they are and helping them work with law enforcement only if they choose to do so. Research shows that **the TRC's approach to victim services produces better outcomes for victims**, reducing symptoms like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Evaluations of the TRC also suggest that providing victims with trauma-informed services and the freedom to choose how they will interact with law enforcement leads to increased levels of trust in government institutions and the legitimacy they need to promote safety.¹¹

America needs a new framework for safety that combines violence reduction and trauma recovery.

America needs a new vision for how government should support efforts to address violence and associated social disadvantages. The resiliency of victims points to an underdeveloped resource for the work ahead. As the Biden-Harris administration and Congress continue their work to help the country recover from COVID-19, policymakers at all levels should use these federal efforts to move beyond America's long war on crime and prioritize the policies and resources victims need to heal. **It is time to develop a new framework for safety, one that combines violence reduction and trauma recovery** to engender the basic trust and hope for renewal that America needs.

Recommendations

1. Prioritize community-based victim services in the planning and implementation of violence reduction initiatives.

When federal, state, and local government leaders convene stakeholders to design and implement plans to address violence, they frequently fail to include community-based organizations and other stakeholders who are dedicated to assisting underserved victims of repeat violence, particularly gun violence. And even when victim services are included in these kinds of efforts, they are typically part of the criminal justice system's response to crime. This exclusion of underserved victims of repeat violence and gun violence has undermined violence reduction efforts.

¹¹ See San Francisco Trauma Recovery Center Report to the Legislature. (May 2004). Prepared by the California Victim Compensation and Government Claims Board; J. Alvidrez, J., M. Shumway, A. Boccellari, J.D. Green, V. Kelly, V., & G. Merrill, G. "Reduction of state victim compensation disparities in disadvantaged crime victims through active outreach and assistance: A randomized trial," *American Journal of Public Health* (2008), 98(5), pgs. 882-888.

To ensure that victims have access to the resources they need, policymakers should:

- Ensure that community-based victim service leaders play an essential role in developing and implementing violence reduction initiatives. These service providers should have a track record of assisting people who are historically underserved, including those who have faced the specific forms of violence that planning and implementation are intended to address.

To address high levels of gun and associated kinds of violence that are concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color, policymakers should:

- Prioritize partnerships with community-based service providers who serve victims of community violence, particularly gun violence.

2. Support trauma recovery and community-based victim services providers in the communities that are most impacted by violence—including a federal investment of \$700 million to scale up Trauma Recovery Centers.

Every government agency that works with victims should actively seek to eliminate any barriers to resources reaching the organizations that have the most credibility and connection in the community. People turn to family, friends, trusted local leaders, and community-based local support services in times of crisis. That is where the vast majority of survivors of violence and crime go for help. Yet, community-based programs often struggle to stay open and meet the needs for services, especially in times of crisis.

To support trauma recovery and community-based services providers, policymakers should:

- Support culturally competent, community-based programs rooted in neighborhoods that experience concentrated violence and crime with multi-year flexible funding and sufficient resources to meet their needs;
- Ensure that State Administering Agencies responsible for Victims of Crime Act Assistance Grants, and other public agencies that distribute victim services funds, prioritize community-based organizations with a strong track record and community ties;
- Direct governmental resources and help to support programs that address the specific needs of communities suffering from high rates of violence;
- Encourage resource-sharing between established providers and newer organizations; and
- Ensure that application, funding, and reimbursement processes do not obstruct government support for community-based organizations.

In addition to these policy changes, Congress should:

- Appropriate \$700 million over five years to scale up Trauma Recovery Centers in communities that experience high levels of violence in all 50 states and American territories. This funding should

support, on average, two to three new TRCs in every state and territory and include capacity building from a non-governmental technical assistance provider that has experience administering and working with TRCs.

3. Expand victim services eligibility to all victims of crime and violence.

While important benefits and protections, such as Crime Victim Compensation and restitution, for victims exist in many states, they are not readily available to all crime victims. And too often, the most victimized populations, including people with histories of criminal justice involvement, are denied services or discouraged from seeking the help they need.

To ensure that all victims are eligible for support, policymakers should:

- End discriminatory rules or practices that treat victims differently depending on their status or demographics; and
- Expand eligibility for services and compensation to all victims, regardless of histories of criminal justice involvement or cooperation with law enforcement agencies.

To ensure that victim services are delivered fairly and do not exacerbate racial disparities, policymakers should:

- Track and publish data by race and other key demographics on denial or approval rates of compensation applications and victim access to services;
- Address disparities in application approvals or access to services to ensure equal access to help for all; and
- Establish survivor advisory councils to review the data and information collected, and set appropriate policies to address the finding.

4. Provide victims with help getting housing, employment, and cash assistance.

One of the most significant ways in which violence traps people in cycles of victimization and trauma is depriving them of the resources they need to pay for food and housing or help finding a job that pays a living wage.

To ensure that victims can meet their basic needs, policymakers should:

- Increase investments to frontline service providers to help quell violence and get survivors the crisis assistance support they need;
- Augment allocation of state general fund dollars to victims compensation programs and the other state grant programs that meet the true community victimization needs; and
- Expand flexible, general support dollars to community-based crisis assistance providers that can help provide survivors and communities with immediate cash assistance to meet these basic needs.

About the series from the Alliance for Safety and Justice (ASJ).

This is the seventh report from the innovations division of the ASJ that takes a deep dive into how federal recovery funds and other federal investments can be used to address core safety issues. Other reports in the series include *The Promise of the American Rescue Plan Funding Opportunities to Reduce Violence, Meet the Needs of Underserved Communities, and Promote a Vision for Shared Safety* (April, 2021), *Seven key takeaways that show how State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds can support innovative safety policies and programs* (June 2021), and an ongoing-series of state-specific analysis that ASJ began releasing in July 2021. The full series can be found at <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/reports-and-surveys/>

About the Alliance for Safety and Justice.

The Alliance for Safety and Justice is a national organization that aims to win new safety priorities in states across the country, and brings together diverse crime survivors to advance policies that help communities most harmed by crime and violence.

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