

Aswad Thomas
Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice
LD 178

Good Morning, My name is Aswad Thomas. I am the Vice President of the Alliance for Safety and Justice and National Director of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice. Thank you to all the legislators for allowing me time to speak with you. It is an honor to be here with you today.

I come to this work from a very personal place – Shortly after I graduated from college about 13 years ago – and just days before I was scheduled to move to Europe to start my professional basketball career – I was shot twice in the back in an attempted robbery in my Hartford, Connecticut neighborhood. Those bullets ended my basketball career and nearly ended my life.

From that moment, everything changed. I was released from the hospital to my mother's apartment, a few blocks from where I was shot, without any referrals to financial support or mental health care. For months, I laid on her living room couch in near-constant physical pain. I was grappling with grief and trauma.

Law enforcement visited several times, but it was always about the case. They never shared any information about victim compensation or victim services - no mention of help, or even expressions of concern, at all.

A few years after I was shot, I learned that one of the young men who shot me had been a victim of gun violence himself just four years prior. Just like me, there was no victim assistance or trauma recovery. And like so many, the life impacts of that lack of help led him down a path only to pick up a gun four years later and nearly take my life. The other young man who shot me was arrested about a year after the incident, and he was facing 40 years in prison at the age of 19 years old. And I remember the prosecutor and law enforcement started telling me a little bit about that young man. They told me he was so different from me. Look at me, I just graduated college, I was a star basketball player, and this young man has never graduated high school.

And the more detail they shared about that young man, I started to think about that young man's journey, his experience, and what led him to shooting me that night. What would have happened had this young man gotten the support he needed? What could he still accomplish if he was given another chance and wasn't condemned to living most of his adult life behind prison walls?

I ended up advocating for him to get ten years instead of the forty years he was originally facing.

And so, these are the experiences that brought me to Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, a flagship project of the Alliance for Safety and Justice, which is a national organization dedicated to replacing mass incarceration with public safety based on prevention and healing—what we call shared safety. Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice is a national network of 180,000 crime victims.

For the past decade of my life, I've traveled the country meeting with mothers and fathers who've lost children to violence, meeting with domestic violence victims, and sexual assault victims.

Crime victims have diverse experiences and perspectives. But what's been clear from my years sitting with survivors and hearing their stories, what we tend to want most is for what happened to us to never happen to anyone else. What we want is for what happened to us, never to happen to another person again.

That is why Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice strongly supports criminal justice policies that promote rehabilitation over long sentences. Policies that focus on rehabilitation and prevention adopt the right approaches to keeping people safe and ending cycles of crime. In 2016, the Alliance for Safety and Justice commissioned the first-ever national survey of victims' views on safety and justice. We found, perhaps to the surprise of some, that victims overwhelmingly prefer safety approaches that prioritize rehabilitation and prevention over punishment.

Last year, we conducted a survey again – and found that survivors continue to overwhelmingly hold this view on safety.

Most relevant to the conversation that you are having in this commission, our 2022 survey found that:

- Victims were twice as likely to say that they want the justice system to focus more on rehabilitating people who commit crimes over punishing them.
- 3 out of 4 victims want sentence reductions for people who participate in rehabilitation and follow prison rules over requiring people to complete the full sentence length issued at sentencing.
- 6 in 10 victims said that they prefer shorter prison sentences and more spending on prevention and rehabilitation instead of prison sentences that keep people incarcerated for as long as possible
- And, by a margin of 3 to 1, victims prefer holding people accountable through options beyond just prison, such as rehabilitation, mental health treatment, drug treatment, restorative justice, or community service.

In order to achieve true safety in our communities, our voices — the voices of crime victims— must be heard. We must bring together crime victims, policymakers, government agencies,

and community-based organizations to create a new vision for safety. Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice strongly supports policies that focus on rehabilitation over long sentences or more incarceration, that give people who are in prison an opportunity at release, and that truly help victims recover.

As our national poll demonstrates, for most survivors, safety has never been being tough on crime. Safety has never been locking people up for as long as we can. Safety is helping crime victims recover and preventing violence.

And also, safety is ensuring that people who have caused harm have access to rehabilitative programs and a reason to pursue them. Safety is ensuring that when people come home, they can access jobs, housing, and things that promote stability. And that's how we get to safety - by really scaling up investments in communities.

We can all agree that accountability is a necessity. It is also critical that we recognize rehabilitation and make it real by releasing people who are incarcerated and who are ready to come home and contribute to their communities. Ensuring a true pathway to release with more incentives for rehabilitation for people in Maine prisons will help ensure that the cycle of crime ends after a person is released. The incentive system has worked in other states.

For too long, billions of dollars have been funneled into incarceration in place of investing in support for survivors and rehabilitation for those who have caused harm.

Maine is spending over 200 million dollars each year on its prison system. Just imagine if the state took some of these dollars and invested that into mental health programs, invested that into trauma recovery centers, invested that into reentry programs.

We can stop cycles of violence. You have the opportunity with LD 178 to prioritize real safety over lengthy punishment in Maine – long sentences have never made us safer.

Thank you for having me here today, and I'm happy to answer any questions.