

OPINION-EDITORIAL



Newspaper editorial pages—both in print and online—are highly popular among readers. Opinion-editorials (op-eds) are longer than letters to the editor and afford the opportunity to delve more deeply into issues. An op-ed is your chance to influence opinions, affect policy, and highlight the work you or your organization is doing to support crime victims' rights.

One way to develop an op-ed is to research local crime coverage and important issues in your community. For example, does your community offer services for victims of human trafficking? How would a partnership between law enforcement and victim service agencies benefit your community? Use or adapt the sample op-ed on the following page or craft your own to highlight an issue local to your community.

Five Elements of an Attention-Grabbing Op-Ed

- Be persuasive. Include the latest research and structure a logical argument or rationale.
- Be confident. You are the expert in this field.
- Stay up to date on related events and the cultural conversations about them.
- Use plain language that a wide audience can understand.
- Keep your submission to 800 words or less.



Sample Op-Ed Column

We often assume that “justice” for crime victims simply means justice in the courtroom—a guilty verdict for the offender, and sentencing commensurate with the seriousness of their crime. But for those who experienced direct harm as a result of the crime, abstract legal notions of justice tend to give way to personal beliefs and feelings about what is just. “Justice” means something different to each victim. Criminal convictions are important to many victims, but often what is even more important is that they be treated with compassion and respect, regardless of the outcome of the case. Helping survivors find their justice means enforcing victims’ rights, listening to and making victims’ needs and wishes a priority, and providing victims with access to the resources and services that can help them heal.

We have come a long way toward establishing and safeguarding victims’ rights. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the American criminal justice system was primarily concerned with protecting the constitutional rights of the accused. The victims themselves were minor players in the legal drama. The tide finally began to turn in 1982, when President Ronald Reagan established the President’s Task Force on Victims of Crime to assess the treatment of crime victims in the criminal justice system. The task force’s **final report** provided 68 recommendations for action by the Federal Government—most of which led to significant changes in policy, programs, and practices at the federal, state, and local levels.

The **Crime Victims’ Rights Act of 2004** (CVRA) increased victim involvement in the federal criminal justice system by guaranteeing them certain basic rights, such as the right to be informed of any court proceedings or parole proceedings, the right to speak at public court proceedings, and the right to confer with the government attorney assigned to their case. But the most fundamental right that it enumerated was the “right to be treated with fairness and with respect for the victim’s dignity and privacy.” By recognizing the essential humanity of victims and expanding their role in the criminal justice system, the CVRA helped restore power to survivors who often feel powerless in the aftermath of a serious crime.

Since the CVRA became law, evidence has accumulated that what justice means to victims often differs from what justice means in the traditional context of the law. A **study** published by the Urban Institute in 2018, for instance, asked 80 survivors of sex and labor trafficking and 100 human trafficking stakeholders in 8 cities across the country for their definition of justice; only 24 percent of respondents defined it punitively, as incarceration.⁵ And a national **survey** conducted by the Alliance for Safety and Justice found that 61 percent of the 800 crime survivors polled supported more spending on prevention and rehabilitation rather than long prison sentences.⁶

⁵ Hannah Love, Jeanette Hussemann, Lilly Yu, Evelyn McCoy, and Colleen Owens, 2018, *Justice in Their Own Words: Perceptions and Experiences of (In)Justice Among human Trafficking Survivors*, Urban Institute. Retrieved January 24, 2022, from www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/97351/justice_in_their_own_words_0.pdf.

⁶ Alliance on Safety and Justice, 2016, *Crime Survivors Speak: The First-Ever National Survey on Victims’ View on Safety and Justice*, San Francisco, CA: Tides Center. Retrieved January 24, 2022, from <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/Crime%20Survivors%20Speak%20Press%20Release.pdf>.



RIGHTS, ACCESS, EQUITY, for all victims
Help crime survivors find their justice.

Whatever form justice takes within the criminal justice system, fulfilling victims' needs regarding justice requires that their voices be reflected and respected not only in the justice system process, but also in the care and support they receive after the crime has taken place. Survivors must have agency and choice in their interactions with law enforcement, service providers, and health and judicial professionals. And they need a seamless continuum of support to heal from the trauma they suffered. Helping victims find their personal justice is thus a communitywide, holistic, and ongoing effort.

The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), part of the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs, is leaning into that effort by identifying creative and innovative ways of expanding access to victim services and increasing service options available to crime victims so that they and their families can choose the services and support systems that best meet their needs. For instance, OVC's TeleSAFE program is expanding access to Sexual Assault Forensic Examiners (SANE) through telehealth technology. Victims in rural, tribal, and remote communities that lack SANE nurses will now have access to safe, trauma-informed examinations following an assault. OVC is also funding a national center for increasing access to victim services and compensation in areas that have been historically marginalized and adversely impacted by inequality.

Closer to home, *[list local organizations, programs, or resources that are improving victim access to services and victim service options]*.

The victims' rights movement that gained national attention with the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime and was strengthened by the CVRA transformed our criminal justice system by creating space for victims' voices. The success of the movement now will be judged by how closely we listen to victims' voices, both inside and outside the courtroom, and the doors we collectively open to help them find the justice they desperately seek.

