

## GAZETTE EDITORIAL

# Put Colorado's crime victims first

Somewhere along the road to “restorative justice,” “harm reduction,” “justice reform” and assorted other catchphrases of the contemporary criminal-justice debate — Colorado left crime’s victims in the dust. That probably was inevitable given the top priority of our Legislature: to extend victimhood to crime’s perpetrators.

It’s why a coalition of our state’s law enforcement agencies decided to speak up this week and call on lawmakers to get their priorities straight as the 2023 legislative session gets underway.

And while the appeal was couched partly in a measured request for lawmakers to focus on helping law enforcement address acute recruitment and retention challenges, as reported by our news affiliate Colorado Politics — the underlying message was unmistakably clear.

“It is important that lawmakers approach crime legislation with a victim-first focus that provides the tools needed to keep our communities safe while offering both treatment and accountability for dangerous offenders,” the coalition Public Safety Colorado said in a statement released Monday.



THE DENVER GAZETTE FILE

“The needs of offenders do matter, and rehabilitation and prevention are important policy issues,” the group said. “These needs, however, should not be placed ahead of the safety of their victims and of the law-abiding community at large.”

Amen.

Public Safety Colorado is the policy voice for the Colorado Fraternal Order

of Police, the County Sheriffs of Colorado and the Colorado Association of Chiefs of Police. Their law officers have been on the front lines of the fight as crime has soared across the state.

They also have had front-row seats from which they’ve had to watch the Legislature systematically gut Colorado’s criminal code over the past few years, watering down penalties for a host of crimes.

For example:

There was 2019’s absurd — and lethal — legislation that decriminalized possession of the full menu of notorious hard drugs, including heroin, cocaine, meth — and of course fentanyl.

A 2021 law allowed criminals convicted of drug dealing, auto theft and many other felonies to legally possess firearms. It eliminated an effective tool

for cops and prosecutors to get habitual criminals off the streets.

In 2014, the Legislature reduced the penalties for auto theft — which began escalating around that time — and in 2021 made it a misdemeanor to steal a car valued \$2,000 or less. It previously was a felony to steal a car valued \$1,000 or more.

As all Coloradans know by now, our state is plagued by fentanyl overdoses. Violent gun crimes in which an arrested suspect turns out to be — surprise! — an ex-con with a lengthy record have become a staple of Colorado news coverage. And our state leads the nation in auto theft.

In its statement this week, Public Safety Colorado calls, among other things, for the Legislature to reinstate “Possession of a Weapon by A Previous Offender” charges for aggravated motor vehicle theft and drug felonies. The coalition also asks lawmakers to restore more serious charges for auto theft.

Yet, if anything, Democrats in control of the Legislature are likely to take a wrecking ball to Colorado’s justice system once again in the 2023 session. Columnist and former 18th Judicial District Attorney George Brauchler alerts readers to pending legislation that will water down more penalties — this time, for serious “juvenile” offenders.

No wonder the morale of Colorado’s law enforcement officers has dipped so low — and gaps in their ranks have been so hard to fill with new recruits.

And it’s no wonder crime has been skyrocketing.

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