



The Politics of Justice Reform in Washington State



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, Washington State has attempted criminal justice reform, but public backlash often forces it to be rolled back. From police pursuits to drug possession laws, prioritizing public safety with punitive approaches is the status quo, despite the growing evidence that supports more efficient methods. This creates a challenging environment to enact reform. This study assesses the feasibility of correctional reform in Washington State and investigates how policymakers and criminal justice professionals perceive the factors that hinder or facilitate reform. The study used a qualitative case study design based on five semi-structured interviews with participants from various political and professional backgrounds, allowing the study to explore areas of disagreement and consensus. Three main themes were identified from the interviews.

First, participants described incarceration as part of a larger cycle rather than merely a response to individual criminal behavior. Housing and economic instability, along with behavioral health issues and racial inequities, were identified as factors that can increase the risk of justice involvement. Participants also described a correctional system that has traditionally depended largely on punitive measures. When the conditions that contribute to justice involvement remain unresolved, punishment alone may do little to disrupt that cycle.

Second, participants described the barriers to reform as reinforcing one another. Beliefs about punishment can shape political rhetoric, political incentives can make “tough on crime” positions safer to support, and media coverage can amplify this rhetoric through sensationalist coverage that draws attention to highly visible crimes. These pieces can reinforce each other by maintaining the status quo through punitive penal policy. As a result, participants believed that

empirical evidence alone is often not enough to gain political and public support for justice reform in Washington State.

Despite these barriers, the interviews also revealed a key area of agreement around prevention and early intervention programs for youth. Participants stressed the value of intervening before someone becomes more deeply involved in the criminal justice system. They also stressed the importance of working across political lines and beginning with areas where common ground already exists.

Based on these findings, Washington State should prioritize justice reforms in areas where political agreement already. Prevention and early intervention programs, particularly for youth, are an area of agreement across participants and may provide a starting point for reform efforts. Beginning with areas of agreement may offer Washington State a more feasible path toward justice reform by allowing progress without first requiring broader political divisions to be resolved.

I. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Washington State has made efforts to enact criminal justice reform in recent years, but those efforts have faced resistance. After the state restricted police pursuits in 2021, the law faced public backlash over concerns that suspects could flee from law enforcement and that it would reward or ignore criminal conduct, even though this policy was implemented to protect innocent bystanders (Associated Press, 2023). The legislature began relaxing restrictions in 2023, lowering the standard for certain police pursuits from probable cause to reasonable suspicion. The legislature further rolled back the restrictions in 2024 through Initiative 2113, which expanded when police could pursue someone suspected of breaking the law (Washington State Legislature, 2024).

A similar pattern followed the Washington Supreme Court's decision in *State v. Blake*, which struck down the state's felony drug possession law. The issue remained politically divisive as legislators weighed treatment against accountability. Criminal penalties ultimately remained part of Washington's response to drug possession, illustrating the difficulty of moving away from punitive approaches (Withycombe & Brunner, 2023). While these policies involved different issues, both show how justice reform can face significant pressure to return to more punitive approaches once concerns about crime and public safety grow.

These debates prompt questions about when correctional reform can be politically achievable in Washington State. Evidence supporting reform exists within a larger environment shaped by competing philosophies of punishment, political pressures, public attitudes toward crime, and media coverage. The purpose of this study is to explore how policymakers and criminal justice professionals perceive the feasibility of justice reform in Washington State. Using semi-structured interviews, the study examines stakeholder perspectives on political,

institutional, and cultural factors that influence reform efforts, as well as perceived barriers and opportunities for advancing reform.

This study is motivated by the difficulty of translating evidence-based reform efforts into sustained policy change. Criminal justice policymaking occurs within a political and institutional environment in which competing beliefs about punishment, public attitudes toward crime, and political pressures may influence which reforms are perceived as feasible or achievable.

Although previous research has examined many of these influences, less attention has been given to how policymakers and criminal justice professionals in Washington State perceive these factors and their relationship to the feasibility of justice reform. Examining stakeholder perspectives provides an opportunity to better understand the obstacles and opportunities to implement reform.

The primary research question guiding this study is:

To what extent is rehabilitation-focused correctional reform perceived as feasible in Washington State, and what political, institutional, and cultural factors influence those perceptions?

To address this question, the study considers three sub-questions:

1. What factors do stakeholders identify as contributing to incarceration in Washington State?
2. What political, ideological, and cultural factors do stakeholders identify as barriers to adopting correctional reform?
3. How can reform efforts move forward considering these obstacles?

This study is guided by the proposition that the feasibility of justice reform in Washington State is influenced by more than empirical evidence alone. Political, institutional, and cultural factors may shape how people perceive reform and how much support it receives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The United States has seen a significant increase in incarceration over the last several decades, resulting in one of the highest incarceration rates in the world (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). According to the 2024 comparison, around 614 per 100,000 people were incarcerated in the United States, compared with 144 per 100,000 in the United Kingdom and 109 per 100,000 in Canada (Widra, 2024; Prison Policy Initiative, 2024). Researchers have attributed much of this growth to policy choices that favored punishment rather than crime rates alone (Garland, 2001). Tougher sentencing laws like mandatory minimums reduced judicial discretion and empowered prosecutors (Luna, 2017), while three-strikes laws increased penalties for repeat offenses (Beale, 2013), contributing to a greater reliance on incarceration as a response to crime. The increase in incarceration rates has raised questions about whether punitive approaches actually reduce crime and improve public safety.

For instance, deterrence theory argues that the threat of increasingly punitive consequences can discourage criminal behavior. However, research suggests that increasing the severity of punishment has limited deterrent effects (National Research Council, 2012; Travis et al., 2014). This pattern has been found across policies such as sentence enhancements and capital punishment, where harsher penalties have not consistently resulted in lower crime rates (National Research Council, 2012). Deterrence also assumes that people consider the costs and consequences of their actions before committing an offense. That assumption becomes more complicated when substance use or mental health crises interfere with rational decision-making (Travis et al., 2014). This raises questions about relying on increasingly punitive approaches to reduce crime.

Another correctional theory is based on rehabilitation. Rather than focusing primarily on punishment, rehabilitation and reintegration seek to reduce future crime by addressing social elements associated with criminal behavior. Nordic correctional systems are often cited as examples of this philosophy while upholding public safety goals (Lappi-Seppälä, 2012). United States-based research also backs rehabilitative approaches. For example, a recent study found lower rates of recidivism among incarcerated people who participated in educational and vocational training through Michigan's IGNITE program (Alsan et al., 2024). In addition, studies comparing confinement with community-based sanctions in Nordic countries have found relatively small differences in recidivism (Lappi-Seppälä, 2019), raising questions about the efficiency of using incarceration as the sole means to achieve public safety goals and to reduce future offending.

Finland provides a notable example of a shift in correctional philosophy from a punitive system towards a rehabilitative system. In the 1950s, Finland's incarceration rate was around 200 prisoners per 100,000 people, making it an outlier among its Nordic neighbors and one of the highest-incarcerating countries in Western Europe (Lappi-Seppälä, 2000). Beginning in the 1960s, Finland introduced reforms intended to reduce its reliance on imprisonment, including shorter sentences, greater judicial discretion, and increased use of community-based sanctions (Lappi-Seppälä, 2012). Finland's incarceration rate significantly declined over the following decades without a corresponding increase in crime relative to Nordic trends (Lappi-Seppälä, 2000).

The policy changes alone do not fully explain Finland's shift away from incarceration. The political environment created the conditions for reform. Lappi-Seppälä (2007) describes consensus among researchers and politicians that the country's high incarceration rate should be

reduced. Crime was less central in electoral politics, giving politicians less incentive to rely on populist “tough on crime” positions and leaving more room for research to influence policy. Finland exemplifies more than just rehabilitation and decarceration; it also demonstrates how political climates can affect whether empirical evidence leads to reform.

The political environment surrounding crime in the United States shows a different story. Public perceptions of crime do not always reflect actual crime trends; surveys show that Americans often believe crime is increasing even when crime rates are falling (Gramlich, 2024). Media coverage can also shape how the public understands crime and public safety, though its effects vary across media forms and audiences (Dowler, 2003). Kilgore (2015) describes how fear of crime became intertwined with political rhetoric and the expansion of punitive criminal justice policies in the United States. This dynamic is reflected in penal populism, where public concerns about crime and political incentives can encourage politicians to adopt “tough on crime” positions that appeal to voters (Pratt, 2007). Moral panic theory further helps explain how heightened perceptions of a social threat can generate pressure for a stronger response (Cohen, 1972). This literature shows how public fear, media attention, and political incentives can reinforce one another, creating support for harsher criminal justice policies even when evidence raises questions about its effectiveness.

Washington State sits within this broader political and correctional environment, but it also presents an important case of its own. The state incarcerates about 373 people per 100,000 residents (Prison Policy Initiative, 2024), and continues to use sentencing policies such as mandatory minimums and three-strikes laws (Beckett & Goldberg, 2023). At the same time, Washington has pursued criminal justice reforms and is generally considered more reform-oriented than many other states. This makes Washington a useful state for examining

rehabilitation-focused reform. The question is not simply whether alternatives to punitive corrections exist, but whether they are politically, institutionally, and culturally feasible within the state.

Existing research has examined mass incarceration, rehabilitation, Nordic correctional systems, and political and cultural forces surrounding punitive criminal justice policy. However, less attention has been given to how policymakers and criminal justice professionals in Washington State perceive those factors together and how they influence the feasibility of justice reform. This leaves a gap in understanding how the broader factors identified in the literature are experienced by those involved in implementing policy in Washington State.

This gap is important because evidence alone does not necessarily lead to policy change. Research has raised questions about increasingly punitive approaches while providing support for rehabilitation and alternatives to incarceration, yet correctional policy does not always move in the same direction as that evidence. Understanding this disconnect requires moving beyond whether rehabilitation can work to examining the political and institutional conditions that shape whether reform can actually move forward.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study design and semi-structured interviews to examine how policymakers and criminal justice professionals perceive the feasibility of justice reform in Washington State. A qualitative approach was selected because this study aims to better understand how individuals directly involved in shaping or implementing policy view opportunities and barriers to reform. Rather than measuring support for rehabilitation or evaluating the effectiveness of specific policies, this study explores participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the political, institutional, and cultural factors they believe influence correctional reform in Washington State.

The literature review discusses Finland as an example of rehabilitative reform and a historical example of decarceration, providing context for understanding reform efforts and helping inform the guiding research questions and interviews. Finland serves as a comparative context rather than as a separate empirical case in the qualitative study. Washington State serves as the setting for this research because it operates within the punitive framework of the United States and has pursued several correctional reforms in recent history. At the same time, some reform efforts have slowed or been reversed, making Washington an appropriate setting for exploring how key stakeholders perceive the feasibility of justice reform. To interpret these perspectives, the study draws on penal populism, moral panic theory, and philosophies of punishment. Together, these frameworks help explain how political discourse, media sensationalism, public opinion, and competing philosophies of punishment may influence or hinder correctional reform.

Data were collected through a literature review and semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their experience with criminal

justice policy or practice. Purposive sampling recruited participants whose professional experience could provide insight into the political, institutional, and cultural factors affecting correctional reform. The goal was to include perspectives from stakeholders with various political and professional backgrounds. Recruitment consisted of an email request for participation. Five individuals agreed to be interviewed: three Democratic state legislators, one Republican state legislative aide, and one retired Washington State juvenile correctional officer with direct experience implementing juvenile justice reform. The participants included two female and one male Democratic state legislators, one female Republican legislative aide, and one male retired correctional officer.

The interviews were held over Zoom and lasted roughly 15 to 30 minutes. With participants' informed consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed. One interview was documented through detailed notes because of a technical issue. Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Ritchie and Spencer's (2002) framework. In the initial stage of analysis, open coding was used to label text and capture the main ideas participants discussed. Rather than organizing participant responses around predetermined categories from the literature review or theoretical frameworks, the initial coding process was driven by recurring ideas in the interview data. This allowed findings not anticipated in the literature review, such as the level of agreement surrounding prevention and early intervention, to emerge through thematic analysis. Initial codes included: punitive correctional philosophy, socioeconomic and racial disparities, ideology, evidence-based policymaking, political division, media sensationalism, prevention and early intervention, rehabilitation, and collaboration. The codes were analyzed multiple times to identify overlapping and broader patterns. Related codes were combined when they reflected different aspects of the same underlying pattern, gradually refining the data into three themes: (1)

Structural Causes of Incarceration, (2) Reinforcing Barriers to Reform, and (3) Building Support for Justice Reform. After developing the themes from the interview data, the study used the theoretical frameworks and relevant literature to interpret the findings. When themes extended beyond topics emphasized in the initial literature review, the discussion stage used additional literature to contextualize the emergent findings.

The study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempt status approval to work with human subjects (ID# STUDY00025475) before participant recruitment began. Participation was voluntary, and participants provided informed consent after learning the study's purpose and how their responses would be used. Participants could decline any questions they were uncomfortable answering. Since the interviews addressed politically sensitive topics involving partisan politics and criminal justice issues, confidentiality was imperative. Participants were identified by their professional or political roles rather than by name, and identifying information was excluded. The interview data were securely stored in accordance with IRB requirements.

This study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on a small, purposively selected sample of five participants and are not intended to represent all policymakers or criminal justice professionals in Washington State. Additionally, some groups were underrepresented due to their availability or willingness to participate. Second, the study examined perceived feasibility rather than measuring the effectiveness of specific correctional policies. The findings therefore reflect participants' experiences and perceptions rather than providing direct evidence on a specific policy. Additionally, one interview was analyzed from detailed notes rather than a verbatim transcript due to a technical issue, which may have limited the level of detail available for coding compared with the other interviews. Lastly, this research focuses exclusively on Washington State. Although the findings may offer insights relevant to discussions elsewhere

regarding correctional reform, they may not transfer to states with different political, cultural, and institutional settings.

IV. RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings from interviews examining perceptions of rehabilitation-focused correctional reform and its feasibility within Washington State. Using thematic analysis, three themes emerged from the data: (1) Structural Causes of Incarceration, (2) Reinforcing Barriers to Reform, and (3) Building Support for Justice Reform. Together, these themes show how participants understood the structural and systemic causes of incarceration, the barriers that have hindered reform efforts and reinforced punitive philosophies, and potential strategies for advancing rehabilitative policy reforms.

Theme 1: Structural Causes of Incarceration

Participants discussed Washington State's reliance on incarceration from different perspectives. Their responses addressed how Washington State approaches crime and the conditions that can increase the likelihood of justice involvement.

Participants described Washington's correctional approach as punishment-centered, with incarceration favored over rehabilitative alternatives. Democratic Lawmaker 2 stated that Washington has “an issue with mass incarceration,” describing confinement as the “default” that prioritizes “punishment over rehabilitation,” rather than treatment, education, and reintegration. Democratic Lawmaker 3 similarly referenced “mass incarceration” in Washington State while pointing to the historical context of the United States. A retired juvenile corrections officer explained his distrust of the traditional system's reliance on punishment, stating, “Honestly, it just didn't feel like that was working... punish, punish, punish, it doesn't produce results.” The Republican Legislative Aide also connected the reliance on incarceration to the “prison pipeline,” describing how “getting in and out” creates a revolving door to the prison industrial

complex. Democratic Lawmaker 1 echoed this concern, stating that “the overflowing juvenile system leads to the juvenile-to-prison pipeline.”

Alongside the traditional reliance on punishment, participants connected incarceration to social, economic, and racial inequities. Democratic Lawmaker 1 identified gaps in Washington’s social safety net as a contributing factor, stating that “the lack of mental health services and addiction treatment programs in Washington state” raises the likelihood that individuals become involved in the criminal justice system.

Democratic Lawmaker 3 described homelessness and drug use as more prevalent in the United States than in Europe, adding that “incarceration goes with those kinds of things.” The lawmaker attributed these differences to a “lack of community support,” and argued that “we haven’t invested in people in the way that European countries do,” referring to the American belief that people should “pull yourself up by the bootstraps.”

The Republican Legislative Aide elaborated on this point, describing the instability faced by youth she mentored, who “lived in tents, out on Mountain Loop Highway, didn’t have family taking care of them. Some had to get their own siblings on the bus in the morning.” The participant explained that experiences like homelessness, parental substance use, and the lack of stable family support often affected children’s performance at school and eventually led to disciplinary actions.

Racial inequities also emerged in participants’ accounts of structural disadvantages. Democratic Lawmaker 1 described “over policing certain areas” as contributing to disproportionate incarceration of “people of color” compared with “white counterparts.”

Democratic Lawmaker 3 similarly identified “racism” as a contributing factor to incarceration, explaining that “we put a lot of Black and Brown people away during the drug crisis.”

Although participants identified different causes of incarceration, their responses revealed an overall pattern. Participants pointed to behavioral health needs and economic instability, with racial inequities further shaping who is most affected. At the same time, they described a correctional system that has historically relied heavily on punishment. Overall, participants described incarceration as shaped by structural conditions rather than individual behavior alone.

Theme 2: Reinforcing Barriers to Reform

Participants discussed the challenges surrounding justice reform in Washington State from different perspectives. Their responses focused on beliefs about punishment, political pressures, and media influence on reform efforts.

Participants described resistance to rehabilitation as stemming from deeply held beliefs about punishment. Democratic Lawmaker 1 expressed, “Data doesn’t work...nobody listens to the data. We can’t data our way out of this.” As an example, the participant discussed legislation limiting high-speed police pursuits. Although evidence showed that restricting pursuits reduced the risk of injury to innocent bystanders, the participant explained that the debate centered less on public safety than on ensuring offenders were punished.

The retired juvenile corrections officer similarly connected resistance to justice reform with longstanding beliefs about punishment, stating that “it goes back to eye for an eye.” The participant argued that punishment has been viewed as the appropriate response to wrongdoing “for millennia” and recalled that when presenting evidence supporting reform, people often responded that rehabilitation “just feels wrong.”

Participants also described how these beliefs can be reinforced through political rhetoric surrounding crime and public safety. Democratic Lawmaker 1 described election cycles as “brutal” for legislators who support criminal justice reform, explaining that they can face “character assassination” and be portrayed as wanting to “let all criminals out on the streets” or caring “more about criminals” than victims. Democratic Lawmaker 2 also described opposition to reform efforts, including coordinated emails and media campaigns that pressured legislators by warning that proposed reforms would result in “letting out all the criminals.” The participant described the messaging as “fear mongering” intended to discourage support for the legislation. The participant challenged this rhetoric by pointing out that people are already released from incarceration but often are “not leaving [jail or prison] rehabilitated,” resulting in “the same person” being released.

Participants noted that the media often amplifies these messages about crime and reform. Democratic Lawmaker 2 described “a big misconception of crime” in the media, explaining that an isolated incident involving someone released from incarceration can be “put all over the media and sensationalized.” The participant argued that media coverage often focuses on the exceptional case where “something bad happened after someone was released.” Democratic Lawmaker 3 emphasized the influence of political commentators and podcasters, stating, “Those people are very influential; they get you elected or not, and they sort of control the narrative.” The retired corrections officer described how polarized media can reinforce existing beliefs, explaining that “people just gravitate to whatever kind of builds that ego,” in reference to confirmation bias and online echo chambers.

Across participants’ responses, resistance to reform emerged as a reinforcing process rather than the result of a single barrier. Existing punitive beliefs can make the public more

receptive to “tough on crime” messages, which can then be amplified through political rhetoric, sensationalized media coverage, and influential political commentators. Participants described how the resulting public pressure can raise the political cost for lawmakers who support reform, particularly when opponents portray them as being “soft on crime” or unconcerned with public safety. As a result, maintaining the status quo can become the politically safer choice, even when evidence favors a different approach.

Theme 3: Building Support for Justice Reform

Participants discussed different approaches to advancing justice reform in Washington State. Their responses addressed prevention and intervention efforts as well as the importance of collaborating across the political divide.

Rather than focusing exclusively on responses to crime, participants advocated investing in programs that address risk factors before individuals become deeply involved in the criminal justice system. Democratic Lawmaker 1 emphasized the importance of preventing juveniles “from going down that road to begin with,” and argued that “reducing poverty is the best way to combat crime.” Democratic Lawmaker 3 similarly emphasized “community support,” describing how European countries “invest in their people from cradle to grave” and argued that “intervention programs” are most valuable before people “become embedded in criminal activities.”

The Republican Legislative Aide echoed this sentiment on early intervention, arguing that youth should be connected to prevention or intervention programs because “they have a chance.” The aide emphasized directing resources toward prevention, explaining, “We have to stop the dam where it’s at.” The retired corrections officer similarly emphasized intervention,

suggesting that rehabilitation efforts can be more successful with juveniles because they are more “malleable.” The participant argued that “investing in youth” produces greater “long-term benefits” for individuals and communities, noting that juvenile intervention receives support from both sides of the political aisle.

The bipartisan support for juvenile intervention also reflected participants’ broader emphasis on finding areas of agreement when advancing reform. The Republican Legislative Aide described divisions between Republicans and Democrats over crime policy, arguing that “if we could come closer together and be a little more realistic, I think we would have a better system... It’s got to swing more in the middle.” The retired corrections officer similarly argued that the best solutions are often found “in the middle” and warned that political extremes can impede meaningful reform. The participant also stressed the importance of talking with people you disagree with, explaining that “you gotta listen to people.” Drawing on experience with juvenile justice reform, the participant said progress usually came when people with different viewpoints worked together and “everybody had to compromise a little bit and find common ground, instead of just being resistant to it.”

Across participants’ responses, prevention and early intervention, particularly for youth, emerged as an area of agreement across political perspectives. This agreement is significant because participants also described political division as an obstacle to broader reform and emphasized compromise and collaboration as necessary for progress. Prevention therefore represents more than a policy preference in the interviews; it provides an existing area of common ground. This suggests that opportunities for reform in Washington State may remain possible despite the political divisions participants described.

V. DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Structural Causes of Incarceration

The findings from Theme 1 suggest that participants viewed incarceration as part of a larger cycle rather than simply the result of individual criminal behavior. They identified housing and economic instability, unmet behavioral health needs, and racial inequities as conditions that can increase the likelihood of justice involvement. Participants' accounts also illustrated how some of these conditions may be present early in life, before justice involvement occurs. At the same time, participants described a correctional system that has historically relied heavily on punishment. This reveals a disconnect between the conditions participants associated with justice involvement and a correctional response centered largely on punishment.

This emphasis on punishment is consistent with Garland's (2001) account of the broader shift toward punitive crime control in the United States. Participants questioned whether incarceration alone can reduce future justice involvement when the conditions that contributed to it remain unresolved. Punishment may respond to the offense that occurred, but it does not necessarily address what contributed to that behavior in the first place. This concern also aligns with research showing that increasing the severity of punishment has limited deterrent effects (Travis et al., 2014).

The Republican Legislative Aide's account explains why this distinction matters. The aide described children growing up in tents with parents struggling with substance use, illustrating how instability can be present early in life. Deterrence assumes that the threat of punishment can influence behavior, yet circumstances such as substance use, mental health crises, and severe instability can complicate that decision-making process (Travis et al., 2014).

By the time the criminal justice system responds, some of the conditions participants associated with justice involvement may have existed for years.

These findings suggest that a correctional response centered primarily on punishment may leave many of the structural conditions participants associated with justice involvement unresolved. When those conditions continue, responding to the crime alone may not be enough to interrupt the broader cycle. The findings therefore raise questions about the effectiveness of a predominantly punitive response when the circumstances surrounding justice involvement extend beyond the offense itself.

Theme 2: Reinforcing Barriers to Reform

The findings of Theme 2 suggest that barriers to justice reform extend beyond the availability of empirical evidence. Participants described an environment in which beliefs about crime and punishment, political pressures, and media influence can limit the role of evidence in reform efforts.

These findings are consistent with the literature on penal populism, which argues that criminal justice policy is often shaped by public opinion and political incentives rather than empirical evidence (Pratt, 2007). Participants portrayed correctional reform policies as politically risky because supporters can easily be characterized as being “soft on crime,” with lawmakers describing the “character assassinations” they faced from political opponents. This creates a greater incentive to maintain the status quo rather than support reforms that may carry electoral consequences.

Participants also described how media coverage can reinforce these political pressures by amplifying rhetoric and drawing attention to highly visible crimes and exceptional cases while

giving less attention to broader crime trends or research findings. This reflects the moral panic literature, which suggests that sensationalized media coverage and political rhetoric can amplify public fears about crime and increase support for punitive responses (Cohen, 1972; Garland, 2001). Rather than viewing politics and the media as separate influences, participants described them as reinforcing one another in ways that strengthen existing beliefs about crime and punishment while also hindering support for reform efforts.

Finland's experience with enacting rehabilitative reform provides an important contrast to what participants described in Washington. Lappi-Seppälä (2007) argues that Finland's reduction in incarceration occurred within a political climate where researchers and political leaders largely agreed that imprisonment should be reduced. Crime was not central to electoral politics, allowing research to have greater influence over policy trajectory. The Washington interviews suggest a different dynamic. Participants did not describe a lack of evidence supporting reform, but rather an environment where that evidence can lose influence once crime becomes politically charged. When concerns about crime become tied to elections, "tough on crime" rhetoric, and media attention, supporting reform can carry a greater political cost even when research points toward a more promising direction. The contrast with Finland therefore reinforces a central finding of this study: evidence alone does not determine whether reform moves forward. The political environment can shape how much influence that evidence ultimately has on policy.

These findings suggest that the barriers to reform can reinforce one another rather than operate independently. Punitive beliefs can make "tough on crime" rhetoric politically persuasive, while media sensationalism can amplify public fear and increase pressure on policymakers to respond. As that pressure builds, lawmakers may face greater political costs for

supporting reform. These pressures can ultimately make maintaining the status quo politically easier than supporting reform.

Theme 3: Building Support for Justice Reform

Unlike the previous themes, which focused on the causes of incarceration and the barriers to reform, Theme 3 considers where participants saw opportunities for progress despite those barriers. Their responses centered on prevention and early intervention, particularly for youth, and the role of collaboration across the political aisle in advancing reform.

The consensus surrounding prevention and early intervention is particularly significant to the feasibility of justice reform. Despite differences in political affiliation and professional background, participants consistently identified early intervention, particularly for youth, as an area where support already exists. This finding is also consistent with research supporting rehabilitative interventions for justice-involved youth. Pappas and Dent (2021) found that juvenile intervention programs were associated with significant reductions in recidivism, particularly when combined with rehabilitative approaches. The participant consensus therefore identifies an area where political support for reform coincides with empirical support for intervention.

The political significance of this agreement becomes clearer when considered alongside the barriers identified in Theme 2. Participants described political division as a substantial obstacle to reform, yet agreement surrounding prevention and intervention programs suggests that these divisions are not uniform across all areas of criminal justice policy. Their emphasis on collaboration and finding common ground across the political aisle further indicates that progress does not necessarily require agreement on every aspect of criminal justice reform. Instead,

existing areas of consensus may create opportunities for progress despite broader political disagreement.

Overall, these findings suggest that the political barriers identified in Theme 2 are substantial but may not affect all reform efforts equally. The strong agreement on prevention and early intervention suggests some reform efforts may face fewer political obstacles than others. This provides a more qualified view of reform feasibility in Washington State, where broader political division can coexist with specific areas of agreement.

Policy Recommendation

Given these findings, Washington State should prioritize justice reform in areas where political agreement already exists, rather than trying to overcome broader divisions rooted in deep ideological beliefs. Prevention and early intervention programs for youth emerged as a clear area of agreement across participants and may provide a practical starting point for reform. Starting with areas of existing consensus may offer Washington State a more feasible path toward reform by allowing progress without first requiring major ideological concessions that result in political gridlock.

Conclusion

This study explored stakeholder perceptions of the feasibility of justice reform in Washington State. Participants described incarceration as shaped by structural conditions and a correctional system that has historically favored punitive approaches. They also identified political, ideological, and cultural barriers to reform, with punitive beliefs reinforced through political rhetoric and media amplification, increasing the political costs of supporting reform even when empirical evidence favors a different approach. Despite these obstacles, participants

identified common ground around prevention and early intervention for youth as an area where progress may be possible.

These findings suggest that participants viewed justice reform in Washington State as possible, but politically constrained. Its feasibility appears to depend not only on the evidence supporting reform, but also on the political and cultural environment surrounding the specific reform being considered. The findings further suggest that reform may be more achievable when policymakers start with areas where political agreement already exists, rather than trying to overcome broader ideological divisions all at once.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The following questions guided the semi-structured interviews conducted for this study. Follow-up questions were asked as needed to clarify or expand on participants' responses.

- 1.) How do you perceive Washington State's incarceration rate compared with other democratic nations?
- 2.) Why do you think Washington State's incarceration rate is so high?
- 3.) What do you think is slowing progress toward criminal justice reform in Washington State?
- 4.) How do politics and the media help or hinder criminal justice reform?
- 5.) What can be done to improve Washington State's criminal justice system?

Appendix B

Interview Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

My name is Felicia Zsiros, and I am currently completing my capstone research project on Washington State criminal justice policy.

As part of my research, I am interviewing policymakers or their legislative aides, legal professionals, and individuals involved in the criminal justice system to better understand perspectives on incarceration, rehabilitation, and the feasibility of reform in Washington State.

My research depends on obtaining diverse perspectives. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you or your legislative aide for 15-20 minutes at your convenience. Participation is voluntary, and your insights would contribute significantly to my research.

Topics include:

- Crime in Washington State
- Sentencing and incarceration policies
- Barriers to reform
- Pathways to reform

If you are willing to participate, please let me know your availability over the next few weeks. I would be happy to accommodate your schedule and answer any questions you may have. Also, your responses will remain anonymous.

Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Felicia Zsiros

University of Washington Bothell