

“We don’t want our pain to be used to punish anyone else,” say Polly Klaas’ sisters

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By [Sam Levin](#) . . . Annie Nichol was seven years old on 19 March 1994 when she was brought to the White House to talk to Bill Clinton.

With a stuffed dolphin by her side, the girl spoke to the president about her 12-year-old sister, Polly Klaas, who had been abducted five months earlier from the family’s home in Petaluma, [California](#), while Annie was sleeping nearby. . . .

Today, Annie is tormented by the memory. Polly’s kidnapping and subsequent murder fueled a host of “tough on crime” laws and a powerful victims’ rights movement, which pushed America to have the highest reported incarceration rate in the world.

The meeting at the White House, Annie said, was a reminder of how her family’s story was exploited to expand mass incarceration and racial inequality in America. . . .

Polly's story led to panic. American media covered every twist in the investigation of the "slumber party that became a nightmare." Commentators argued the "age of innocence had been lost" and that "the 12-year-old's awful fate drove home the disturbing message that youngsters are not safe even in their own bedrooms."

By 1994, voters in California had approved the Three Strikes and You're Out law, which, inspired by the extensive criminal record of Polly's killer, established [life sentences](#) for all felonies if the defendant had two prior convictions for serious or violent offenses. . . .

Annie and her older sister Jess are now on a mission to reclaim their family's legacy and undo the harsh legislation the tragedy that befell them sparked. They say they want a different criminal justice system, one that focuses on preventing violence; accountability, treatment and rehabilitation for people who cause harm; and care and services for survivors.

Their message is urgent, the sisters say, as growing concerns over crime in cities across the US since the pandemic have led to familiar calls for more punitive responses from pundits and some politicians facing midterm elections.

"There's the trauma of losing Polly and then there's the trauma of how her death was used to punish other people," Jess said. "We don't want our pain to be used to punish anyone else ... We're on the precipice of repeating a really terrible history. And we don't want people to make the same mistake."

[**Read the full piece here at the Guardian.**](#)