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Civil Rights Corps is a non-profit organization dedicated to challenging systemic injustice in the American legal system while using strategic policy to advance a holistic, root cause-focused approach to community safety.

We work with individuals who are accused and convicted of crimes, their families and communities, people currently or formerly incarcerated, activists, organizers, judges, movement organizations, and government officials to challenge criminal-legal injustice, further racial equity, and build an affirmative vision for how we keep families and communities safe.

Community Safety for All

Framework for Understanding & Advancing Safety Goals

Introduction

For too long, we have made “safety” synonymous with jails, prisons, and a sprawling criminal-legal system. But this notion of “safety” has failed us. Investments in these systems cannot address significant harms that communities experience every day, including unsafe workplaces, housing and food insecurity, economic instability, domestic violence, exposure to deportation, and so much more. Moreover, these systems have made many people feel *less* safe by directly perpetrating harm and by exacerbating racial, economic, and gender injustices.

Divesting from these carceral systems is crucial to ensuring that all people feel and are safe in their communities. But advancing community safety is about so much more than removing harm. **Advancing community safety is about making proactive and preventative investments that holistically address our underlying safety needs—what many have come to call the “social determinants of safety”—while strengthening communities.** These investments across public health, violence intervention, non-carceral crisis housing, education, youth programs, economic justice, and community infrastructure are evidence-based ways to prevent violence and harm. Moreover, they present a roadmap to the safe, equitable future that our communities deserve.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY SAFETY?

Community safety is about advancing safety goals not by addressing symptoms or intervening far too late, but through evidence-based investments that prevent violence and harm upfront. The following section surveys what these “social determinants of safety” are—and how addressing them can make *all* of our communities truly safe.



Healthcare, Treatment & Harm Prevention

Health is a basic part of human safety. Moreover, evidence shows that when we invest in basic healthcare, substance use treatment, and harm prevention services, we significantly increase the physical safety of our communities.

Access to Healthcare

- Expanding [access to basic healthcare](#) has been found to reduce crime and save money on legal system expenses.
- Unsurprisingly, the reverse of this phenomenon is also true. Taking away an individual's Medicaid coverage makes them [more likely](#) to be criminalized.

Substance Use Treatment

- Research shows that when the number of [substance use treatment facilities](#) increases in a particular area, violent and financially-motivated crimes decrease locally.
- Further research has shown that Medicaid expansions yielded significant reductions in robbery, aggravated assaults, and larceny theft. This was primarily due to increased uptake of [treatment for substance use through Medicaid coverage](#).

Interrupting Cycles of Violence

- A study of Baltimore's non-carceral violence interruption program "Safe Streets" found that its outreach workers [reduced serious violence by 69 percent](#).
- Robust research has shown that [violence prevention programs](#) in schools significantly reduce violent behavior.

Safe & Supportive Housing

Having high-quality, stable, integrated housing is not only essential for economic and social stability, but also makes all community residents safer and better able to thrive.

Housing Affordability

- At a local level, increasing [access to affordable housing](#) by building more low-income housing units has significantly reduced violent crime
- A program to subsidize the construction of rental housing for low-income residents in high-poverty areas was associated with a [significant decline](#) in reported rates of violence.

Supportive Housing

- Permanent housing subsidies have been found to reduce [rates of intimate partner violence](#), especially for families with more complex psychological needs.
- [Supportive housing](#) that provides wraparound services upon re-entry substantially reduces recidivism and incarceration within the year following release.

Built Design & Community Infrastructure

For years, research has shown that basic investments in community infrastructure—in parks, streetlights, public transportation, and addressing vacant lots—has significant implications for reducing violence and harm. In coming years, infrastructure for climate change mitigation and resilience will be increasingly central to ensuring community safety.

Built Design

- Recent studies in multiple jurisdictions, including [Philadelphia](#), [Baltimore](#), and [Youngstown](#), have found that maintaining green space reduces certain types of crime.

- A [rigorous study](#) found that restoring vacant land in cities significantly improves both local residents' perceptions of their safety, as well as their actual physical safety. Restoration projects produced large reductions in crime, including a 30 percent reduction in gun violence.

Environmental & Climate Justice

- Evidence from a decade-long study of temperatures in [Philadelphia](#), as well as a [nationwide research project](#), indicate that mitigating rising temperatures will also help to reduce incidences of violence.
- Other evidence shows that [improving air quality](#) may be a cost-effective way to reduce crime.

Public Transportation

- Increasing [public transportation options](#) for residents has been shown to have a lasting impact on local crime rates.
- In fact, of the five factors studied by Raj Chetty's Opportunity Insights team, [shorter commute times](#) in a given neighborhood were found to be the strongest predictor of upward mobility. Consequently, public transportation investments have [been shown](#) to reduce local inequality—which evidence shows to be a [driver](#) of property and violent crime.

Education & Youth Programming

Investing in education and youth programming dramatically affects safety—not only by preventing youth incarceration and keeping kids safe, but also by breaking cycles of trauma and lack of opportunity that so often drives criminalization later in life.

Improving School Quality

- Research has found that [improving school quality](#) reduces the probability of serious crimes and incarceration, particularly for our most vulnerable youth.
- A recent study looked at the effects of a change in Michigan law that increased [spending on schools](#) in low-income areas, focusing on students who experienced the increase in elementary school. The resulting decrease in adult crime rates was so large that the law ended up saving the state money overall.

Out-of-School Programming

- Programs to support students' [social and emotional well-being](#) have been found to reduce total arrests by as much as 35 percent and violent crime arrests by as much as 50 percent.
- Other research has found that [wraparound youth services](#) in disadvantaged areas can reduce juvenile arrests, as well as child abuse cases.

Economic Opportunities & Equity

Investing in economic justice, especially for survivors of intimate partner violence, has consistently been shown to reduce crime and violence.

Financial Assistance

- [Emergency financial assistance](#) for those experiencing economic insecurity, one study showed, reduced total arrests, including a 51 percent reduction in arrests for violent crimes.
- Many studies have demonstrated that [cash transfers](#) reduce domestic violence events in particular.

Employment Opportunities

- [Decreasing unemployment](#) has been shown to reduce property crime. In fact, much of the reduction in property crime seen during the 1990s can be attributed to the declining unemployment rate.
- Increasing youth employment, such as through summer jobs programs, has been found to reduce violent crime by up to 43 percent—with long-lasting, positive effects.

Reducing Inequality

- Local inequality drives property and violent crime. Looking at neighborhoods within major American cities, property crimes are much more common in areas that have higher median income gaps between adjacent areas. The researchers suggest that [reducing localized inequality](#) would reduce the incentive for property crime.
- Even small increases to the [minimum wage](#) have been found to have noticeable impacts on recidivism in the three years following release, with chance of re-arrest falling by 2.15% for every \$0.50 increase.
- Decreasing the gender wage gap has been found to [reduce domestic violence](#) against women. Reductions in the gender wage gap can explain 9 percent of the domestic violence decline between 1990 and 2003, as measured through hospital admissions.

If you have questions about the research discussed here, please contact Thea Sebastian (Thea@Civilrightscorps.org) or Sam Washington (Samwashington@Civilrightscorps.org).