



# A Guide to Safe and Equitable Communities



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# Overview

Community safety and justice decisions are often exclusively in the hands of police, prosecutors, and other institutional players rather than in the hands of people who live and work in impacted neighborhoods. However there is an inherent contradiction in putting the safety of communities, particularly communities of color, in the hands of historically inequitable institutions that can contribute to feelings of reduced safety and increased stress for many residents, particularly Black men. In fact, community residents themselves are the experts on their own neighborhoods, with a fundamental understanding of what needs to happen to achieve the prerequisites to community safety—e.g. education, economic mobility, quality housing, mental health supports, safe public spaces, trust in one’s neighbors. What residents often require is the opportunity to think creatively and collaboratively about what constitutes true safety for themselves, their families and their neighbors; and the resources to implement and iterate on community-based solutions.



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*They help us with a lot of different things here: academics, personal life—If anyone comes and sees the stuff we did, they’ll see this is a good outlet. The garden, the painting, the cleanups. It puts a smile on my face thinking about it.*

— TYSHON BAILEY, Brooklyn resident



At the same time, in the criminal justice system itself, there are a growing number of voices calling out for new and innovative approaches to public safety. Calls to reduce the police footprint, end mass incarceration, and reimagine public safety have grown louder and more urgent, igniting the need for solutions to prevent crime and improve safety outside of traditional criminal justice responses. These solutions must acknowledge the role our criminal legal system plays in upholding and reinforcing white supremacy and racism and look beyond practices like arrest, prosecution, and incarceration that have long caused harm and violence in BIPOC communities. This will require more than a new program or policy—it will mean transforming perceptions of safety and justice among justice system stakeholders, policymakers, local organizations, and community residents. This is a moment, in other words, where we must figure out how to do things differently.

#### CENTER FOR COURT INNOVATION

Originally created as an engine for justice system reform, for nearly three decades the Center for Court Innovation (the Center) has been testing and executing community-based crime prevention strategies in New York City; it has implemented, iterated upon, and refined a model grounded in building community power and access that has been effective in increasing safety, quality of life, economic mobility, and community connectedness. The strength of this approach is in its focus on keeping people out of the justice system while using strategies designed to strengthen the social and economic fabric of often under-resourced and over-policed communities. Designed to create safe and healthy neighborhoods with strong local institutions, vibrant resident networks, and meaningful relationships with government agencies, the Center's approach to developing safe and equitable communities is ripe for replication across the country.

# Six Key Principles



1

## Participatory Justice Research

The Center for Court Innovation’s approach starts with a process of community-led investigation and idea generation designed to identify and prioritize both the issues facing the neighborhood and potential solutions to be implemented. This means furnishing residents with the tools and support they need to find, access, and interpret relevant data behind why the issues exist; assess the needs of their neighbors; and develop strategies to address local community safety challenges. In these efforts it is important to go beyond the usual suspects, making a special point to fully involve young people, justice-involved people, and others who may face barriers to civic engagement.



2

## Building Power with Community

Once our programs have begun, we build on the participatory justice research process to create strong resident networks, engaging communities to create policies and practices that can solve pressing local issues and work towards transforming the conditions that allow these issues to exist. Our strategies elevate the knowledge, solutions, and relationships embedded within communities to ascertain resident perspectives, goals, and safety concerns; and then support resident-led efforts to design and implement the solutions with the help of local agencies, organizations, and neighbors. Staff help guide this process—gathering data to inform decisions, identifying partners, and coordinating the intervention. In short, this approach gives residents the opportunity to access needed resources to implement the solutions they have generated and work in partnership to make these ideas happen.



### 3

## Restoring Community-System Partnership

Many of the communities we work in have been failed for generations by government institutions, including law enforcement, whose work in communities of color has historically ranged from neglectful to directly harmful. We believe that communities can hold government agencies and service systems to a higher standard, creating opportunities for real community-government partnership aimed at developing real solutions for local issues. Continued use of the conventional tools of the criminal justice system, particularly heightened police enforcement, can further undermine neighborhood trust and social infrastructure. The Center's approach works to create a shared framework that brings together local residents, community organizations, and city agency representatives to jointly identify and address the underlying drivers of public safety concerns.



### 4

## Focusing on the People and Places Most Impacted

We have a targeted approach to community safety, investing in those places and people who have been most marginalized and negatively impacted by the criminal legal system. We engage those who have less access to decision-making power to develop and lead our programs. Our place-based work focuses on specific locations that have been the site of violence and disinvestment. Young people, particularly those most likely to experience criminalization and community violence, are often the primary leaders of our community problem-solving efforts.



## 5

### Keeping it Customizable and Flexible: One Size Doesn't Fit All

What works in one neighborhood may not be the right approach in another; our goal is to encourage community residents to develop and iterate their own innovative strategies for community solutions. And what works today may not be the right solution tomorrow; all of our programs are nimble and aware of the need to evolve to respond to changing community needs as they arise. Each program is agile enough to pivot when necessary and resourceful enough to demonstrate small, tangible wins everyday. Rather than a single model, we provide a blueprint for resident engagement and activation.



## 6

### Committing to Racial Equity

Our approach is grounded in the understanding that the very systems that are supposed to make communities safer have been shaped by racism and other forms of oppression. Communities should not have to choose between safety and justice. We are committed to using our privileged position to fight injustice and promote racial equity.

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*Our work can be used to speak up against things and we can use our arts work and our music to make our voice heard.*

*— PARTICIPANT, Neighbors in Action*



# What Neighborhood-based Safety Looks Like

Once local networks have been strengthened, resident needs assessed, and stakeholder goals articulated, neighborhood-based safety solutions can take on many responsive forms:

## Placekeeping

The Center helps residents transform neglected spaces, converting high-crime areas into safe and inclusive public spaces in which social and commercial activity can flourish. By creating places that are welcoming, maneuverable, familiar, and conducive to economic development and social interaction, placekeeping can tip the scales in favor of safe and vibrant communities without relying on conventional law enforcement responses. Placekeeping is more than just space improvement or beautification; it is vital that residents—those who are closest to the issue—define the goals and the tools for change since they are closest to the solutions. In this sense, placekeeping is as much about cultivating resident decision-making as it is about environmental design.

### Community Revitalization through Placekeeping

The Brownsville Community Justice Center’s Belmont Revitalization Project in Brooklyn, New York is transforming a crime-ridden retail corridor into a thriving business district that promotes positive pedestrian activity and strong community. The project seeks to support public safety through beautification projects (façade improvements, capital construction, horticulture, etc.), marketing campaigns, youth engagement, increased foot traffic, a strengthened economic infrastructure, entrepreneurial supports, and community organizing.

The Belmont Revitalization project has produced an annual festival that draws **900** residents; a cutting-edge public plaza, and a youth-led tech program providing innovative lighting solutions to increase positive pedestrian traffic towards local businesses, while launching a local Merchant Association and steering over **\$500,000** in investments towards the Belmont Corridor.

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*Instead of telling them you need to do this or that, we asked them directly what their needs are... We are talking to them, connecting to them, and listening to them. They need to know that we care about them because they are the future.*

— JOLYN, Manhattan resident



Save Our Streets reduced violence in the Bronx:

**63%**

reduced shooting victimizations

**37%**

reduced gun injuries

## Preventing Violence

Our programs work to create safer communities by preventing violence at all levels and responding when violence does occur. We engage those who have been most impacted by violence using multiple strategies including street outreach, conflict de-escalation by trained violence interrupters, mentoring, community organizing around gun violence prevention, and leadership opportunities for impacted youth. When violence occurs, we respond by providing opportunities for communal response and healing.

## Reducing Street Violence

Save our Streets (S.O.S.) works in four New York City neighborhoods to reduce conflict and prevent outbreaks of gun violence. Outreach workers and violence interrupters work on the streets, in our storefront offices, and in local hospitals to defuse conflicts before they erupt into violence while addressing the traumatic impact of violence on young men of color.

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*Safety, to me actually means freedom. Safety to me is I can wake up free from trauma. I can go outside confident in my identity. The community and the infrastructure around me is healthy and strong. I can explore and build myself. When I mess up, there's cushioning there that means I won't just die or go to jail because I made a mistake.*

— DERON JOHNSTON  
Center for Court Innovation



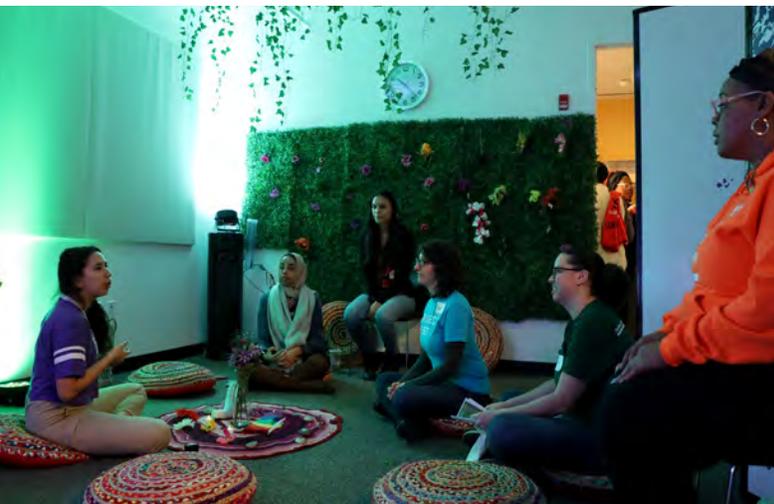
## Economic Development

We understand that long-term community safety cannot be achieved without addressing the centuries-old connections between crime, poverty, and structural racism. An integral part of our safety approach is providing mobility out of poverty through a combination of entrepreneurship training, incubating local small business ideas, and creating safe public spaces and business corridors that can attract businesses, customers, activity, and investment.

### Promoting Economic Opportunity in Brownsville

The Brownsville Community Justice Center encourages neighborhood economic development by providing work opportunities for youth, promoting entrepreneurship, and patronizing local Black-owned businesses.

In 2020, the Justice Center helped launch six new businesses, supported over 50 young people find employment or internships, and funneled over **\$900,000** to local black-owned businesses.



## Supporting Healing

We understand that we work in spaces that have experienced tremendous individual, community, and historical trauma. Public safety solutions that are not trauma-informed can perpetuate past harms. That is why we strive to integrate healing and resilience into all of our projects and programming, creating spaces and conducting activities dedicated to emotional, mental, and physical restoration while emphasizing the importance of caring for self and others with our neighbors, program participants, and staff members.

### Neighborhood-Based Responses to Trauma

Neighbors in Action staff coordinate grief counseling, support circles in response to violence, and ongoing circles for survivors of gun violence.

In 2020, staff engaged **2,700** community members through holistic responses to community crises, with a focus on opportunities for individual and collective healing.



## Valuing and Listening to Young People

While young people are disproportionately at risk of criminalization, crime victimization, and justice system involvement, traditionally youth have been left out of public safety conversations. They are often labeled as “the problem” rather than respected as the demographic with the most insight into why and how crime takes place. We advocate placing impacted youth at the center of community safety work, providing them with opportunities for economic opportunity, civic leadership, creative and entrepreneurial endeavors, and transformative relationships with peers and mentors.

### Focusing on Youth

Our community-based youth programs serve over **600** young people each year, providing them with over **\$500,000** in stipends annually.

## Neighborhood Mobilization and Support

Staff are training hundreds of public housing residents across the city to be community organizers and neighborhood leaders. These residents are designing and implementing social programs and place-based safety strategies in their housing developments, identifying public policy concerns and discussing them with city agency representatives, and leading local responses to community crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Mobilizing Neighborhood by Neighborhood

Neighborhood Safety Initiatives staff and community members worked in 17 public housing projects citywide to implement over \$550,000 in resident-designed public safety improvements.

Staff mobilized resident teams to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in public housing, reaching **7,000** households (over **45,000** NYCHA residents) with **10,000** deliveries of food and essential goods.





## Access to Justice

Poverty and eviction too often go hand-in-hand. In neighborhoods where residents are facing housing insecurity due to economic concerns, lack of employment, or gentrification, Staff link vulnerable tenants with legal services and supports they need to remain in their homes. Our projects promote access to justice by providing legal information, referrals, and resources to ensure housing stability for low income residents.

### Preserving Housing Stability

Annually, the Center for Court Innovation helps over **5,000** New Yorkers with their housing issues.

# Where Are We Located?

The Center's New York City-based programs have reduced crime and violence, increased community engagement, bolstered economic opportunity, co-created opportunity with youth, and changed community norms.

Currently the Center runs programming in a dozen New York City communities and throughout seventeen New York City Housing Authority public housing developments. We also provide technical assistance to our community courts and our sister projects in Newark, Syracuse, Los Angeles, and London.

# How Can We Work With You?

The Center is available to work with local and national communities seeking to build capacity and implement sustainable, community-driven safety solutions.

We have extensive experience as a national training and technical assistance provider for the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), other federal agencies, and major private institutions including the MacArthur Foundation and the Singer Foundation. Notably, the Center has served as BJA's national technical assistance provider for community courts since the inception of the National Community Courts Initiative and served as the site coordinator and technical assistance provider for the federal Minority Youth Violence Prevention initiative. Our staff has delivered on-site technical assistance to hundreds of state, county, town, rural, and tribal jurisdictions to plan and implement innovative projects. The Center also has a wealth of experience in delivering remote assistance (via video conference, webinar, online demo, and more), creating online resource centers, facilitating trainings and peer-to-peer learning, and producing free downloadable practitioner guides.

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