

Understanding the Social Determinants of Safety:

A Policy Framework for Building Safety That Works

In health, evidence suggests that our [greatest increase in life expectancy](#) stemmed not from medical advances, but from social improvements like better hygiene and reduced air pollution. This central insight was partly responsible for catalyzing a new “[social determinants of health](#)” framework that broadened how many policymakers and medical professionals viewed health. Rather than focusing only on healthcare and curative medicine, this “social determinants” framework analyzes how environmental conditions, education, neighborhood conditions and built environment, and social context affect health outcomes. In so doing, the framework has allowed lawmakers to develop solutions that treat causes rather than mere symptoms—while saving lawmakers millions of dollars. Today, data shows that [each dollar invested](#) in evidence-based public health produces [fourfold](#) or [fivefold](#) returns. And a [2017 systematic review](#) found that every \$1 invested in “health protection interventions” produced \$34 in cost savings.

The preventative approach is equally applicable to violence and harm. Most interactions with the criminal-legal system ultimately reflect unmet social or structural needs, including access to housing, physical or mental healthcare, safe spaces like parks and community centers, financial stability, safe and supportive schools, and more. In fact, most offenses charged are misdemeanors that serve little more function than to criminalize poverty. And for other offenses, including those that involve violence or cause harm of any nature, evidence shows that preventative interventions are significantly more effective than enhanced punishment or expanded criminal-legal enforcement—while, again, producing significant cost savings. [Nearly every study](#) evaluating preventative measures has found that benefits far outweigh costs. In one study, adding streetlights yielded [\\$121 for every \\$1 invested](#). In another, the police group Strong America noted that a federal preschool investment would return an estimated [\\$3 for every dollar spent](#), partly through reduced criminal justice spending.

Building from these key insights, the “social determinants of safety” (SDOS) are the underlying social and structural conditions that drive both safety outcomes and contact with the criminal-legal system. As a framework, then, the accompanying approach involves identifying safety needs and implementing evidence-based solutions that address these underlying issues before violence and harm occur.

For more information regarding the social determinants of safety (SDOS), please see the following resources.

[Getting Smart on Safety:
Evidence on Investments
That Work to Prevent
Violence & Harm](#)

[A Roadmap to Community
Safety:
A Guide for Local
Lawmakers](#)

[A Roadmap to Community
Safety:
A Guide for State
Lawmakers](#)