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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.

Getting Smart on Safety

Evidence on Non-Carceral Investments That Work to Prevent Violence & Harm

Overview

Research consistently demonstrates that non-carceral investments can produce dramatic improvements in community safety—while avoiding the devastating consequences of jails, prisons, and police contact. The following brief surveys some of the academic research that shows the promise of these non-carceral, life-affirming approaches to keeping families and communities safe. Additionally, each section provides a concrete example of a particular policy or initiative that is achieving significant results in the real world.

This brief primarily cites the effects that various interventions have on crime rates, especially violent crime—which is a relevant but insufficient measure of safety. Crime rates have severe limitations, including issues around [lackluster](#) and sometimes skewed reporting, and fail to encompass many harms that actually keep people unsafe. Harms related to workplace safety, environmental toxins, food security, and housing insecurity, for example, are essential for being safe, but are excluded from these metrics. Nonetheless, these studies are useful for demonstrating that these interventions have a significant impact on community safety overall, albeit just one aspect of this concept.

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Investments in Built Design

For years, research has shown that basic investments in built design—in streetlights, parks, road design, public transportation, and addressing vacant lots—has significant implications for community safety. Decades of criminology research has found a link between built design and residents' safety. This growing body of literature should influence how urban planners and local policymakers leverage our most basic resource: the design of our physical space.

- [The design of urban spaces](#) can have crime-reducing effects. Recent studies in multiple jurisdictions, including [Philadelphia](#), [Baltimore](#), and [Youngstown](#), have found that maintaining green space reduces certain types of crime.
- In [Flint, Michigan](#), neighborhoods that participated in a “Clean & Green” program where community members cleaned up and did routine maintenance on vacant lots saw 40% fewer assaults and violent crimes on participating streets than those that did not participate.
- In New York City, research demonstrated that [streetlights](#) can reduce “index crimes”—including murder, robbery, aggravated assault, and some property crimes—by more than a third.
- A [rigorous study](#) found that restoring vacant land in cities significantly improves both local residents' perception 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.
- [Reducing traffic congestion](#) may lower rates of domestic violence in areas with high congestion.
- Increasing [public transportation options](#) for residents also has a direct effect on [economic opportunities](#) while reducing certain types of crime.
- Efforts to mitigate climate change and implement [climate-cooling design](#) will also be vital to reducing violence, as rising temperatures have been shown to [increase rates of homicide](#) and other violence.



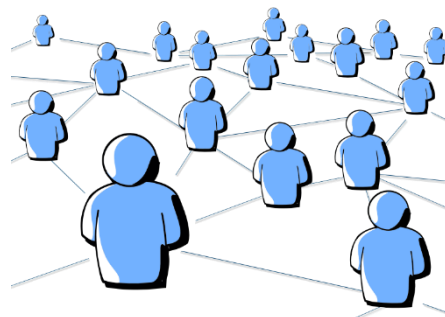
Spotlight: Green Stormwater Infrastructure

Philadelphia undertook a major [Green Stormwater Infrastructure](#) (GSI) effort, a form of urban greening. Philadelphia's approach is what the city refers to as the “triple bottom line”: that investment in GSI not only helps meet environmental engineering standards, but also has social and economic benefits by improving health and safety outcomes. A [study](#) of the GSI program found that urban greening significantly reduced local arrests for several offenses, including drug possession and burglaries.

Investments in Social Capital

Alongside reconsidering basic aspects of physical space, many researchers have focused on a related issue: how investments in social capital, including nonprofit organizations, can dramatically affect how safe a community feels and is. The core finding is simple and powerful: Increasing funding for community-led organizations and centering community members can play a direct role in reducing harm.

- According to one national study, every additional ten [non-profit community organizations](#) tackling violence and building stronger communities results in a 9 percent drop in the homicide rate.
- In Seattle, a program that provides matching funds to community organizations so that they can work on [neighborhood improvement projects](#) was found to substantially decrease violent crime, especially in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods.
- An overview of [community-driven safety models](#) found that processes connecting community-led organizations to researchers improved the research quality and yielded programs that better served the community's safety needs.



Spotlight: Phoenix Union High School District

In the summer of 2020, the Phoenix Union High School District ended its contract with the Phoenix Police Department for school resource officers (“SROs”) for the next three years and [reallocated the \\$1.2 million](#) to participatory processes that would solicit ideas for alternative school safety investments. For the initial investment, school staff are responsible for reallocating \$500,000, students are responsible for reallocating \$500,000, and parents are responsible for reallocating \$200,000. Each stakeholder group will develop, propose, and then vote to select among investment options.

Investments in Community Violence Prevention

Perhaps some of the most obvious ways that non-carceral investments impact safety involve investments in organizations that directly work to prevent or interrupt violence. Some of these programs employ formerly incarcerated individuals, funding them to provide youth education and mentorship. Some fund violence prevention-focused programming in schools. Others simply protect kids while they walk to school. These programs have been found, time and time again, to dramatically improve community safety—even though they have received far less funding than traditional criminal-legal approaches.

- The [Cure Violence model](#) (formerly CeaseFire), which takes a public health approach to preventing gun violence, has found significant success in Chicago and the cities to which it has [spread](#).
- A study of [hospital-based peer intervention](#) for youth found that such interventions reduced the survivor's odds of experiencing future violence or being arrested themselves.
- Robust research has shown that [violence prevention programs in schools](#) significantly reduces violent behavior among students at all grade levels and in all school environments. Many of these programs

also have the added benefit of improving academic performance and reducing problematic substance use among youth.

- [Safe Passage to School](#) programs—which place civilian guards along specified routes to keep students safe on their way to and from school—have been found to reduce violent crime by 14 percent.
- A [meta-analysis](#) found that trauma-based youth violence prevention programs are able to substantially reduce both recidivism and re-injury.
- [U-Turn](#), a diversion program that enrolls young people who have been arrested for auto theft in a 10 week intensive on car mechanics, maintenance, and body work, has [been found to](#) reduce recidivism and to increase job skills and overall well-being.



Spotlight: STAR Denver

Denver's Support Team Assisted Response ([STAR](#)) program has 911 operators divert calls away from police to a team of paramedics and health clinicians when the caller is reporting an issue related to mental health, addiction, or homelessness. A study of the program [found it to be](#) very successful in connecting individuals with the resources that they need while reducing police interaction.

Investments in Education & Opportunities for Youth

Investing in education and youth dramatically affects safety—not only by preventing youth incarceration and keeping kids safe, but also by reducing the chances that a child will enter the criminal-legal system later in life.

- Programs to support students' [social and emotional well-being and decision-making skills](#) have been found to reduce total arrests by as much as 35 percent, violent crime arrests by as much as 50 percent, and, for program youth in juvenile detention facilities, recidivism by 21 percent.
- 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.
- Robust research shows that correctional education programs are [one of our most effective ways](#) to reduce recidivism and increase employment opportunities upon reentry.

- Socioeconomic [segregation of schools](#) has been found to increase violent crime, suggesting that promoting more diverse and integrated schools could reduce violence.
- Youth-focused sports and therapy programming can reduce the [likelihood of future arrests](#) for a violent crime by 50 percent.
- High-quality afterschool programs have broadly positive impacts for children. By providing a safe space that promotes students' health and development, these programs [can reduce drug use and decrease arrests](#) and other forms of criminal-legal involvement among children.
- Programs focused on wraparound education services in high risk areas [have been shown](#) to reduce juvenile arrests as well as child abuse cases.
- Early childhood intervention programs, as well as nutrition programs for newborns, are [likely to reduce crime](#).



Spotlight: Parramore Kidz Zone

The mission of Parramore Kidz Zone ([PKZ](#)) in Orlando, Florida is to level the playing field for Parramore's children, equipping them to become successful, healthy, well-educated adults in Orlando's highest poverty neighborhood, and ultimately replicate this model in other Orlando neighborhoods. PKZ is achieving these goals through investments that make a difference in children's lives—such as quality early childhood education, afterschool programs, programs that build family economic success, youth development programs for teenagers, access to healthcare, mentoring, tutoring, college access assistance, and more. A [study](#) of the PKZ found it produced a 61 percent decline in juvenile arrests, a 56 percent decline in teen pregnancies, and a 38 percent decline in child abuse cases in the neighborhood.

Investments in Employment & Economic Security

Physical safety, at a human or biological level, requires that a person is able to meet their basic needs—which helps explain why investing in economic security, including employment, has consistently been shown to reduce crime and violence. The evidence further shows that these investments are particularly effective for those people who are too often left behind: harm survivors.

- [Emergency financial assistance](#) for those experiencing economic insecurity, one study showed, reduced total arrests, including a 51 percent reduction in arrests for violent crimes. Short-term financial assistance, especially when [combined with access to therapy](#), has been shown to decrease violence and crime. Many studies have demonstrated that [cash transfers reduce domestic violence events in particular](#).

- [A study](#) of data in both the US And UK found that increasing the availability of well-paid entry-level jobs when a young person is entering the job market could have a lasting impact on their likelihood of committing future crimes.
- 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.
- [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.
- 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.



Spotlight: Community Love Fund Guaranteed Income Initiative

The [Community Love Fund](#) is a landmark guaranteed income initiative that will distribute recurring, direct cash relief to formerly incarcerated women in the Roxbury community for one year. Families for Justice as Healing and the National Council have created the Community Love Fund to demonstrate that directly affected women can establish and distribute the funds necessary to support each other. This guaranteed income initiative pilot is the first of its kind in Boston.

Spotlight: The Evergreen Cooperatives

The [Evergreen Cooperatives](#) are an effort on the part of several Cleveland-based institutions to create and foster worker cooperatives that are owned and operated by residents of the city's lowest-income areas. Not only do these cooperatives provide well-paid jobs to workers who may otherwise have difficulty finding employment, they create intra-community wealth and sustainable economic development. This model is [gaining steam](#) across the country, and presents a promising opportunity for creating employment and economic security in a way that centers collective power and community interests.

Investments in Health & Treatment

Health is a basic part of human safety. And evidence shows that when we invest in basic healthcare, treatment, and environmental quality, we significantly increase the physical safety of our communities.

- One study shows that [Medicaid expansion](#) reduced crime by 3 percent annually, producing crime-related cost savings of \$13 billion each year. One study found that for certain populations, ACA Medicaid expansions reduced recidivism for violence crimes by as [much as 16 percent](#).
- Further research has shown that Medicaid expansions led to significant reductions in robbery, aggravated assaults, and larceny theft. This was primarily due to increased [uptake of treatment for](#)

[substance use](#) through Medicaid coverage. Unsurprisingly, the reverse of this phenomenon is also true. Taking away an individual's Medicaid coverage makes them [more likely](#) to commit property crimes.

- Additional research demonstrates that when the number of substance use treatment facilities increases in a particular area, [violent and financially-motivated crimes decrease](#) locally.
- Expanded access to [mental health treatment](#), and to psychiatric treatment in particular, has also been found to reduce violent crime.
- Targeted [interventions for children who have suffered from lead poisoning](#)—including lead abatement, medical care, and public assistance—have long-term positive impacts, including a reduction in future arrests for violent offenses.
- [Decriminalizing marijuana](#), specifically through allowing access to medical marijuana, was found to decrease violent crime, particularly in Southwestern border states.



Spotlight: Medicaid

Several of the activities listed here—including mental health and substance use treatment—can be funded, or at least partly funded, using the Medicaid program. And thanks to the American Rescue Plan, the potential of Medicaid recently increased: the Rescue Plan included several Medicaid and CHIP provisions that [expand federal reimbursement](#) for certain Medicaid programs and add new optional Medicaid activities. Also relevant to funding community safety is the new [85% federal reimbursement](#) for “qualifying community-based mobile crisis intervention services.” This increased Federal match will last for a 5-year period, beginning in April 2022.

Investments in Housing & Housing Equity

Having stable housing is essential for economic and social stability. Having high-quality, stable, integrated housing also makes all community residents safer and better able to thrive.

- At the local level, increasing [access to affordable housing](#) by building more low-income housing units results in significant reductions in violent crime.
- [Reducing socio-economic segregation](#) of neighborhoods—such as through housing vouchers that enable low-income families to move to neighborhoods of opportunity—has been shown to reduce youth arrests for 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 robberies and aggravated assault.

- In Philadelphia, a project to remediate abandoned homes was associated with a [39 percent reduction in firearm assaults](#) and, given the low cost associated with the remodels, returned hundreds of dollars for every dollar invested in the program.
- Permanent housing subsidies have been found to [reduce rates of intimate partner violence](#), especially for families with more complex psychological needs.
- Other research [has found](#) that having stable housing decreases the likelihood of committing a crime.



Spotlight: Permanent Supportive Housing

Permanent supportive housing (PSH) is a model that combines stable, affordable housing with wrap-around services benefitting residents and their families. For example, PSH for those who have been recently released from prison provides employment support, counseling, and other vital reentry services. Offering supportive housing upon re-entry [has been found to](#) reduce re-arrest rates by 40 percent and re-incarceration by 61 percent within the year following release. At a local level, increasing [access to affordable housing](#) by building more low-income housing units has significantly reduced violent crime.

Alongside its safety benefits, PSH is a cost-effective financial investment. In the long-run, governments recoup a large share of the upfront costs through reduced healthcare, short-term shelter, and criminalization expenses. [In New York](#), reduced service use yielded annualized savings of \$16,282 per housing unit, equal to 95% of the supportive housing costs. In Portland, savings were even more extreme, with the government actually saving \$15,000 per unit after deducting both the cost of housing and services provided.

Spotlight: Community Land Trusts

[Community Land Trusts](#) are another promising avenue for promoting affordable housing, with the added benefit of increasing collective power and promoting sustainable economic development. Community land trusts, or CLTS, are nonprofit, community-led organizations designed to ensure community control and stewardship of land. CLTs can be used for a variety of developments, including commercial and retail projects, but their main function is to ensure long-term affordable housing for residents of a given community---and ensure that wealth accumulation both stays within the community and is shared by all community members.

Rebalancing Social Spending & Advancing Economic Equity

At a macro level, evidence also shows that our spending allocations matter significantly. Jurisdictions that spend more on social programs generally have less incarceration and less crime. Similarly, jurisdictions that have reduced economic inequality produce more safety for their residents.

- Economic inequality predicts homicide rates “[better than any other variable](#).” A simple measure of inequality predicts approximately [half of the variance](#) in homicide rates between American states and between countries. Data from 39 countries shows that even small [decreases in inequality](#) would reduce homicides by 20 percent and cause a 23 percent long-term reduction in robberies.
- 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.
- Other researchers [found that](#) “within-tract”—that is, within a given census tract—inequality was associated with higher Uniform Crime Reports of violent and property crimes. This finding held when the comparison was not within tracts, but between neighboring tracts.
- Comparing U.S. states, [researchers have found](#) that as welfare spending increases, rates of imprisonment increase less sharply or are relatively lower—even once they controlled for crime rates and numerous other variables.
- This finding holds between nations. [Another study](#), examining welfare spending and incarceration within OECD countries, found that states spending a greater proportion of GDP on welfare have lower imprisonment rates—and this relationship has become stronger over the last 15 years. While the finding is correlation rather than causation, the finding is strong and consistent enough that further attention is warranted.
- [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.



Spotlight: The American Rescue Plan's Fiscal Recovery Fund

The American Rescue Plan Act, signed into law on March 11, 2021, is a \$1.9 trillion package [intended to](#) “provide direct relief to Americans, contain Covid-19, and rescue the economy.” The law created or enhanced several grant programs intended to help state, territorial, tribal, and municipal governments respond to the crisis and the underlying problems that it revealed. The largest and most flexible of these is the \$350 billion Fiscal Recovery Fund. These funds can support a number of the programs that are uplifted throughout this document, including large scale investments in health, housing, economic opportunity, and other social spending. For more information about how to use the Fiscal Recovery Fund to make holistic community safety investments, see [Community Safety & The American Rescue Plan](#).