Social Conditions for Public Safety

Background

Everybody deserves to be safe in their body and community, no matter who or where they are. There are many policies, systems, and conditions that prevent crime and promote safe communities. This literature review explores the system-level factors (as opposed to individual-level factors or attributes) that contribute to crime prevention and safety, as well as those that increase the risk of crime or violence.

Contributors to community safety

- Community engagement

- Economic equity

- Access to education, and educational achievement

- Access to high quality health care

- Built environment features such as well-maintained parks, voluntary organizations, and coffee shops

Limitations

This is not an all-encompassing review. Rather, it is an introduction to some system-level mechanisms that promote community safety. Other social conditions where safety thrives may exist that are not represented in this review or the existing literature.

Recommendations

- Meaningfully engage communities in public safety, crime prevention, and crime intervention system design, implementation, and tracking

- Increase funding for research into the social conditions where community safety thrives

- Increase investment in social conditions that promote community safety and prevent crime

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Background

Purpose

This literature review is grounded in a moral stance: everybody deserves to be safe in their bodies, regardless of identity, achievements, location, or the characteristics of the communities in which they spend their lives. Everybody deserves to be free from violence and other crime victimization. Therefore, violence and other crime should be prevented.

Additionally, research increasingly explores how public health frameworks can contribute to knowledge of what makes safe communities. One helpful framework organizes policies and programs into prevention and/or intervention categories (Roeder et al., 2015). According to this framework, the criminal legal system in the United States is primarily a public safety intervention. Police investigations, prosecution, criminal court, and criminal consequences all begin after an alleged violation of criminal law. However, analysis of incarceration rates and crime rates in the 2000s show no relationship between rates of incarceration and crime (Roeder et al., 2015). In other words, one thing we know about how the criminal legal system intervenes in criminal behavior is that it has little to do with preventing violence or other criminal behavior.

Another relevant public health framework is one that explores the social determinants, or social contexts, for public health. Public health professionals frequently ask what conditions or determinants help create healthy individuals and communities, and how government can drive improvements to those conditions or determinants. Applying that framework to public safety, we investigate what conditions create safe communities, and how government and system actors can improve those conditions in order to improve community safety.

The purpose of this literature review is to begin to understand the social conditions where safety thrives, including how local, county, and state government actions can promote safety, or prevent crime or violence before it happens.

Method and limitations

Wilder Research librarians searched academic literature and reports, working papers, and government documents using the following terms: public safety, community safety, neighborhood safety, violence prevention, crime prevention, risk of crime, risk of violence, social determinants, public health, built environment, and protective factors.

This is a brief literature review on the social conditions where safety thrives. We did not do an exhaustive search of the literature. Additionally, the application of social determinants

or conditions frameworks to crime prevention factors is a relatively novel concept. However, while there may not be much research on what social conditions prevent crime, there is robust research on what community factors increase the risk of violence and crime. Here, we summarize key findings on both.

Findings

Case studies and empirical research illuminate community-level factors that contribute to community safety, as well as those that increase risk of violence and crime. Many can be communicated in a presence-absence framework. For example, the presence of economic equity can prevent crime and the absence of economic equity can increase the risk of crime. We present key findings from the literature, organized, where possible, in this presence-absence framework.

Community engagement drives safety; community marginalization is related to violence

Community engagement promotes safety.

Community voices and studies illustrate that meaningful community engagement in setting public safety strategies can prevent crime or promote safety. Community members participating in an initiative to build health, safety, and well-being in 14 sites in California recommend community input to improve public safety, such as involving survivors of violence in customizing community safety strategies (Prevention Institute, 2015). This is because "systems that share power in pursuit of shared outcomes such as community safety are able to tackle the root conditions that fuel violence" (Prevention Institute, 2015, p. 11). Community members identified other community engagement activities that can protect against crime and violence, including youth leadership, youth development, and community organizing activities (Prevention Institute, 2015).

Other research points to the need for robust community engagement in advancing public safety. Case studies of community and government partnerships to achieve safety found that "efforts to prevent violence will be more effective when multiple private, public, and community players come together in a strategic and coordinated way. In one national assessment, for example, cities with the most coordinated approaches also had the lowest rates of youth violence" (Prevention Institute, 2015, p. 12). Additionally, the National Crime Prevention Council recommends engaging those most impacted by public safety initiatives in their design and implementation, and viewing "community from an 'asset-based' lens" (2009, p. 19). This means that, in addition to engaging community, government actors should value the wisdom, input, and strengths of individual community members

and the community as a whole (as opposed to focusing on perceived needs or lacks). Doing so may contribute to lower rates of violence in the community. Finally, community policing initiatives that advance community safety include "institutionalization of forums for input and social control by citizens" (Petesch, 2013, p. 30). Put another way, an essential ingredient to successful community policing is community engagement and control over community policing practices.

Policies that promote collective efficacy will also promote community safety. Collective efficacy is "a willingness to intervene for the common good" (Armstrong et al., 2015, p. 123). In identifying conditions that drive public safety, community voices in one study named "trust and community cohesion," as well as "connected and empowered families" (Prevention Institute, 2015, p. 7), which seem essential to achieving collective efficacy. A study involving a citizen survey of collective efficacy and crime data also found that collective efficacy predicted violent crime. Crime is lower where collective efficacy is higher, even when controlling for the influence of community structural characteristics, such as the length of time people live in the community and poverty (Armstrong et al., 2015).

Just as collective efficacy promotes safety, policies that institutionalize community organizing can promote collective efficacy. A review of community violence risk factors found that "community organizing interventions have been successful in gaining social and political power to address several problems that are associated with marginalized neighborhoods. … Organizing has also been central to initiatives to prevent gun and youth violence" (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 12). Organizing, empowering, connecting, and engaging communities all have a role to play in promoting safety.

Community marginalization increases the risk of violence.

Just as community engagement and safety are related, so too are community marginalization and violence. First, systemic marginalization is its own form of violence: structural violence.

> Structural violence is described as the invisible, structured social arrangements (i.e., disparate access to resources, political power, education, health care) that exclude or marginalize groups of people and normalize some form of harm as legitimate, making violence ubiquitous or a consequence of 'bad' actors (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 3).

Economic and government systems operate such that some groups of people suffer disadvantages, harm, or exclusion; this is structural violence. Recent historical examples include race-based school segregation and the practice of redlining, or excluding Black people, Jewish people, and others who were not white or Christian from buying specific houses, or houses in specific neighborhoods. A current example is that, while rates of

illegal drug use are similar across races, Black and Native people are many times more likely than white people to be arrested for illegal drug use.

Second, community marginalization increases the likelihood of interpersonal violence. One report comparing case studies of communities that experience peace and others that struggle with persistent crime and violence found that where inequalities in health, education, income, and political inclusion "are severe and persist across generations, they are … associated with higher likelihood of violence" (Petesch, 2013, p. 5). Structural violence increases the risks of interpersonal violence. Another study found that "social, economic and political inequalities across groups" are important risk factors for violence, especially where "grievances combine with strong collective identity" (Willman & Makisaka, 2010, p. 10). Structural violence meted out on communities of people who feel like they have important identities in common, such as race, ethnicity, or religion, can predict violence within the marginalized community. This study further found that "the accumulation of risk is more influential than the impact of any particular risk factor by itself," which further supports the idea that experiencing structural inequalities is a contributor to violence (Willman & Makisaka, 2010, p. 13).

Another study found that

> [L]esbian, gay, and bisexual teens living in counties with a more discriminatory social environment (e.g., lower proportion of schools with antidiscrimination policies that included sexual orientation, etc.) were more likely to report attempting suicide than those living in counties with less discriminatory social environments (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 3).

Not only is structural violence related to a higher risk of interpersonal violence, it is related to a higher risk of violence against one's self. Additionally, community voices in one study agreed with this research. Community members pointed to disenfranchisement of community members, including youth, as a contributor to violence (Prevention Institute, 2015).

Finally, community members in California identified the lack of access to prevention strategies, over-reliance on policing and other suppressive and reactive strategies, and a lack of government accountability as drivers of violence (Prevention Institute, 2015). When the response to interpersonal violence is overly reliant on reactive and punitive methods, community may experience this as structural violence, which could increase the risk of interpersonal violence. Other research supports the idea that a lack of government accountability may drive violence. In police precincts with high structural disadvantage, "police misconduct … was significantly related to the community risk of experiencing violent crime. … [T]he findings support ... that compromised police legitimacy, due to perceived mistreatment and marginalization by police, may lead to increases in violence

as some residents in structurally disadvantaged communities cease cooperating with police" (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 5). Where there is police misconduct in communities already suffering structural violence, police misconduct is related to greater community violence. Engaged communities are safer communities; marginalized communities are at a higher risk of violence.

Advancing economic equity builds community safety; economic inequality and poverty are related to violence

Economic equity increases safety.

Economic equity is the perception of fair or just distribution of resources and assets. One study found that community members agree that government should focus on improving economic opportunities, including employment opportunities for youth, which will contribute to safe communities (Prevention Institute, 2015). This is supported by other research. Evidence-based recommendations for crime reduction from other studies include:

- Government should advance "opportunities for participation in social and economic life" (Willman & Makisaka, 2010, p. 8)

- Government should adopt policies to reduce structural violence and "social group inequalities" (Petesch, 2013, p. 29)

- Programs should combine "generous assistance," meet "diverse needs for building skills and social and psychological support," and also attach "fewer strings to access resources" (Petesch, 2013, p. 31)

Additionally, a study found that state-level spending on social and public health services is associated with lower rates of homicides, or murder. This study adjusted for community-level demographic and economic factors, including gender, race, age, poverty rates, high school graduation rates, unemployment rates, single-parent households, GDP per capita, and Medicaid rates and found that:

> [E]very $10,000 increase in spending per person living in poverty was associated with 0.87 fewer homicides per 100,000 population or approximately a 16% decrease in the average homicide rate (Sipsma et al., 2017, p. 1).

Public funds directed to those living in poverty can decrease the murder rate. This study further found "there was no significant effect [of increased public welfare spending on violence in the community] in the quartile of states with the highest percentages of individuals living in poverty but significant effects in the quartiles of states with lower percentages of individuals living in poverty" (Sipsma et al., 2017, p. 1). Where fewer people live in poverty, public funds directed to those living in poverty are more related to declines in the murder rate. Minnesota has one of the lowest rates of people living in poverty in the nation (45th; https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/ranking-tables/), which uniquely positions the state to significantly reduce homicides through spending that alleviates poverty.

Economic inequality, controlling for poverty, is associated with reduced safety.

When asked what contributes to violence in their communities, one study identified the inequitable distribution of resources, money, power, and a systemic lack of opportunity (Prevention Institute, 2015). Evidence backs up community wisdom. Higher levels of income inequality contribute to unsafe communities among those that are economically marginalized. First, "income inequality at the census tract level has … been linked to higher rates of violent crime, and this association has been shown to outweigh that of poverty and violent crime" (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 3). Gaps between incomes people earn in a community have a stronger relationship with violent crime rates than poverty or other violent crime exposure. Also, "higher levels of income inequality … at the county level has been linked to higher rates of child abuse and neglect even when controlling for child poverty" (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 3). People living in communities with high income inequality face greater safety risks than those living in communities with greater equality between incomes.

Poverty is associated with reduced safety.

Poverty is linked to many adverse life experiences, including reduced safety. Studies have found that poverty can increase the risk of being apprehended for a crime, as well as being a victim of crime (Caruso, 2017). Additionally, "concentrated disadvantage and unemployment is a risk factor associated with child abuse and neglect, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, suicide, and youth violence perpetration" (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 3). Further, studies show that poverty and low socioeconomic status during childhood is a "risk factor for subsequent criminal and substance misuse behaviors." Additionally, even in studies that control for genetic and family environment, "there still remains an inverse association between parental income during childhood and development of behavioral problems" among their children (Caruso, 2017, p. 3). An individual faces a greater risk of developing behavior problems if they were a child when their caregivers'

incomes were lower; a sibling who was a child while the caregivers' incomes were higher is less at risk of developing behavior problems. Finally, a study looking at the relationship between pockets of crime and income found "a strong linear relationship between violent crime and income for per-capita income below $50,000 but very little relationship above per-capita income of $50,000." This suggests that "per-capita income and poverty are strongly associated with excess violent crime" (Humphrey et al., 2019, p. 7). While people of all income levels can commit or be victims of violence, there is a relationship between violence and income for people who earn less than $50,000 a year. Poverty can increase the risk that people suffer violence.

Housing instability can increase risk for violence.

Related to poverty, one source found that high population turnover rates increase risk for violence (Kondo et al., 2018). Another found that homelessness and mental illness "puts people at an increased risk of being the victim of a crime as well as being arrested for a crime, particularly disorderly conduct and property theft" (Caruso, 2017, p. 6). The risk can be experienced as a cycle. Just as homelessness increases risk of arrest and crime victimization, incarceration increases the risk of someone staying or becoming homeless. One study found that "upon release from prison those who were previously homeless often return to homelessness while many others experience homelessness for the first time" (Caruso, 2017, p. 7). Additionally, mortgage foreclosures and vacancies "have been associated with increased violent crimes" (Kondo et al., 2018, p. 255). Humphrey et al. (2019) similarly found "that neighborhoods with more vacancy are associated with higher crime" (p. 1). Housing instability and homelessness is related to increased risk of apprehension and victimization, and incarceration can increase the risk of housing instability and homelessness.

Exploitative employment may be associated with unsafety.

One review of scholarly literature explored the connection between job prospects and risk of violence. They concluded that there is an increased risk of violence depending on the characteristics of labor market opportunities. Specifically, in areas where union manufacturing jobs are scarcer than in previous generations, and where educational disparities meant that youth are not equally prepared for jobs that are not "demeaning, insecure, and exploitative," youth are more likely to join gangs and contribute to unsafe communities (Cramer, 2011, pp. 9-10). This source hypothesized that where there "are no structured institutional mechanisms for people in employment to express their complaints and to press for improved conditions or for conflict resolution with the employment relation, the chances that these problems are 'referred' in the form of one or another type of violence may

increase," (p. 24), though the exact mechanism of the connection between exploitative employment prospects and increased risk of violence is a subject for further study.

Education contributes to community safety.

Research shows that education and safety are linked. First, community members in one study suggest that schools should change "policies to become more equitable, to support prevention and intervention strategies, and to promote restorative and healing practices rather than punitive ones," as doing so "is essential for establishing social norms that promote, rather than undermine, community health and safety" (Prevention Institute, 2015, pp. 11, 21). Also, they identified mentoring as a method of promoting safety and said that failing and deteriorating schools is a contributor to increased crime (Prevention Institute, 2015). Community wisdom is that schools can contribute to community safety by being places where students have the same likelihood of achieving academic success, and where students can learn positive ways to manage stress and deal with conflict.

Further, a literature review of attributes of safe and unsafe communities found that "feeling a sense of connectedness to one's school has been shown to be one of the most important protective factors against violent behavior and other risky behaviors" (Willman & Makisaka, 2010, p. 33). Where students are welcomed and feel connected to their school, they are protected against violent and risky behaviors. An additional analysis of community attributes and crime statistics found that "the percentage of professionals in a community served as a buffer against violence" (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 4). This suggests that higher rates of academic and career success at the community level can also protect against violence.

Education has a role to play in not just preventing crime and undesirable behavior, but also in behavior interventions. A literature review of educational opportunities and recidivism found that "participation in prison education, including academic and vocational programming, was associated with an over 40% reduction in recidivism – while also saving $4 to $5 for each dollar spent" (Caruso, 2017, p. 8). Recidivism is usually defined as a second criminal conviction following punishment for a first. Educational programming for people experiencing incarceration can greatly reduce the risk of further criminal convictions after release, which contributes to safe communities – and taxpayer savings.

Health care services promote public safety.

Academic studies find a positive connection between access to health care services and community safety. A review of indicators of community violence risk factors found that "access to mental health and substance abuse services is a protective factor for child abuse and neglect and suicide." It also concluded that communities with more hospital beds,

primary care and general practice physicians, and chiropractors were more able to detect and intervene in elder abuse (Armstead et al., 2019, pp. 3-4). Another study found that the availability of public health services at the neighborhood level "can protect against the propensity for violence" (Willman & Makisaka, 2010, p. 8).

Community members in one study identified Indigenous healing services as a factor that can build community safety. Indigenous healing services are those that remedy trauma, are appropriate for people at every life stage, and draw on cultural frames, practices, and strengths (Prevention Institute, 2015). This supports the idea that health care should not just be available, but also culturally relevant.

Built environment attributes can advance public safety.

The built environment is the human-made world. One community perspective is that improving the built environment through community design can promote public safety (Prevention Institute, 2015).

Many studies explore the connection between aspects of the built environment and crime, and empirical research proves community's point. First, direct investments in the publicly run parts of the built environment yield public safety benefits. In Philadelphia, a case-control study found that "the presence of street lighting, illuminated walk/don't walk signs, painted crosswalks, public transportation, parks, and maintained vacant lots were significantly associated with at least 76% decreased odds of a homicide" (Kondo et al., 2018, p. 255). A number of other studies have also shown that "in poor or blighted environments, mitigating dilapidated housing through the remediation of open doors and windows and the cleaning and greening of vacant parcels can significantly decrease gun violence and other forms of violence" (Kondo et al, 2018, p. 266). "Greening" vacant lots has also been associated "with a reduction in gun assaults and vandalism" (Humphrey et al, 2019, p. 8). There is a relationship between well-lit and maintained streets, public transportation, parks and vacant lots, and lower rates of murder, violence, and other crime. This may bolster findings that structural violence – a symptom of which may be poorly lit and maintained public areas – can increase the risk of interpersonal violence.

The types of services and businesses in a neighborhood also can impact public safety. Coffee shops and other locations where community members can gather have been shown in longitudinal studies to "precipitate avenues of effective social control, thereby leading to lower crime rates" (Wo, 2016, p. 1303). Studies also find that, "Voluntary organizations reduce crime in neighborhoods over time. Such organizations importantly provide services, resources, activities, and events in neighborhoods" (Wo, 2018, p. 2). These crime-control benefits extend to a ½ mile radius from the location of the organization, which means that "voluntary organizations exert protective effects on crime that is

broader in spatial scale" than the deleterious effects of bars, check-cashing stores, and pawn shops (Wo, 2018, p. 20). Built environment changes that prioritize creating places where community can connect and help each other build public safety, and do more to build that safety than features such as bars, check-cashing business, and pawn shops do to promote crime.

Physical disorder and substance availability are related to lack of safety.

Factors in the built environment can contribute to heightened risk of crime and other social problems. A study of physical disorder at the neighborhood level found that "physical disorder was significantly and positively associated with rates of crime, firearm injuries and deaths, and teen births, while controlling for concentrated poverty" (Armstead et al., 2019, p. 4). Additionally, studies found that "high density of alcohol outlets and high drug availability increase the risk of firearm homicide," (Kondo et al., 2018, p. 255) and alcohol outlets influence violent crime more generally (Wo, 2016). Poorly maintained public spaces are related to higher rates of crime, violence, and teen pregnancy, even when controlling for other risky conditions like poverty. The availability of alcohol and drugs also increases the risk of violence.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this literature review, we recommend:

Centering the voices of communities most impacted by violence and criminal legal system involvement in government. Evidence shows that community engagement is related to community safety. There is a direct relationship between higher levels of coordinating with community on public safety and lower crime rates. There are also indirect relationships: drawing on community wisdom can mean that crime prevention efforts will be more successful at addressing the root causes of undesirable behavior. To best advance community safety, we recommend robust community engagement in public safety, crime prevention, and crime intervention system design, implementation, and tracking.

Increasing research into the social conditions for community safety. There are crime prevention benefits to investment in a number of seemingly unrelated mechanisms, from efforts to boost community engagement in government to cleaning up parks and attracting voluntary organizations to a neighborhood. However, the community safety benefits of these types of public investments are not always explored. We recommend that funders, government, and researchers pursue opportunities to understand the crime prevention or community safety impacts of positive community investments. For funders, this could mean prioritizing applying public health frameworks to criminological research. For government, this could mean investigating whether and how crime rates change with shifts in funding for schools, housing, health care, transportation, community engagement, youth development, parks and recreation, and other services. For researchers, this could mean working with clients to investigate the safety implications of participant involvement in different programs, or to build community safety return on investment investigations into program evaluation projects.

Increasing government investment in social conditions that promote community safety and prevent crime. This literature review illuminates many positive ways to advance community safety and prevent crime. We recommend robust investment in these and other crime prevention mechanisms. Where there is perceived scarcity in funding, we recommend decreasing reliance on punitive responses to criminal behaviors and shifting those resources to invest in community engagement, economic equity, education, health care access, the creation of a well-maintained built environment, and other crime prevention and community safety mechanisms. Put another way, a question for government could be, "Do we want to pay a little to advance educational equity, or a lot to deal with increased risks of violence, as well as police, courts, and jails or prisons?"

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