REDEFINING COMMUNITY SAFETY IN THREE US COUNTIES: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Everyone wants to feel safe in their community. Yet, little is known about what safety looks and feels like to people in the community. Discussions among policymakers and in the media often emphasize crime rates as a key measure of community safety and the criminal legal system as the primary means of achieving this goal. This conceptualization overlooks the perspectives and experiences of people most impacted by violence, high rates of police enforcement, and mass incarceration, many of whom are people of color. Allowing communities to define safety enables them to tailor this definition to their needs and values and to identify their priorities for action, ultimately helping to advance the goal of safety for all.

This report explores the meaning of community safety for people who live and work in three US counties (Missoula County, Montana; St. Louis County, Missouri; and Mecklenburg County, North Carolina) by documenting local dynamics of crime and the criminal legal system from the perspectives of stakeholders and the media. To understand the portrayal of crime trends in the media, we conducted a media analysis of local news sources in each site and identified the causes of and solutions to crime present in these sources. To develop a new conceptualization of community safety, we surveyed people about what this term means to them and then solicited a group of local stakeholders who are most impacted by crime and the criminal legal system (e.g., people who work in the criminal legal system, system-impacted individuals, and people who work with system-impacted people) to help organize and make sense of these responses. A Community Safety Concept Map was generated that has 11 components, which can be categorized into five domains or "regions."

Community Safety Concept Map

Personal Safety & Security
- Freedom from Violence and other Harms
- Day-to-Day Feelings of Safety

Thriving & Socially Connected Community
- Sense of Community
- Investments in infrastructure and Programming

Systems for Preventing & Addressing Harm
- Fair and Ethical Policing
- Accountability for Harm

REDEFINING COMMUNITY SAFETY

Resources for a Socially & Economically Just Community
- Social and Economic Justice
- Access to Supportive Services

Responsive Government & Public Safety Agencies
- Gun Violence Prevention
- Responsive, Ethical, and Transparent Government
- Comprehensive and Effective Emergency Responses

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Personal safety and security are at the heart of community safety, yet the types of harm and day-to-day hassles that most concern residents vary based on life experiences.** For example, system-impacted and unhoused individuals and people of color discussed feeling unsafe because they perceive that they receive lower-quality emergency services than others. These differences underscore that conversations about community safety must be inclusive and include the perspectives of marginalized groups, as their safety concerns may require different policies and actions.

- **Media coverage of crime trends predominantly featured the perspectives of government officials and criminal legal system actors, while the perspectives of system-impacted individuals were rarer.** Increased violence was often attributed to root social causes (e.g., mental health issues, substance use, poverty); however, the solutions presented were just as likely or more likely to rely on the criminal legal system. Although many factors shape news coverage, these selective narratives have significant sway over public perceptions of violence.

- **Survey respondents rated all the components of community safety as important or very important.** Recognizing the overlap of safety with other priorities, such as ensuring basic needs are met, can help promote and sustain collaboration among agencies. The results also highlight the importance of including organizations outside the criminal legal system when discussing and addressing community safety.

- **Viewpoints on the role of the criminal legal system in promoting community safety are often nuanced and conflicting.** A common theme was that the criminal legal system is a key partner in community safety, but current systems can be unjust, ineffective, and harmful to people and communities.

- **Safety cannot be measured with a narrow set of indicators.** Participants recognized that administrative data (e.g., crime statistics) and perceptual measures typically collected with surveys, have their strengths and weaknesses. Triangulation of multiple data sources will provide the most nuanced and representative understanding of community safety.

- **Community safety should be a collective responsibility**, not just the responsibility of the police and/or the people who live in areas most impacted by crime, violence, and high levels of enforcement. Participants felt that everyone benefits when people work together to reduce violence and other harms; however, some believed that the burden of crime and the responsibility for increasing safety are not equally distributed in the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Frame conversations around "community safety" instead of "public safety"** to help people think more expansively about safety and methods for advancing this goal.

- **Educate people on what a more inclusive and equitable vision of safety can look like.** The media and other stakeholders often focus on a very narrow conceptualization of safety that overlooks the voices of people closest to the problem and fails to capture positive changes in the community, like increased access to resources and services, improved feelings of safety, and a stronger sense of belonging.

- **Identify local priorities and structure future action steps using the Community Safety Concept Map** generated from this research.

- **Solicit the perspectives of a representative group of individuals from the community, including those most affected by crime and the criminal legal system.** Replicate this work with groups not represented in this project, such as youth and rural populations.

- **Work with local media to ensure the voices of those most impacted by crime and the criminal legal system are represented in news coverage.** Encourage the media to follow best practices when reporting.

- **Make data on community safety easily accessible to the public.** Creating a dashboard or website that makes a variety of safety-related indicators readily available can empower communities to assess their progress toward achieving safety and help keep local leaders accountable.

- **Use the Toolkit for Prioritizing and Measuring Community Safety to facilitate conversations around reimagining community safety.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:
- Redefining Community Safety in Three U.S. Counties
- Community Safety Concept Map
- Toolkit for Prioritizing and Measuring Community Safety
- Media Narratives on Increasing Violence in St. Louis County and Mecklenburg County