

The Community Well-Being & Public Safety Framework

Part 1: Using Community Well-Being Indicators as Early Signals

Data Stories seeks to illuminate how data and analytics can advance criminal justice reform

Key Takeaways

- **Community well-being and public safety are interdependent.**
Improving safety requires strengthening the systems that support stability, health, and opportunity.
- **Indicators should be examined together.**
Analyzing community well-being indicators (such as rent burden and 311 complaints) alongside public safety indicators (like reported crime and victimization surveys) reveals patterns that are invisible when analyzed separately.
- **Use integrated indicators to act early.**
Identifying neighborhoods under strain before harm escalates allows jurisdictions to align systems and resources to address everyday problems, and measure what responses systematically reduce harm.

A Partnership Built on Data Innovation

Along with the leading national pretrial data and analytics company Luminosity, Inc., the New York City Criminal Justice Agency (CJA) has built significant data infrastructure to support criminal justice innovation and greater public understanding of the criminal justice process. Through face-to-face interviews with over 150,000 individuals being arrested and prosecuted every year – and with dedicated data feeds from the New York Office of Court Administration and the New York City Police Department – CJA has put together a comprehensive view of the process from arrest to arraignment and ultimately to the final disposition of cases coming through the New York City courts.

The same rigor that CJA and Luminosity have applied to understanding New York City's pretrial population now informs our exploration and adoption of a new approach: **the Community Well-Being and Public Safety Framework (the Framework)**.

This paper is the first in a series of three reports exploring how integrated data can advance community well-being and public safety. The second report will examine the data and analytical approach behind the Framework – including how community well-being and public safety indicators can be brought together and what the CJA and Luminosity partnership makes possible. The third will turn to practical application, using community health indicators alongside incarceration data to identify neighborhoods showing key warning signs and to guide intervention.

Overview of the Community Well-Being and Public Safety Framework

Community well-being is how well a neighborhood supports people's everyday lives — whether families can stay housed, meet basic needs, stay healthy, connect with others, and access reliable schools, services, and safe public spaces. Public safety is the extent to which people are protected from harm in daily life, including in homes and relationships, in public spaces, and through local institutions and broader systems — not only through traditional crime measures.

Community well-being and public safety are interdependent in ways that can make safety easier or harder to sustain. Improving safety, therefore, requires strengthening the systems that support stability, health, and opportunity. Analyzing community well-being indicators — such as housing stability, income, rent burden, 311 complaints, and school quality — alongside public safety indicators reveals patterns and pressures that are invisible when analyzed separately. The potential power of this approach lies in creating an integrated early warning system capable of identifying neighborhood strain before it escalates into serious harm.

In stable neighborhoods, well-being and safety tend to reinforce each other — reliable housing, services, and public spaces keep small problems from escalating.¹ In neighborhoods under strain, violence and instability feed back into daily life, eroding trust and connection, and making it harder for families and businesses to stay rooted.² As Figure 1 shows, these dynamics are

not tradeoffs: the same conditions that shape well-being also shape safety, and vice versa. Most people are taught to explain outcomes primarily through individual choices — a lens that misses how those choices are shaped by interacting influences at multiple levels, including neighborhood conditions and broader structural and historical forces that have been deeply and unequally shaped by race and class.³

Foundational Concepts Behind the Framework

Four important concepts underpin the Framework, illustrated in Figure 1:

- **Conditions shape safety, and safety shapes conditions.** Neighborhood conditions can either reduce everyday stress and conflict or amplify them. When violence rises, it can further weaken trust, stability, and connection, creating a cycle hard to break without investing in preventive measures.⁴
- **People shape their environments, and environments shape people.** Community well-being and public safety are tracked across four levels: individuals; daily settings such as home, school, and work; neighborhood conditions that reflect civic infrastructure; and structural and historical forces such as laws and policies.⁵
- **Every level contains a mix of protective strengths and real strain.** The goal is to tip the balance by strengthening protective factors and reducing conditions that fuel harm and escalation.⁶
- **Safety depends on early problem-solving capacity — through both relationships and institutions.** That capacity can be informal (neighbors, families, community groups) and formal (schools, housing management, service systems, and city agencies), working in ways that make small problems easier to solve early.

Together, these concepts frame community well-being and public safety as interconnected, dynamic, and responsive to early, coordinated action. Practically, this means treating violence as an outcome sensitive to related conditions and using community well-being indicators as both levers for change and early warning signals of neighborhood strain.

Cross-sector collaboration unlocks a more powerful approach to public safety — one that spots the warning signs of harm before they surface in crime statistics

Community Well-Being

Public Safety

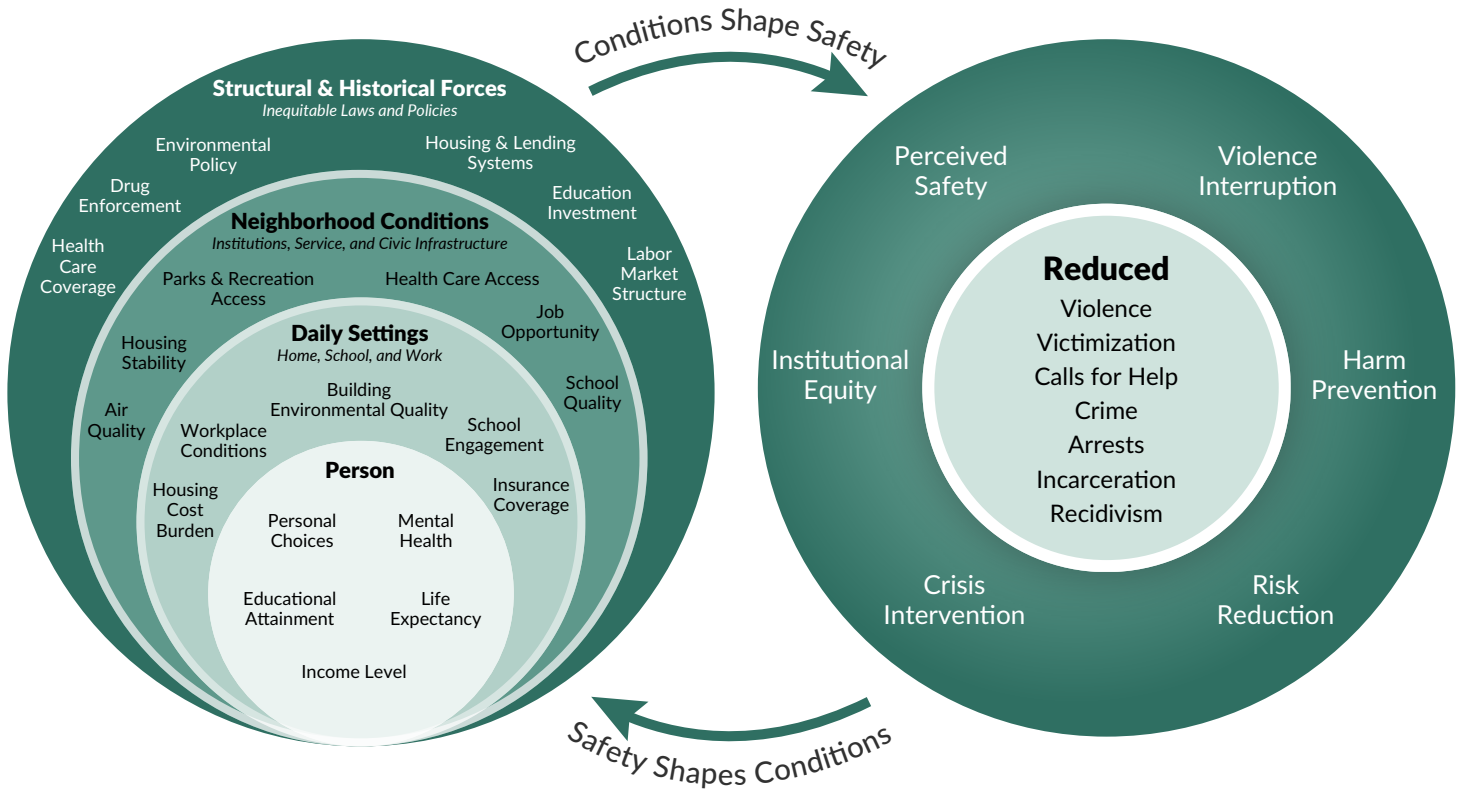


Figure 1: Community Well-Being & Public Safety Framework⁸

The Framework does not deny personal responsibility. Instead, it explains how responsibility is exercised within systems that shape available options, stress levels, and exposure to risk – and why the same individual decisions can lead to different outcomes depending on the neighborhood context. Importantly, neighborhoods are not determinative: they do not cause people to offend. Research has long shown that a small group of people is typically responsible for a disproportionate share of crime in any given neighborhood.⁷ A systems framework therefore views neighborhood safety in terms of the likelihood of harm (probability) and the degree to which people are exposed to risk.

Use Indicators as Early Warnings, Not Just Descriptions

Public safety indicators span multiple levels – from typical crime statistics like arson, shootings, and auto theft to structural-level crimes like wage theft. But their real value emerges when examined alongside

community well-being indicators, which often change before safety indicators do. Together, these measures reveal not just where harm is happening, but what conditions may be driving it and where earlier action could prevent escalation.

The most useful indicators tend to change before serious harm escalates, connect meaningfully to later violence or instability, and point toward action.⁹ Housing loss, for example, increases community stress and is associated with higher risk of firearm violence.¹⁰ Rising unemployment and deepening income insecurity – as tracked by tools like the Distressed Communities Index – signal reduced social buffers before harm surfaces in crime data.¹¹

Monitoring harm-escalation indicators within crime data adds another layer, helping decision-makers spot where risk is intensifying in specific places or situations.¹² Sustained increases, multiple signals moving together, and geographic clusters can identify neighborhood strain early enough to respond upstream – before the situation requires a purely reactive response.

Related Evidence

Ramsey County, MN

Starting in 2019, Ramsey County's public health, social services, public safety, and housing and economic development agencies launched an initiative to develop shared goals, make decisions together, and use data to coordinate interventions. Working in partnership with the communities most impacted, they made improving well-being and safety a proactive priority.¹³ Treating indicators as early warning signals can help jurisdictions replace the "pick one program" approach with a coordinated set of actions that reinforce each other.

Milwaukee, WI and Atlanta, GA

In both cities, emergency departments share non-clinical details about violent injuries — such as general location and timing — through a public health partnership. This data-sharing captures incidents that do not appear in police reports and provides insights into where harm is occurring. The cities then implement practical early interventions, including safer public-space design, outreach, and coordinated services, to strengthen neighborhood systems in places showing greater risk.¹⁴

The United Kingdom: The Cardiff Violence Prevention Model

The cities of Atlanta and Milwaukee have adapted an approach developed in the U.K. that provides strong evidence for acting on early indicators. Rigorous evaluations found that using anonymized emergency department data to inform prevention efforts was associated with a 42% reduction in violence-related hospital admissions compared with similar cities. Economic evaluations also showed substantial returns: a modest initial investment in establishing new data sharing protocols led to substantial criminal justice and public health cost savings.¹⁵

Looking Ahead

The early iterations piloted in Ramsey County, Milwaukee, Atlanta, and the United Kingdom are promising — but incomplete. What makes the Framework proposed here genuinely transformative is what becomes possible at full implementation: richer datasets drawn from across many domains, the potential for more strategic cross-agency coordination, and a more

systematic and integrated study of the effectiveness of cross-sector interventions.

A fully implemented Community Well-Being & Public Safety Framework would enable jurisdictions to respond intentionally to early warning signals — and to track whether those responses are actually reducing harm over time. When cross-agency data shows a cluster of housing stress, for example, relevant agencies can respond collaboratively — fixing urgent building problems, strengthening neighborhood supports and services, using policy and funding tools to prevent eviction and keep homes safe. Data would then track whether conditions improve, and crime and violence decline over time.

For many jurisdictions, integrating data across sectors remains a complex challenge, but the costs of continuing to rely on fragmented systems include missed opportunities for early intervention and the perpetuation of reactive responses. Advancing the Framework does not require perfect data or fully integrated systems from the outset. It requires identifying the correct signals, sharing an interpretation of risk and strain, and coordinating decision-making across agencies that influence daily living conditions. Even partial alignment — when indicators are examined together and acted on collectively — can improve the timing and effectiveness of responses.

The ultimate measure of progress should not be the sophistication of data visualizations alone. It should be whether everyday conditions improve — including fewer families facing housing instability, safer and more usable public spaces, more responsive services, and reductions in serious harm over time. Strengthening the connection between community well-being and public safety is not an abstract exercise; it is a practical strategy for improving quality of life across neighborhoods.

Communities that act on early warning signals coordinate reinforcing action across agencies — rather than relying on single-program fixes.

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