

# SOCIAL FABRIC: A NEW MODEL FOR PUBLIC SAFETY AND VITAL NEIGHBORHOODS

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REIMAGINE JUSTICE

Should the police own safety? For the past forty years, localities across the country have responded with a resounding “yes,” as the primary response to crime has been to call upon the police and criminal justice system. That approach has come with harms, long understood in communities of color and further underscored last summer by the protests in the wake of George Floyd’s death. These harms undermine the trust that should be the very foundation of any system of justice. This paper argues that there is a different and more durable model, based on the oldest of ideas and eminently doable, especially in this moment of pandemic-straitened budgets: tight-knit communities, where residents are brought together through local institutions and have access to basic civic resources, are the places where safety thrives.

Instead of police accreting more and more civic functions, local governments should knit together the resources shown to improve safety—from employment to vibrant public spaces. Under disciplined leadership, these services, of which police are one, should work arm in arm with the other institutions also present in neighborhoods every day—neighborhood groups and families—that play an important role in defusing violence. Using New York City as an example, the report shows how re-orienting our approach to achieving safety by strengthening the social fabric is very much within reach. The New York City budget demonstrates the opportunity: as arrests and incarceration dropped by half over the past seven years, the

budgets for criminal justice agencies increased by over 17 percent in real dollars, with New Yorkers paying 161 percent more per person arrested and 118 percent more per person incarcerated. More safety and wellbeing could be achieved by investing in the full spectrum of safety-creating strategies.

## A NEW MODEL

### 1. A Restructured City Budget

A city’s budget should produce the most safety for every dollar invested. By this measure, an array of approaches supported by rigorous evidence would form the core of the city’s public safety program, creating a broad civic strategy to increase residents’ wellbeing of which arrest, prosecution, incarceration, and community corrections are an ever-shrinking piece.

### 2. A Deputy Mayor for Justice Policy and Operations

Municipal governments should task a high-ranking civilian official, such as a deputy mayor, with mobilizing the city’s public safety resources—including law enforcement as just one part—and working side-by-side with communities in shaping and implementing a different model of safety.

### 3. New York City Demonstration Project

New York City should put these concepts to the test with a local demonstration project. A new coalition—composed of residents and local organizations and supported by government resources—must become the primary institution responsible for public safety and community wellbeing.



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