



GRASSROOTS & ANTI-OPPRESSIVE APPROACHES TO SAFETY

BY DAGEN PERROTT & JULIE CHAMBERLAIN

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This report was initiated by the South Valour Residents Association (SVRA), which was formed in 2020 in the west end of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The SVRA's mission is to foster community well-being in South Valour, connecting residents to build an inclusive and supportive neighbourhood. The SVRA's vision is of a thriving community where everyone feels they belong. Everything the SVRA does is driven by values of inclusivity, positivity, collaboration, care, and being evidence informed.

For more info, find the South Valour Residents Association on [Facebook](#), or at: <https://south-valour-residents-association.mailchimpsites.com/>



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About the authors:

Dagen Perrott is an undergraduate student in Conflict Resolution and Urban and Inner-City Studies at the University of Winnipeg.

Julie Chamberlain is an Assistant Professor in Urban and Inner-City Studies at the University of Winnipeg.

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“How can we best know or measure how safe a person or community is? Any measurement will be informed by a way of conceptualizing what safety is, and, as we have seen, there can be disparity among understandings of safety”
(Harbin, 2017, p. 172).

Introduction

What are anti-oppressive, grassroots approaches to talking about and acting on community safety? What evidence-informed strategies are appropriate at a neighbourhood level? Initiated by the South Valour Residents Association in Winnipeg, Manitoba, this broad review of scholarly research and community initiatives demonstrates that there are many good answers to these questions.

This review was designed to help inform community groups who want to discuss safety in their neighbourhood and take steps to enhance it. The review begins by outlining how we interpreted anti-oppression for the purpose of the review. The first section then focuses on ways of understanding safety, and on approaches to discussing it. As we outline, our feelings and beliefs about safety, crime, and harm impact the conversations we can have in community. The second half of the review focuses on approaches to creating safety. We introduce and explain each

approach, and then give examples of how it can be put into practice.

What do we mean by anti-oppressive?

At its core, anti-oppressive means exactly what it sounds like: challenging oppression and inequity where it exists, in whatever field or community you're in. This literature review takes an approach to anti-oppression that is based in some of the key values of the South Valour Residents Association. Those values include: *positivity, collaboration, inclusivity, and care*. We looked at approaches to discussing and doing safety that were positive or strength-based, meaning that the strategies should build people and communities up by drawing on their existing assets and gifts. To be collaborative, safety should involve people of various backgrounds in an inclusive way. We considered sources inclusive if they showed an awareness of the inequities of our society, including inequities created through structures of capitalism, settler-colonialism, racism, patriarchy, cis-heteronormativity, and

ability¹ that can be reproduced or challenged in our everyday actions. Care in the context of anti-oppression was taken to mean that well informed and reflexive actions can help reduce oppression and create safety for all. As a result, this review reflects how safety can be understood in many ways and how communities can implement creative methods of providing it for all.

What is safety?

Safety can be about care, connection, a warm feeling, building community, and being unafraid of the unknown. Safety can also be about discomfort: amplifying our fear of danger, dividing us, creating borders, and reinforcing isolation. Often, many contradictory elements appear together in our discussions and pursuits of safety: a park might for example be both a relaxing shortcut in the day and a dangerous obstacle at night; a CCTV camera might both discourage crime and make us feel that a place is more dangerous than it actually is. Community-based approaches to safety for all require critical thinking about what we mean when we say ‘safety,’ which we discuss in this section.

¹ For some starting points on how these structures impact Canadian safety in inequitable ways consider *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to Present* (Maynard, 2017) or *All Our*

Safety is a Shared Resource

An anti-oppressive approach to safety focuses on how we can all *share* and collectively experience safety, rather than using methods that only enhance the security of a *select few*.

If we increase the vulnerability of one person to benefit another’s sense of security, then it is not actually creating safety. Safety comes from stronger relationships, community supports, and addressing the root causes.

Safety as a Shared Good

An anti-oppressive approach to safety understands and measures safety as a shared resource, rather than as an exchangeable or individual good (Harbin, 2017; Hughes, 2003). When you think of possessing safety *individually*, there is pressure to either sacrifice or prioritize your own safety for another’s (Harbin, 2017). This leads to safety initiatives that only protect or care for certain demographics or groups within a community. Instead we can direct our discussions and approaches towards increasing the safety of all community members (Harbin, 2017). For

Relations: Finding the Path Forward (Talaga, 2018). For a more historic and academic look at how safety is deeply political consider *Bearing Witness to Crime and Social Justice* (Quinney, 2001).

example: shared safety is the safety that comes from building stronger relationships, addressing the root causes of harm or crime, enhancing community supports, and using restorative process when harm does occur (Harbin, 2017).

Tied to safety is the idea of vulnerability, the experience of social insecurity and harm. Some researchers suggest vulnerability is an inherent aspect of being human and a result of living in physical bodies (Brown, 2017). Others say it is the result of our uncontrolled openness to being affected by and affecting others, in both positive and negative ways (Cousens, 2020; Harbin, 2017). The impacts of vulnerability are heightened by social inequality and institutional forces that individual people only have so much ability to control (Brown, 2017).

Vulnerability may be a natural part of being human, but we can experience the negative impacts of vulnerability in inequitable ways. Vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of a particular group or individual, it is a result of power dynamics that limit some people's agency to navigate external factors in their safety and well-being (Brown, 2017; Cousens, 2020). For example, women are not inherently more vulnerable to certain crimes because they are women, but

because of patriarchal power structures that create vulnerability.

These insights can inform community conversations about safety in two key ways, encouraging us to: 1) focus on how we can share and expand safety to be as inclusive as possible, rather than concentrate it in one place, person, or group; 2) recognize that we cannot get rid of all vulnerability, but we can reduce the negative impacts by addressing power relations as well as individual actions.

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Distinguishing between Facts, Feelings, and Beliefs about Safety

Feelings of safety, beliefs about what creates safety, and facts of safety are separate, but connected concepts that we can take into account in our community conversations (Harbin, 2017). Our feelings and beliefs about safety are often poorly aligned with the facts of safety, which is to say the actual amount of harm and of crime within our neighbourhoods. Feelings of safety, especially fear of crime, impact how we spend our money, where we go, and our health and wellbeing. Our beliefs about what creates

safety informs the policies we lobby for, the places we volunteer, and the solutions we put forward. As a result, we need to pay attention to our feelings and beliefs when we plan safety strategies for our community.

Facts of Safety vs. Fear of Crime

Current research on the facts of safety offers three major insights to inform community discussions:²

- 1) Violent crime has been steadily decreasing globally since the 1990s, especially in Western liberal democracies such as Canada (Costelloe et al., 2009; Patterson, 2015; Weimann-Saks et al., 2022)
- 2) Responding to harm with punishment or retributive justice³ does not reduce crime (Dean, 2014; McKinsey et al., 2022; Patterson, 2015)
- 3) There are many prominent factors in crime, including trauma, criminalization, environmental context, and structural disadvantages that limit people's access to safe

housing, stable employment, and social security (Lynch, 2016; McKinsey et al., 2022).

The evidence contradicts our commonly held beliefs about safety that are based in a fear of crime and the fear of people who are stereotyped as dangerous or criminal.

The facts of safety contradict our commonly held beliefs about safety that are based in a fear of crime and fear of people who are stereotyped as dangerous or criminal.

Researchers have not found clear links between fear levels and actual crime rates (Becker, 2014; Fernandes, 2018; Rader et al., 2020). Fear of crime is mostly driven by subjective perceptions, but it has direct negative impacts on physical health and social wellbeing: it causes stress and chronic health problems, it impacts people's sense of mobility, and disrupts social ties (Burt et al., 2022; Hanslmaier et al., 2018; Pain, 2001; Parenti, 2000; Rader et al., 2020; Stone, 2006). Fear of crime has in some cases been shown to increase with direct experiences of

² Most research on safety focuses on how services, community values, and urban design impacts the rate of crime. This has several significant limitations. Crime is a social construction of a state and reflects the values of specific demographics or classes (Quinney, 2001; Zehr, 1990, 1994). Many forms of violence and harm exist outside of the concept of crime, such as structural or cultural violence (Galtung & Fischer, 2013). Some

types of crime are poorly captured within statistics, such as gender-based violence (Pain, 2000, 2001). For these reasons and more, official statistics on the crime rate are not a fully reliable measure of safety.

³ Retributive justice is a term describing justice approaches where the state or other professionals own the criminal process and punishment is the primary method of achieving justice (Zehr, 1994).

violence or crime (Price-Spratlen & Santoro, 2011). However, certain demographics, such as white men, who on average experience lower rates of victimization, display a disproportionate fear of crime (Hartnagel & Templeton, 2012; Rader et al., 2020). Researchers then suggest fear of crime is influenced more by other factors, such as the sensationalizing of crime within media and individuals' sense of social insecurity (Chamberlen & Carvalho, 2022; Costelloe et al., 2009; Leverentz, 2011). Fear of crime is also heightened by perceptions of physical disorder within a neighbourhood (Burt et al., 2022; Fernandes, 2018; Hanslmaier et al., 2018) and by both how vulnerable people think they are and more objective measures of poor health that impacts people's mobility or independence (Hanslmaier et al., 2018; Rader et al., 2020). Some researchers have found evidence that fear of crime and punitive attitudes are connected, suggesting that shifting views of punishment can reduce fear of crime (Hartnagel & Templeton, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Sparks, 2021).

While fear of crime has important impacts on people, it can be problematic when centred in discussions of safety. People can confuse discomfort in a particular place with actual imminent danger, and it can be difficult to challenge their perceptions (Harbin, 2017;

Jackie, 2012). However, fear and discomfort are often rooted in our upbringing and education within a racist and classist society that has particularly taught white people to avoid People of Colour and Indigenous people, and to see Black and Brown people, especially men, as threats (Harbin, 2017; Jackie, 2012).

Discomfort and fear of crime have often been used as a justification for the segregation of space and exclusion of people who are perceived as dangerous, even though those who are excluded are also vulnerable (England & Simon, 2010; Hanslmaier et al., 2018; Pain, 2000; Shirlow & Pain, 2003). Specifically, the fear of crime is commonly rooted in perceptions of the supposed inherent danger posed by people of a certain 'race' or ethnicity (Becker, 2014; Day, 1999; Harbin, 2017; Pain, 2001), a certain gender (Day, 1999; Pain, 1991, 2001) or age (Hanslmaier et al., 2018; Pain, 2001), or people who have a lack of housing (Shirlow & Pain, 2003). Fear of crime has been used to justify the removal of people experiencing homelessness from public spaces such as parks, for example (England & Simon, 2010; Shirlow & Pain, 2003). Reducing fear of crime is important to social and physical wellbeing and to sense of safety, but it should be pursued with caution.

Our beliefs about what makes us safe are often tied to our fear of crime and an assumption that punishment will deter or reduce harm. There are several ways to shift beliefs around what creates safety or danger:

- 1) Recognize that people's anger, worry, or fear of victimization is real, but not necessarily connected to actual rates of harm;
- 2) Remember that harm can be done and is done by everyone, not just an imagined other;
- and 3) Understand that crime or harm is not always a rational choice made to hurt someone, but can be a sign of someone struggling to survive (Courage - It Looks Good On You, n.d.-b). For some communities, shifting beliefs around what makes us safe can be as important as starting or increasing safety initiatives.

SAFETY IS A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OR BELONGING WITHIN A COMMUNITY, IT IS BOTH SOMETHING YOU PARTICIPATE IN AND DO (SYVIXAY, 2017)

Feelings of Safety

A focus on fear of crime encourages talking about safety in negative terms, as a lack or absence of something. It also encourages muddling up safety and security, as though they are the same thing. Researchers argue, though, that safety is broader than just security.

Security tends to focus on protection from physical violence or property crime, especially through bordering, patrolling, and surveilling to keep out danger from 'outside' the community (Davies, 2015; Okechukwu, 2021). Security conjures images of urgency or danger which can override social norms and evidence-informed process in community conversations (Crawford, 2013).

Researchers and community experts show that safety is much more than security. Safety is an active and positive experience. A safe community is one with a high quality of life, with vibrant food, culture, good walkability, friendly faces, secure jobs, and a sense of belonging (Courage - It Looks Good On You, n.d.-a). Safety feels like knowing and working with your neighbours (Justice for Families, 2013; May Day Collective & Solidarity & Defense, 2017; Zimmerman, 2018). Safety is felt when there are usable sidewalks for strollers, minimal physical hazards, recreation spaces, health and wellness opportunities, places that demonstrate the strength of a community, and

a sense of investment in the neighbourhood (Davis et al., 2020). Feelings of safety arise from having access to public space and facilities without being policed or surveilled (Meucci & Redmon, 1997; Nayak, 2003). We can even feel safer after we have been harmed, if we receive strong community support, validation of our story, and demonstrations of accountability (Kim, 2010; Law, 2011). Ultimately, safety is a sense of ownership or belonging within a community. It is both something you participate in and do (Syvixay, 2017). In other words, the feeling of safety is an active experience that comes from trust, relationships, social connections, and familiarity. It can be disrupted by harm or victimization, but under the right circumstances will not be destroyed.

What should we keep in mind when we talk about safety?

Based on this section we can understand that safety is experienced through an active process of caring and being cared for: familiarity, trust, and support. Attempting to create safety through security initiatives that only protect some are bound to only divide and isolate communities. However, because of the connections between our beliefs, fears, and understandings of harm, discussions of safety are complex.

Six Reflective Questions

The research evidence points to several reflective questions that can enhance discussions about safety from an anti-oppressive perspective:

- 1) Are we discussing safety as something that should benefit everyone?
- 2) Are we recognizing that harm and vulnerability are natural and experienced and perpetuated by everyone?
- 3) Are we centring what makes us feel safe instead our fear or discomfort?
- 4) Are we centring community-building that actively keeps us all safe and addresses vulnerabilities, instead of securing the neighbourhood against outsiders?
- 5) If discussing crime, are we talking about actual rates of crime or our fear of crime?
- 6) If discussing fear of crime, are we critically reflecting on the role of prejudice in our fear and discomfort?

How can We Create Safety in our Neighbourhood?

There are many grassroots approaches to creating safety. We have collected some of the more prominent strategies in six categories: 1) community development of social capital; 2) public and green space; 3) community connections; 4) emergency responses; 5) harm reduction; and 6) street outreach. These strategies provide a spectrum of tactics, engaging with safety and security, prevention and response, which can be used based on what best fits the context and concerns.

SOCIAL CAPITAL IS “A TYPE OF RESOURCE (SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS) THAT FACILITATES ACTION (E.G. CULTIVATING TRUST, SHARING INFORMATION)” (NEAL, 2015, P. 370).

Building Social Capital

Social networks, trust, and relationships contribute to the safety and the overall wellbeing of a community. This idea is increasingly studied through the lens of “social capital.” Social capital is the strength of communal relationships (Phillips & Pittman, 2009), a source of power based in the integration of people (Boulding, 1989), and a set of social-relational resources that uses trust and reciprocity to increase the wellbeing of a community (Binik et al., 2019; Hustedde,

2009). Social capital is “a type of resource (social relationships) that facilitates action (e.g. cultivating trust, sharing information)” (Neal, 2015, p. 370). Social capital is the resource that makes it possible to borrow hardware tools from your neighbour, get a ride to a store, or have someone watch your kid for an afternoon. Social capital cannot replace the need for equitable distribution of resources

between communities and neighbourhoods, but it can mitigate inequity by maximizing the value of existing assets and adding on additional intangible supports (Baycan & Öner, 2022; Price-Spratlen & Santoro, 2011).

Social capital has been further divided into two types: bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital refers to resources gained through expanding social relationships between groups (Haines, 2009; Neal, 2015; Phillips & Pittman, 2009). In practice, bridging social capital can be built through a community event organized by multiple religious groups, a solidarity action between

labour advocates and Indigenous land defenders, or an ongoing coalition between various residents' associations. In all cases, bridging social capital is the resources gained by connecting with other people across a certain social or geographical divide.

Bonding social capital refers to the resources gained through reinforcing the social relationships within a group (Haines, 2009; Neal, 2015; Phillips & Pittman, 2009). In practice, this might be built through a block party, an afterschool program for youth, or regularly attending neighbourhood meetings. Bonding social capital is inward facing, increasing the degree of emotional and material support able to be offered within a group.

In many cases, both types of social capital will be built together. For example, a youth book club or organizing around a vacant lot will bring together people with some common interest, and potentially diverse backgrounds, strengthening the cohesion of the group and expanding the network of people they have access to. Zachary Neal (2015) argues that diverse neighbourhoods where individuals have strong ingroup connections but are actively open to connecting with those viewed as having social differences have the greatest potential for social capital.

Building and bridging social capital can be built together. For example, organizing around a vacant lot will bring together people with common interest, and potentially diverse backgrounds, strengthening the cohesion of the group while also expanding the network of people they have access to.

A high level of social capital is linked to safety through improved community capacity for action, whether addressing disorder or engaging in community development, which in turn can lead to a greater sense of safety (Bogar & Beyer, 2016; Matsukawa & Tatsuki, 2018; Price-Spratlen & Santoro, 2011; Sabol et al., 2004). Others have suggested social capital, mediated by the degree to which a community is actively and effectively working together, creates an informal social control that discourages crime (Binik et al., 2019). Greater social capital has been shown to improve wellbeing markers, such as community livability for youth and elders (Matsukawa & Tatsuki, 2018; Mullenbach et al., 2022). Increased social capital has also been shown to reduce both fear of crime and the amount of actual crime (Binik et al., 2019; Matsukawa & Tatsuki, 2018).

There are critiques of social capital and its relationship to safety. The use of the

word ‘capital’ may suggest it is a resource to be bought and sold, where instead it describes the measure of trust and connection within or between groups (Claridge, 2018). People may ignore a community’s isolation, marginalization, or disinvestment in favour of blaming the problems on a lack of social capital (Sabol et al., 2004). Much research has also focused only on social capital’s positive impacts (Baycan & Öner, 2022) and does not have consistent definitions or measurements (Claridge, 2018). This suggests the research may be overly optimistic and we should be cautious of approaching social capital as a cure all for social and economic ills. Instead, it is one piece of a larger puzzle in improving the safety and wellbeing of neighbourhoods.

One method of building social capital is connecting the existing communities and assets within a neighbourhood. This can be done comprehensively through asset-mapping projects, such as between faith communities in Manitoba (Coalition of Manitoba Cultural Communities for Families, n.d.) or across multiple neighbourhoods in the City of Edmonton (Vibrant Communities, n.d.). It can also be done through interviews, surveys, walks and other participatory forms of gathering information on the community (Love My Hood, n.d.). Asset mapping strengthens social capital by enhancing

awareness of what is already being done in the community and connecting groups who might otherwise be unaware of each other.

An effective approach to social capital is well documented in Manitoba’s long history of neighbourhood renewal corporations (NRCs) who have had measurable impacts on social capital and safety (EKOS, 2010; The Coalition of Manitoba Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations, 2016). NRCs have used safety audits, community kitchens, support groups, and advocacy for improvements to the built environment as methods of improving the safety of their neighbourhoods (EKOS, 2010; The Coalition of Manitoba Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations, 2016). These safety initiatives involved participatory processes in which residents gained social capital by working with neighbours and NRCs.

Building social capital and community development are deeply connected processes. Well-maintained green spaces, parks, and public areas can improve social capital (Aiyer et al., 2015; Bogar & Beyer, 2016; Mullenbach et al., 2022). Improvements to the built environment that reduce perceived disorder such as landscaping and improved sightlines lead to enhanced social capital (Day et al., 2007; Hanslmaier et al., 2018). Urban design that encourages street level interactions can

also contribute to greater community connections (Aiyer et al., 2015; Jacobs, 1989). Art-based approaches to programming and community-building have also been shown to improve social capital (Lipsitz, 2017).

Cultivating Greenspace

While well-maintained green space has benefits for social capital, it also impacts the perception and degree of safety within a

neighbourhood. Greater amounts of greenspace, that is the general amount of greenery in a landscape, is positively associated with the reduction of crime (Bogar & Beyer, 2016; Larson & Ogletree, 2019; Lin et al., 2021; Mullenbach et al., 2022). Research has shown that quality is a central factor in the effectiveness of green space on reducing fear of crime and crime itself (Mullenbach et al., 2022). Greenspace reduces crime through a few mechanisms: by demonstrating that a neighbourhood cares about the space, increasing the number of people using public space, and reducing stress or aggression in people (Burt et al., 2022; Larson & Ogletree, 2019; Mullenbach et al., 2022). However, green space has also been shown to be connected to increased crime when it reduces visibility or contributes to a sense of neighbourhood disorder (Mullenbach et al., 2022).

Several approaches to increasing the availability and quality of green space have been taken at a grassroots level. One common strategy is the creation of community gardens, which [the City of Winnipeg provides support for](#) (City of Winnipeg, n.d.). Another approach is turning vacant lots awaiting redevelopment [into temporary parks](#) or other beneficial spaces (Carruthers, 2022; CBC News, 2017). Communities can also advocate

Strategies for Building Social Capital

- Asset mapping, especially when it involves direct resident participation.
- Organizing inter-organization or inter-group events that facilitate new relationships.
- Organizing support groups, community kitchens, or other activities that bring people in the neighborhood together.
- Inviting residents to participate directly in events and safety strategies.
- Increasing the quality and quantity of public spaces within the neighborhood.
- Art-based programs and approaches to community development.

for increased city spending on the creation and maintenance of greenspaces, which can be done independently or tied into existing work done by organizations like the [Manitoba eco-network](#), [Budget for All](#), and [Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba Branch](#) ([Budget For All](#), n.d.; *Winnipeg at a Crossroads: Alternative Municipal Budget 2022, 2022*; Manitoba Eco-Network, n.d.). Residents' associations across Winnipeg, [such as William Whyte Neighbourhood Association](#), are also active advocates for protecting and renewing the tree canopy in their neighbourhoods ([William Whyte Neighbourhood Association](#), n.d.).

ADVOCATING FOR GREEN SPACE

Neighbourhoods are advocating for increased quantity and quality of greenspace:

- Organizing and maintaining community gardens.
- Redeveloping vacant lots into parks, gardens, or other public spaces.
- Campaigning for increased municipal spending on greenspace either within the neighborhood or across the city.
- Advocating for the protection or renewal of the tree canopy.

“People who live in a place where neighbours know each other, help each other and trust each other have a greater sense of personal safety”
(Perreault, 2017, p. 4).

Seeing Your Neighbours

One of the most influential ideas for grassroots approaches to creating safety is the idea of eyes on the street, the sense that people are seeing and caring for each other when in public spaces. This concept comes from Jane Jacob's 1961 work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Goodyear, 2013; Jacobs, 1989). Eyes on the street has been measured by the number of outdoor activities and public socialization occurring within a community (Lin et al., 2021). Neighbourhoods with open sightlines and parks without low canopies enhance the eyes on the street contributing to a positive effect on safety (Cozens & Davies, 2013; Larson & Ogletree, 2019; Lin et al., 2021). The most important factor for a sense of safety here is the degree to which there is social connection, a sense of knowing your neighbours (Okechukwu, 2021; Webb Jamme et al., 2018). Eyes on the street does not mean being the passive eyes and ears of state surveillance, but rather actively seeing each other and building strong social

relationships of care and support (Goodyear, 2013; Okechukwu, 2021). This is reinforced by research showing that “people who live in a place where neighbours know each other, help each other and trust each other have a greater sense of personal safety” (Perreault, 2017, p. 4).

This sense of seeing each other can be fostered through community conversations. One example of this is Justice for families’ Night Out for Safety, Democracy and Human rights, a public forum to hear residents’ voices on building safety through collective action and caring for each other (Goodyear, 2013; Justice for Families, 2013). Another approach is nurturing accessible public spaces with various types of shops and gathering places that attract diverse people at various times rather than building a highly regulated and restricted public space (Jacobs, 1989).

Really seeing your neighbours and community may require advocating for greater funding of accessible public spaces and free facilities such as pools, libraries, recreation centres, or community centres, which create safe places for many different people to interact and take refuge (Davis et al., 2020; Meucci & Redmon, 1997; Nayak, 2003). Children and youth especially note that safety means having public spaces that they can use for homework, play, or socializing (Meucci &

Redmon, 1997; Nayak, 2003). Often campaigns for accessible public places take place at a municipal level, but they can also be seen in grassroots organizing. One example is Millennium for All, which called for the end of the exclusionary use of metal detectors and body searches at the downtown Winnipeg library, and for increased funding for public libraries so they can be welcoming for all (Murphy, 2020).

Creating an Environment for Seeing Each Other

Some ways communities have worked to foster a culture of seeing each other include:

- Public discussions and forums on what seeing and caring for each other looks like.
- Supporting the development of a diverse public space used at various times and by various groups.
- Advocating for increased access to public spaces and free facilities.
- Promoting local institution, shops, and other important locations within the neighbourhood.

Responding to Harm Without Criminalization

Harm and crime are realities in all communities. An anti-oppressive approach to fostering safety includes shifting our responses to crime and harm to reflect an inclusive understanding of safety as a resource we share with community members who cause harm or break the law. Calling the police in response to mental health crises and public nuisances can reduce the overall feeling of safety in a community rather than enhance it.

Calling the police often results in the escalation of an incident. The police might assume criminal or violent intent and act with force, and a rational existing distrust or fear of police abuse of power can create heightened fear and anxiety for those interacting with police (Maynard, 2017). This escalation can be lethal for people who are Black or Indigenous or who are dealing with mental health crises and are thus perceived as dangerous by law enforcement (Cole, 2020; Maynard, 2017; Talaga, 2018). Research in the U.S. context has found that interactions with police actually increase people's fear of crime and dissatisfaction, even for victims (Abbott et al., 2020). For some community members, being policed or surveilled, especially in public areas, reduces their sense of safety (Meucci & Redmon, 1997; Nayak, 2003). This suggests it is worthwhile to

ALTERNATIVES RESPONSES

Calling the police in some scenarios may escalate or cause further harm. Some alternative solutions include:

- Raising awareness of crisis response lines.
- Raising awareness of outreach supports.
- Raising awareness of safe spaces.
- Compiling lists of alternative resources and making them publicly accessible.
- Advocating for the expansion of social supports and non-criminal emergency response services.

consider some alternative approaches to responding to mental health crises and interpersonal harm that can improve everyone's sense of safety.

Many resources and alternative approaches to responding to crises have been developed locally and nationally (May Day Collective & Solidarity & Defense, 2017; Walby, 2022). [Bar None Winnipeg offers a workshop on alternatives to calling the police](#) (Bar None Winnipeg, 2021). [In 2020 a google doc of alternative numbers to call in Winnipeg was put together](#) (Numbers for Winnipeg, n.d.). Identifying the existing supports, safe spaces, and crisis lines within or near the

community is a method of fostering community safety. Another is advocating for increased social supports, youth programming, safe spaces, harm reduction supports, and neighbourhood revitalization (Walby, 2022).

Engaging with Harm Reduction

Since vulnerability is natural, we can also think about safety as including harm reduction, which is about “finding safer ways to practice a risky behavior” (Young Women’s Empowerment Project, 2011). Often applied to reduce the negative consequences and risks associated with drug use, harm reduction can also be applied to other practices and behaviours that are typically criminalized or stigmatized (National Harm Reduction Coalition, n.d.; Winnipeg Regional Health Authority, 2016).

Harm reduction aims to reduce factors that make certain activities dangerous, rather than trying to stop the activities themselves (Manitoba Harm Reduction Network, n.d.; National Harm Reduction Coalition, n.d.; Rhodes, 2009). Research shows harm reduction approaches have been effective globally at reducing the spread of certain diseases, improving quality of life, reducing mortality, and may also help reduce crime (Beg et al., 2015; Potier et al., 2014).

Some local examples of harm reduction include Street Connections’ distribution of new injection and inhalation supplies to reduce the spread of infections and provide a safe mobile deposit site for used supplies (Street Connections, n.d.). Mobile harm reduction can help prevent overdoses and improve health outcomes (Jackson & Strike, 2020). The Daniel McIntyre and St. Matthews Community Association has hosted a “weekly drop-in for sex trade workers, providing harm reduction supplies, a hot meal and a safe space” (The Coalition of Manitoba Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations, 2016, p. 17). Thunderbirdz and other street outreach organizations on occasion provide condoms and used needle disposal (Thunderbirdz, n.d.). Since 2017 the government of Manitoba has funded the provision of Naloxone, a medication that can reverse the effects of opioid overdose, and access to the medication and training in how to use it is available at multiple sites (Government of Manitoba, n.d.). This is in line with the approaches many communities across Canada are taking to provide individual training, accessible overdose prevention and response services, and tailored supports for people who may be in conflict with the law (Leece et al., 2019).

Harm reduction at a community level can also mean sharing the existing harm reduction supports that are available outside of our communities and welcoming harm reduction organizations into our neighbourhoods.

Street Outreach

A grassroots approach to responding to harm can include providing immediate support to those experiencing crises through forms of street outreach. There are many different types of street outreach organizations and initiatives in Winnipeg. These include some that provide trained mobile support and transportation, such as [Main Street Van](#) or [Street Connections Van](#) (Main Street Project, n.d.; Street Connections, n.d.). Others offer community patrols that are volunteer-based and Indigenous-led, such as [Bear Clan](#), [Mama Bear Clan](#), and [Thunderbirdz](#) (Bear Clan Patrol, n.d.; North Point Douglas Women's Centre, n.d.; Thunderbirdz, n.d.). These street outreach organizations walk the streets of a neighbourhood with various supplies including food, water, clothes, and harm reduction supplies, and can provide security to neighbourhoods or foster safety by being an accessible and human connection for those who may need support. Organizations differ in how much training staff and volunteers

Harm Reduction Strategies

Communities are finding numerous ways of making risky behaviours safer:

- Distributing clean injection and inhalation supplies, condoms and other safer sex supplies.
- Distributing Naloxone kits and training people to use them.
- Training residents in overdose prevention.
- Creating safe injection sites.
- Creating support groups that are not based on an abstinence model.

receive, with some hiring residents with lived experience and knowledge (Dickinson et al., 2021).

Part of what makes informal community patrols function well is their grounding in Indigenous approaches to safety. While informal community patrols are still growing here, they have been well established in Australia for several decades. Indigenous Australian night patrols, a form of grassroots community service, serve a number of functions, including safe transport, dispute resolution, prevention of violence, and

resources for those unhoused or using substances in ways that are problematic (Blagg & Anthony, 2019; Cooper et al., 2016). The effectiveness of these patrols is rooted in the sense of legitimacy from the communities they operate in and their cultural resonance as a longstanding form of building safety in Indigenous communities (Blagg & Anthony, 2019; Cooper et al., 2016).

These successful patrols are distinct from neighbourhood watch and patrol schemes which are about surveillance, keeping crime and harm ‘out,’ and the creation of safety for some and not others (Becker, 2014; Hughes, 2003). Neighbourhood watches, patrols and other security schemes can often target marginalized populations who are perceived as disorderly or unwelcome. As a result, some community patrols can reproduce insecurity.

For communities without street outreach programs or the capacity to organize one, inviting in existing groups can be an alternative method of increasing the sense of safety.

STREET OUTREACH

Community outreach can be an effective method of bringing people together and providing an accessible point of support and safety for those who otherwise might not feel connected to the community, but they can also reproduce insecurity. Some approaches to creating safety through outreach include:

- Focusing on mobile supports rather than surveillance.
- Offering food, water, clothing, or other supplies.
- Providing safe transportation through a mobile van or a safe walk.
- Community ownership and involvement of the full diversity of the community.

Conclusion

This review was initiated by the South Valour Residents Association to inform community discussions and planning about safety in their west end Winnipeg neighbourhood. Drawing on existing research and community reports, the review shows how communities can take grassroots action to cultivate an approach to safety that is anti-oppressive, through strategies that are strength-based, caring, and inclusive. The findings may be of use beyond South Valour, for other groups and communities who similarly are wondering how they can discuss and take action on safety based on these values.

An anti-oppressive approach begins with creating a collective understanding of safety that recognizes and addresses the roots of inequality and oppression. Safety can be a shared resource that belongs to everyone in our communities, or it can be a scarce resource for a select few. Drawing out differences between safety and security, vulnerability and discomfort in how we talk about safety, and shining a light on common fears of crime and faulty beliefs about danger, can create room for reflection on a community vision of safety. We can focus on creating a positive sense of safety as something for all community members to actively feel and nurture.

Anti-oppressive action for community safety means inclusive, community-building strategies that address the roots of unequal vulnerability to harm, rather than securing neighbourhoods against people who are perceived as outsiders. Community development that builds social capital, sense of belonging, and connection within and beyond the borders of the community can contribute to feelings and practices of safety.

Communities have had success improving sense of well-being and reducing fear and crime by making inclusive public and green spaces and promoting a vibrant street life with neighbours who see and care for each other. We can also increase access to social supports and resources that enrich neighbourhood life and do not involve the criminal justice system to prevent harm to those who are most vulnerable.

Everyone deserves to be safe, and the evidence demonstrates that safety is something we experience and do together, through connections and a sense of care. Our neighbourhoods and communities are uniquely suited to direct, local discussions and action to increase sense of safety for all.

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