ACT NOW

Youth Deflection and Community Safety

A Report from the Nation to the Nation

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I. Introduction

ACT NOW's work began during a time of national reckoning. Communities across the country were calling for meaningful change in the institutions whose responsibility it is to provide public safety. The initial focus of ACT NOW was on police reform, an issue brought to the forefront because of the killing of George Floyd by police in 2020. His death, captured on video, went viral. It sparked public outrage, including millions of people demonstrating in the streets. In this convulsive moment, ACT NOW engaged in hundreds of listening sessions with community members, educators, law enforcement, faith leaders, and young people in more than a dozen locations across the country reflecting the diversity of the nation. Out of this dialogue emerged a broader picture.

Communities were insisting on reforms in policing. But they were also demanding steps be taken to prevent young people from being pulled into criminality in the first place. They wanted to know what it would take for everyone in their communities, especially youth, to thrive.

In light of what we learned, ACT NOW's work evolved. This Report is the result of that evolution.

To be sure, the majority of this Report's recommendations focus on police reforms, and for a good reason: Reforms are being called for by people in communities across the nation and by those in law enforcement at every level. But the conversations sparked by police reform also led ACT NOW to a focus on youth deflection, which are interventions aimed at preventing young people from entering the juvenile justice system by offering alternatives to arrest and prosecution. That isn't always possible, of course. But certainly in the case of non-violent, low-level offenders, keeping them outside of the formal juvenile justice system is in everyone's interest. According to an R Street Policy

Study, "being arrested can negatively impact a young person's life trajectory." Involvement in the juvenile justice system is tied to increased rates of recidivism, delinquent behaviors, likelihood of adult incarceration and mortality rates, as well as decreased test scores in English and math, educational achievement, chances of marriage and lifetime earning potential.[1]

Youth deflection programs typically focus on addressing the root causes of problematic behavior and providing support services that prevent arrests and prosecutions from going forward. The goal is to prevent a cycle of destructive behavior that can end in disaster for the individual and the community.

Over the last decade more than 160 task forces, councils, working groups and commissions have explored ways to improve policing and public safety. What ACT NOW has contributed to this body of work is intentionally listening to many different voices on the front lines, with the goal of learning from their perspectives. From the beginning, ACT NOW invited into conversations people doing the day-in day-out work in communities, yet whose voices were too often absent from the national conversation. From these conversations, the majority of policing and criminal justice organizations advanced the idea that we should begin reimagining policing. Jim Copple, Co-Founder of ACT NOW and a facilitator of some of these task forces and most of these community conversations, made the case that the only thing missing in reimagining policing is imagination.

ACT NOW went to dozens of communities across America – in large cities, suburbs, rural areas and on tribal lands. We wanted to report *to* the nation what we learned *from* the nation, and especially from those members of communities whose voices aren't often heard, who feel unsafe in their neighborhoods without an outlet to express their views, and from police officers on the frontlines of public safety who deal with these issues on a daily basis. This Report does that. But it does more than that.

"Reimagining Community Safety" operates on the belief that police reforms, while necessary, are insufficient when it comes to the task of healing our communities and providing hope to all, especially to young people. Driven by the listening sessions, this report widens the aperture to include not just police reform but to also prioritize youth deflection programs. While one of the aims of youth deflection programs is to prevent young people from entering the juvenile justice

[1] https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FINAL_r-street-policy-study-no-290.pdf

system by offering alternatives to arrest and prosecution, the interventions also focus on forming and maintaining support for youth and strengthening community. During listening sessions held by ACT NOW, it became clear how comprehensive a concept youth deflection is, involving as it does youth employment, chronic absenteeism and high school dropout, and mental health issues including stress, anxiety, and isolation. It is a holistic, multifaceted approach addressing the root causes of problematic behavior and providing support services early, when they have the greatest chance of making a difference. "Opportunity Youth" – those out of school and work and living in poverty – are particularly vulnerable and need appropriate supports.[2] The goal is to prevent a cycle of destructive behavior that can end in disaster for the individual and the community.

ACT NOW is in 14 communities including rural, urban, counties, statewide, and tribal sites.

An analogy may be helpful here. Imagine you're an adult on a hike with a group of young children. You come across a turbulent river; your goal is to keep the kids from falling into the river. If some do, you will of course try to rescue them, and in some cases you might succeed. But it's hard work.

[2] J. Bridgeland, Milano, J, Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's Forgotten Youth, 2012, White House Council for Community Solutions, found at: https://www.civicllc.com/_files/ugd/03cac8_bf6b58256cd2484ba286443fd3fc7240.pdf

In other cases some children might go under, while even those who are rescued might still be traumatized.

Youth deflection programs at their best keep children from falling into the river in the first place by setting up layers of protection.

Youth deflection programs are no panacea; they can't keep every young person out of trouble or entering the juvenile justice system, and there's a range of quality found among them. But many of these programs, staffed by skilled and compassionate individuals and by neighborhood volunteers trained in caring outreach, are doing outstanding work. And when they work well, they are a powerful crime fighting tool and youth development strategy that saves money and saves lives. They are becoming major advocates for opportunity and creating pathways for education and employment. They are a great ally for those working in law enforcement. They are also a great indicator of a flourishing neighborhood.

> From the beginning, ACT NOW invited into conversations people doing the day-in day-out work in communities, yet whose voices were too often absent from the national conversation.

Youth deflection programs, which involve prevention, intervention, and treatment, can specialize in an array of areas, including substance abuse prevention and treatment, mental health and trauma counseling, youth employment, homelessness and family support services, and combating chronic absenteeism from school. All of these domains are important; each can contribute to make communities safer, healthier and more whole.

One example is school absenteeism, which reached a crisis during the pandemic. Chronic absenteeism[3] doubled to more than 30 percent in the 2021-2022 school year and remains well above pre-pandemic levels (nearly 28 percent in the 2022-2023 school year). That matters because chronic absenteeism can increase the likelihood of behavioral problems, including violence, academic struggles and social isolation. It is one of the prominent early warning indicators of dropping out of high school and unemployment.

[3] Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing at least 10 percent of school days, or approximately 18 days in a year, for any reason, excused or unexcused.

It can impede social development, including the failure to find meaningful employment as vital social skills and connections nurtured in classrooms are lost or not made. Chronic absenteeism is just a piece in a profoundly complicated social puzzle.

The approach undergirding ACT NOW in general, and this Report to the Nation in particular, is human-centered, integrative, and puts an emphasis on what works. And the way we find out what works is by listening to and learning from those who are doing the hard, time-intensive, deeply rewarding work of transforming neighborhoods and communities – engaged citizens, local leaders, civil rights activists, and those working on the front lines of law enforcement, government agencies and faith organizations. They are everyday American heroes who prove what is possible by showing us what is actually being done. ACT NOW's commitment to learn from those not normally included in these conversations, including marginalized populations, may not be unique, but it is rare. It distinguishes ACT NOW's approach from some other reform efforts. And we are convinced it's part of the right approach.

ACT NOW is dedicated to creating more opportunities for more people, and especially more young people, to thrive. This Report, which shares the knowledge and wisdom of the best among us, is part of that high calling. It is also an invitation to other communities across the nation to join the ACT NOW movement.

II. Community Safety

America's twin charge to establish justice and ensure domestic tranquility is as old as the U.S. Constitution. For tens of millions of Americans, that commitment has been met. But for many millions of others, that is not the case. The promise of a "more perfect union" remains unfulfilled. Many Americans feel unsafe in their communities. Multiple commissions and task forces, wise and well-intentioned, have struggled to translate recommendations for public safety into concrete action on the ground.

One missing piece from many of these efforts has been proper attentiveness to the perspectives of people in their own communities and the rank-and-file police officers who are charged with their safety.

In an effort to give voice to the vulnerable and to learn directly from those most affected, ACT NOW engaged in listening sessions with dozens of communities across the country. Ten pilot communities representing the whole of the country from urban centers, to suburban neighborhoods, rural areas, and tribal lands worked with ACT NOW. They convened listening sessions, hosted Breaking Bread events, and formed community-led coalitions known as "Justice Circles" and "People's Commissions" to move from dialogue to action. These grassroots groups are creating safer, more connected communities where everyone can thrive.

ACT NOW brings together a wide range of local voices including youth, Opportunity Youth, parents, educators, employers, mental health professionals, faith leaders, and law enforcement to identify shared concerns and design community-rooted solutions. While public trust and accountability remain essential goals, these coalitions prioritize holistic strategies that focus on prevention, healing, and belonging. Youth are not just participants in these efforts, they help shape them.

> Public safety is not the job of one group alone. It is a shared effort that benefits when trust is mutual and solutions are co-created.

One of the notable achievements of the Oklahoma City Justice Circle was their participation and support of the OKC Diversion Hub. The Diversion Hub, a voluntary service model that provides programs to assist individuals and families impacted by the criminal legal system, is changing countless lives for the better. A recent report produced in partnership with the Urban Institute found that 96 percent avoid new criminal charges and 91 percent show up to all court dates with the help of our justice navigators, who assist clients with understanding and meeting court requirements. These "navigators" — individuals who assist people in legal proceedings — speak at court appearances on behalf of clients, providing critical context that court personnel use to alter justice outcomes. Ninety-seven percent of the pretrial stage clients do not receive a prison or jail sentence while engaged with Diversion Hub. It serves almost 6,000 clients annually through 10 programs, with 76 staff and 25 representatives of 18 partner agencies on site. The cost savings, a critical efficiency metric, are significant. For under $1,200 per client served, recidivism is reduced by more than one third. Meanwhile, individuals and families access the short- and long-term services they need to be safe, healthy, and productive out in the community.

This collective, community-driven work laid the foundation for a broader shift in mindset that moves beyond enforcement along and toward shared responsibility for safety and well-being. It is within this context that ACT NOW aligns with and builds upon national efforts to reimagine public safety,

including calls for law enforcement to adopt a more human-centered, community-oriented approach.

As the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) put it, "Law enforcement culture should embrace a guardian – rather than a warrior – mindset to build trust and legitimacy both within agencies and with the public." That guardian mindset is most powerful when paired with the voices and leadership of young people, parents, educators, and community members who understand what it takes to make neighborhoods safe and whole. Public safety is not the job of one group alone. It is a shared effort that benefits when trust is mutual and solutions are co-created.

The goal is not only to reduce crime, but to strengthen the social fabric that prevents harm in the first place. When public trust grows, so does the community's capacity to support one another. That requires every voice at the table, especially those who have too often been left out.

III. Listening Sessions and Breaking Bread

ACT NOW's approach to building trust among neighbors and bringing change to communities employs the Social Reconnaissance model to assess need and build grassroots support. We chose to call these assessments "listening sessions" to convey the goal of the gatherings. Listening sessions bring in local leaders and asks them to candidly assess the situation on the ground, whether it is the relationship of the police to the community or the issues plaguing youth development. These sessions are facilitated by a person/people trained to listen well, meaning being fully engaged, attentive to what others are saying, reflecting back what's being said, considering the perspective of the speakers, utilizing non-verbal cues, and remaining open-minded. Sometimes, solutions are offered immediately; other times more work needs to be done before moving to the problem-solving phase.

Listening sessions, which are kept relatively small, give voice to those most vulnerable to a breakdown in community safety. It identifies areas for dialogue. They are held in neighborhoods and often include rank-and-file police officers in order to learn from their experience and solicit their input.

Breaking Bread sessions are larger community events, often involving 100-300 people. Carefully facilitated by trained volunteers, these events are designed to create space for open, respectful dialogue, including on topics that can catalyze intense feelings. Sharing a meal encourages open

dialogue, creates common understanding and builds trust and connections among community members. Out of it can emerge greater empathy and greater understanding. Over the last few years, more than 20,000 people have participated in more than 40 Breaking Bread events nationwide.

Starting in 2020, ACT NOW went into communities in Chicago, Dallas, Nashville and Oklahoma City; in Martin County, Kentucky, Schenectady, Albany, and Washtenaw County, Michigan; in Northern Cheyenne, Montana and Pascua Yaqui, Arizona; and at Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming. ACT NOW participated in or facilitated 135 separate listening sessions of grassroots community members through neighborhood meetings, community town halls and Breaking Bread events, and they are expanding across the nation.

IV. What We've Heard

Historically the mindset of many of those advocating reforms was that it needed to be done "to" or "for" the community; ACT NOW's approach is that reform needs to be done *with* the community. The listening sessions were so informative they led to more formal structures with leaders in the community, including law enforcement and other arms of government.

"It's about time the leaders of our community hear our voice," one person at a listening session in Dallas said. At another event in Chicago a participant told us, "You are the first group to include us and to ask our opinion of how policing affects our community." At an Oklahoma City Breaking Bread event, a person attending spoke with pain and passion about how minorities are often viewed. "They're assumed to be guilty, lying, or dishonest, which results in a lack of humility and humanity toward people and creates this issue of distrust," this individual said.

In Washington, D.C., a young person who grew up in poverty and participated in a year of national service at the Earth Conservation Corps said, "Previously, we were just viewed as problems to be solved. Now our community is sending the signal we are potential to be fulfilled." In Martin County, a leader of a listening session emphasized that while "we might have thought we understood the perspectives of those folks, the listening sessions opened our eyes to some bias and some assumptions we had wrong. You'll never go wrong by listening to your people, even if you think you know what they're going to say, because you probably don't."

Hearing from the community means hearing from people who for too long have been disenfranchised, who were not given a say in matters that affected their lives, and they were finally

invited into the conversation to participate. That includes ordinary members of the community as well as tribal communities that had long been excluded from such dialogue around community and tribal safety.

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>
> Community Leader
> Martin County, KY

One of the core beliefs of ACT NOW is that a sense of powerlessness among citizens is corrosive. It creates feelings of despair and anxiety, frustration and anger. Human beings need to feel a sense of human agency; they need to believe they can influence things, particularly things that touch their daily lives. Too often government, including local government, seems detached from the lives of the people the government is supposed to serve. The lack of structures to enable such communication and engagement has been a key missing piece. That has certainly occurred in the area of policing and when there are opportunities for individuals to participate in shaping their communities, many seize it. That is why it was so encouraging that a participant in an ACT NOW event in Martin County, Kentucky said the men and women in that community began to view themselves as "change-makers" and "conduits of change" – people who are "taking creative action to solve social problems." That is the road to progress and human flourishing.

But it was essential, too, that line officers – more than 1,200 to date -- were included in the sessions. It gave them a chance to hear from the community, and for the community to hear from them. They work on the front lines of our streets, neighborhoods and tribal lands and experience community in ways that give them a comparative advantage to shape responses that will be effective in keeping us all feel safe and empowering people to play a role in shaping such environments. For too long, those on the front lines of policing reported that they didn't always have a means of communicating their views. ACT Now has been working to provide those outlets.

Speaking on the culture of policing, an officer in Chicago at a Breaking Bread event said, "We wear plenty of hats in this job that citizens who don't know the job wouldn't understand." In describing the expanded roles that are being thrust on the police, another officer said, "We see everything, day and night, from shootings to domestic situations. So now we're counselors, right?" He added, "Normal citizens think they understand, but they don't. They think they can tell us our jobs, but

they don't walk in our shoes. Experiences – what we hear, what people say to us, what we see – we are processing crises every day." Another police officer put it this way: "There's that two percent of officers who make us all look bad."

This kind of dialogue – informed, candid, respectful and rooted in day-to-day experiences -- hasn't happened nearly enough.

V. Going Deeper

As ACT NOW continued listening and building trust in communities, a common theme emerged: concern for the well-being of youth, not just in relation to policing or the criminal justice system, but in the broader context of opportunity, belonging, and support. Community members spoke time and again about the need to deflect youth from pathways that lead to harm by opening doors to meaningful alternatives. That means investing in workforce development, addressing chronic absenteeism and truancy, and ensuring young people have the tools they need to succeed. It means linking systems that encounter youth who are in trouble – schools, social service agencies, counseling agencies, health care systems and other organizations. Again and again, youth themselves voiced a simple truth: if support systems are in place early, if someone listens, understands, and responds, they are far less likely to end up entangled in the criminal justice system. Crime becomes preventable when we invest in helping young people thrive.

That is why this Report, which begins with a commitment to police reform, widens the focus to youth deflection: a growing movement of community-based efforts to prevent young people from entering the criminal justice system. When done right, when programs are accountable, they offer pathways of prevention and healing, supporting young people at critical moments before punitive systems become involved.

ACT Now is in 14 communities in America, including rural, urban, county, statewide, and tribal sites. Each site works on challenges unique to their community. Each in their own way is

reimagining community policing, housing, education, and more as a way to achieve safe and flourishing neighborhoods and communities.

Each ACT NOW site has taken its own distinct approach to youth deflection, informed by data and insights from their own communities. This has resulted in a multi-pronged strategy tailored to meet the specific needs and challenges of each location.

Talk a Mile

Portland's initiative Talk A Mile emerged from a desire to turn collective support into meaningful action. Youth were being left out of the conversation about their future and the future of their communities. Talk A Mile began by reaching out to local Black high school students with a simple, powerful prompt: What would an impactful, productive day look like for you? They responded this way: By being met with understanding during encounters with police no matter their background, identity, or neighborhood. Young people don't want every encounter to be predicated on the assumption that they are guilty of crimes.

Talk A Mile randomly paired trainees from the Portland Police Bureau one-on-one with local high school students and sent them on a walk-and-talk. Eleven events later, they found that something as simple as that mile long conversation made both a police officer and a student more likely to become more involved in their local community, if they weren't already. A student in Portland said, "It taught me how much more of an impact my voice can make."

Police trainees had the opportunity to connect directly with the youth. This changed some of the stereotypes and assumptions they might unconsciously have carried. For students, especially those at greater risk for negative encounters with law enforcement, or for those who have already experienced them, the program offered a chance for an interaction with police that was characterized by conversation, not confrontation.

OKC Justice Circle Breaking Bread Event

"Being able to really feel comfortable when we're approached by the police, or even when we approach the police, that was probably the biggest thing for me," a student said. "Not to fear for my life, or even think that they're judging me in some type of way. I just am able to be myself." That is how barriers are broken down and trust is built up.

While Portland focused on building trust through one-on-one walks, **Oklahoma City** (OKC) emphasized shared meals and group dialogue. At a Breaking Bread event in OKC, you will be seated with strangers by design. Every table is intentionally mixed, bringing together people with different opinions and life stories. Those are the kind of encounters that act as a community adhesive. The OKC Justice Circle initially centered on police reform but shifted its focus in response to community concerns about youth well-being. The Oklahoma City Thunder basketball team funds each Breaking Bread event. To date, they have held 15 different breaking bread events involving close to 3,000 people.

School can also play a huge protective factor in keeping students out of trouble. Kids who stay in school are far less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. Conversely, students who drop out of high school are eight times more likely to end up in prison.[4] Students who persist gain valuable skills in school, some of them academic and some of them social, which boosts their career prospects and sociability. Chronic absenteeism in Oklahoma City is rampant, particularly post-COVID, so the OKC Justice Circle held a Breaking Bread event to discover why.

The Justice Circle has focused on chronic youth absenteeism, gathering the kids who don't show up to school, feeding

> If support systems are in place early, if someone listens, understands, and responds, they are far less likely to end up entangled in the criminal justice system.

[4] Bridgeland, J, Dilulio J, Morison, K, The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts (2006).

them and asking them what they would do to help kids who are in their exact situations. They feel comfortable expressing those solutions with trustworthy adults.

Listening to the voices of students who are more likely to skip class or drop out of school is important. Hearing directly from youth in safe, supportive settings like the OKC Justice Circle's Breaking Bread events help shape effective responses; it deepens the understanding of adults by bringing them more into the world of students. It's much easier to build trust when everyone has had a say. It is an example of the natural progression of ACT NOW's focus and adapting to the needs named by the community.

In **Nashville**, the Justice Circle has become a powerful force for community healing and youth engagement. Their regular Breaking Bread series brings together community members, faith leaders, and the Metro Nashville Police Department for honest, cross-cultural conversations about community safety. The Inspire Youth Program, led by local students, focus on achieving community safety through training, modeling, and experiential learning. It aims to shape a new generation of civic leaders by centering youth voices in school and community reform efforts. The partnership between the Justice Circle and local law enforcement is fostering trust, accountability, and a sense of shared responsibility in Nashville.

In **Chicago**, the Root2Fruit Youth Foundation is empowering teens in the Austin neighborhood on the west side of the city to lead on community safety. Supported by ACT NOW, a small group of youth came together at the home of mentor Aisha Oliver to design the Austin Safety Action Plan (ASAP), a youth-led strategy to reclaim their neighborhood from gun violence. Their plan centers on a Safe Zone at Austin Town Hall Park, where weekly basketball tournaments offer a gathering space grounded in joy, community, and healing. "Instead of waiting on help, we created help for ourselves," Oliver explained. The initiative offers a tangible way for young people to take ownership of their community's safety and build consistent, positive spaces in the midst of ongoing challenges.

Root2Fruit Youth Foundation

In **Martin County, Kentucky**, the THRIVE Community Coalition fills gaps in local social services, offering wraparound support and empowering youth to become active, confident members of their community. As part of their work, THRIVE partnered with Mount Vernon Nazarene University to study the experiences and needs of marginalized populations. Eric Mills from THRIVE reflected, "The value of ACT NOW's approach is that it focused our energy around marginalized populations," emphasizing the importance of listening deeply to those most affected. "You'll never go wrong if you listen to your people, even if you think you know what they are going to say." THRIVE's approach offers comprehensive assessments based on eight dimensions of wellness – physical, environmental, financial, occupational, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual -- and helps individuals identify areas of their wellness they wish to improve. By providing access to a network of local health, education, wellness, and community services, THRIVE helps overcome obstacles, promote positive growth, and support families in finding sustainable pathways to success.

ACT NOW CEO James Copple with Members of the Crow Tribe

Important to this process was the commitment to involve representation from tribal communities. Listening sessions were held with the Northern Cheyenne in Montana, The Crow Tribe in Montana, the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, the Pascua Yaqui in Arizona, and the Wind River Tribe in Wyoming. Engaging with a diverse range of communities also shows the unique challenges they may face. On the Wind River Tribal Land, located in southwestern Wyoming and home of the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes, listening sessions highlighted the primary public safety concern – missing indigenous women and children. During a three-month period when meeting with these tribes, a startling 133 tribal women were missing or murdered on these reservations. During that same period, the nation became focused on the disappearance of Gabby Petito, a white girl who was murdered by her fiancé. The disparity in media coverage illustrated the frustration experienced by tribal advocates.

These examples offer just a glimpse of the varied approaches taken by ACT NOW sites. Each strategy is grounded in local insight and shaped by the unique needs of its community. Work is ongoing in Washtenaw County, Houston, and newly engaged sites across the country, where communities are supporting families affected by gun violence, reducing harm and strengthening

relationships between residents and law enforcement. Across all sites, youth engagement is a central focus, addressing chronic absenteeism, building trust with schools, and creating opportunities for young people to lead and shape the future of their communities.

With its renewed focus on youth and trust-building, ACT NOW is working alongside communities to create environments where young people feel seen, supported, and valued. By investing early, before a crisis or criminal intervention is ever needed, these efforts help transform potential points of harm into opportunities for connection and growth. The goal is not just to deflect youth from the justice system but to raise a generation equipped with the relationships, resources, and confidence they need to thrive.

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In turn, ACT NOW is focusing on working with communities to measure outcomes that reflect the guardian approach focused on prevention, not just the warrior approach to public safety focused on arrets and punishment. The strongest example of this approach is the co-responder model that forges partnerships with social service agencies. They bring their expertise to a problem and leave the community confident that the issues are being addressed by competent professionals.

VI. Recommendations We Received

Among the most significant messages to emerge from the ACT NOW listening sessions was re-prioritization. Community safety should be much more of a national priority than it is today. Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, and those living in urban, rural, tribal, and frontier communities, all seek to live without the fear of crime or violence. Further, every demographic participating in the listening sessions believe that a whole-of-community and government approach is vital to achieving community safety.

Maybe the most unexpected thing we observed in the listening sessions is how often they began with *catharsis* – the process of releasing previously unexpressed emotions. Many participants needed to express their fears, concerns, and anger about violations of trust, which minority communities in particular have long experienced. Many police officers, on the other hand, needed to express their frustration at the lack of public understanding of how difficult their jobs are, the multiplicity of roles they are expected to take on, and how often the actions of a few bad cops overshadow the work of the many good cops.

But what began as catharsis ended with ideas for greater civic peace and flourishing. We heard from more than 4,000 people who participated in ACT NOW's listening sessions. The insights and

recommendations we received are below. Together they offer a roadmap to achieving a more decent and orderly society. And if implemented, they could facilitate one of the greatest transformations in policing culture since the advent of community policing nearly a half-century ago.

Meaningfully support youth in every community.

A recurring theme across all ACT NOW listening sessions was the urgent need to support young people long before they encounter systems of punishment or crisis.[5] Community members emphasized that investing in youth isn't just a moral imperative; it's a safety strategy. These recommendations reflect what communities themselves say they need to meaningfully support youth and build safer, more resilient neighborhoods for all.

- **Address chronic absenteeism and school disengagement as a public safety issue.** Fund programs that will increase school attendance, including programs focused on addressing the barriers such as transportation assistance and access to food and basic needs. As one example, students with access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program were 18 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school compared to those who did not have such access.[6]

- **Prioritize support for mental health programs.** Ignoring mental health disorders makes progress on youth deflection much more difficult. Studies show that "regardless of geographic area or type of juvenile justice facility, the vast majority (65 percent to 70 percent) of youth involved with the juvenile justice system have at least one diagnosable mental health disorder."[7] More than 60 percent of youth with a mental health diagnosis meet criteria for a substance-use disorder.

[5] Youth deflection refers to programs and practices that *prevent* arrest and involvement in the court systems whereas youth diversion refers to redirecting a legal case *following* arrest.

[6] https://www.chn.org/voices/fact-of-the-week-snap-kids-are-nearly-20-percent-more-likely-to-graduate-high-school/

[7] https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/youth-mental-health-disorders-juvenile-justice-system-results-multi

- **Strengthen the youth workforce pipeline.** Expand access to job training, paid internships, and entrepreneurship support—particularly in historically marginalized neighborhoods.

- **Invest in school and community-based deflection programs.** These offer youth alternatives to justice system involvement—such as peer mediation, mentorship, restorative justice, and youth-led leadership development.

- **Support and scale up youth-driven listening sessions and commissions.** These allow young people to voice their needs and shape local policies. Trust is built when youth have a significant voice in community conversations.

> The greater flourishing within a community there is, the fewer dangerous tasks police are called on to perform.

- **Fund neighborhood-based "third spaces" for youth.** These are social environments outside of home and work such as youth-run cafés, drop-in centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, and creative hubs, which are physical or virtual spaces that bring together creative people and organizations to foster collaboration, networking, and community engagement. The purpose is to offer a sense of belonging, purpose, and safety outside of school hours.

- **Prioritize family-based interventions**. Family dysfunction is often a significant factor in youth misbehavior. Understanding and untangling destructive patterns can help young people overcome toxic and even destructive relationships.

- **Emphasize early intervention and set up early warning systems in schools**. The sooner the problem behavior is identified, the better the chances are of keeping a young person out of trouble and out of the court system. Early intervention decreases recidivism. Schools and districts across the country have been setting up "early warning systems" that identify students whose attendance, behavior, and course performance in reading and math signal early signs of trouble and providing the supports they need to get back on track.

- **Support civil citation programs.** They're an alternative to formal arrest for certain low-level offenses, primarily involving juveniles. The goal is to connect young people with

programs that will assist them – for example, counseling, community service and substance abuse programs – without creating a criminal record, which will make efforts to find employment and housing much more difficult. Florida has a model program that should be studied and replicated.[8]

- **Create trauma-informed responses to youth behavior in schools and communities.** Shift from punitive discipline to restorative practices that recognize the role of trauma, stress, and structural barriers in youth decision-making.

- **Ensure accountability**. This means transparency, including related to data gathering, and holding programs responsible for outcomes. Identifying metrics for evaluation is essential.[9]

Establish a holistic police mission

The fundamental mission of policing is to ensure community safety and maintain community order. That requires thinking of policing in a holistic way, meaning not isolating policing from broader social realities. Police reform needs to take place within a broad web of alliances, with communities taking an active role and law enforcement welcoming their involvement. The spirit of reform should be that we are all in this together; we need to see ourselves as links in a social chain.

- **Center youth in public safety strategies.** A holistic police mission must include intentional efforts to support and protect young people. This means investing in youth development, creating positive interactions with law enforcement, and addressing the root causes that lead to criminalization. Programs like youth mentoring, restorative justice circles, and school-based diversion initiatives help build trust, reduce harm, and empower the next generation to thrive within their communities.

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[8] https://www.rstreet.org/research/data-driven-deflection-a-systems-approach-to-reducing-juvenile-arrests/

[9] According to a 2020 Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission report, "One of the primary conclusions of the City of Chicago Office of Inspector General audit report was that although the JISC has been in operation for nearly 15 years, the City does not know whether the JISC achieved its goal of reducing recidivism because of poor record-keeping, destruction of records, lack of data sharing among city agencies, lack of coordination among program partners and an overall lack of a governing board or documents with established programmatic purpose and goals. Due to this overall lack of structure, transparency and accountability, the JISC has been an expensive investment that has not been shown to improve outcomes for the City's youth, families or communities."

- **Invest in communities to reduce disparities.** One of the best ways to help defuse tensions between police and communities is to address widespread economic and social disparities. A major national commitment is needed to strengthen neighborhoods and communities, to reweave their fabric, and to help make them whole. Investment in these communities is essential for greater justice and, ultimately, for people to live in safe and peaceful neighborhoods.

- **Promote a whole-of-community approach.** The plight of communities bears directly on the challenges facing police. The greater flourishing within a community there is, the fewer dangerous tasks police are called on to perform. Tensions between police and the community will inevitably decrease. Leaders in law enforcement and community leaders should therefore promote a "whole of community" approach, promoting protective factors – including in the areas of health and public education, employment and economic opportunity, parks and recreation – that strengthen communities. Civil society and the corporate and private sector have essential roles to play.

- **Incorporate multiple perspectives into reform.** Reforms in policing need to be guided by those who have spent their lives in law enforcement. But they also need to take into account insights of local political leaders, such as mayors, county executives, and advocates, as well as residents in neighborhoods. That will provide a more comprehensive understanding of community safety. When that happens, programs can be designed to better promote community safety with buy-in for the practices, policies and other actions by those in the community.

OKC Justice Circle

- **Include community voices in research and policy.** Precisely because community involvement is crucial for effective policing, community leaders need to be at the table when developing police policy, budgets and practices. They need to be included in the design,

implementation and review of research conducted in their communities. This inclusive approach builds trust and helps ensure that police practices align with community needs. It fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. And involving community members in the design, review and implementation of research increases the likelihood that the research is relevant and useful.

- **Use community-based platforms for engagement.** Create community-based platforms that engage and encourage community voices to address issues in their local neighborhoods and communities. This can involve utilizing platforms like social media, online forums, and community engagement software to foster conversations, gather feedback, and promote solutions.

- **Build proximity through shared experiences.** Create proximity between law enforcement and community members. One way to do that is through ACT NOW's Breaking Bread events, which bring diverse groups together to share a meal and tell one another their stories. Breaking Bread events establish a broader platform for community engagement with marginalized populations; create a safe space for inclusion and dialogue; help establish higher levels of awareness, empathy, and trust; and help a community build the will to tackle broader issues of injustice, inequality and quality of life.

Breaking Bread

- **Partner with faith-based organizations.** Faith-based organizations are doing extraordinary work to heal and strengthen communities. They are often trusted by residents from all walks of life; they have large networks of volunteers that help support youth in a variety of ways. Police departments should prioritize collaborating with them.

- **Deploy mental health crisis response alternatives.** Organizations need to be identified that can respond to mental-health crises and substance abuse disorders, which are often the root cause of crime. It's unfair to expect police to pick up the pieces because of the failures of the rest of society.

- **Organize Justice Circles and People's Commissions:** Organize Justice Circles and People's Commissions to drive community participation in reform. These are critical, formal structures that include officials in government and law enforcement and foster regular dialogue on policies and practices that can help shape community safety efforts.

- **Prioritize wrap-around safety planning.** Wrap-around safety plans involve a holistic approach to eliminate "criminogenic conditions" – poverty, lack of opportunity, social isolation – that lead to crime. They need to be prioritized. This involves, as a first step, conducting a thorough assessment of neighborhoods to identify the underlying causes of safety concerns, from failing schools to substance abuse to mental health issues. Residents need to be involved in every step of the planning process to tailor the plans to the specific needs of each community.

- **Expand the role of Citizen Review Boards.** Citizen Review Boards – a body of citizens, independent of the police department, that reviews complaints against police officers and can recommend disciplinary action or policy changes – need to be more fully engaged in crime analysis, in determining force deployment in consultation with department leadership, and in promotion and compensation matters.

- **Respect the cultural needs of tribal communities.** Tribal communities, which have been shamefully underrepresented in discussions about policing matters, want to shape policies and approaches that understand and appreciate the cultural dynamics of the tribe and reservation life.

Police hiring and training

Reimagining public safety begins with reimagining who enters law enforcement and how they are trained. To build trust and foster meaningful relationships with the communities they serve, police departments must reflect the diversity, values, and lived experiences of those communities. This

includes not only who is hired, but also how officers are supported, supervised, and held accountable.

- **Integrate youth engagement training into officer education.** Police training programs should include dedicated modules on positive youth interaction, adolescent development, and trauma-informed approaches. Officers need tools to recognize and respond to the unique needs of young people, especially those from marginalized communities. This training should prepare officers to build trust with youth, avoid escalation, and support pathways that divert young people away from the justice system and toward community-based opportunities.

- **Recruit more women and reflect local demographics.** Women tend to be more effective at de-escalation than are men. Yet today only 18 percent of the nation's police are women. Police departments need to develop campaigns to recruit more women. More broadly, police departments should, as much as they reasonably can, reflect the race, gender, and life experiences of the community in which they work. This is not for the purposes of fulfilling a quota; it's to increase the chances of peace and promote deeper ties between law enforcement and the neighbors they patrol and communities they protect.

- **Conduct comprehensive background checks and certification reviews.** Background checks and a review of qualifications for officer certification is essential. This involves thorough investigations that review an applicant's history, character, and suitability for law enforcement. They involve a comprehensive review of various aspects of the applicant's life, including criminal history, education, employment, finances, social media activity, and more. A psychological evaluation, polygraph, and medical examination are also common components.

- **Expand mental health support for officers.** Communities need to do more to provide mental health support for local law enforcement due to the high rates of stress, burnout, anxiety and depression often due to the nature of their work. These issues can lead to PTSD, suicidal ideation and substance abuse.

- **Train all officers in Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT).** CITs are police-based programs designed to improve interactions between law enforcement and individuals experiencing

mental health crises. CITs involve specially trained officers who are equipped to de-escalate situations, understand mental health conditions, and connect individuals with appropriate support services. CIT training should be provided for all officers, not just specialized units.

- **Provide resilience training for officer wellness.** Resilience training can be a useful tool that police agencies can use to support officer health and wellness. Resilience is the capacity to prepare for, recover from, and adapt to stress and adversity. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), resilience training is a "one-day interactive training with role plays, videos, and discussions. Program attendees include sworn personnel from all ranks as well as dispatchers. Trainings are held regionally and accommodate a select number of attendees per agency." Focus areas include learned optimism, real-time resilience, avoiding thinking traps and managing difficult conversations. The goal is for attendees to "have a set of strategies and tools to call upon when managing stress, overcoming challenges, and adapting to adversity."

ACT NOW Convenes Police Officers and Community Members

- **Require Citizen Review Board (CRB) approval for certification.** Gaining the approval of CRBs should be required for department certification.

- **Increase police academy and field training time.** Training requirements should be enhanced, with an emphasis on increasing time spent at the police academy and field training experience before being certified. This would allow for, among other things, more in-depth coverage of topics, including legal procedures, policing strategies, and physical condition, and more opportunities for new officers to hone their skills under the supervision of experienced officers.

- **Require participation in the National Decertification Index (NDI).** Require all departments to participate in the NDI, a national registry of law enforcement officers whose credentials have been revoked due to misconduct. This should help ensure that individuals

with a history of misconduct are not employed in law enforcement.

- **Conduct psychological evaluations for fitness for duty.** Psychological evaluations for fitness for duty should be done as part of the hiring process and promotions.

- **Train supervisors in proactive leadership.** Proactive supervision training for sergeants and unit commanders should focus on developing skills to anticipate and prevent problems before they escalate, rather than simply reacting to issues after they occur. This training emphasizes a shift from a reactive to a proactive leadership style, encouraging supervisors to be more involved in the daily operations of their units.

- **Professionalize policing through better training and accountability.** Policing needs to be professionalized by embracing a multi-pronged approach, including (i) enhancing the training curriculum by focusing on de-escalation techniques, community policing strategies, ethics, and the use of force; (ii) implementing rigorous certification processes that reflect the "best practices" in policing; and (iii) strengthening accountability mechanisms, including defining the process for investigation complaints and handling misconduct. Civilian oversight boards need to be established to review complaints and ensure that the public has a voice in policing.

- **Raise education requirements for specialized roles.** Increase and establish education requirements for officers – specifically requiring college coursework and/or degrees when it comes to more specialized roles like detective and investigative work.

- **Involve community members, including youth, in training policy development.** Citizens need to be more involved in developing training policies for police. One way to do this would be to place representatives from the People's Commissions – a grassroots initiative comprised of community members who "co-create" police reforms in conjunction with police departments – on state and local police officer standards and training boards.

Police Practices

Policing practices shape not only how law enforcement operates but also how communities

experience justice, safety, and trust. Reforming these practices is essential to building a model of policing that prioritizes well-being, accountability, and community partnership. The following recommendations focus on shifting away from punitive approaches and toward strategies that promote healing, de-escalation, and inclusive, responsive public safety.

- **Implement youth-centered diversion strategies.** Departments should adopt policies that expand deflection and diversion programs. These efforts should focus on restorative practices, mentorship, and community-based interventions that address the underlying causes of youth involvement in harmful behavior, while promoting accountability and growth in supportive environments.

- **Demilitarize the police.** Police departments should move away from paramilitary models to a service model. The paramilitary command-and-control structure doesn't support the essential mission of creating safety through community collaboration and harm-reduction strategies. Decision-making must be inclusive, and personnel at every level of the organization must be empowered to make decisions, build relationships, and act in partnership with communities. Strict hierarchical command-and-control structures should still be employed when necessary to carry out tactical missions, but it shouldn't be the norm to manage routine operations.

- **Prioritize a "Heal and Build" strategy.** This strategy focuses on addressing the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of police officers. This involves addressing stress, promoting mental health support, and implementing policies that build trust and accountability. This holistic approach is better for both police and the communities they serve.

- **Measure outcomes beyond enforcement.** Communities should work in partnership with law enforcement and other agencies and organizations to develop outcomes the community wants to measure that do not just relate to punishment (enforcement actions, stops, frisks, and arrests) but also positive interactions, such as numbers of people working

with the community to solve problems, attending community meetings, and youth kept out of the criminal justice system with youth deflection policies and efforts.

- **Embed de-escalation into training and culture.** De-escalation techniques must be in police culture and in police training. That means slowing down a situation, building a rapport and using verbal communications to keep situations from escalating into violent confrontations. The purpose of de-escalation is to bring chaotic situations to as peaceful a resolution as possible.

- **Mandate a duty to aid.** Make it clear that police officers have a responsibility to provide medical assistance when a use of force has resulted in an injured person and to request emergency medical services. This duty should be routinely included in police policies and training.

- **Mandate a duty to intervene.** Officers must prevent or stop a fellow officer from engaging in misconduct, including excessive force or other actions that violate constitutional rights or department policies. This duty requires officers to intervene in situations where they observe such behavior and have a reasonable opportunity to act. Failure to intervene can result in civil or criminal liability as well as disciplinary action.

- **Prohibit choke holds.** Choke holds as a tool to enforce compliance should be prohibited. Choke holds are too often the result of an excessive force mentality and can lead to deadly outcomes.

- **Reform fines and fees systems.** The average accumulation of fines and fees during incarceration is $20,000. Released inmates can't secure a driver's license until the fines and fees are paid. The punitive nature of fines and fees therefore needs to be reconsidered. In addition, law enforcement officers should not be involved in collecting fines or fees. It diverts from their primary mission of protecting and serving the community.

> Policing practices shape not only how law enforcement operates, but how communities experience justice, safety and trust.

- **Adopt violence intervention strategies.** These are comprehensive, community-based approaches whose aim is to reduce violence by preventing and interrupting cycles of violence, addressing trauma, and providing support and services. These strategies, which focus on individuals and communities most at risk, aim to address the root causes of violence and build stronger, safer communities.

- **Develop co-responder models.** Pair police officers with social service providers, mental health counselors, and other officials with competence in key areas that underlie threats to community safety.

- **Promote two-person patrols.** Two-officer patrol units can increase safety for officers, provide opportunity for training and mentorship from more experienced officers, improve response time and increase deterrence to crime because of increased police visibility.

- **Establish clear use-of-force policies.** Define when and how law enforcement officers may use force in specific situations. This should include a "use of force" continuum that focuses on a progression of force based on the level of threat. De-escalation techniques should be emphasized, with officers being trained to avoid use of force whenever necessary.

- **Incentivize officers living in the communities they serve.** Establish policies, procedures, and incentives for officers who live in the communities they serve in order to foster stronger bonds between law enforcement and the public.

- **Eliminate qualified immunity.** This doctrine shields police officers from personal liability unless their actions violate clearly established statutory or constitutional rights. Removing qualified immunity and requiring local jurisdictions to assume the legal burden would increase accountability for government employees and incentivize departments to improve training and oversight.

- **Require body cameras and dash cams.** These tools bring transparency and accountability to policing and serve as a check on improper conduct.

- **Reform traffic stop practices.** Traffic stops, as currently practiced, can contribute to mistrust and fear in many communities. Innovative strategies should be encouraged to replace pre-textual traffic stops – stops that occur when police use a minor traffic violation as a reason to stop a vehicle with the intention of investigating other potential crimes or violations – with organizations that don't require police officers. At a minimum, further research around this approach should be encouraged.

Rebuild Police Culture

Policing is a profession that relies on thousands of discretionary decisions made by every member, from front line officers to chiefs of police. Creating a culture that leads to self-restraint in the use of force would benefit police and those who the police take an oath to protect and serve. Officers who see themselves as part of an honorable profession are motived to act in an honorable manner and are more likely to exercise sound judgment when exercising their authority. Changing police culture from a "warrior" mindset to a "guardian" mindset would be dramatically enhanced if leaders did the following:

- **Engage youth in shaping police culture.** Involve young people in informing department policies, training, and community safety strategies. This could include youth advisory groups or other channels that elevate youth voices. Including their perspectives builds early trust and encourages a culture of service and accountability.

Police officers listen to young community leader

- **Shift to community safety.** Move from the idea of public safety to community safety. Public safety generally refers to the protection of citizens from harm, encompassing a broad range of actions to prevent crime, accidents, and emergencies. Community safety, on the other hand, focuses on creating safe and secure environments within specific communities, often addressing local issues and promoting social connections.

- **Decentralize decision-making.** Move away from hierarchical structure and managing routine operations through command-and-control processes. Officers must be trusted and empowered to make appropriate decisions at the level necessary to facilitate collaboration with community members and organizations.

- **Reward innovation.** Change incentives for advancement. Those who try new strategies for community safety should be rewarded rather than shunned as disrupters. New learning should be valued, supported and rewarded.

- **Develop leadership capacity.** Deliver robust leadership development programs that include an emphasis on change management and equip leaders to create resilient cultures that support learning, growing, and adapting.

- **Uphold internal equity.** Maintain respect, transparency, inclusion, and accountability for all members of the organization, no matter their rank, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

- **Prioritize community service.** Establish a mindset of service to the community, seeking to identify and address root causes of criminal behavior rather than focusing predominantly or exclusively on suppression and containment. Community members must be seen worthy of support, investment, and compassion, even when enforcement action must be taken.

- **Reject aggressive enforcement as default.** Vigorous enforcement is a necessary strategy during times of crisis and outbreaks of violence. But police leaders must reject the attitude that aggressive enforcement should be the primary strategy for reducing all types of crime or a substitute for addressing complex underlying drivers of crime and violence.

- **Emphasize the sacredness of life.** Policies and procedures should emphasize the sacredness of life. What this means is the expectation should be that everybody goes home safely after police and citizen encounters.

Those who try new strategies for community safety should be rewarded rather than shunned as disrupters.

- **Foster participatory governance.** People's Commissions/Justice Circles meet with city and police leadership to discuss and modify organizational structure, moving from a command-and-control structure to greater participation by citizens and line officers in decision-making around policy and practice.

- **Instill commitment to rights.** It should be drummed into police officers from Day One that policies and tactics require them to protect civil and human rights in all circumstances. Those who won't need to find another profession.

- **Build trust and legitimacy.** Police leaders must establish trust and legitimacy with the community. Doing so is fundamental to community safety. Trust and legitimacy must be prioritized rather than seen as optional and incidental.

- **Measure accountability collaboratively.** Programs that build respect, transparency, and accountability must be implemented in collaboration with the community, and metrics must be developed to measure and monitor how effectively police perform in each domain.

VI. How to Become an ACT Now Community

ACT NOW is moving forward with more communities seeking participation and discovering that listening is the foundation for ACTION. Communities are seeking to become sites to engage in building the coalitions that will allow them to design initiatives to keep young people out of the criminal justice system and to create an environment for Opportunity Youth to reconnect to school, to work and to civic life. To become an ACT NOW site, identify a youth serving agency in your community to organize the coalition required to fulfill a specific mission of youth deflection. Sign up at **actnowfor.us**. to become an ACT NOW site.

We will work with you on strategic planning, how to organize listening sessions, facilitate Breaking Bread events, how to collect relevant data and evaluation of your work. ACT NOW will work with you on developing a theory of change, invite you to become part of our learning community with monthly webinars, and provide technical assistance and share resources to build your capacity. Join this movement to build community-driven change and help our youth to thrive.

VII. Conclusion

We've emphasized throughout "Reimagining Community Safety" that the goal of ACT NOW is to hear from Americans on the front lines what they need to make their communities safer and better. Those in communities, not outsiders, are best positioned to know what is happening on the ground and what needs to be done to make things better. That doesn't mean that outside expertise isn't valuable. It is, and we've relied on it as well in this Report.

But when people are given autonomy to manage their own affairs, it is empowering. They are more likely to take initiative and ownership of what's happening around them. It fosters a sense of personal and community responsibility, respects human dignity and deepens community ties. ACT NOW believes that as a general matter, problems are best solved at the level where they arise and solutions most often emerge from those who have the most investment in solving them.

What became clear to us, and what we hope is clear in this Report, is that police reform and youth deflection efforts, while distinct categories, are also enmeshed. They are mutually reinforcing. Progress in one requires progress in the other. Communities that want to flourish need to take a holistic approach.

The good news is that in both areas, policing and youth deflection, we know much more than we did a decade ago, and certainly a generation ago. We know what works, and what doesn't. Which means implementing these reforms is increasingly a matter of civic will.

We have a long way to go. There are institutions and individuals who are fiercely resistant to change, who are convinced they know better, and who are skeptical of any reform, for any reason. For example, despite their documented successes, only one-third of jurisdictions in the U.S. currently have a juvenile deflection program.[10]

Good ideas often have to overcome old ways of thinking. This area is no different. But we have no doubt that the walls of opposition will eventually crumble, and perhaps sooner than we think, as the case for reform gets made and the stories of success are told. That's what ACT NOW has tried to do with this Report.

We see our role as giving voice to the wisdom of others. We have tried to do that in "Reimagining Community Safety." We invite Americans in every region and station of life to join those on this journey toward healing and wholeness and greater human flourishing.

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[10] https://www.rstreet.org/research/data-driven-deflection-a-systems-approach-to-reducing-juvenile-arrests/

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