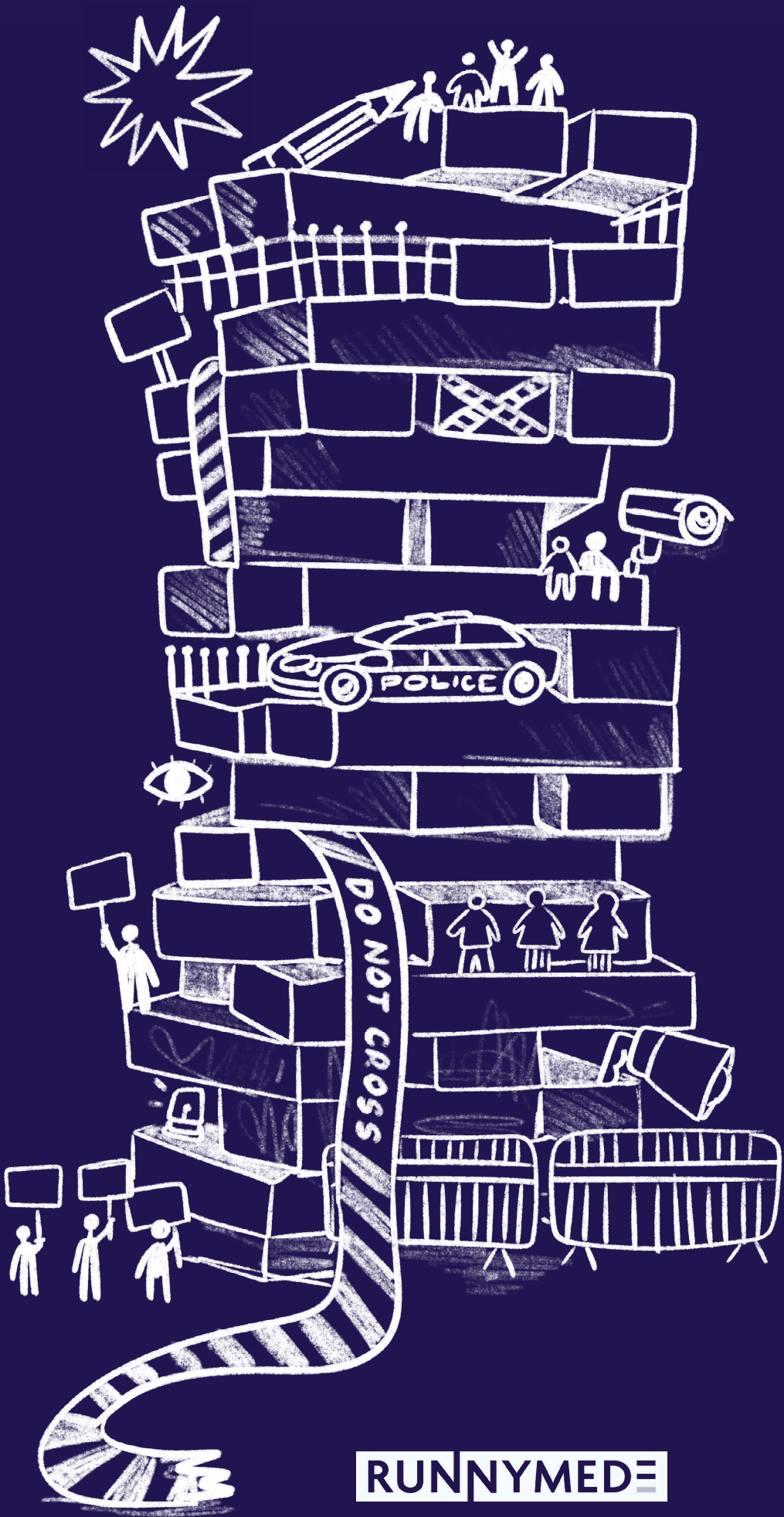


# Keeping Us Safe



**RUNNYMEDE**

Rethinking  
policing,  
harm and  
justice

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# Foreword

**The flourishing and freedoms of a society can be measured by its people's capacity to dream and build life-affirming material infrastructures and social relations that keep all people safe, belonging and dignified.**

By life-affirming infrastructures, we mean public and civic provisions: housing, education, health, transport, food systems and more, that fundamentally enhance the quality of people's lives. Not merely by prolonging life expectancy or ensuring financial stability, but in a fuller sense of living well with each other and with the planet.

By life-affirming social relations, we mean communities that are healthy, rooted in belonging, and capable of responding to harms and injustices in accountable and transformative ways. Communities that can address conflict without dispossessing or disposing of each other, and without entering cycles of violence and punishment.

What this requires is that the systems we rely on to create safety, justice, and health cannot themselves be places of injustice, harm, and violence, as is currently the case across many of our public institutions.

*Keeping Us Safe* reckons with the origins, development and maintenance of infrastructures of harm that are disguised as infrastructures of help. Often we turn to institutions like the police - despite decades of evidence of racism, discrimination and failing of the public - because we have been conditioned, both materially and culturally, to see policing as the only inevitable response to harm. For decades, it has been documented - particularly by marginalised and racially minoritised people - that policing and the wider carceral structure (including detention, border enforcement, and psychiatric restraint), don't merely fail to deliver safety, but actively produce harm. That they criminalise and punish people when they are most in need of support. If we are serious about collective health and safety - which we all require and deserve - then we need a total reimagining of these structures.

**'Keeping Us Safe' offers a powerful proposition and invitation to build responses to harm that don't reproduce the violence caused by policing and punishment, but instead meet our fundamental longing for safety. It asks us to consider how we create the conditions for safety - conditions that are deeply intertwined with dignity, health and belonging for us all.**

It accounts for these longings and demands from a grounded and practical space, attending to our material, emotional, social, spiritual needs, and to what communities themselves are calling for. It helps us begin at the right place: 'What do our communities really need for the conditions of safety, accountability, protection, and health?' Not: 'We need more police on the streets and harsher sentences to make us safer!' - as is the mainstream rhetoric.

In a time of escalating economic, social, political, ecological crises, we are witnessing the weaponisation of criminality to deepen austerity, repression and inequity, and to advance authoritarian and far-right agendas. In this moment, we must confront a fundamental question: if violence begets violence

and harm begets harm, how do we create the conditions for healing, health and flourishing instead?

At Healing Justice London - an organisation building community-led healing in response to intimate, interpersonal and structural violence - we grapple with the scale of distress and suffering we are witnessing. Nearly two decades of practice affirm what the many community responses in this report make clear: without structural change, we are projected towards a future with more violence, more trauma, and more harm. Now is the time to interrupt that trajectory and to turn towards our deepest longings: to be well, to be safe, to be loved, to be cared for, to live in dignity, and to belong. And to ensure these are not privileges reserved for those protected by hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ableism but available to all of us.

The pursuit of collective safety and wellbeing is all our work. One that requires a total transformation of how our society is organised - including our notions of morality, our stake in each other's lives and the civic and public services and infrastructure that we have. It demands that we redefine safety outside of securitisation, protection of property and punishment in the interests of capital, states, and corporations. Instead towards meaningful safety for people and the planet. So that when people encounter our communities, they can see by the material and social design of our institutions and relations, that life here is precious, cared for and we made it so.

**Farzana Khan,  
with Healing Justice Ldn**

What we  
cannot  
*imagine*  
cannot come  
into *being*

bell hooks

# Short read

## Rethinking policing, harm and justice

**Keeping Us Safe is a report that asks us to fundamentally rethink the way we understand what it means to prevent harm.**

Moving away from our fixation on policing and decades of ineffective policing reforms<sup>1</sup>, we show that it is essential to change how public resources are allocated and how power is structured. We need to consider the possibility of building the public infrastructure for care and accountability, rather than for punishment and control.

The report examines how the police in Britain is not a timeless institution but one with relatively recent origins in colonialism – one that was built to protect power, suppress resistance and maintain structural inequality.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Baroness Casey Review (2023) 'An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service'

<sup>2</sup> Elliot-Cooper, A. (2021) *Black Resistance to British Policing*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

**For generations, from Toxteth to Tottenham, communities – working-class communities of colour in particular – have resisted police violence and impunity and demanded meaningful change.<sup>6</sup> Their continued experiences of disproportionate stops and searches, use of force, imprisonment, and police killings show that policing is not broken: it is functioning as intended. As this report outlines, reform is not enough.**

Keeping Us Safe invites us to rethink what truly keeps communities safe. Based on extensive research with impacted communities, it challenges the widespread assumption that policing is an entirely common-sense, necessary or inevitable response to harm and conflict.

The report reveals how policing and criminalisation are used as tools for social control. The police response to actions and circumstances shaped by inequality, structural racism, harsh social and material conditions, and social exclusion – such as rough sleeping, drug dependency or experiencing a mental health crisis – criminalises them while the root causes remain unaddressed. At the same time, the government and media whip up moral panics around 'knife crime' and 'gangs', migration, and protest, which they then use to justify giving the police increased powers and resources and expanding surveillance and policing into our vital and decimated public and social services – including schools, healthcare settings and community spaces.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Gilroy, P. (1987) *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, London: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. and Roberts, B. (2013) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

**We need structural change.**

This report builds on decades of research demonstrating how policing can harm communities. Police escalate surveillance, violence, punishment and social exclusion, and can cement inequalities while failing to address the root causes of social issues.

When presented with binary yes/no questions, the public show broad support for policing. However, polling does not occur in a neutral setting, real experiences of harm can shape strong emotional responses, and the methodology of such surveys has limitations.

To overcome these issues, we also asked our respondents what they believed to be the most effective way to prevent harm. Around half of the public think greater investment in public and social services would do more to prevent crime than increasing the number of police on the street (50 per cent) and increasing police powers (52 per cent), with just 22 per cent and 18 per cent disagreeing, respectively (the rest are unsure). Support for social interventions increases when respondents are presented with specific scenarios.

Across our workshops and research, people made it clear that safety doesn't come from more policing: it comes from meeting people's needs. Responses showed that the public overwhelmingly believe that social interventions like secure housing, mental health care, education and youth services are more effective at preventing harm than policing responses.

But successive governments have ignored the evidence and public opinion, instead choosing short-term, punitive policy responses. Political rhetoric, media narratives and even TV shows play a

powerful role in shaping public belief.<sup>8</sup> As a result, safety has been misrepresented as synonymous with policing, when the evidence suggests otherwise. Police spending power continues to increase, with a budget of £19.9 billion in 2025/26 (a 4.1 per cent real terms increase since 2010/11)<sup>9</sup>, while many services that would help to reduce harm and build safety, such as those in local communities, continue to bear the brunt of austerity.<sup>10</sup>

## Keeping us safe therefore requires a set of non-reformist reforms and decriminalisation.

Our research suggests that it is time to stop pouring public resources into, what we evidence as, counterproductive systems. Instead, we must address root causes, and invest in community-led, trauma-informed and non-coercive approaches to safety, care and accountability. This is about not just about withdrawing from discriminatory, harmful and ineffective approaches but also actively preventing harm and supporting healing.

8 Mondon, A. and Winter, A. (2024) *Creating a Crisis: Immigration, Racism and the 2024 General Election*, London: Verso Books.

9 Home Office (2025) 'Police funding for England and Wales: 2015 to 2026', 138 August, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-funding-for-england-and-wales-2015-to-2026> [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-funding-for-england-and-wales-2015-to-2025](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-funding-for-england-and-wales-2015-to-2025)

10 Institute for Government (2025) 'Performance Tracker 2025: Local Government', <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-2025/local-services/overview>



## 'Serious youth violence'

The fear of and political focus on 'serious youth violence' has contributed to fuelling a moral panic, and this has been used to justify expanded and intensified surveillance and policing in young people's everyday lives, especially the lives of working-class Black boys. While evidence tells us the so-called 'knife crime epidemic' is manufactured, we do need to address the genuine harm caused by violence that disproportionately impacts Black communities.<sup>1</sup>

However, current approaches treat the issue as an individual matter, stigmatise entire communities and prioritise police enforcement. These measures are making matters worse. Instead the problem needs to be understood as a structural failure: violence among young people is driven by poverty, exclusion, lack of opportunity and the erosion of safe community spaces.<sup>2</sup>

Our research shows that policing responses – such as stop and search, criminalising orders, and gang labels – are not only ineffective but actively harmful, as they reproduce the very conditions that cause 'serious youth violence'. Instead, we must address the root causes: poverty, lack of opportunities, loss of community and trauma. This requires adopting trauma-informed and anti-racist public health approaches, while investing in community resources and restorative practices that prevent harm from happening in the first place.

1 Williams, E (2023), 'Policing the crisis in the 21st century; the making of "knife crime youths" in Britain'. *Crime, Law and Social Change* (82), pp.799-820

2 McAra, L. and McVie, S. (2022) *Causes and Impact of Offending and Criminal Justice Pathways: Follow-up of the Edinburgh Study Cohort at Age 35*. Report to the Nuffield Foundation, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Law School, [www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Causes-and-Impact-of-Offending-and-Criminal-Justice-Pathways.pdf](http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Causes-and-Impact-of-Offending-and-Criminal-Justice-Pathways.pdf).

## Education



Police–school partnerships, and an increasing reliance on draconian measures such as school exclusions, suspensions, in-school isolation and policies like Prevent, disproportionately target children from marginalised communities and feed a school-to-prison pipeline. This reflects not only a lack of adequate resources to support young people effectively, but also the broader impact of austerity and structural deprivation and the state’s prioritisation of control over care.<sup>1</sup>

We call for public health approaches that reject punitive and zero-tolerance models and instead invest in teachers, schools and supportive interventions – including restorative practices – that prioritise care, learning and long-term wellbeing.

1 Runnymede Trust (2023) *Over-Policed and Under-Protected: The Road to Safer Schools*, London, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/over-policed-and-under-protected-the-road-to-safer-schools>

## Housing and homelessness



The housing crisis and its interconnection with gentrification are key drivers of homelessness<sup>1</sup>, made worse by the collapse of mental health services<sup>2</sup> and a lack of meaningful support for people experiencing substance dependency.<sup>3</sup> Rather than addressing these systemic issues, policing criminalises rough sleeping and the everyday survival strategies people rely on, deepening harm and entrenching marginalisation.

Homelessness cannot be solved through enforcement. We must invest in long-term, community-led solutions; improve local support networks; and explore creative, structural responses to the housing crisis. This includes housing-first approaches, accessible mental health care and treating housing as a basic right, not something that is earned through compliance.

1 Almeida, A. (2021) *Pushed to the Margins: A Quantitative Analysis of Gentrification in London in the 2010s*, London: Runnymede and CLASS, [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/61d6fc536143d6219ea19fa4\\_Pushed-to-the-Margins-Gentrification-Report-min.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/61d6fc536143d6219ea19fa4_Pushed-to-the-Margins-Gentrification-Report-min.pdf).

2 Rethink Mental Illness (2025) ‘New analysis of NHS data on mental health waiting times’, 21 February, [www.rethink.org/news-and-stories/media-centre/2025/02/new-analysis-of-nhs-data-on-mental-health-waiting-times](http://www.rethink.org/news-and-stories/media-centre/2025/02/new-analysis-of-nhs-data-on-mental-health-waiting-times).

3 National Records of Scotland (2025) ‘Drug-related deaths in Scotland, 2024’, <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/drug-related-deaths-in-scotland-2024>/BBC News, ‘Slight rise in Scottish suicide rates’.

## Policing the border



So-called ‘hostile-environment’ policies, data-sharing and immigration policing cause harm, and this is not an accident. They are designed to make life untenable for certain people who have migrated to the UK. In doing so, they entrench poverty, criminalise survival and deter people from accessing support.<sup>1</sup>

Policing is central to this system, which relies on surveillance and punishment rather than care and support.<sup>2</sup> Though they are framed as targeting undocumented people, hostile-environment policies fuel institutional racism and state violence across all racialised communities.

The anti-migrant rhetoric of politicians and the media deepens this harm, encouraging the social exclusion of both recently arrived and long-established communities and the proliferation of violence against them.<sup>3</sup> To overcome this, we must dismantle everyday borders, reverse hostile-environment policies and invest in creating the material conditions – such as secure housing and income – that enable people to live in safety and dignity.

1 Montiel-McCann, C. and Julios-Costa, M. (2025) *A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Surveillance and the Media (phase two)*, London: Runnymede Trust, [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/688b6baccbeb036f9e0f022\\_A%20hostile%20environment\\_Phase%20Two\\_v6%20\(1\).pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/688b6baccbeb036f9e0f022_A%20hostile%20environment_Phase%20Two_v6%20(1).pdf)

2 Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G. and Cassidy, K. (2018) ‘Everyday bordering, belonging and the reorientation of British immigration legislation’, *Sociology* 52(2): 228–244.

3 Julios-Costa, M. and Montiel-McCann, C. (2025) *A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media*, London: Runnymede Trust, [www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/a-hostile-environment-language-race-politics-and-the-media](http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/a-hostile-environment-language-race-politics-and-the-media)



## Gender-based violence

This report shows how current approaches to gender-based violence are failing. Domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault are still under-reported, and reporting rarely leads to anyone being charged.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true for survivors who are most affected and have the least resources, including women of colour, migrant women, disabled people and people living in poverty.<sup>2</sup> These intersecting inequalities shape who is most vulnerable to harm and least able to escape it.

Focusing narrowly on prosecution as a way to provide justice obscures the broader reality of gender-based violence, much of which is state-sanctioned. This includes 'everyday bordering' and border-related violence, state-induced poverty including the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy, the criminalisation of sex work, homelessness, and exploitative working conditions – all of which policing helps to enforce.

We must decentre criminal-legal responses that compound harm and instead invest in holistic, community-led models of justice, healing and prevention.<sup>3</sup> Meeting people's basic material needs – secure housing, income and freedom from border violence – is essential to eliminating the causes of gender-based violence.

1 Stripe, N. (2021) 'Sexual offences in England and Wales: Year ending March 2020', Office for National Statistics (ONS), 18 March, [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/sexualoffencesinenglandandwalesoverview/march2020](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/sexualoffencesinenglandandwalesoverview/march2020).  
2 Crenshaw, K., (1991) 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–1299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.  
3 Gavin, P., Kite, C., Porter, C., McCartan, K. and Cawley, P. (2024) 'Restorative justice in cases of sexual violence: Current and future directions in the UK', *Issues in Criminal, Social, and Restorative Justice* 26(4): 393–410, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10282580.2024.2330375?src=recsys#abstract](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10282580.2024.2330375?src=recsys#abstract); Restorative Justice Council (no date) 'Restorative justice and sexual harm', <https://restorativejustice.org.uk/restorative-justice-and-sexual-harm#:~:text=Restorative%20justice%20can%20help%20survivors,it%20reduces%20reoffending%20by%2014%25>.



## Mental health

The mental health crisis is not just clinical: it is structural and political.<sup>1</sup> Drivers include racism, the hostile environment, poverty, a lack of support for children and young people, and the chronic underfunding of health services; poor mental health is a logical response. This is compounded by a lack of anti-racist, trauma-informed care and a system that prioritises productivity over wellbeing. Racism is not a secondary factor in the mental health crisis – it is a central one.

Mental health is too often treated through a carceral lens. The police are often first responders<sup>2</sup> and frequently escalate crises rather than resolving them.<sup>3</sup> Instead of investing more in punitive and coercive approaches to care, we need to address the social and material conditions that harm mental health and build community-based, non-policing responses – creating spaces for healing rooted in care, safety and collective

1 Walsh, D., McCartney, G., Collins, C., Taulbut, M. and Batty, G.D. (2017) 'History, politics and vulnerability: Explaining excess mortality in Scotland and Glasgow', *Public Health* 151: 1–12.  
2 College of Policing (2021) *College of Policing Analysis: Estimating Demand on the Police Service*, London, <https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2021-03/demand-on-policing-report.pdf>.  
3 Sheku Bayoh Inquiry (no date) 'An independent public inquiry set up to examine the events surrounding the death of Sheku Bayoh, the subsequent investigation and whether race was a factor', [www.shekubayohinquiry.org](http://www.shekubayohinquiry.org).

## Reimagining harm prevention

**Community members and organisations who took part in this research made it clear that safety does not begin with enforcement. It begins with meeting people's basic needs. It begins with reducing poverty, not increasing neighbourhood policing. It begins with strengthening community ties, not extending surveillance. And it means recognising that punitive responses to harm only create further harm, especially for working-class communities of colour.**

If we are serious about creating safety for everyone, we need to invest in systems that prevent harm in the first place – secure housing, inclusive education, anti-racist mental health support, accessible healthcare, economic and social security, and freedom from border violence and criminalisation. These are the conditions in which communities are better equipped to live in safety and dignity.

To re-orientate towards preventing harm and promoting safety, we need to shift how public resources are allocated and how power is structured. We don't need more research or reports to discover new ideas about harm

prevention. Over centuries, Black, Indigenous and other marginalised communities have developed powerful knowledge and practices in response to systemic harm, grounded in care and healing, which show us what's possible when we move beyond the limitations of policing.

These include:

- Transformative justice practices that address harm without reproducing violence, grounded in care, consent and collective accountability;
- Reparative justice approaches that acknowledge and seek redress for historic and ongoing harms caused by racism, colonialism and slavery and the inequalities they produce;
- Restorative justice initiatives that empower survivors and create genuine opportunities for people who've caused harm to take responsibility and repair relationships;
- Healing justice models that recognise harm as both systemic and interpersonal and treat healing as part of a collective political project.

These approaches persist, underground and on the margins, through community healing spaces, peer-led mental health hubs, transformative justice circles and grassroots youth centres. Alternative models of safety are not only possible: they are already being built from the ground up.

But these models can't succeed in isolation. They need to be supported by structural changes – ending hostile-environment policies, abolishing school-based policing, reversing the criminalisation of poverty, and redistributing wealth and power.

We need to move beyond reforms that tinker around the edges of systems that were never designed to ensure safety or justice for all. Instead, we should invest in building systems rooted in care, justice and collective wellbeing. Guided by a shared purpose and drawing on long-standing community-led practices, we can begin to build a world where everyone can not only survive but thrive. That is what will keep us safe.

**That is what will keep us safe.**

*Note: this short read is a summary of an extensive evidence base available in the Runnymede Trust's 2026 report 'Keeping Us Safe: Rethinking policing, harm and justice'*

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*This report represents the views of the Runnymede Trust and not necessarily the positions of our partner organisations or individual contributors.*



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