

JUSTICE

Cruelty Is Not Order, and Chaos Is Not Compassion

Safety and justice systems that reduce harm, uphold the rule of law, and treat people with dignity. Immigration gets its own brief: Build the Front Door.

PILLAR 8 · HUMANE SAFETY, JUSTICE, AND IMMIGRATION

AT A GLANCE

The problem

Neither performed cruelty nor looking away delivers safety, while the measured drivers of crime go unfixed.

The proposal

Prevention through protective factors, solved crimes over mass arrests, restorative justice where it works, the safe city; equal LGBTQ+ civil rights and a health-first drug policy.

Cost & funding

Cheaper than the incarceration-heavy status quo it replaces.

Evidence strength

Strong city-level RCTs; scale-up effects to be proven, with the evaluations named as binding.

Principal risk

Scale-up fade, and the perception gap: safety people cannot feel gets replaced by performed toughness.

Success looks like

Serious violence down, clearance rates up, perceived safety tracked alongside victimization.

Summary

We are usually offered two bad answers on safety, justice, and immigration. One says the way to look strong is to be harsh: lock more people up, treat enforcement as cruelty, and call the result order. The other flinches from enforcement altogether and calls the resulting disorder compassion. Both fail the people they claim to serve. Cruelty is not order, and chaos is not compassion. The goal of these systems is straightforward. Reduce real harm, uphold the rule of law, and treat people with dignity, and earn the public's trust by actually doing those things rather than performing toughness or performing leniency.

This brief carries the safety and justice halves of the pillar: a public-safety agenda built on preventing harm, on the protective factors that hold up mental health and hold down crime, and on police who are well trained, accountable, and focused on serious crime; a safe-city agenda that removes the measured environmental drivers of crime, lead, blight, and darkness, ends impunity where violence concentrates, and gives teenagers summers with stakes; and a justice system that decides who is held by risk and due process rather than by who can pay, that stops criminalizing addiction and mental illness, that makes restorative justice a real path, and that helps people return and stay out. The immigration half of the pillar, a system that is lawful, fast, humane, and capable, is built in its own companion brief, Build the Front Door. The standard throughout is the same. Less harm, more legitimacy.

The Principle

Public systems that use force and power in the public's name carry a double obligation. They have to reduce harm, and they have to earn legitimacy, because authority that is not trusted does not actually keep people safe; it just frightens them. A justice system loses legitimacy when it jails people for being poor, criminalizes illness, and breaks the people it processes. An immigration system loses it when it is so slow and broken that following the law becomes nearly impossible, and when enforcement turns to cruelty. The answer is not to abandon enforcement or the rule of law. It is to make these systems effective, accountable, and humane at the same time, because those qualities reinforce one another rather than trading off.

And the reason prevention works is not a mystery. Criminology has been writing it down for a century, under three names. Strain theory: people under crushing pressure, poverty, humiliation, blocked paths, commit more crime, so easing the strain prevents it. Social attachment: people bonded to family, school, work, and community have too much to lose, so building those bonds prevents it. Differential association: people learn from the people around them, so who surrounds a kid matters more than any lecture. Three names for one observation. The protective factors that hold up a person's mental health, stability, belonging, purpose, are the same ones that hold down crime. That is why this brief treats mental-health care and community-building as public safety itself, not as something softer than it.

The System Failure

On safety, we have leaned almost entirely on punishment after the fact while underinvesting in what actually prevents harm. We ask police to handle homelessness, addiction, and mental-health crises they were never trained or equipped for, then act surprised when those encounters go wrong, and the resulting distrust makes everyone less safe, including officers. On justice, cash bail jails people not because they are dangerous but because they are poor, holding them while wealthier people charged with the same thing go home, and decades of mass incarceration have broken families and communities without making us safer, while addiction and mental illness are still met with a cell instead of care.

And some of what perpetuates crime sits outside the justice system entirely, in the physical environment, and the data on this has become hard to argue with. A child poisoned by lead is measurably more likely, years later, to be suspended, detained, and arrested. A blighted vacant lot raises the violence around it. A dark street invites what a lit one deters. An unsolved shooting teaches a neighborhood that violence is free and that protection must be arranged privately. An idle, broke summer in a hard place is a risk factor with a calendar. None of these is a metaphor. Each is a measured driver of crime, each has been tested against a fix in randomized or rigorously controlled city-level trials, and the fixes worked where they were tried. Honesty about scale: a trial that worked in Philadelphia or Chicago proves the mechanism, not a guarantee that a national version performs identically, which is why every safe-city plank below pairs the intervention with continued evaluation as it scales. That is what the agenda is built from.

Immigration fails in its own compounding ways, and the diagnosis and the full rebuild live in the companion brief, Build the Front Door: a legal system buried under backlogs, enforcement that lurches between neglect and cruelty, and millions of long-settled people left in permanent limbo. None of this is order, and none of it is compassion. It is a set of systems failing on their own terms.

The Proposal

Safety That Reduces Harm

1. **Invest in what actually prevents crime.** Fund the things that stop harm before it happens: violence-interruption programs, addiction and mental-health treatment, and investment in the neighborhoods where concentrated disadvantage drives crime. Prevention is both more humane and more effective than waiting for harm and then punishing it.
2. **Send the right responder, and use police for what police are for.** A large share of what we ask police to handle is not crime at all. It is mental-health crisis, homelessness, addiction, and welfare checks, and sending an armed officer to those calls too often turns a health emergency into a tragedy. The fix is concrete and already proven. For nonviolent crisis calls, send a trained civilian response, a mental-health worker paired with a medic, with police available as backup when there is a real threat. Eugene, Oregon ran exactly this model, CAHOOTS, for more than thirty years; a national study found it reduced arrests and saved money,¹ and the program handled thousands of calls a year while needing police backup only a tiny fraction of the time. The original Eugene program lost its city funding and wound down in 2025, which is its own lesson about giving these services stable footing, but it continues in neighboring Springfield and the evidence it produced still stands. Denver's STAR program, evaluated by Stanford researchers, cut low-level crime by about a third in the areas it covered, at several times lower cost than a police response, without any increase in violent crime. This is the standard: match the responder to the situation, and stop using armed officers as the default answer to every kind of human distress.
3. **Train and use police as guardians first.** Where police are the right responders, they should be trained accordingly. At minimum, officers should be trained first in de-escalation, mental health, and community service and only second in the use of force, the reverse of how much American training is weighted today, and a co-responder model that pairs an officer with a mental-health worker should be standard for calls that may need both. Support police who are well resourced, held accountable for misconduct, and focused on serious crime rather than on the low-level enforcement that erodes trust. Accountability and effective policing are partners, not opposites, because a department the public trusts solves more crime.

The Safe City

4. **Remove the poisons and repair the places that produce crime.** Some of what drives crime is not in anyone's character. It is in the ground, the buildings, and the dark. Childhood lead exposure raises later suspension, detention, and arrest, and the phase-out of leaded gasoline is credited by some studies with a large share of the great crime decline of the 1990s, so finishing lead abatement, in pipes, paint, and soil, is crime prevention with a decades-long payoff. A citywide randomized trial in Philadelphia found that simply cleaning and greening blighted vacant lots cut gun violence nearby by about 29 percent. Streetlights randomly assigned to New York public housing developments cut nighttime outdoor crime by at least 36 percent. These are among the cheapest, best-proven safety interventions ever measured, and they require no one to be arrested. Fix the places: get the lead out, remediate the vacant land, light the streets, and treat the built environment as the crime policy it measurably is.

5. **End impunity where violence concentrates.** Violence is not everywhere. It concentrates, in a few places and among a small number of people and groups, and it feeds on impunity. So concentrate back. Raise clearance rates for shootings and homicides by funding the investigative capacity that solves them, because solving crimes is the deterrent that actually deters and the legitimacy that lasts. And use focused deterrence, the strategy that identifies the few driving the violence and delivers one message with two hands: real help, services, jobs, a way out, and certain, swift consequences for continued shooting. A Campbell systematic review of twenty-four evaluations found significant crime reductions, with gun violence down about 26 percent across thirteen studies, and the honest caveat comes with it: effects shrink in the most rigorous designs, so this is a strong tool rather than a silver bullet, and it only works paired with the legitimacy agenda in the rest of this brief.

The counterexample for what happens without certainty is running right now in Bogota. The city's own police chief reports that of roughly 33,000 people arrested in 2025, fewer than 10 percent ended up in jail, with officers describing catching the same offender twenty times; nationally, fewer than one in six arrested Colombians is ever imprisoned. The result is not leniency or toughness. It is a churn that deters no one, exhausts police, feeds vigilantism, and teaches the same lesson as an unsolved shooting in an American neighborhood: consequences are a lottery. Mass arrests with no follow-through is the worst of both worlds, all the harm of aggressive enforcement with none of the deterrence of certainty. Certainty, not severity or volume, is the active ingredient, which is exactly what the clearance-rate and focused-deterrence agenda funds.

6. **Give every teenager a summer with stakes.** In a randomized trial of 1,634 Chicago high schoolers, eight weeks of a summer job cut violent-crime arrests by 43 percent over the following sixteen months, with most of the effect arriving after the job ended. Cognitive behavioral programs like Becoming a Man cut violent-crime arrests by 45 to 50 percent during the program year in two large randomized trials. Fund summer jobs and these programs at the scale of the need, tie them to the tutoring corps and service pathways in the education and civic pillars, and keep struggling kids in school rather than pushing them out, because a suspension that puts a teenager on the street transfers him to the riskiest classroom there is. This is the strain, attachment, and learning logic of this brief made concrete: a job eases the strain, a mentor changes who a kid learns from, and both give him something to lose.

Justice That Earns Legitimacy

7. **Decide custody by risk and due process, not by cash.** Reform cash bail so that whether a person is held before trial turns on genuine risk and on due process, not on the size of their bank account. This is bail reform, not the abolition of pretrial detention: people who pose a real danger can still be held, but no one should sit in jail simply because they are poor.
8. **End the worst of mass incarceration and treat illness as illness.** Roll back the policies that drove mass incarceration without improving safety, and treat addiction and mental illness as the health problems they are, through treatment and diversion rather than cells. The measure of a justice system is whether it reduces harm, not how many people it holds.

9. **Make restorative justice a real path, not a boutique.** Where the victim chooses it and the case fits, bring victim and offender face to face to account for the harm and agree on how to repair it, alongside or in place of standard prosecution, and make it the default gateway for youth cases. This is not leniency, and the evidence is unusually rigorous: a Campbell systematic review of ten randomized trials found offenders who went through face-to-face restorative conferences committed significantly less repeat crime² than those routed through standard prosecution, with the largest effects on violent crime, while victims reported higher satisfaction, apologies they rated as sincere, less desire for revenge, and fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms. A process that leaves victims more whole and produces less reoffending is not an alternative to accountability. It is accountability that works.
10. **Make reentry work.** Help people leaving the system find housing, work, and care, because reentry that fails produces more crime and reentry that works prevents it. A system that releases people set up to fail is choosing its own next case.

Immigration: Build the Front Door

11. **See the companion brief.** The immigration half of this pillar, an earned path to status, wide legal channels, a restructured civil enforcement agency, a border managed by capacity rather than cruelty, and service-to-citizenship, is built in full in Build the Front Door, with its evidence, its sequencing arc, and its polling ground. The two briefs share one standard: lawful, fast, humane, and capable, with enforcement that is accountable rather than cruel.

Firearms: License the Purchase, Train the Owner

The platform's firearm position follows its evidence rules rather than either side's catechism, and the strongest evidence points somewhere specific: permits.

Connecticut required a permit, contingent on a background check and safety training, to buy a handgun; researchers found the law associated with a 40 percent drop in firearm homicides.³ Missouri repealed its similar law and firearm homicides rose 25 percent, with later analyses finding larger effects and a rise in firearm suicides. That is the platform's favorite shape of evidence, a policy tested in both directions, and it sets the lead plank: a permit to purchase, requiring a completed safety course and background check, the same basic logic as a driver's license, paired with safe-storage requirements, extreme-risk protection orders, and universal background checks that command near-universal public support. What this position does not lead with is as deliberate as what it does: the measures above have the strongest causal evidence, they respect lawful ownership, and they aim at the certainty-and-friction margins where the safe-city planks in this brief already work.

Equal Under the Law: LGBTQ+ Civil Rights

The position is simple, and the platform states it without hedging: LGBTQ+ Americans are entitled to the same protection from discrimination in work, housing, credit, education, and public life that civil rights law extends to everyone else. The vehicle is the Equality Act, which writes sexual orientation and gender identity into the nation's existing nondiscrimination framework, and which has passed the House twice before. This is also one of the least divided questions in American life: 72 percent of Americans support nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people, including a majority of Republicans, a consensus that has held for a decade even as the political noise around it has grown louder.⁴ Marriage equality is settled law twice over, in the courts and in the Respect for Marriage Act that Congress passed with votes from both parties in 2022, and this platform treats it as settled. The stakes are not abstract: the largest annual survey of LGBTQ+ youth, run by a suicide-prevention nonprofit and read with that provenance in mind, finds that young people in accepting communities attempt suicide at less than half the rate of those in unaccepting ones.⁵ Acceptance is not a favor. It is protective, at the level where protection is measured in lives.

Where questions get genuinely contested, the platform does what it does everywhere else: it follows the evidence and says so out loud. On clinical questions in transgender medicine, especially for minors, the position is evidence-based medicine, not politics-based medicine, in either direction. That means decisions made by families with their doctors under clinical guidelines; it means funding the rigorous long-term research that everyone on every side of this debate claims to want, because the honest reading is that several European health systems reviewed the same evidence base and urged more caution while major American medical associations support access to care, and a dispute among clinicians is a reason for better evidence, not for legislatures to practice medicine. And it means opposing blanket political bans that override every family and every clinician categorically, because a categorical ban is not caution. The test is the same one this platform applies to itself: positions move when evidence moves, and the people closest to the decision, with the most information, decide.

End the Drug War Where It Failed: Decriminalize, Divert, Legalize Cannabis Honestly

Fifty years of criminalizing addiction has produced neither less addiction nor safer communities, and the platform's position follows what the evidence supports: treat drug use as a health problem, reserve the criminal law for trafficking and harm to others, and be honest about each substance on its own terms. The anchor case is Portugal, which decriminalized personal possession in 2001 and routed people to health services instead of jail: new HIV diagnoses among people who inject drugs fell from over 1,000 a year to under 20, and its drug-death rate is now among the lowest in Europe.⁶ Decriminalization there was never legalization and never neglect; it was a health system showing up where a courtroom used to be. The domestic version already has American evidence: Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program, which hands low-level drug cases to case managers instead of prosecutors, cut participants' odds of rearrest by roughly 58 percent in its peer-reviewed evaluation,⁷ and versions of it now operate in dozens of jurisdictions. The platform's plank is national: decriminalize personal possession, fund diversion and treatment at the scale of the problem, and measure the system on deaths, disease, and recovery rather than arrests.

Cannabis gets its own honest paragraph, in both directions. Legalize it federally: 24 states have already done so, about two-thirds of Americans support it, prohibition's enforcement fell overwhelmingly on Black Americans despite equal usage rates, and the MORE Act, the leading vehicle, pairs descheduling with expungement of the records the drug war left behind. And tell the truth about the drug at the same time, because a platform that only recites the case for legal cannabis is marketing, not policy. The strongest long-run study we have, following a birth cohort to age 38, found that persistent cannabis use begun in adolescence was associated with an average 8-point IQ decline that did not fully recover after quitting,⁸ a finding whose critics argue part of the effect may be confounded, and the debate is carried here rather than hidden. Heavy use, high-potency products, and adolescent use carry real cognitive and psychiatric risks. Legalization done right looks like alcohol and tobacco regulation at its best, not its worst: age limits enforced, potency labeled, marketing restrained, revenue funding prevention and treatment, and public-health surveillance that would catch it if legalization starts moving adolescent use in the wrong direction, which is a named tripwire in this platform's what-would-change-our-position test.

Implementation Pathway

Prevention, crisis response, and policing standards run through a mix of federal funding and state and local practice, since most policing is local; the federal role is to fund what works and set standards for accountability. Bail and sentencing reform are largely state matters, with the federal government able to lead by example and by conditioning grants. Treating addiction and mental illness as health connects directly to the healthcare pillar. Immigration is the most federal of these, and its pathway, first-term competence through appropriations and executive action, then the decade legislation, is laid out in Build the Front Door.

Funding and Public-Value Logic

Prevention is cheaper than punishment. Violence interruption, crisis response, treatment, and reentry cost a fraction of what incarceration costs and prevent more harm per dollar, and holding people in jail before trial simply because they cannot pay is both unjust and expensive. A functioning legal immigration system reduces the enormous costs of a broken one, in detention, in court backlogs, and in the economic loss of pushing willing workers and taxpayers into the shadows. The public value is safety that is real rather than performed, justice that people trust, and an immigration system that is orderly because it works, not because it is cruel.

Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is being misread as soft on crime or open-borders, which is why the framing has to stay precise: this is prevention plus accountable policing, bail reform rather than the end of pretrial detention, and restructured rather than abolished immigration enforcement. The rule of law and real enforcement remain, made humane and effective rather than discarded. The second risk is that prevention and reform are promised but underfunded, leaving only the cuts, so the investments have to be real and come first. And the guardrail on enforcement is accountability and due process, the things that keep effective enforcement from sliding into the cruelty this brief is named against.

Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on harm, fairness, and function.

- Rates of serious violent crime, and the outcomes of crisis calls handled by trained responders.
- Pretrial detention driven by risk rather than inability to pay, and jail populations held for poverty alone.

- Incarceration rates alongside recidivism, and the share of addiction and mental-health cases met with treatment rather than jail.
- The safe-city drivers, tracked directly: childhood blood lead levels toward zero, vacant lots remediated and streets lit in the highest-violence neighborhoods, clearance rates for homicides and shootings rising, and youth summer employment in those same neighborhoods.
- Perceived safety, measured alongside victimization, because the two can diverge dramatically: in Bogota's 2025 city survey, about 15 percent of residents reported being victimized while 66 percent believed insecurity was rising. Perception is a political fact with real consequences, it drives flight, vigilantism, and the demand for performed toughness, and a safety agenda that cannot make people feel the improvement will be replaced by one that performs cruelty instead. So this platform counts both numbers and answers both.
- The share of eligible cases, especially youth cases, resolved restoratively, with reoffending and victim satisfaction tracked against standard prosecution.
- For the immigration half, the metrics live with the companion brief: processing times, backlogs, and enforcement measured by lawfulness and public trust.

Opposition and Responses

Some will say this is soft on crime. It is the opposite of soft; it is serious about what actually reduces crime. Prevention, accountable policing focused on serious harm, and reentry that works prevent more crime than punishment after the fact, and bail reform still allows dangerous people to be held. What it ends is jailing people for being poor and criminalizing illness, which never made anyone safer.

Some will say restructuring immigration enforcement means open borders. It is the reverse, and Build the Front Door makes the full case: an orderly, lawful, humane border and a legal system that actually functions is what real order requires. Enforcement remains; it is made accountable and humane rather than chaotic and cruel. Open borders and cruelty are both failures, and this platform rejects both.

Some will say restorative justice is a slap on the wrist. Ask the victims: in the randomized trials they came out more satisfied, less afraid, and less traumatized than victims routed through standard prosecution, and the offenders reoffended less, with the biggest gains on violent crime. A wrist-slap does none of that. And what restorative justice asks of an offender, sitting across from the person you harmed and answering for it, is harder than sitting silent behind a lawyer.

Some will say prevention does not work. The evidence says otherwise: violence interruption, crisis response, and treatment have track records of reducing harm at lower cost than incarceration. And the mechanism is a century old: ease the strain on people's lives, build the bonds that give them something to lose, and change who a kid learns from, and crime falls. Protective factors are prevention.

Some will say lead pipes, vacant lots, and streetlights are not crime policy. The randomized trials say they are: greening blighted lots cut nearby gun violence by about 29 percent, lights cut nighttime crime by at least 36 percent, and a summer job cut violent-crime arrests among the highest-risk teenagers by 43 percent. These are some of the largest, cheapest, best-proven effects in the entire field, and not one of them requires putting a person in a cell. Refusing to use them is not toughness. It is choosing more crime.

What Would Change Our Position

This brief already concedes that focused-deterrence effects shrink in the most rigorous designs; that concession is the template. If the safe-city interventions fail to replicate as they scale, the platform treats the scale-up evaluations as binding, funds what survives them, and drops what does not. If restorative justice in new trials showed higher reoffending or victims reporting worse experiences, its role would narrow to the case types where the evidence holds. If clearance-rate investment showed no deterrent return, the money moves to what does. And if serious violence rose in adopting cities, the response this platform owes is investigation and revision, not denial, because communities do not owe a theory their safety.

The new planks carry their own tripwires. On firearms, if permit-to-purchase states stopped outperforming on firearm mortality in the ongoing evidence, the plank's design would be rebuilt around whatever the evidence then favored. On drug policy, the cannabis tripwire is adolescent use: if public-health surveillance showed legalization pushing adolescent use or cannabis-related psychiatric admissions materially upward, the platform would tighten the regulatory design, potency limits, marketing rules, and enforcement of age limits, before it defended the plank. Decriminalization is held to Portugal's own test: deaths, disease, and treatment uptake, not arrests. And on LGBTQ+ civil rights, the civil-rights baseline is not evidence-contingent, but every clinical position is: as the long-term research this platform funds comes in, the position follows it, in whichever direction it points.

Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. We keep getting offered a false choice: be cruel and call it order, or look away and call it compassion. Neither keeps anyone safe. Real safety means preventing harm, police you can trust who focus on serious crime, and a justice system that holds the dangerous, not just the broke, and gives victims a real say in how the harm gets repaired. And it means fixing what the data says actually produces crime: get the lead out of the water, clean the vacant lots, light the streets, solve the shootings, and give every kid a summer job and someone worth learning from. Every one of those fixes has been tested in real cities, and every one worked where it was tried; we will keep testing as we scale. Real order on immigration means a legal system that actually works, and that is a big enough job that it gets its own plan: Build the Front Door. Cruelty is not order. Chaos is not compassion. We can do better than both.

SOURCES

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2. Strang et al., Campbell systematic review of restorative justice conferencing (ten randomized trials) ↵
3. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Connecticut permit-to-purchase study (Rudolph et al., AJPH 2015) ↵
4. PRRI, 2025 American Values Atlas: LGBTQ rights across the 50 states ↵
5. The Trevor Project, 2024 National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health (advocacy-run survey; provenance noted on the Evidence page) ↵
6. Transform Drug Policy Foundation case study of Portugal, built on EU monitoring data (advocacy source; official data underneath) ↵

7. Collins, Lonczak & Clifasefi, "Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD): program effects on recidivism outcomes," Evaluation and Program Planning (2017) ↵
8. Meier et al., "Persistent cannabis users show neuropsychological decline from childhood to midlife," PNAS (2012) ↵