

STABILIZING CHILDREN'S LIVES

Safety, Justice, and Law Authorities

Gina Adams and Catherine Kuhns
April 2, 2020

Safety, justice, and law authorities include people charged with protecting the public good, ideally with a focus on safety, peace, and prevention, and usually publicly funded. These actors include people ranging from police officers, judges, juvenile probation officers, and public defenders to school resource officers and crossing guards. Although less direct, people who establish and enforce laws and regulations that can affect safety and well-being, such as child care licensing, housing codes, food safety, and so on, can also fall into this category. Finally, some voluntary safety, justice, and law authorities, such as volunteer fire departments or community neighborhood watch organizations, also indirectly support children. This category can also include the subset of social service providers and civic and faith organizations who are involved in protecting children and families. (See companion documents on *Social Service Providers* and *Civic and Faith Organizations*.)

How Do Safety, Justice, and Law Authorities Affect Stability?

Safety, justice, and law authorities can directly stabilize children by ensuring the environments children grow and develop in are safe and that children have what they need to lead dignified and healthy lives. This may be achieved by effectively working with communities and policymakers to ensure that children's neighborhoods, schools, and communities are safe, and ensuring that children who are engaging in harmful behavior receive supportive and developmentally appropriate responses. For young people and parents most vulnerable to being swept into the justice system, these authorities may stabilize families by connecting them with community providers geared toward primary prevention,

ABOUT THIS MEMO

This document illustrates part of a conceptual model (see last page) showing how a child's healthy development depends on the stability of seven core needs. Whether those needs are stably met depends on the actions of key actors, including parents or guardians, who are part of a stabilizing web of supports, which is also shaped by larger contextual forces. For more information, visit <https://www.urban.org/stabilizing-children> to see the conceptual model and documents about each core need and each actor.

relying on involvement of law enforcement authorities only when absolutely necessary. For people already involved in the justice system, these authorities can serve as conduits to community services, such as culturally relevant after-school programming for young people or community-based reentry service providers for parents—indirectly stabilizing children. Safety, justice, and law authorities may also indirectly stabilize children by helping their parents learn about other services that may help support the family’s overall safety and well-being, working with community providers whenever possible.

However, these authorities can also destabilize children in various ways. This can happen simply by carrying out the duties of their role, such as sentencing a parent or guardian to a lengthy prison term. Yet it can also happen when authorities act in ways not only destabilizing for children, but also unjust. In some cases, these unjust actions are mandated in the law, while in others they are a result of the way people interpret or implement the law. Regardless, the current reality is that many communities are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement and the criminal justice system. This includes Black, Latinx, and indigenous communities, for whom the law and criminal justice systems are often experienced and perceived as racially unjust, as well as immigrant communities affected by deportation fears. For these vulnerable children and families, these authorities risk destabilizing children’s sense of safety and well-being and the stability of their relationships with family and friends who are also at risk.

How Does the Larger Economic, Political, and Cultural Context Shape These Authorities’ Ability To Support Children?

Policymakers have immense power in shaping the policies and procedures these authorities use to maintain peace and keep children and families safe. A context in which safety, justice, and law authorities employ culturally responsive practices and have well-funded programming at the community level is likely to have long-term positive effects for children and families. However, the justice system, which can be punitive in nature and have far-reaching consequences for children and families, is often characterized by structural inequity that only recently policymakers have begun to address. Despite these constraints, there are steps authorities can take and are taking to more actively support the stability of children and families—the movement toward restorative justice, for example, shows one such effort to take a different approach.

What Core Needs Do Safety, Justice, and Law Authorities Affect?

Although the role of safety, justice, and law authorities is most obvious in affecting the stability of children’s core need for *safety*, they can also directly or indirectly affect the stability of several other core needs, including *relationships*, *health*, *housing*, and *education and care*. Each is described below.



SAFETY

Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access

The inherent responsibility of safety, justice, and law authorities is to keep children safe and free of harm. In many ways, these actors exert their influence across a range of contexts that can keep children safe—from school resource officers and crossing guards in schools to regulators implementing licensing regulations for child care programs to family court judges working with children and their caregivers in collaborative ways to support their safety and well-being. These authorities and others may directly stabilize children’s safety by supporting basic safety practices, monitoring their

multiple environments, linking them to community-based services and supports, or providing children and their families with information around safety and how to identify and avoid risky or dangerous situations. They can also intervene to protect children or families when they are in danger.

However, safety, justice, and law authorities may also miss the opportunity to stabilize children if they are absent from the multiple contexts in which children live, an absence that may contribute to unsafe schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Yet, there is also evidence that they can destabilize children's lives when they are present, sometimes because of a legal system that is not necessarily designed to support collaborative efforts between communities and these authorities, and sometimes because of the ways that authorities enforce those laws. In some cases authorities intervene inappropriately or with excessive force—overcriminalizing, harassing, or harming children, their parents or primary caregivers, and friends and family—which undermines children's perceived and/or actual safety. Further, law enforcement officials can perpetuate deeply destabilizing practices in many communities of color, particularly Black communities, which can make them less safe for children. The current anti-immigrant climate, in which immigration authorities are implementing and enforcing deportation laws more aggressively, may be having a similar effect on the extent to which immigrant communities, and thereby their children, see law enforcement and the legal system as a threat rather than a source of protection. This could affect the extent to which these authorities are destabilizing children's lives.



RELATIONSHIPS

Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access

Safety, justice, and law authorities such as security guards, crossing guards, and other everyday fixtures in children's lives may themselves have stable, trusting relationships with children. Other safety authorities may stabilize children's relationships by stepping in when children are in unsafe situations or making appropriate referrals to other services as needed. For example, intervening when a child is in a dangerous home environment can protect a child from a harmful situation and ideally could connect the child and family with supports to help stabilize the child and build healthier, more stable relationships. Further, these authorities may play a role in identifying domestic abuse, violence, neglect, or other features of unstable relationships and refer the family to the appropriate supports.

Importantly, safety, justice, and law authorities may also miss opportunities to stabilize children's relationships, or they may actively destabilize them because of problematic policies or practices. For example, they may fail or not have the authority to connect families with appropriate resources in the face of unstable relationships or may unnecessarily remove parents or guardians from the household through incarceration or deportation, further destabilizing children's relationships. They may also fail to follow existing protocols (or not have adequate protocols) on how to behave around children who may be confused or scared that their parent, family member, or friend is in trouble with the law, or unfriendly visitation policies may affect children visiting incarcerated parents. Finally, in the current situation where children of color may see or experience safety, justice, and law authorities as racially biased or motivated or as enforcing laws that disproportionately affect their families and communities (such as deportation efforts), children may experience these figures and indeed the larger legal system as dangerous and destructive to their relationships.



HEALTH

Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access

Safety, justice, and law authorities can stabilize children's health through their actions to support children's need for safety, as well as support basic standards of health and safety in their environment. Helping children be physically and mentally safe in their schools, communities, and homes supports children's physical and mental health. In some instances, these authorities' programming also provides older children with information around risky and dangerous health behaviors such as drug and alcohol usage, and resource officers in schools may facilitate referrals to other services for children in need. Further, enforcing health and safety standards in the child's environment, whether through ensuring standards in child care programs or supporting the quality of housing or food through regulations, can also support children's health.

However, the absence of safety, justice, and law authorities in communities and schools that may otherwise be dangerous can affect children's health by failing to provide a safe environment for children to learn, grow, and thrive. For example, schools that don't provide crossing guards on nearby busy streets or agencies that fail to enforce health and safety regulations (such as child care licensing standards or housing codes) can destabilize children's health. These authorities may also contribute to mental health challenges if there are no established safeguards for children when arresting or detaining parents, or if the safeguards aren't followed, or if they use excessive force in front of children or on children themselves. Finally, in communities where law enforcement has become associated with excessive force or issues such as deportation of undocumented immigrants, safety, justice, and law authorities can be seen as threatening to children's core needs of safety and stable relationships, which can then undermine their physical and mental health.



HOUSING

Key mechanisms: direct interactions, information and access

Safety, justice, and law authorities can help stabilize children's home life by ensuring that children feel safe and secure in their homes, neighborhoods, and communities. These authorities may directly intervene in children's home life (e.g., in cases of domestic abuse) or may support children's home life more indirectly through ensuring that the greater community context allows children to feel safe and cared for. They can also affect the quality of children's home life by enforcing housing codes and taking remedial actions to support housing quality.

However, safety, justice, and law authorities may also contribute to instability if they don't or can't effectively protect children in their home, neighborhood, or community or don't intervene when children's home life is unsafe or unstable. When parents or guardians are deported, incarcerated, or otherwise removed from the home, children face significant emotional challenges, as well as the possibility of homelessness, entry into the child welfare system, and/or high housing mobility that destabilizes their housing and compromises their access to other needs, such as education and care, food, health, and relationships.



EDUCATION AND CARE

Key mechanisms: direct interactions

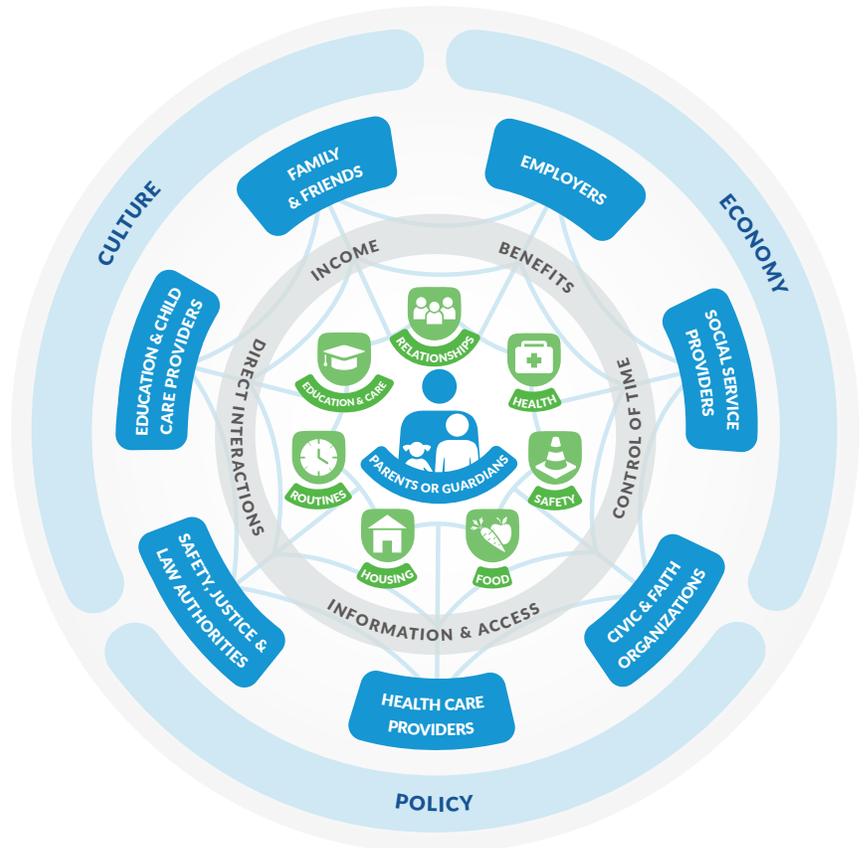
Safety, justice, and law authorities stabilize children's access to education by providing children and families the safety they need to commute to school, have safe outdoor places to play, and foster a safe environment free from danger where children can learn and grow. From the crossing guard to the school resource officer, these authorities simultaneously affect multiple needs (e.g., safety, education). By helping children feel safe and secure in their communities, neighborhoods, and places of education and care, these authorities foster an environment where children can learn and flourish both in school and at home. Agencies that ensure the basic health and safety of the learning environment, such as the child care licensing agency or the facilities oversight component of the school system, also can play a role in ensuring that children are safe from harm while they are at school, thus facilitating their ability to learn.

Alternatively, safety, justice, and law authorities can contribute to instability in children's learning environments if they don't or can't actively work to keep children's environments safe and healthy—which can make it harder for children to learn and grow. Exposure to community violence affects children's educational outcomes, and the presence of police officers in schools, as currently implemented, has sometimes been correlated with harsher student treatment—in particular of Black students. Moreover, school resource officers may miss an opportunity to stabilize children if they don't have access to resources (such as counselors). Further, when safety, justice, and law authorities directly intervene in ways that children experience as harsh or punitive or racially biased, children's sense of safety is affected, which in turn can affect their ability to learn.

Stabilizing Children’s Lives—A Web of Stabilizing Supports

Stability in children’s environments, relationships, and basic needs being met is critical for their healthy development and well-being. Instability—defined as the experience of abrupt and/or involuntary change in individual, family, or community circumstances—can create significant barriers to meeting these foundational needs, particularly if the disruption is negative, frequent, or not buffered by an adult. The extent to which children experience instability is related to the actions of various **actors**, with **parents and guardians** primary among them, who together play an important role in the stability of meeting children’s **core needs** and can buffer children from instability through different **mechanisms**. However, all relationships and interactions demonstrated in the model, and the ability of different actors to actively support stability in meeting children’s core needs, are shaped by the greater contexts of the **economy, policy, and culture**. Finally, the model’s different elements are highly **interconnected**, as they are all part of the child’s **web of stabilizing supports**.

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CORE NEEDS

All children need stability in three core areas: **relationships** with at least one loving, caring adult, access to basic resources (**food, health, housing, education**), and daily life (**routine, safety**). The **parent or guardian** directly or indirectly helps children access most core needs and serves as a child’s central buffer against stress and instability.

MECHANISMS

Children’s core needs can be stabilized or destabilized through different mechanisms, or the ways in which different actors affect core needs. Key mechanisms include **income, benefits, direct interactions, information and access, and control over time**.

ACTORS

Although **parents or guardians** are the central actors affecting a child’s core needs, other actors can affect the stability of these needs being met through mechanisms that affect children directly, or indirectly through parents. Key actors include but are not limited to **employers; social service providers; health care providers; civic and faith organizations, safety, justice, and law authorities; education and child care providers; and family and friends**.

CONTEXT

The ways in which actors in the model affect children’s core needs are shaped by the **cultural, economic, and political** climate in which all actors live. These overlapping contexts affect what resources families have,

how they spend their time and with whom they spend it, their communities, what services and supports they have access to from other actors, and the quality of those services and supports—all of which can be stabilizing or destabilizing for children. These contextual factors also shape the ability of key actors to support stability in children’s lives.

THE WEB OF INTERCONNECTIONS

All actors and core needs in the cycle of family stability are interrelated, as illustrated by the **web** in the model. The impact of one actor on a child’s life can not only affect the stability of a child’s core needs being met, but can also reverberate back out and affect the stability of that child’s relationship with another actor. Moreover, the stability of any given core need can affect the stability of other core needs.

Acknowledgments

This memo was funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. The authors would like to thank Heather Sandstrom, Mary Bogle, Laudan Aron, Susan Popkin, Elaine Waxman, Heather Hahn, Elisabeth Jacobs, Erica Greenberg, Julia Isaacs, Diana Elliott, Leah Sakala, and Samantha Harvell, who were instrumental in providing insights and guidance for these materials; Elizabeth Forney, Serena Lei, and Liza Hagerman for their editorial and production support; Brittney Spinner for her design support; and Shirley Adelstein for helping bring this idea to life.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

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