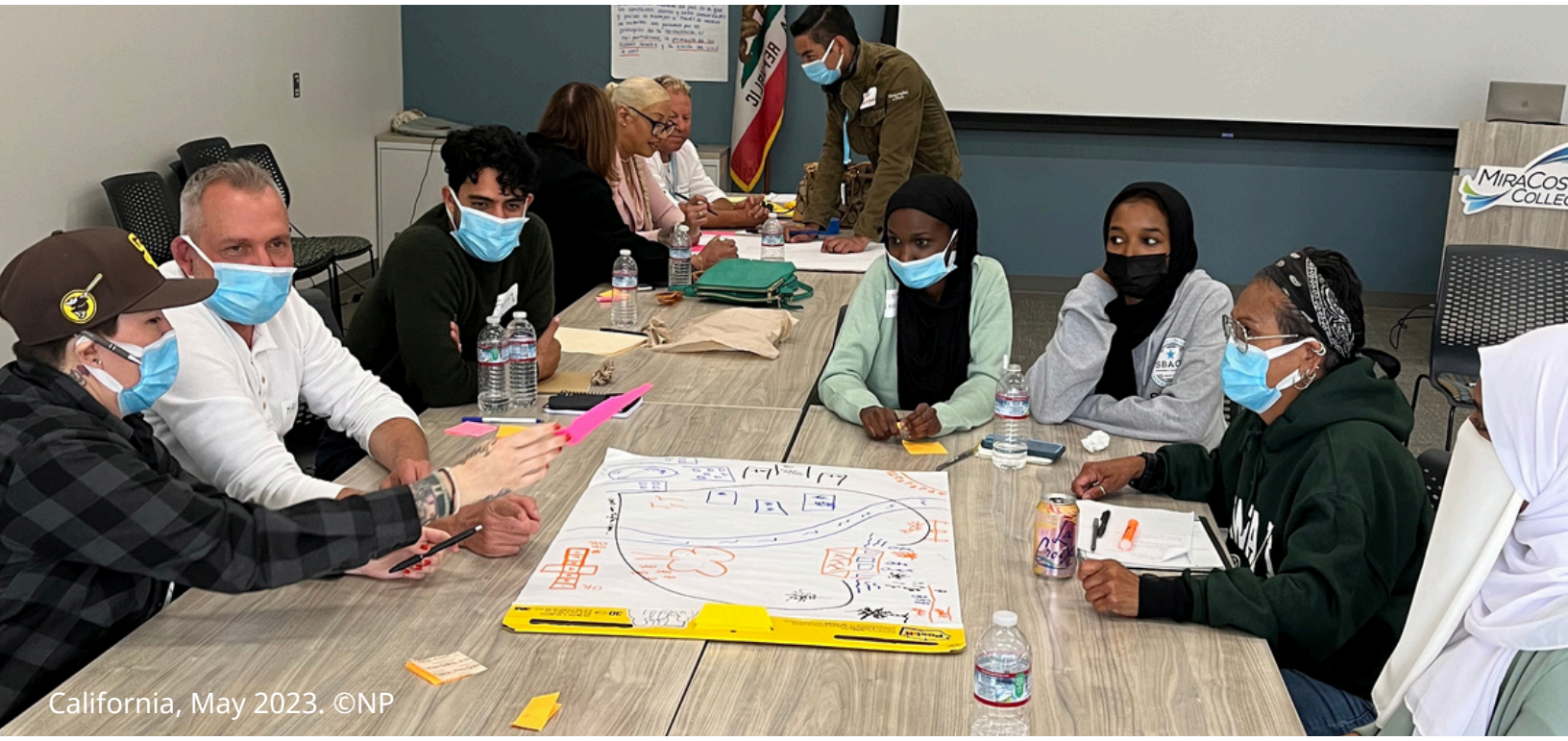
www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org

COMMUNITY SAFETY **IN CALIFORNIA**

MAY 2023



California, May 2023. ©NP

CONTACT

Kalaya'an Mendoza
He or They/Them
Director of Mutual Protection, USA
kmendoza@nonviolentpeaceforce.org

BACK**GROUND**

Community safety needs in California – and around the United States – are urgent and escalating. There has been a documented increase in violence against civilians, particularly against the most marginalised communities. As violence strains our social fabric, also under pressure from the Covid-19 pandemic and rising economic pressures, people face a range of threats that undermines their personal and community safety.

This violence presents in many different forms. Hate crime statistics are one indicator of growing threats to community safety in California, with recent reports suggesting a significant uptick in violence based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability and sexual orientation. Federal data analysis suggested a 12% increase in hate crimes nationally over the course of 2020-21, a figure that is likely to underrepresent the actual prevalence of this violence. In California, these figures are even more concerning, with an increase in hate crimes in the state of almost 33% in 2021 – the highest surge in reported hate crimes since the 9/11 attacks. In metropolitan areas, figures are even more astonishing, with San Francisco Mayor London Breed reporting a 567% increase in reported hate crimes against Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities from 2020-2021. These figures mirror tracking from the Southern Poverty Law Center, which highlights 65 hate groups present in California - the highest number of any state in the country. As shocking as these figures are, they likely underrepresent the true scale of violence experienced by community members, particularly by marginalized communities.

Other events and trends are also raising concerns about community safety in California. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers face major risks of violence during displacement and resettlement, with widespread discrimination against displaced populations. Violence experienced in California exacerbates existing violent traumas, with one in three newly arrived refugee women in the state reporting experience of traumatic events, including sexual, physical, and weapons assault.

Civil rights groups have also flagged major concerns about escalations of violence in the lead up to presidential elections, raising alarm about risks to communities in the lead up to the 2024 election. This reflects increasing acceptance of political violence, and the risks this poses to protection and safety of communities. As Dr. Rachel Kleinfeld argued in testimony before the Select Committee investigating the January 6th attack on the United States Capitol, threats, intimidation, and violence in American political life are becoming increasingly mainstreamed and pose a major threat to society: “The damage that this violence itself, and the conspiracies driving it, are causing to our democracy are already substantial and are likely to produce significant democratic decline if not arrested soon.” Also noted in this testimony is the tendency for violence to lead to more violence – interrupting this cycle is essential to ensure community safety, and to protect human rights.

Many community organizations are working tirelessly across California to address this violence, from the individual and interpersonal level, to pushing for structural and policy transformation. Across the state, they do so with very little resources, despite escalating risks. “We know where the gaps are,” shared one LGBTQI+ community representative “but we’ve been trying for years and we still have no resources.” Shared another, “we don’t have space to talk about personal safety and community safety.” One Muslim leader echoed these conclusions: “we really have a need for safety training, community education, and empowerment.”

This report stems from requests from such organizations to address this challenge: to highlight the need for dedicated investment in community-based safety infrastructures as an essential component of a response to escalating risks of violence. It highlights the need for resourcing for communities and organizations that focus on community resilience to violence and protecting targeted groups and their communities. It also emphasizes the need for cross-organizational and cross-sectoral learning spaces, and how safety through solidarity is an essential component of interrupting violence and protecting civilians and civic space.



California, May 2023. ©NP

METHODOLOGY
& GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

This research draws on ongoing Nonviolent Peaceforce analysis of violence and community safety needs and responses in California and the United States more broadly. Since February 2021, NP has conducted 12 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), met with over 15 community organizations currently organizing and working against different kinds of violence in the state, and held space for nine organizations to discuss and train on different community-based safety responses. The partners that we have worked with represent a broad range of communities facing different kinds of violent threats, including from the LGBTQI+ community, migrant and undocumented communities, organizing bodies representing different BIPOC communities, and social justice collectives. Partners we have worked alongside predominantly reside in Oakland, San Francisco, Fresno and San Diego. However, these locations broadly reflect demographics and challenges faced by communities in other areas of the state.

NP USA is currently building a permanent presence in California, alongside standing programs in Minnesota and New York. NP has been working alongside communities on safety and protection programming in the US since 2020.



COMMUNITY SAFETY RISKS **& NEEDS IN CALIFORNIA**

Communities in California face a myriad of violent risks and threats, which are escalating at a time when the capacity of local communities to respond to violent escalation is constrained. Civil society is overstretched by need and limited resources, and though they recognize the need to invest in safety infrastructures – both for frontline staff and for communities more broadly – time and financial resources to do so are minimal.

IDENTITY-BASED VIOLENCE AND HATE CRIME

As reflected in the introduction in escalating rates of hate crimes, identity-based targeted violence – based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability and sexual orientation – is on the rise, and expected to become even more exacerbated in the lead up to the 2024 election. Community based organisations representing BIPOC, LGBTQI+ and religious communities all named dehumanization of their groups and hate speech as key threats to safety. Examples given by community representatives included the treatment of trans youth, such as those who have stood up to give public testimony of their experiences to school boards and others and been verbally and physically targeted as a result: "kids are being asked to do way more than we can humanly expect of them," shared one community leader regards the burden of abuse faced by trans youth. Whether it is through anti-trans legislation, at school board meetings or just walking in their neighborhoods, trans youth leaders have shared the fear and hypervigilance they experience in their everyday life. Interrupting violence of all kinds is essential to ensure that it does not become normalized.

It is also important to note how intersecting structures of marginalization increase the risk of violence faced by different individuals and groups. Interviewees consistently noted the heavy challenge faced by those who simultaneously embody multiple targeted identities, such as the trans Latinx community, trans youth (particularly BIPOC trans youth), or BIPOC religious communities (particularly for women who wear the hijab).

DISPLACEMENT, ASYLUM, AND MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Those who have displaced to California also face higher rates of violence. In addition to violent traumas many have faced prior to (and often leading to) their displacement, violence often continues once they have entered California. Migrants – particularly for those who lack documentation - often do not have access to social safety nets, shelter, or resource capacity to meet their basic needs. This increases risk of exploitation, human trafficking, and other forms of violence. Due to the recent expiry of Title 42 - a Trump-era directive that enabled border

officials to expel asylum seekers trying to enter the United States (justified as an attempt to arrest the spread of Covid-19) pressures on available services have increased as border officials have left asylum seekers, including children, at transit centers with no assistance to connect with services or support. Particularly when it comes to seeking legal or safety support, migrants are often fearful of contacting state services such as the police because of risks of deportation. This is all part of a concerning trend nationwide where migrants are put at risk due to "harsh U.S. immigration deterence policies."

"Our work for human rights is directly tied to what is happening at the border," shared one community leader—a sentiment echoed across organizations, across the state. "Whether it is government policy, the actions of government and security actors in the borderlands, or the polarizing rhetoric about migration and migrants at all levels, we see how it affects the communities we work with." This intense unease is only expected to grow, as highlighted by another leader: "next year is another presidential election year, where migration and border politics are sure to be on the ballot. None of us are looking forward to it. No matter who runs, migrants are dragged through the mud. No matter who wins, migrants lose." This sentiment was shared by many throughout the assessment: "I am seeking asylum in the U.S. because I was persecuted in my home country—I left the certainty of death there for the daily fear of death here." "I am now a citizen, but I know people with citizenship who have been deported. Any time I run into anti-migrant escalations on the street or on the bus, my mind jumps to that possibility."

PROLIFERATION OF WEAPONS AND GUN VIOLENCE

The proliferation of weapons and related armed violence continues to post a major threat to communities in California. At the time of writing in May 2023, there have been 18 mass shooting events in California in 2023 alone. Someone is killed by a gun every three hours in California, with over 3200 people killed by firearms each year, on average.

Community groups regularly receive gun-related violent threats against individuals and events, particularly those representing identity groups often targeted by right-wing hate organizations, such as LGBTQI+ or Islamic community groups. Following the Club Q shooting on November of 2022 where five LGBTQI+ people were murdered, LGBTQI+ communities around the U.S. were on a heighted level of alert.

Interviewees noted that they are not only at risk of gun violence from those outside their identity groups, as noted above, but also from their neighbors. In January, 11 people were killed and 9 people injured in a Monterey Park, CA mass shooting where the perpetrator of the violence was of the same community of the victims and event attendees.

Many of the communities that are on increased alert and at increased risk face barriers to risk reduction and responses to threats and instances of violence. Conventional threat-based security resources, such as calling the police, are not perceived to be safe or accessible for many marginalized communities, e.g. Transgender Latine members. One member of community organization Trans Fronteras highlighted unmet (and often unspoken and unreported) gaps in protection because of these fears: “A neighbor was harassing me using transphobic language. In that moment, I was afraid of the situation escalating to the level gun violence. However, I felt stuck without a response. I didn’t feel safe calling police—both due to my fear of police violence as well as fear for my long-term safety as an undocumented migrant.”



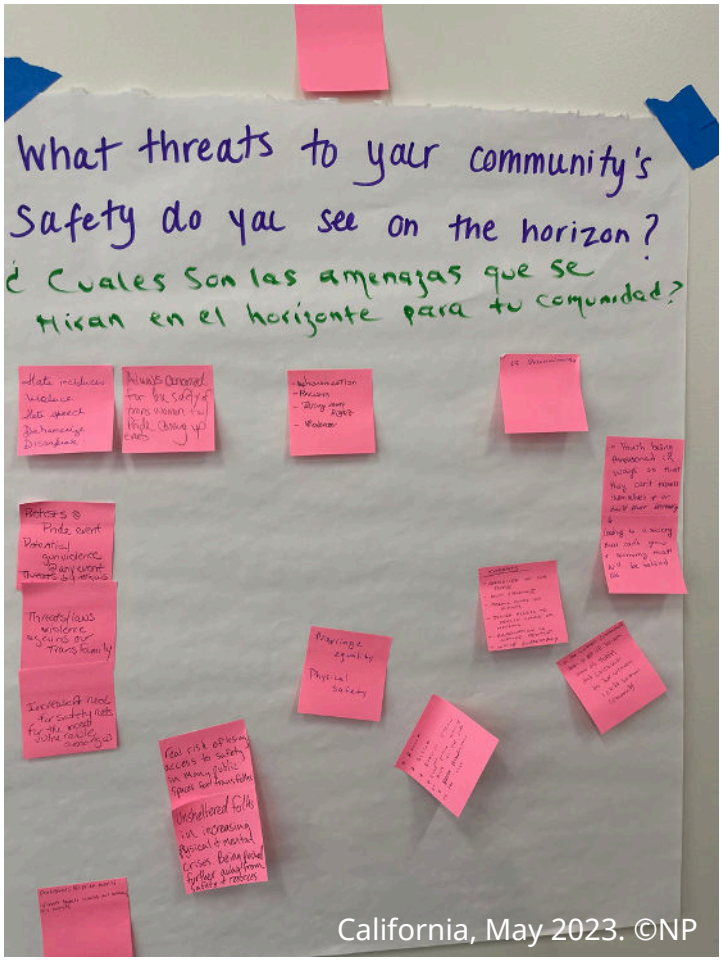
California, May 2023. ©NP

DIGITAL SAFETY AND VIRTUAL HATE

Along with the near-daily threats to communities' physical and psychosocial safety, there is also a digital escalation of targeted hateful rhetoric against LGBTQI+ and BIPOC communities. This feedback loop of online-offline hate and violence, puts individuals at further increased risk of psychosocial harms and physical violence. These harms have direct effects on social cohesion and increase community-wide risks of violence. and BIPOC communities. This feedback loop of online-offline hate and violence, puts individuals at further increased risk of psychosocial harm and physical violence. These harms have direct effects on social cohesion and increase community-wide risks of violence.

Although interviewees shared varied concerns about online-offline violence (doxing, outing, bullying, etc.), there was recurring concern over patterns of increased harassment and threats of violence ahead of publicized events. One week before Drag March LA, West Hollywood was vandalized with anti-Trans messaging by Gays Against Groomers, a group which "amplifies dehumanizing anti-trans rhetoric" and "directs online harassment and intimidation campaigns targeting LGBTQ+ people and events" (Southern Poverty Law Center). Responses by event hosts are varied, but there is a vigilant consideration for safety: For example, after a Drag Story Hour at Books Inc. in Campbell, CA was disrupted by protestors, the bookseller hired private security.

While community groups are searching for ways to respond to general and specific threats of violence, interviewees consistently referenced the lack of community-based tools at their disposal. Steeped in this climate of fear, one organizer shared: "How do I move forward hosting an event when I know there is a very real threat of violence? I'm seeing what's in the news and what is on our social media pages and I'm angry and afraid." However, once organizers became aware of community-based event safety, there was consistent interest to deepen that work. In one instance, a coalition of South Asian and Southeast Asian groups contacted NP for consultation, training, and capacity-building support in preparation for potential hate-fueled gun violence at upcoming events in Fresno.



California, May 2023. ©NP

URGENT ACTIONS **& RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. SCALE UP PROACTIVE SAFETY RESPONSES

Monitoring harm or tracking incidences of hate crime is not enough. A proactive safety response not only observes and understand the violence people are experiencing but provides for direct response to prevent threats from escalating as they emerge. Strengthening community safety infrastructures requires clear strategies and dedicated funding for safety and protection initiatives. This includes investment in dedicated Community Safety Teams that are trained to monitor, plan, and respond to both state and non-state actor violence. In addition, many community groups are seeking to strengthen their own internal capacities and have requested training in safety skills and knowledge. Trainings in unarmed civilian protection strategies such as Upstander/Bystander Intervention, currently being piloted out by Nonviolent Peaceforce in California, demonstrate the potential value-add of this kind of initiative, with participants affirming their increased confidence in identifying and responding to threats: "We have the power to protect us – and, that takes knowledge and training," shared one training participant.

Community organizations we interviewed also see need and value for proactive safety responses to extend to communities broadly: "how do we democratize this information?" was a common question. With violence becoming an ever-present element of daily life in California, many identified the need to broaden training and knowledge in safety to community members outside of targeted groups. In addition, Training of Trainers programming was identified as important to enabling safety skills and knowledge to be shared and disseminated more broadly to different communities.

2. FOCUS ON CRISIS RESPONSE

Though many community organizations and grassroots groups have longstanding crisis response strategies in place, the limited resources available barely touch the level of need in California. Particularly when it comes to violence experienced by migrant communities (both at the US-Mexico border, and elsewhere in California) and those experiencing homelessness, or both, community groups do not have the capacity to provide appropriate safety responses. As noted above, these communities are often reluctant to engage state services such as police because of high risks of violence and/or deportation. Investment in Community Safety Teams at the border and specialized in migration support is one way of addressing this critical gap in services, whilst protecting those with specific vulnerabilities from potential exposure to state violence.

3. SUPPORT CROSS-ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND SOLIDARITY

Across the board, community organizations and individuals highlighted the need for cross-organization learning on responding to violence and safety. Recognizing that the root of violence faced by communities is often the same – for example, white supremacist ideologies – groups see the need to organize alongside one another to face violence together. “We are facing the same challenges in different spaces,” highlighted one organizer. Specifically, strategizing and training alongside other groups within the same geographic spaces was identified as critical to collective and effective safety action. Groups identified common language and practices of safety as something that has been missing from their toolkit, highlighting the way that some safety-oriented groups have approached this work in partisan or exclusionary ways. “Building relationships with others is very helpful, especially when we’re trying to advocate for our community,” shared one training participant who had been able to connect with other people outside their own thematic area.

4. DEDICATE LONG-TERM RESOURCING FOR SAFETY

Across the board, community organizations and individuals highlighted the need for cross-organization learning on responding to violence and safety. Recognizing that the root of violence faced by communities is often the same – for example, white supremacist ideologies – groups see the need to organize alongside one another to face violence together. “We are facing the same challenges in different spaces,” highlighted one organizer. Specifically, strategizing and training alongside other groups within the same geographic spaces was identified as critical to collective and effective safety action. Groups identified common language and practices of safety as something that has been missing from their toolkit, highlighting the way that some safety-oriented groups have approached this work in partisan or exclusionary ways. “Building relationships with others is very helpful, especially when we’re trying to advocate for our community,” shared one training participant who had been able to connect with other people outside their own thematic area.

5. INVEST IN SERVICE MAPPING AND ACCESS TO PROTECTIVE INFORMATION

Communities and organizations have very limited access to protection resources beyond conventional police structures. Where alternatives exist, knowledge about those resources is not readily available to community members. Service mapping must be improved to identify gaps and increase awareness about available resources. In addition, response services need be aware of the nuanced need of each community to ensure that referrals address the intersectional nature of varied needs. One of the key needs identified by community members and organizations was for “live-saving” Mobile Crisis Response Teams.