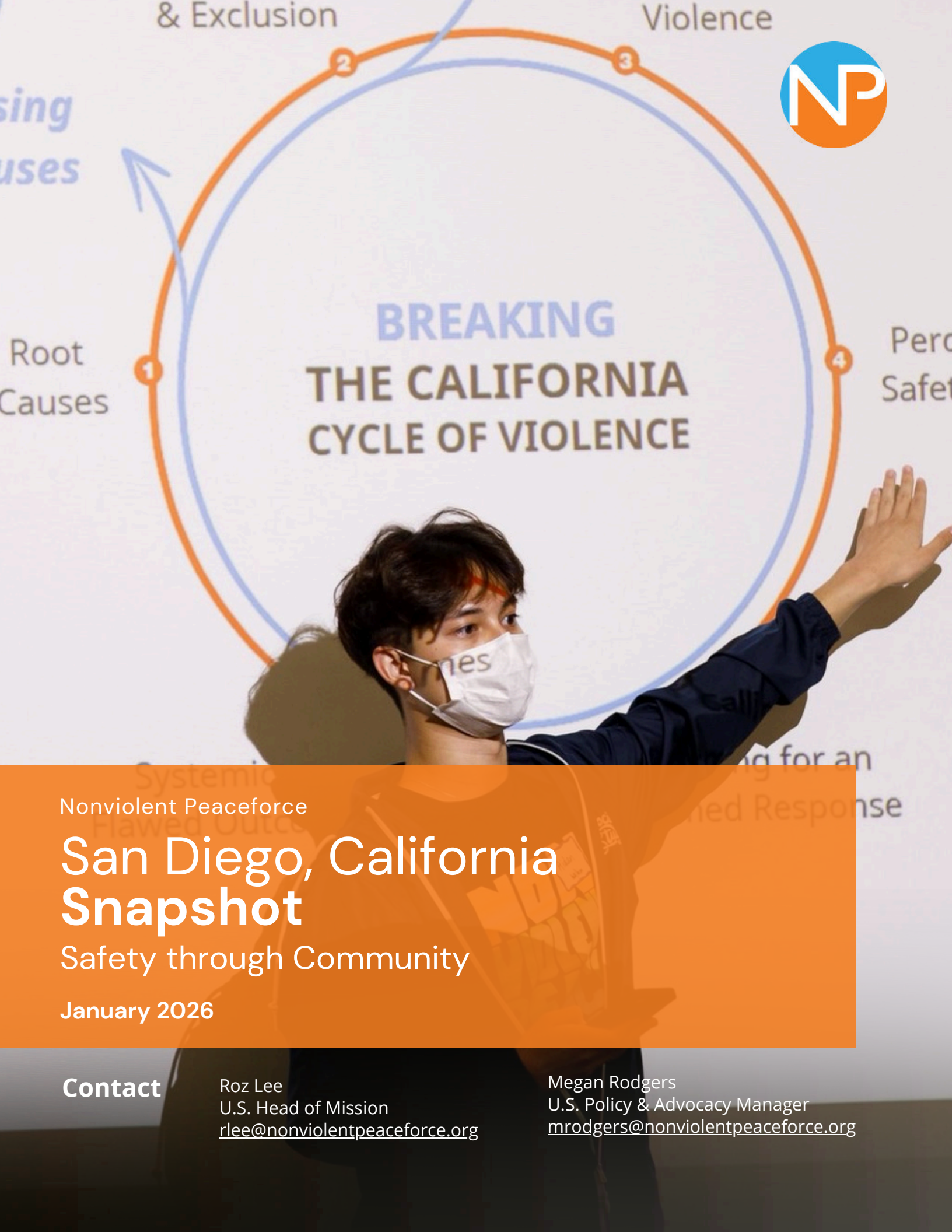

Nonviolent Peaceforce

San Diego, California **Snapshot**

Safety through Community

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Executive Summary

This snapshot gives insight into how civilian-led protection and safety cultivated by community can play a significant role in meeting emergent community needs in San Diego. With a consistent presence in San Diego since 2024, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) has built relationships with leaders and community organizations doing a wide range of work to protect civilians. Through analysis and consultations, NP finds migrant, Asian, Muslim, LGBTQIA+, and unsheltered communities in significant need of protection support. Common threads amongst these communities are the significant risk of violence posed by state actors, as well as identity-based violence targeting a broad range of communities. This Snapshot places special focus on the targeting of immigrant communities by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) due to the dramatic escalation in ICE activity since the beginning of 2025 and repeated references by community members of fears of violence related to this escalation.

NP has facilitated convenings, trainings, and workshops across 2024 and 2025, enhancing the capacities of local organizations and trainers to apply Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) methods in their local communities. UCP skills – such as conducting threat assessments, crafting Early Warning Early Response protocols, employing protest safety best practices – enable communities to coordinate responses across San Diego's complex conflict landscape. Ultimately, NP recommends a range of proactive and responsive actions to align community initiatives and co-create a San Diego free from violence.

Background

San Diego is home to many marginalized communities, which have presently and historically been targets for hate, violence, and other harms. There are 17 federally recognized tribal nations, which generally include four distinct cultural groups: the Kumeyaay/Diegueño, Luiseño, Cupeño, and Cahuilla. San Diego is also greatly influenced by its position near the U.S.-Mexico border. More than a third of San Diego County is Hispanic or Latino, according to the US Census Bureau's 2023 estimations, and the San Ysidro Land Port of Entry is the busiest land port of entry in the western hemisphere with 90,000 people crossing daily. The region has been an arrival point for various immigrant and migrant communities throughout history, particularly for Vietnamese, Somali, Haitian, and Karen peoples.

The demographic diversity of San Diego, when contrasted with its colonial, white supremacist, and racist history, creates ripe conditions for hate and identity-based violence. Marginalized communities have been segregated (and sometimes self-segregate for belonging and protection) based on factors like ethnicity, sexuality, and immigration status, making it easier for state and non-state actors to locate and terrorize communities based on identity.

Methodology

The information from this snapshot was primarily compiled by NP's programs team in San Diego. Exploratory, non-structured conversations with community leaders provided first- and second-hand information about emergent risks, threats, and protection needs. 30 community organizations with varying experience practicing community protection, representing, and working alongside communities most affected by violence also contributed to NP's snapshot through consultation, participation in trainings and workshops, and by sharing their work. This information was supplemented with available data from government and nonprofit sources, news articles, and the practice of civilian-led protection efforts by NP staff across the United States and the world. For additional context, this snapshot should be read alongside NP's U.S. Risk Assessment, which provides an analysis of national-level threats, trends, and risk factors.

Protection Needs

Nonviolent Peaceforce conducted a needs assessment in May 2023 to identify safety risks and protection needs in California. The report identified four key areas of focus and need: identity-based violence and hate; violence against displaced, asylum, and migrant communities; the proliferation of weapons and gun violence; and digital unsafety and virtual hate. Since 2023, tensions and violence have continued to escalate, and the need for community-led protection has intensified. In San Diego, several incidents and crises in the past two years have underscored previously highlighted and newly emerging safety needs.

Workshop, May 2023, ©NP

Violence Against Immigrant, Refugee, and Asylum-Seeking Communities.

In San Diego

Far above the national average for increases in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrests since January 2025 – San Diego immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking communities are facing unprecedented threats to their health, well-being, and safety. In June 2025, Alliance San Diego released a statement regarding new data compiled by the Deportation Data project:

"From January to June, ICE arrests in the California-based Areas of Responsibility (AOR) have jumped threefold from about 900 a month to over 3,300. From the beginning of 2025 through June, close to 9,000 people were arrested. The Los Angeles AOR saw a fivefold increase, the biggest nationally, the San Diego AOR saw a fourfold increase, the second biggest, and the San Francisco AOR saw a twofold increase. During this time, ICE arrests also doubled nationwide."

On their own, deportations are incredibly dangerous, as people are often returned to the life-threatening circumstances from which they are seeking refuge. The violence with which ICE raids are conducted has also resulted in injury and death. In July 2025, ICE raided Glass House Farms in Camarillo, CA, where agents employed tear gas launchers and military helicopters to round up over 200 migrants, including a dozen minors. In the fray, Jaime Alanis Garcia, a farmworker, fell 30 feet and eventually died from his injuries, leaving behind his wife and daughter, whom he was sending money to back in Mexico. Even more recently, ICE agents shot and killed Silverio Villegas-Gonzales after they attempted to detain him during a traffic stop in Chicago, Illinois.

The risks associated with ICE raids are only set to increase as immigration enforcement budgets increase. New hiring practices also encourage the contracting of untrained agents and civilian bounty hunters to target and detain undocumented community members in their homes, schools, places of worship, and even at federal courthouses as they attend their mandated immigration hearings. With dangerous escalations of immigration enforcement tactics occurring every day, it is all but certain that San Diego's immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker communities will experience severe protection risks for the foreseeable future.

In the Borderlands

Safety risks are dire in San Diego's borderlands, where injuries and deaths among migrants have become even more prolific under the U.S.'s ever-expanding "Prevention Through Deterrence" policy. In data released in July of 2025, No Mas Muertes ("No More Deaths") notes skyrocketing injuries and deaths as a direct result of Border Patrol aggression:

"The rate of these kinds of injuries and deaths has rapidly increased in recent years, and is sure to increase more with continued wall construction and the emboldenment of USBP to engage in deadly enforcement tactics with impunity. Too often, those injured in direct interactions with border enforcement are deported before receiving crucial medical care. The number of deaths we document in this database is therefore only the tip of the iceberg: many more people have died or become injured, or permanently debilitated, as a result of violent border enforcement and infrastructure."

The report also notes severe underreporting by federal entities. In some cases, oversight bodies, such as CBP's Office of Professional Responsibility, completely omit reporting of deaths, such as those caused by CBP use of force. This is especially troubling considering these numbers do not account for the tens of thousands lost or missing in the borderlands, nor for deaths occurring in Mexican territory. Home to the largest land port of entry in the Western Hemisphere, San Diego and the borderlands in its proximity cannot be ignored when it comes to the direct protection needs of the most vulnerable among us, especially as the Trump administration's war on immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers continues to escalate with the declaration of a *militarized zone* along California's southern border.

"Our people hold their breath in fear when a Border Patrol car passes by. We shouldn't have to live like this." - Marco B., San Diego and Imperial Counties Labor Council, AFL-CIO

State-Sanctioned Violence

San Diego, like other big cities, relies heavily on traditional, force-based policing. Though its population has only increased by 8 percent over the last 20 years (2005: 1.284M; 2025: 1.389B), the police budget has soared by 118% over the last 20 years. Similarly, the San Diego County Sheriff's office has seen a budget increase of 189% over the last 20 years despite only a 12% net increase in population over the same time period. Most of these budget increases have gone towards bolstering the numbers of force personnel, yet funding has also been funneled to boost departmental militarization. This has been a trend in the United States since the establishment of the 1033 program in 1990, allowing the Department of Defense to transfer excess military weapons and equipment to local police departments. As a result, weapons and equipment used for engaging in acts of war have made their way into San Diego.

According to their 2023 annual military equipment report, the San Diego Sheriff's Department has in its possession a M240 Machine Gun along with a message from the manufacturer stating that its "high volume of fire makes it the principal suppressive fire instrument for the military." Along with spending millions on militarizing their arsenals, San Diego law enforcement's militarization is also reflected in its increased use of surveillance technology. In 2023, the San Diego City Council approved the use of Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs), a tracking technology that has become controversial for its breaches of privacy laws and failure to deliver on safety promises.

In 2024, it was reported that Information gathered from ALPRs was shared with federal enforcement agencies, including Customs and Border Protection, despite strict government regulations against this kind of info sharing. Police militarization has been shown to increase the rate of violence and killings of civilians in the United States. Paired with an unprecedented capacity to monitor civilians using advanced technologies, law enforcement militarization poses serious threats to civilian life and the upholding of civic space.

In 2020, San Diego experienced intense unrest in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. In response to activists' demonstrations, police deployed tear gas, baton rounds, pepper spray, and a long-range acoustic device to suppress protester activities. In one instance, a 59-year-old grandmother was shot in the face with a beanbag round, almost losing her eye. More recently, in 2024, the San Diego County Sheriff's Office brutalized and arrested dozens of UCSD students after they formed an encampment to protest the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

There are deep concerns about future expansions in the use of state-sanctioned force in San Diego due to similar expansions in other U.S. cities, including the deployment of National Guard forces in Washington D.C., Chicago, Memphis, and Portland under the pretense of "a war from within." San Diego's listing as a "sanctuary jurisdiction," and the region's unique conflict context and positioning at the border make it likely that these protection risks will worsen in the coming years.

Identity-Based Violence

In San Diego, violence based on race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation is on the rise. Hate crime data, which is widely considered to be underreported, shows consistent targeting of LGBTQIA+ communities, Black communities, Asian communities, Latino communities, Muslim communities, and Jewish communities.

Attacks against the LGBTQIA+ community have been increasingly visible and create an environment of fear. On May 18, 2024, four LGBTQIA+ establishments located in the LGBTQIA-friendly neighborhoods of Hillcrest and North Park were shot at by an assailant with a pellet gun in a moving car. Multiple people were struck, and at least three were directly shot. Just a few weeks later, a projectile shattered the windows of Trans Fronteras, a community organization that serves LGBTQIA+ migrants. Two staff members were inside the office at the time of the incident. Other incidents have targeted LGBTQ communities, vandalizing property with swastikas and slurs. In conversations with NP staff, queer organizers have expressed the need for practical safety support and planning. Many feel they have limited options for their own protection in the face of systematic discrimination against queer communities by traditional police forces.

"As an undocuqueer individual, I believe my options for safety, especially state-based forces, are very limited and basically non-existent." -Ines D., an undocuqueer immigration services caseworker in North County San Diego

"The state continues to scapegoat our community while tensions rise across the country. We know from all too recent history that the police and other state-based forces only serve to further institutionalize and enforce violence against us. - Nicole L., a queer housing justice advocate and youth leader based in central San Diego

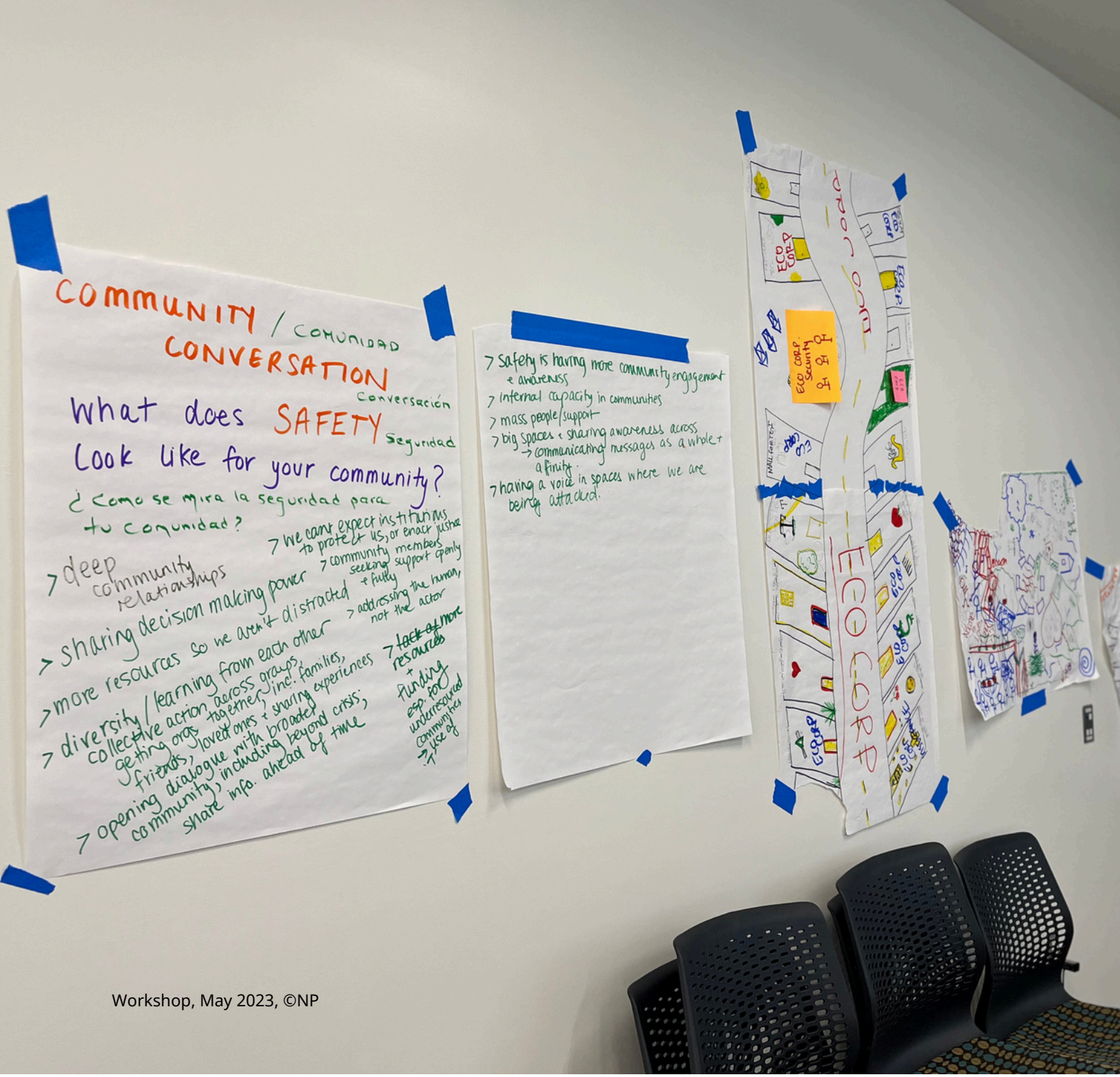
Attacks based on race and ethnicity are also on the rise. In June 2023, three Black men were attacked by a group of Hells Angels motorcycle gang members who told the men they did not belong in the Ocean Beach neighborhood and hurled racial slurs. Two of the victims were severely beaten. In July 2024, a Filipino American man was pelted with frozen eggs and anti-Asian slurs while walking his dog. In an interview, the survivor referenced the elevated level of hate and violence he's seen against Asian Americans in a "post-COVID world."

Identity-based violence has also targeted religious communities with hate crimes motivated by religion increasing since 2021. The Anti-Defamation League of San Diego notes a significant spike in antisemitic incidents since 2022, Muslim students at the University of California San Diego report harassment and/or discrimination due to their identity, and police are currently investigating a series of what appear to be "non-denominational" hate crimes, including 14 cases of vandalism mostly targeting places of worship.

Criminalization of Homelessness

Homelessness in San Diego is becoming increasingly criminalized, further exacerbating the risks of violence for those experiencing homelessness. A recent City of San Diego encampment ban—passed in the name of "safety"—has pushed homeless camps out of the urban core to areas near highways and on riverbeds where unhoused people face increased risks of violence and are further away from crucial community services that they rely on. Since the ban, homelessness-related citations and arrests doubled, according to CalMatters.

Furthermore, the city's response has resulted in the formation of two large government-sanctioned camps with nearly 800 tents between them. In a recent federal lawsuit against the city, residents claim that the encampments "force people to live in uninhabitable and inhumane conditions." According to the complaint, conditions include "extreme heat in the summer, cold and flooding in the winter, overcrowding, inadequate meals, and rat infestations that lead to rats crawling over them at night." To be homeless in San Diego means criminalization, unsafety, and frequent violations of one's human rights and dignity.



Workshop, May 2023, ©NP

California also has the highest rates of human trafficking in the United States, a fate that is a severe risk for those experiencing homelessness. According to Covenant House, research demonstrates that "youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are among the most vulnerable groups to traffickers – one in five unhoused young people experiences either labor or sexual exploitation."

NP's Response

Throughout 2024 and 2025, NP has been building its on-the-ground presence, experience, and practice in San Diego. In addition to a deeper understanding of regional and emergent protection needs, we have been building robust relationships with leaders, organizations, and the vibrant ecosystem of community care.

In March 2024, NP held another convening for Training of Trainers on Early Warning Early Response. At this training, participants learned how to conduct threat assessments, build EWER protocols, and coordinate responses as safety teams, and conduct training on the material in their communities.

Since then, participants have used EWER protocols to create safety at events and for organizational safety planning. Pillars of the Community used EWER to prevent violence at a baseball game between two rival neighborhood sets, and Our Time To Act (OTTA) used an EWER framework to safety plan at their Civic Youth Action Network Summit in January 2025.

In August 2024, NP held a safety convening with various anchor organizations in San Diego, such as Pillars of The Community, Karen Org SD, North County LGBTQ Resource Center, and CAIR San Diego. The convening trained these community leaders on conducting threat assessments, mapping capacities, and crafting Early Warning Early Response (EWER) protocols.

In June 2025, NP worked with City Heights-based organizers to put on a community safety training in the wake of a confrontation between ICE and the community during a raid in South Park, San Diego. At this training, NP trained dozens of community members in digital hygiene, situational awareness, safety team planning, risk assessment, and street medicine. NP will continue to build and deepen relationships with community-based organizations and train grassroots and labor organizers in UCP methods.

Parallel to capacity-building efforts, NP has participated in direct protection efforts on the ground. After ICE began detaining community members attending their legally mandated court hearings, NP staff have assisted grassroots groups in providing accompaniment and human rights observation for community members as they go to their hearings. NP has also had a presence in the City Heights neighborhood, participating in community patrols and helping groups do their work safely and securely as they confront ICE in their communities.

Recommendations

San Diego has a robust network of nonprofit and community-based organizations. NP's on-the-ground programmatic presence, assessments, and partnerships for the past two years have found that these groups operate with impressive efficacy to serve specific communities, issue areas, or regions. These degrees of specialization have also created silos in community-based responses and strategies to combat hate-based violence. Many groups seem to agree that there is a need for the community to break down siloes and build civilian capacities for protection and conflict resolution across targeted groups. In order to do so, NP recommends that community members, elected officials, and donors:

1. Advocate for, and sufficiently resource, resilient, community-led safety infrastructures.

Communities must be empowered and encouraged to take responsibility for their own safety. As protection gaps deepen in an increasingly unstable geopolitical climate, nonprofits, funders, and governments alike must invest in long-term, sustainable safety infrastructure that is community-centered and community-owned. Community protection teams, collective risk assessment, safety strategizing, and joint advocacy for responsive and accountable state actions are key components to this infrastructure. This would require not just funding commitments, but a shift of power and decision-making from traditional duty holders to community-level institutions and leadership.

2. Co-create Early Warning Early Response (EWER) Systems with the capacity for regional rapid response and mutual protection throughout the San Diego Community.

EWER systems are a vital tool in supporting communities to assess, monitor, and respond to changing risks. An effective EWER system in San Diego would leverage grassroots knowledge, real-time data, and community-led action to identify and address risks before they escalate into violence. By centering the experiences and leadership of those most affected by violence, interventions become timelier, trauma-informed, and rooted in dignity and care. A robust Early Warning Early Response system is not just about preventing harm—it is about strengthening the bonds of solidarity that make collective safety possible.

3. Create and resource spaced for cross-silo coordination and solidarity.

The many different groups actively working for community safety each bring different skill sets and experiences that are beneficial across communities and organizations. By increasing collaboration and solidarity between these groups the impact of each can be increased, leading to a safer San Diego for all.

4. Build the capacities of individuals to learn about and implement UCP and other protection skills.

Ensuring community members and organizations are prepared to handle the pressing protection needs they face must be a top priority. Whether it is creating safety teams, building and enacting EWER protocols, or learning basic street medicine, San Diego's residents can and should become active participants in their own safety. Utilizing a Train the Trainer model, CBO's can serve as hubs for UCP and other protection-based skills to democratize protection across communities. By building these capacities together, we reinforce the idea that security is not something imposed from the outside, but something created through care, connection, and shared responsibility.

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