EDITORIAL

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What happens when injustice is the norm?

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I am both grateful and humbled to join the *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* as a Contributing Editor and be invited to address the brilliant community through this editorial. By way of short introduction, here is how I ended up here: I studied English Literature at Oxford and Columbia and always thought I would end up in academia. But I had the opportunity to work with civil society organizations in The Gambia reporting on the truth commission set up to investigate human rights violations committed during the Jammeh regime. These reports were used to open three universal jurisdiction cases in Germany, Switzerland, and the USA, all of which ended in conviction. So, I got an LL.M (Masters of Laws) in International Criminal/Humanitarian Law and have since worked on legal research and strategy on various contexts, including The Gambia, Myanmar, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and, most recently, North Korea.

I suppose my interest and connection to this specific journal may still not be clear, so let me try to be even more brief. I am, in no particular order, a human rights practitioner/researcher, an aspiring activist, and a staunch defender of the humanities. I will structure this editorial around insights from each of those roles. I hope my reflections help you understand the connection between my work on authoritarian and volatile environments and the importance of the work we do on community safety and well-being (CSWB) in more "stable" domestic contexts.

"What happens when injustice is the norm?" I encountered this question at several points during my human rights work and education. I remember a specific moment in class, when a defence lawyer from the International Criminal Court (ICC) showed us a picture of the holding cells (ICC, 2025a) used for accused persons in The Hague. She highlighted that the Netherlands has progressive standards regarding the treatment of defendants and the ICC's accommodations reflect that – after all, they are innocent until proven guilty. I will admit, this concept is difficult to swallow at the international level. When we are dealing with notorious individuals, such as former dictators, known to be responsible for immeasurable suffering, it is hard to presume innocence. After all, these figures often evade justice for decades, fleeing to tax (or crime) havens and living out lives of luxury (Freeman, 2017), blissfully unbothered by the scale of misery they left in their wake. During their tenures, they actively *warp* justice, bend it to their will, placing it well below power and money and self-preservation. In such contexts, the law and policing too often function as a mere extension of both state power and selfish power, often perpetrating the very acts they are supposed to prevent. The extraordinary abuses enabled by this travesty of a "system," perfectly poised to be a machine of cruelty, force us to reckon with the very worst of humanity.

Even though international justice was arguably created for such figures, a vanishingly small number of cases at this level have dealt with them in recent history. The ICC has never successfully prosecuted a (former) Head of State (ICC, 2025b). The recent arrest and transfer of Rodrigo Duterte is auspicious. It could have seismic implications for the future of international justice (Araneta-Alana, 2025). Nevertheless, the lack of uniform enforcement makes international criminal law seem toothless; inert; empty. Vladimir Putin, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Omar Al-Bashir all have outstanding arrest warrants against them but, until they travel to a country willing to arrest them, they will remain at large. Famed judge Antonio Cassese remarked that "the ICTY [International Criminal Tribunal of Yugoslavia] remains very much like a giant without arms and legs – it needs artificial limbs to walk and work. And these artificial limbs are state authorities" (Cassese, 1998, 13). His remarks could apply to the promise of international justice as a whole. A giant without arms and legs, until every state agrees that the prevention of the "most serious" (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998) crimes ranks above politics – in every case.

Some translate their frustration into an almost cosmological vision, positing a supranational police force that overturns states' lack of political will. I am convinced this would be a *terrible* idea. There should certainly be greater incentives for states to comply with legally binding obligations, which include rejecting atrocity crimes, refusing to harbour war criminals (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2025), or, recently, preventing significant harm to the environment (International Court of Justice, 2025). But policing at this level would likely mirror existing issues with the international system, such as double standards and power skewing towards a handful of states. Generally speaking, concentrating power upwards carries an innate risk of further corruption.

At the domestic level, I rarely hear people calling for *more* enforcement or *more* policing. Perhaps more than ever, we are deeply aware of the complex relationship(s) between public policy, policing, and the criminal justice system, and the heartbreaking consequences of pushing a simplistic relationship between enforcement and prevention. I lived in New York when George Floyd was murdered. I reverted to my usual (and unhealthy) response. I went down a rabbit-hole of

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similar cases, until the sheer weight of the names and stories was too overwhelming to compute. Eric Garner, Oscar Grant, Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Ahmad Aubray … I could go on, of course. George Floyd's murder sparked an international outpouring of grief and anger. Countries all around the world were forced to reckon with long histories of systemic racism and police brutality and consider how the two were related in their own jurisdictions (Silverstein, 2021). There was a marked shift in the perception of policing, inviting more scrutiny and creativity in framing their ideal role in society.

Of course, the larger questions underlying the field of CSWB long pre- (and post-) date George Floyd's murder. How do we address the violent outcomes of racialized policing? How does surveillance and policing affect communities? How do communities define safety in their own terms? While gut-wrenching stories of police brutality illustrate the importance of this field, our job as practitioners and researchers is to grapple with these questions every day and propose ideas that are both ambitious and actionable. My work on various contexts showed me how complex this work is; policy recommendations change starkly across societies. Ensuring CSWB requires an understanding of history, culture, law, demography, etc., and these factors necessarily vary between populations. Analysing authoritarian systems also gave me a unique perspective on how the "rule of law" is constructed and maintained. For many, the relevance of work on authoritarian or volatile environments to democratic backsliding and community safety in "safe" countries may seem unclear; indeed, even discussing them in the same breath invites accusations of hyperbole or fearmongering. It may seem ludicrous to suggest that we have something to learn from so-called "authoritarian regimes" or the excruciatingly slow and uneven march of international justice. But I think the lesson is simple: injustice breeds mistrust. And mistrust can lead to either progress or collapse. Let me explain:

Today, even in nations that purport to know better (i.e., the USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, etc.), there are many reasons for people to be mistrustful of their governments. They include: the suspension of democratic and economic norms, rising social inequality, the ever-accelerating trajectory of climate change, the transparency of double standards regarding (international) justice, etc. I could go on. These issues translate into domestic policy. The use of "lawfare" tactics to muzzle specific protests (Pasternak, 2025), federal agents given free rein to terrorize immigrant communities for "public safety" (Bier, 2025), the promise of development whilst glossing over costs to indigenous rights and environmental protections (Ferguson, 2025) … all of these events expose the constant interplay between law and politics.

For many communities, law has always represented the threat of violence rather than the promise of justice. The constant spectres of surveillance, aggressive policing, and incarceration make it difficult to argue otherwise. Law loses legitimacy when it is repurposed, weaponized, or selectively applied, creating mistrust and discord. Sometimes mistrust drives solidarity. People stand with their communities and demand greater accountability from leaders, working to ensure safety even when it means taking personal risks. But sometimes mistrust drives division. People stand for themselves and align with power, directing political forces to scapegoat communities and assure self-preservation and uninterrupted privilege. Unfortunately, the impulse to scapegoat or other people spreads across various factions of society, moving from privileged classes to the broader population, sowing further division. Long-term frustration with (perceived and actual) injustice leads people to look for an easy enemy, often settling on already disenfranchised and over-policed communities, rather than those with power. The language of law (Kwan, 2021), i.e., "criminals," "illegals," is easily used to justify growing prejudice, which fuels a necessary condition for authoritarianism: a permissive attitude to persecutory uses of state power. Historical (Berkowitz, 2007) and contemporary (Hallward, 2025) examples show us that that associating specific minorities with criminality makes it easier for governments to defend abuses as repressive actions are rationalized in the name of zeal or commitment to the "law".

Clearly, backsliding and instability threaten existing social structures, pushing people to reconsider what they need from their governments and how they define their communities. An empowered and responsive civil society is essential in these conditions, helping steer us towards solidarity rather than further division. In the face of rising repression and disillusionment, this journal's commitment to robust and innovative research on CSWB is crucial. The communities we serve are facing complex problems, making solutions difficult to imagine, let alone implement. The work featured here in this current issue again covers a diverse range of topics: police reform in Bangladesh, prison leadership, and drug deflection policy, to name a few.

Personally, I would encourage our readers to consider the following:

Myth and metaphor shape all our perceptions; we are always reaching for adequate language to describe extremes. For most of our readers, the darkest examples of repression have been more commonly confined to environments separated from us by distance and time, where human rights violations played out in widespread and excessive ways. If global norms keep shifting, and if we stand by and allow the erosion of hard-won principles, what else might we lose along the way? After all, few societies are authoritarian at inception. Usually, they erode over time, as slow concessions are made in response to growing discontent. The past decades have shown us that the consequences of these concessions proliferate through time (see Somer, 2025; Vaishnav, 2025). In the field of CSWB, we have an obligation to reject complacency and embrace lessons from other contexts. Our work shows us that phrases like "That could never happen here" and "Never again" are commitments, not foregone conclusions. They require us to consistently uphold ideals like equality and justice even as others take them for granted.

Upcoming issues of the journal will feature select contributions from the recent 7th International Law Enforcement Public Health Conference. Journal colleagues were recently at LEPH Ottawa to lead a panel centred on these and other existential questions for CSWB. Attendees quickly settled on some primary considerations for enduring innovation, citing such things as resilience, local adaptability, and vital fidelity of initiatives that respond to broad risk factors and marginalization. Notably, the panel and session delegates considered these things in the context of cross-border collaborations,

and in diverse global environments facing economic, social, and political upheaval.

Most of us are familiar with the well-used phrase "it takes a village." Perhaps when it comes to linking human security, social equity, peace-making, and CSWB, the important message here may be that it takes an entire world of collaboration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

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