Building the Beloved Community: Designing Technologies for Neighborhood Safety

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Abstract

Neighborhood safety technologies, such as Nextdoor and Citizen, aim to enhance user safety through features like real-time alerts, interactive maps, and personalized feeds. While these platforms can support users' sense of safety, they can also fuel a local culture of policing and lateral surveillance, which disproportionately impacts racialized and unhoused members of the community. In contrast, the theory and practice of Transformative Justice was developed to ensure the safety of those populations who are constructed to be dangerous by society. We conducted a case study of a neighborhood social work program in Jackson Grove, Atlanta to understand the design implications of a Transformative Justice-oriented approach to neighborhood safety. Our findings highlight an opportunity for designers to reconceptualize safety from merely protecting users towards: 1) meeting the basic needs of a community, and 2) building relationships to support accountability. These shifts create an opportunity for designers to reimagine neighborhood safety technologies and the associated practices for users. We surface a new wave of safety research in HCI that aims to support both safety *and* justice and contribute key design priorities towards this work.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → *Empirical studies in HCI*.

Keywords

crime, community safety, transformative justice, outreach, unhoused, homelessness, social work, neighborhood, safety technologies, neighborhood safety

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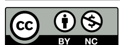

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1 Introduction

> "*The idea of the Beloved Community is lived out in our day to day lives. It happens by asking how each community can take care of the people who live there... as opposed to looking elsewhere or having someone else deal with the 'problem.'*" - Director of Unbounded Care

Neighborhood safety technologies (NSTs) are digital technologies designed to help users protect themselves from threats to their safety at home and in their community. NSTs such as Nextdoor, Citizen, and Amazon Neighbors are some of the most downloaded social and news platforms in the United States, and are used in hundreds of thousands of neighborhoods nationwide [85, 90]. These platforms often include features like real-time alerts, interactive maps, personalized feeds, and the ability to report, consume, and discuss criminal incidents and other safety-related information with other community members online. Although NSTs can contribute to a sense of safety for users [25, 61], their design can also produce negative externalities for populations that are constructed to be "dangerous." A growing body of work documents the range of these societal harms, including race and class-based profiling [62, 75] and a community-instigated culture of policing and surveillance that disproportionately impacts racialized and otherwise marginalized individuals [13, 22, 63, 66, 91, 117]. Criminologists describe unique harms to unhoused individuals, who are a "*feared other*" onto whom the public's crime-related fears can be projected [64]. Indeed, prior work calls for designers of NSTs to attend more carefully to the impact of their designs on social justice concerns [24], citing disproportionate harms to unhoused individuals, amongst others [26].

In this study, we build on nascent work from the HCI community to ask what justice-oriented NSTs might look like. We conducted a case study of a novel neighborhood social work program, which aims to address concerns about public safety due to rising rates of homelessness in Jackson Grove, a neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia [1]. This program aligns with the principles of Transformative

[1] Neighborhood name is anonymized

Justice, an approach to addressing violence which seeks to dismantle oppressive systems and replace them with community-based alternatives that center human dignity and focus on the structural causes of harm. The neighborhood social work program is also a sociotechnical approach to enhancing safety, creating a unique opportunity for HCI to glean insights about the design of justice-oriented NSTs. We interviewed 17 community members who participated in the program and triangulated this information with data collected from a virtual ethnography of the Jackson Grove neighborhood Facebook group. We report on three types of common public safety incidents experienced by members of the Jackson Grove community, along with the strategies the community uses to address them.

This work makes multiple contributions. First, we respond to calls to trouble the existing notion of safety in HCI [77], and offer two alternative conceptualizations of safety, which shift the focus from protecting privileged members of the community towards 1) meeting the basic needs of community members, and 2) building relationships to support accountability. These shifts create the possibility of new practices for community members to enhance safety beyond surveilling and controlling one another. They also create an opportunity for designers to reimagine NSTs as technologies with the potential to benefit entire communities, including the most vulnerable members. Second, we describe the trajectory of safety research in HCI and make visible an emerging third wave of research that does not prioritize the safety of some community members at the expense of others. To energize this third wave of research, we highlight key design capabilities as priorities for designers to support.

2 Background

In this section, we reflect on the history of safety research in HCI, highlighting how an orientation towards protection has influenced user behavior and contributed to the construction of a "feared other." We discuss the unhoused population as one such "other" onto whom anxieties about crime are projected, creating fuel for harmful and discriminatory policies. In contrast, Transformative Justice offers an alternative approach to enhancing safety that prioritizes the dignity of those who are constructed to be dangerous and focuses on the *structural* causes of harm. This study asks what NSTs which are guided by the principles of Transformative Justice may look like.

2.1 Safety Technologies in HCI

There are multiple waves of evolving scholarship on safety technologies in HCI that span over a decade. This body of work has oriented towards protecting privileged members of the community from external violence or threat [21, 60, 61, 73, 94, 101, 104, 119]. Much of the early literature sought to reduce individuals' risk of victimization by offering users features such as safety maps and crime alerts [15, 61, 104, 111]. Examples of platforms in this first wave of safety research includes CrowdSafe, which shared location-based crime information and traffic navigation guidance with users [104], and ComfortZones which allowed women to view and label places on digital maps as "safe" or "unsafe" [15]. These technologies aimed to protect users by increasing their awareness of risk and providing them with information that would lower their chance of victimization.

In contrast, a second wave of safety research focused less on individuals and more on co-located groups of people, emphasizing the importance of community engagement and collaboration for effective community policing [36, 40, 61, 73, 102, 119]. HCI researchers studied neighborhood listservs [36, 40, 73] and social media platforms [53, 57, 101, 102, 119] to understand how design could increase collaboration between citizens and law enforcement [102, 119], encourage civic engagement [36, 40], and facilitate information sharing amongst friends and neighbors [21, 61, 73]. This second wave focused largely on geographically bounded communities as they offer unique opportunities for interventions that leverage social ties and civic infrastructure to improve safety outcomes [36, 38–40].

While these neighborhood safety technologies can contribute to a sense of safety for users [25, 61], scholars have also documented a range of societal harms [13, 18, 26, 63, 66, 75, 76, 87, 88]. Notably, these platforms enable privileged members of society to enforce dominant perspectives about "quality of life" that seek to remove "disreputable and disorderly populations" in the name of protecting their communities [14]. In contrast to the top-down activities of the state, NSTs enable citizens to act as "surveillance agents" who monitor their environment and the behavior of other residents and fuel distrust towards those who are constructed to be dangerous, including those who are poor, Black, Brown, and/or male [87]. Simone Browne argues that this behavior is a *racialized* form of social control, which gives dominant social groups the "power to define what is in or out of place," and in doing so, reifies power differentials along racial lines and legitimizes the ongoing deployment of surveillance and policing technologies [19]. NSTs further profit off of this conceptualization of safety as protection from dangerous others. For example, Nextdoor profits off the idea that your neighborhood is a "*private haven of safety in a world otherwise filled with untrustworthy stranger*" [67], and the Neighbors app relies on the "fear of the Other" to justify the need to surveil the "Other" [17]. The social harms produced by NSTs necessitate not only rethinking communities' approach to safety, but also the roles and activities that community members adopt to enhance safety [116].

The most recent scholarship on safety technologies in HCI is grappling with these harms, identifying and documenting their societal implications [17, 26, 62, 66, 117], and wrestling with the field's reductive conceptualization of safety as protection and control [32, 35, 37, 77, 112, 116]. Lu and colleagues call for a multiplicity of safety conceptualizations in order to trouble and confront the hegemonic *"myth of promoting safety through surveillance"* and offer *noticing* as one alternative practice to promote safety [77]. To and colleagues highlight the need to think beyond deficit-oriented theorizations towards joy and flourishing for BIPOC communities [112], and Dickinson et al develop a mobile application as a counter-structure to traditional violence prevention activities [32, 37]. We build on this nascent literature, responding to calls to reconceptualize the field's idea of safety.

2.2 The Unhoused "Other"

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines people experiencing homelessness to include those individuals

who are living in shelters, who are inhabiting a place not intended for housing, who will lose a place of residence within two weeks time, or who are fleeing domestic violence without the resources to secure housing [41, 80]. Between 2022 and 2023, the number of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. increased by approximately 12%, or over 70,000 individuals, reaching the highest level recorded since federal reporting began in 2007 [29]. Researchers broadly agree on the factors contributing to homelessness, including macro-level factors such as a lack of affordable housing and poor economic conditions, as well as micro-level factors such as adverse childhood experiences and domestic violence [72].

Despite the structural factors that contribute to homelessness, unhoused individuals face considerable stigmatization and are frequently constructed as irresponsible, dangerous, or problematic for society [81]. This stigma can be layered and intersecting; national surveys reveal that homelessness is often associated with other stigmatized traits [74], including mental illness [97], incarceration [83], substance use [31], and racial identity [79]. For example, the overrepresentation of Black and male individuals among the homeless population [29] contributes to the perception that the unhoused are dangerous due to cultural narratives of Black criminality [34, 114]. Additionally, because many people have limited objective knowledge about homelessness [71], their perceptions are often shaped by a few individuals who exhibit unusually disruptive or dangerous behavior [97]. Consequently, the unhoused are frequently viewed as a *"feared subject"* onto which societal anxieties about crime and other issues are projected [64].

Over the past forty years, every major city in the United States has passed laws criminalizing homelessness [45], not because of the risk unhoused populations pose to others, but because communities want to reduce the visibility of this socially stigmatized group [12, 107]. Quality of life laws make it illegal for individuals to perform life-sustaining activities, such as sleeping, urinating, panhandling, sitting, and storing belongings in public spaces [45]. Violations of quality of life ordinances make up the largest percentage of incarceration rates for the unhoused [49]. Criminalizing these activities focuses the public's attention on the discrete behaviors of individual actors, rather than on the structural causes of homelessness [10]. The criminalization of homelessness thus reinforces harmful stereotypes, framing unhoused individuals as dangerous and problematic for society. Our study is an attempt to look beyond criminalization and leverage alternative perspectives that foreground human dignity.

2.3 Peacemaking Criminology and Transformative Justice

Peacemaking criminology is a subfield of criminology that holds an underlying belief in the innate dignity and worth of all individuals [86]. Thus, peacemaking criminology seeks to respond nonviolently to incidents of crime and violence [86, 92, 96]. One of the most well-known theories within the field of peacemaking criminology is Transformative Justice [92], an approach to addressing violence which seeks to dismantle oppressive systems and replace them with community-based alternatives that support the safety of populations that have historically been harmed by the police state and the criminal justice system, e.g. indigenous communities, black communities, poor and low-income communities, sex workers, and queer and trans communities [84]. These populations required alternatives to the traditional criminal justice system in order to ensure their safety and thus developed a range of practices and principles [84]. While there are many frameworks that could be helpful in troubling HCI's existing conception of safety, we choose to leverage Transformative Justice in this work as it was developed to ensure the safety of those populations who are constructed to be dangerous by American society.

Transformative Justice is an approach to addressing violence that asks practitioners to examine the ways in which current systems, structures, and norms perpetuate harm [58, 98]. Ruth Morris, a Quaker who first coined the term "Transformative Justice," argued that our current conceptualization of crime ignores underlying socioeconomic and structural causes; crime, she explained, is *"an attempt to find power by the powerless and a negative response to pain by those in pain"* [89]. Transformative Justice thus aims to go *"all the way down to the root system of the harm"* and critically examine the intersecting roles of economics, identity, and politics that may have contributed to an incident of violence [58]. In contrast to retributive forms of justice, which ask who is to blame and what punishment they deserve, Transformative Justice asks what circumstances enabled the harmful behavior and what measures could prevent these circumstances in the future [3].

While Transformative Justice seeks to hold those who have perpetrated crimes accountable, it also acknowledges the humanity and innate worth within those who have committed harm [92]. Criminologist and activist Anthony J. Nocella II provides an example of how Transformative Justice addresses individuals who have committed harm: "*For instance, if a 14-year old boy who is queer and from a poor neighborhood robbed a store when it was closed at 2:00 a.m., transformative justice would not only look at the crime of burglary, but why the boy did it. Was the boy kicked out of his home by a father who was homophobic? Did the boy need money for food, clothes, and shelter?*" [92]. Our society marginalizes those who are poor and queer, hence there are at least two victims in this scenario—the owner of the store who was robbed and the 14-year-old boy who is a victim of wider systemic injustices. This is an example of how Transformative Justice breaks down victim-perpetrator binaries and sheds light on the systems that perpetuate harm [92].

Recent scholarship in HCI has leveraged the work of Transformative Justice scholars and practitioners to resist retributive approaches to addressing violence [23, 32, 37, 108]. Dickinson and colleagues created an app for street outreach workers, who are tasked with preventing violence without the involvement of police [32], and Erete and colleagues study how street outreach workers use ICTs, showing that they "*1) identify and mediate conflict; 2) support collaboration and teamwork; and 3) invoke community connections and trust*" [37]. Our study builds on this body of work by leveraging Transformative Justice to explore the roles community members can adopt to enhance local safety.

3 Methods

We employed a case study method [82] to understand the design needs for a justice-oriented NST. We bound our study to Jackson

Grove community members and their experience with a neighborhood social work program from 2023–2024. For the single case to have power, the selection of the case needs to be strategic [43]. We selected the Jackson Grove social work program because we see it as an *unusual* case, one that deviates from everyday occurrences and provides a unique opportunity worth observing and analyzing [118]. The neighborhood social work program is unusual because it deviates from default approaches to enhancing local safety and instead adopts a novel sociotechnical approach that is aligned with the principles of Transformative Justice, the first of its kind in Atlanta. In doing so, it provides a unique opportunity for researchers to explore implications on the design of NSTs.

We triangulated data from two sources [118]. We conducted 17 interviews with community members who contacted the neighborhood social worker about one or more safety incidents. Concurrently, we used virtual ethnography to collect data from the Jackson Grove neighborhood Facebook group. These two forms of data collection are complementary; interviews can provide context and depth to data collected online, while virtual ethnography allows researchers to observe individuals in a natural environment where they are more likely to behave authentically [46]. In this section, we provide context for this case and describe our process for collecting and analyzing data.

3.1 Context

Jackson Grove is a neighborhood in southeastern Atlanta with a population of roughly 3,000 people. While Jackson Grove is a historically Black neighborhood, it's racial demographics have changed drastically in the last two decades due to gentrification and population growth, and White people now make up the largest percentage of the neighborhood [4, 65]. Estimated per capita income is $54,218, and the homeownership rate is 57.98% [5]. Homelessness is a high-priority topic for local business owners and residents and is regularly discussed at monthly Jackson Grove Community Association meetings [2].

In Atlanta, 18.5% of residents (92,338 people) are estimated to live in poverty based on a point-in-time count in 2022, and 2.2% of residents (2,017 people) living in poverty are experiencing homelessness [51]. Following a national trend of increasing homelessness among older adults [28], people over 50 years old made up the largest percentage of homeless individuals in Atlanta [51]. Black individuals are also overrepresented among the unhoused relative to the overall population; an annual city survey estimates that 86% of the unhoused population is Black in 2024 [44]. Recent increases in homelessness in Atlanta have also been linked to the effects of gentrification, which has driven up housing prices and poverty rates even as the city's median income has increased [51]. In 2022, individuals experiencing homelessness made up 12.5% of arrests at the Atlanta city jail, and many of these people were incarcerated for violating quality of life ordinances [51].

The Jackson Grove neighborhood social work program began in October 2023 to address local concerns about increasing homelessness and public safety. The city council, along with the Jackson Grove Neighborhood Association, collectively raised $100,000 for a one-year pilot program to hire a dedicated social worker, Mic Lona (anonymized for privacy), to support the local unhoused population. Mic is an employee of Unbounded Care (also anonymized), a homeless outreach agency that uses a trauma-informed, consent-based, and housing-first approach. Mic's role evolved over the course of the program, but includes 1) supporting the unhoused population in getting the documentation needed to move into permanent supportive housing, and 2) following up on referrals made by community members about neighborhood situations that involved the unhoused. Mic's role does not include emergency services. Mic accepted community referrals by phone and text (see his business card in Figure 1) and informally via the neighborhood Facebook group.

The Jackson Grove neighborhood Facebook group is described as a private "forum for Jackson Grove to share about neighborhood issues or anything else that the community may need to know about." It was created in 2014 and, as of January 2024, it had over 10,000 members. The group is highly active, averaging around 27 posts per day.

3.2 Positionality

The first author has been a resident of Jackson Grove since February 2022 and has served as the Jackson Grove Outreach Committee chair since February 2023. As chair of the outreach committee, she is charged with managing and tracking progress related to the neighborhood social work program. Her responsibilities include meeting once a month with Unbounded Care and sharing updates with residents through the Facebook neighborhood group as well as at the monthly neighborhood association meeting. Seven months after assuming her chair position, she decided to pursue a research project on the neighborhood social work program. Walstrom refers to researchers in these roles as "*participant experiencers*," because they are active participants in the group under study and have "*personal experience with the central problem being discussed by group participants*" [113].

These two roles—that of researcher and of committee chair—productively informed one another. For example, the first author had relationships with local leaders—nonprofit directors, business owners, leaders in the community association—who were willing to participate in the study due to their relationship with the first author. Additionally, her established presence in the neighborhood Facebook group gave credibility to recruitment posts. At the same time, her position on the outreach committee may have led participants to dampen their criticism, since she is associated with the program. Some participants also appeared to overestimate her ability to implement their suggestions and feedback.

Researchers doing place-based work are often critiqued for extracting data and then abandoning a community [52, 70]. Here, that was not the case. The first author continues to serve as the chair of the Jackson Grove Outreach Committee and plans to do so indefinitely. Furthermore, the research team is dedicated to leveraging the credibility that accompanies academic research to draw attention and funding to the Jackson Grove community.

3.3 Data Collection

We investigated the neighborhood social work program by collecting data about referrals made by Jackson Grove community members to Mic Lona. We chose to focus on referrals as these are

Figure 1: Mic Lona's business card

hyper-local safety concerns that may otherwise be posted on traditional NSTs like Nextdoor. However, because the referrals are directed towards Mic, they allow us to view a range of safety needs and their sociotechnical implications within the context of a program that prioritizes the dignity of the local unhoused population.

We collected data about referrals in two ways: 1) by interviewing members of the community who self-disclosed that they had made a referral, and 2) by collecting posts made on the neighborhood Facebook group.

3.3.1 User Interviews. We conducted 17 semi-structured interviews, one with Mic Lona and 16 with community members, business owners, and nonprofit leaders who had made a referral about a neighborhood situation that involved unhoused members of the community. To recruit users, we posted on the neighborhood Facebook page and a Slack group associated with a local nonprofit. We also reached out to business owners and nonprofit leaders who regularly interact with the unhoused population. Table 1 lists the demographics of all 17 participants. While all participants identified as community members (C), some participants also held additional roles, such as business owners (B), directors of nonprofits (N), and/or leadership either in the Jackson Grove Business or Community Associations (L) (identifiers used in column one of Table 1 make these roles visible). We used purposive sampling, intentionally recruiting a diversity of roles to understand the range of needs and perspectives in the neighborhood. Sixty-five percent of participants' primary role was that of community member (n=11). Of these, two participants identified as housing insecure or unhoused (C10 and C11). Our participants lived or worked in Jackson Grove an average of 16 years. The majority self-identified as female (65%) and White (71%). Six percent of our participants were aged 18–24, 6% were aged 25–34, 31% were aged 35–44, 19% were aged 45–54, 19% were aged 55–64, and 13% were aged 65+.

Our interview protocol asked participants to describe: (1) their motivation for making a referral, (2) their method for making a referral, (3) the information they shared and received, (4) their overall experience with the referral process, and (5) changes that they would like to make to the referral process. Interviews were conducted in person or on Zoom. We also conducted one interview via Facebook Messenger chat as C10 did not have transportation to meet in person and was not comfortable using Zoom. Each participant was compensated with a $40 e-gift card, except for C11. Mic shared that C11 was actively struggling with alcohol addiction and a large monetary compensation might be enabling; we thus compensated her with a hot meal and appropriately sized clothing. The challenges associated with interviewing C10 and C11 demonstrate the need for researchers working with vulnerable populations to minimize the harm that can occur when making seemingly mundane choices.

3.3.2 Virtual Ethnography. Virtual ethnography requires the researcher to immerse themselves in people's virtual lives for an extended period of time [55]. The first author joined the neighborhood Facebook group in April 2022 and the second author in November 2023. We used participation in the group as a means to understand, for example, hyper-local safety concerns and emergent social hierarchies. We manually collected the text, comments, and reactions of all posts that were either authored by Mic or that tagged him in the comments or text of the post between October 1 and December 31, 2023. Data for each post was collected at least two weeks after it was posted to ensure that we captured all responses. This process resulted in a total of 54 posts and 800 comments.

Virtual ethnography introduces ethical challenges around consent and anonymity [42, 55, 99]. While the research team disclosed their roles on the Facebook neighborhood group, we did not share that we were collecting Facebook posts as we did not want members of the group to alter their online behavior, a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne effect [103]. Thus, members of the Facebook group likely did not expect their posts and online activity to be visible outside the group or to be used beyond the Facebook context. The potential for harm is heightened in this study as not only do the risks apply to members of the Facebook group, but they also apply to those individuals who are *discussed* on the Facebook group.

The approaches to address these ethical challenges are highly variable and best practices continue to be debated [42, 99]. In this study, we actively worked to minimize potential risks by leveraging Bruckman's practice of *heavy disguise* [20]. This includes anonymizing the name of the neighborhood, the name of the Facebook group, and giving pseudonyms to all individuals in our study, including those who are discussed in the *content* of Facebook posts. All quotes from the Facebook neighborhood group are paraphrased and details such as times and places are fabricated, including in figures [78].

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Identifier	Age	Race	Gender	Number of Years Living or Working in Jackson Grove	Role in Jackson Grove	Housing Status
Mic	N/A	White	N/A	3	Social Worker	Housed
C1	35-44	White	female	2	Community Member	Housed
N1	35-44	White	Male	3.5	Director of Non-profit	Housed
C2	65-74	White	Female	5+	Community Member	Housed
C3	35-44	White	Female	8.5 nearby just a visitor in Jackson Grove	Community Member	Housed
C4	25-34	Hispanic or Latino/a	Female	5	Community Member	Housed
C5	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Community Member	Housed
B1	35-44	White	Female	5	Business Owner	Housed
C6	55-64	White	Female	16	Community Member	Housed
N2	45-54	Black, White	Female	47	Director of Non-profit	Housed
BL2	45-54	White	Male	18	Business Owner; Neighborhood Leader	Housed
C7	35-44	Asian or Pacific Islander	NonBinary	13	Community Member	Housed
B3	55-64	Asian or Pacific Islander	female	16 years	Business Owner	Housed
C8	18-24	White	female	38	Community Member	Housed
CL9	55-64	White	Male	22	Community Member; Neighborhood Leader	Housed
C10	18-24	Black	Female	13	Community Member	Housing Insecure
C11	45-54	White	Female	40+	Community Member	Housing Insecure

We do not use any quotes or images directly from the Facebook group; all images from the Facebook group shared in this paper are stock images. We additionally shared a draft of this paper with Mic, who had no additional concerns or suggestions. We received IRB approval from the University of Washington for this study.

3.4 Data Analysis

We conducted inductive thematic analysis, *"searching across a data set… to find repeated patterns of meaning"* [16]. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's approach, we first immersed ourselves in the data, reading all interview transcripts and Facebook posts and noting initial reflections and questions [16]. These notes seeded rich conversations during weekly team meetings, which helped us collectively evolve our understanding of the corpus. We then manually coded the entire corpus, looking for patterns across both datasets. Examples of codes at this point included "training for community members" and "Mic's credibility." The first author used Delve, a qualitative data analysis tool, to group these codes into initial themes [30], and we discussed and revised these themes during weekly team meetings. We crystallized upon eight *semantic themes* as well

as a set of *conceptual themes*. Conceptual themes are not explicitly discussed by participants, but point to underlying ideas and assumptions that inform the semantic content of the data [16]. The three conceptual themes corresponded to three types of safety incidents, which spanned the set of safety concerns in the dataset: 1) threats to public space, 2) threats to a community member's safety, and 3) threats to personal safety. To share both semantic and conceptual themes with the reader, we decided to organize the Results Section into three subsections, each dedicated to one of the conceptual themes. Within each subsection, we used a vignette to illustrate the conceptual theme and then discussed related semantic themes in context. We chose vignettes which were discussed by multiple participants, discussed in both interviews and on the Facebook group, and which were representative of the the set of safety incidents that fit within that conceptual theme.

4 Results

Mic received community referrals about three types of safety incidents: threats to public space, threats to a community member's safety, and threats to personal safety. Each of these is discussed in its own subsection, where we present a representative vignette and related semantic themes. Collectively, these findings surface a range of design implications for technological infrastructure that supports a justice-oriented approach to neighborhood safety.

4.1 A Threat to a Public Space

C2 walks her dog in Sandalwood Park every day. In mid-October 2023, she noticed that a man had moved into the park and had set up a tent. At first "*he was pretty clean and self-contained*"; C2 even remembered giving him Halloween candy and bringing him dinner. However, by November, the area around the tent had become "*a garbage dump*" (C2). C2 felt that it was a threat to one of the few green spaces in the area and decided to contact city services as well as Mic Lona, the neighborhood social worker, to relocate the man and get the park cleaned.

4.1.1 Identifying and Reporting Unaddressed Needs. When Mic receives a call, he views the community referral as an opportunity to meet an "*unaddressed need*." He shared that: "*the way my mind works it out is, there's an unaddressed need. This person is in the park, and they don't have food or there's a mental issue, there's something going on.*" When someone makes a referral, it's helpful for him to get as much information as possible about those unmet needs. Mic explained that "*if I know that someone is panhandling and their sign says they're hungry, then when I go over there, I'm going to make sure I have food and water with me, so that if they are in fact hungry when I get there, I can fill that need*," and through that, begin to build rapport and trust. Mic shared that he would "*really love*" to have a "See Something, Say Something" app to support community members with making referrals. This app could prompt users to share details about unmet needs, enable them to share exact location information, and offer guidance on how to take respectful photos or videos so he would know what to look for when he went out to the streets. Current NSTs often draw users' attention to potential threats, but the "See Something, Say Something" design concept offers an alternative approach which would focus users' attention on people's unmet needs.

Residents made community referrals via Facebook, text messaging, Instagram, WhatsApp, and phone call. When there were incidents of broad concern, neighbors would share and request Mic's contact information on Facebook and Nextdoor. Participants voiced a number of challenges associated with making a community referral, including understanding how and when to do so. C2 made "*dozens*" of calls before she came across Mic's number. There are so many public service agencies that participants found it challenging to understand when it was appropriate to contact Mic and for what types of situations. C1 and C8 complained that it takes months "*to figure out who's responsible*," and C3 admitted that "*I know he [the neighborhood social worker] is a resource in the community, I don't know how to utilize him the right way*." Interview participants suggested design solutions, such as a decision tree. C3 brainstormed aloud: "*if you see this, these are the appropriate actions, Mic [the neighborhood social worker] is the person to call for this scenario, this scenario, this scenario… a process flow document*" would be helpful. C2 and C3 hoped for a simple interface to "*log a community issue*" and automatically alert the responsible authorities. These examples demonstrate a design opportunity to support residents in engaging effectively with community infrastructure.

4.1.2 Managing Community Expectations Around Progress and Updates. When C2 called Mic and made a community referral about the man living in Sandalwood Park, Mic was able to share that the individual in the tent had relocated and was no longer living there. C2 later confirmed that the man "*was gone*," which she attributed to the fact that the case worker "*really knows that infrastructure, and what's available and what's not available*." Mic also communicated this update on Facebook, sharing that "*the individual is currently in the process of relocating*" (see Figure 2). While members of the Facebook group appreciated this update, some individuals also requested more information, which Mic was not comfortable sharing. In an interview, Mic clarified that his official policy when he receives a community referral is *not* to keep the referrer updated. He explained that, "*your right to further information does not exist, because that is a person with autonomy, and that person is also a client of mine. So what happens with me and that client is between us; that's not for public consumption, and I will not be discussing it with you directly or in a public forum because it's none of your business*."

Residents struggled to understand these norms and expected more updates after making a community referral. Some interview participants wanted a more formal reporting system to log issues and receive a case number (N1) for "*tracking*" and "*follow through*," including information about "*what's happening about it? Is this going to be addressed one month from now, three months from now? Is this a long-term situation?*" (C1). Others wanted to see more evidence of progress, including statistics (C1), a "*readers' digest*" to show "*where he adds value, this is where you involve him*" (C3), or other types of data that can demonstrate that "*this worked*" (BL2). Residents' requests surfaced a value tension between the need to protect the privacy of Mic's clients and the desire that other community members have for visibility around progress.

Local leaders shared strategies they use to manage community members' expectations. BL2, who was instrumental in organizing the pilot program, shared that he comments "*for awareness*" whenever he tags Mic on Facebook to emphasize that he's tagging Mic

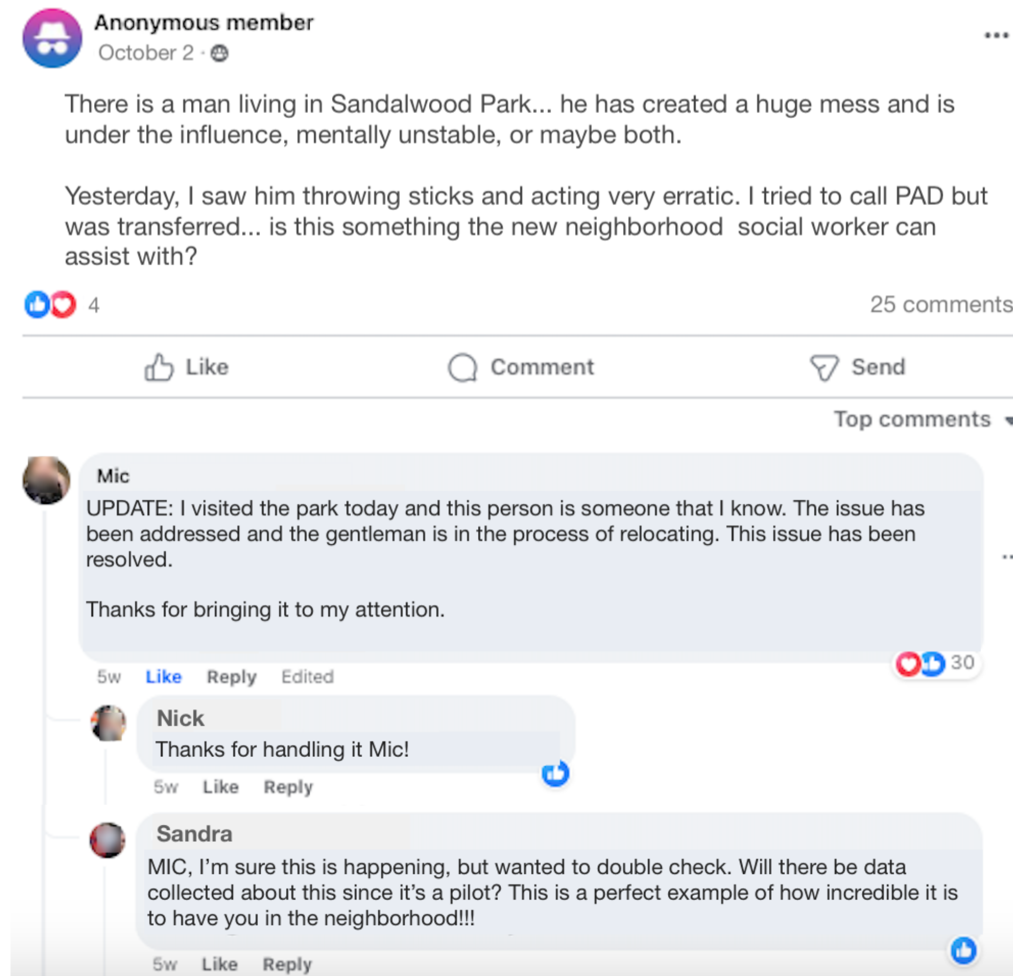

Figure 2: An anonymous member of the Facebook group creates a post wondering if the new social worker can support a man who is living in Sandalwood Park.

for Mic's awareness, and not necessarily expecting updates or a resolution. Mic and BL2 both felt that an autoresponder could help communicate Mic's information-sharing policy while still providing assurance that people's concerns aren't going "*into the ether*" (BL2). N1, who runs a local nonprofit, believes that most of the progress "*isn't measurable in KPIs or dashboards*," and that the neighborhood needs to cultivate a culture of "*enlightened philanthropy*" that "*entrusts folks to do the work and not put as much administrative burden work on them*." These examples demonstrate that service providers are rarely offered support in managing the public's many expectations, which can result in frustration and perceptions of incompetency or inefficiency.

Summary. This vignette demonstrates how an unaddressed need can contribute to a threat to public space. Reporting and responding to those unaddressed needs can foster safety for both the individual (in this case, the man in the park) and those around him (C2 and others). We surface the need for information and communication technologies that can: 1) draw users' attention to community members' unmet needs, and 2) direct that information to the responsible service providers. After receiving a community referral, Mic faced challenges in communicating progress and managing expectations about right to information. This further demonstrates an opportunity to 3) make visible the communication policies of service providers and 4) support services providers in sharing progress and updates while protecting clients' privacy.

4.2 A Threat to a Community Member's Safety

C5 was driving on I-20, returning home to Jackson Grove on the evening of November 29th. As she exited the highway, she saw a little boy and his mom *"almost in traffic"* asking for money on an "*incredibly cold*" night. She decided to take a picture and post on the neighborhood Facebook group because she found the situation "*heartbreaking*" and hoped that "*somebody might have some ideas of some resources*" or that neighbors could pool funds for a hotel room (see Figure 3).

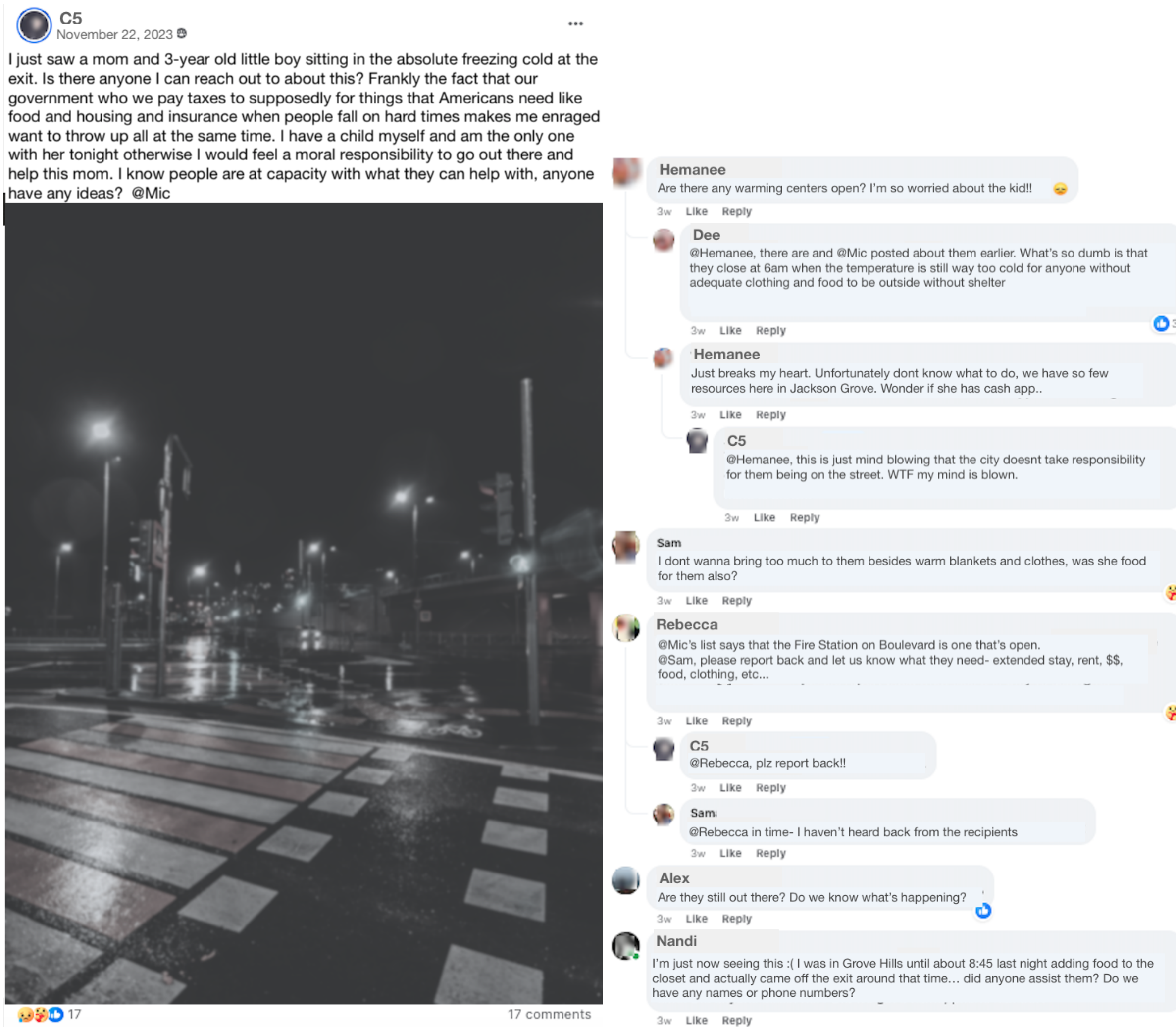

Figure 3: C5's post on the neighborhood Facebook group and associated comments.

4.2.1 Collective Problem Solving. On the neighborhood Facebook page, people collectively tried to problem solve, tagging Mic and other local leaders. Members of the Facebook group also shared information about resources, including a city-operated warming center that was open nearby because of the freezing temperatures. This type of collective problem solving and support was not uncommon. In other posts on the Facebook group, we saw examples of neighbors contributing to local nonprofits for emergency situations, cheering an unhoused member of the Facebook group who shared she was "*11 days clean and sober*", and sharing information about local resources, such as a food pantry. C7 reflected that despite the arguing and "*animosity*" on the Facebook group, "*it's still a really good place for people to get to know and almost problem solve together as a group because people will comment and respond and you'll see everyone processing out loud.*"

Community members, however, also voiced challenges to providing support and problem solving together online. C5 was disappointed in the response she received online about the mother and son in the cold. She was expecting more people to respond, but reflected that people might be "*maxed out on all the donations*" or that they might not have seen it on their feeds. She felt that Nextdoor can be more helpful than Facebook because you can post to multiple neighborhoods and "*get way more eyes on a thing.*" Another challenge that community members faced in receiving support online was gaining neighbors' trust. C10, a single mom who is housing insecure, found that she has to reveal personal details in order to get a response on Facebook. She shared that it can feel "*strange opening up to hundreds of people I haven't met*" but that those details help her get the resources that she needs. At the same time, those details invite "*backlash*" in the form of "*comments telling me [her] to get a job , they make posts saying I'm begging or some might dm me and say I'm using the group for money. I've even had someone talk about my mom and said I need to work on being better than her [sic].*" When she does receive support from the group, she feels that it's important to "*show that I [she] can be trusted, proof of receipts , bill ledgers showing the balance is paid.*" For C10, privacy is the price

that she pays for neighbors' trust and financial support. C11, who has been unhoused since the age of 17, has blocked people who are negative and instead tags specific individuals so that her posts reach the people she trusts and knows "*will listen or get what I'm [she's] saying.*"

4.2.2 Dedicated Online Spaces for Committed Residents. Both on the Facebook group as well as during interviews, participants shared that seeing neighbors struggling was "*heartbreaking*" and "*challenging to just ignore*" (C5). Some participants felt that they were "*responsible for other people in the space*" (C4, also C3), and C5 wondered if it might be helpful to have a dedicated online space for residents who want to take more "*accountability of the neighbors in our community*". A dedicated group for people who "*really want to help and are available to show up in that way*" would increase the likelihood that posts such as hers don't "*get lost as much in an algorithm*" and would also prioritize productive actions over "*negative commentary.*" C6, N2, and C7 are members of a neighborhood Slack group with over 70 members that is used to coordinate daily drop offs to a local food and clothing closet. N2 loved that members of the Slack group "*are genuinely interested in helping.*" It is a space for more engaged neighbors and many of them interact with unsheltered or vulnerable neighbors on a weekly basis. C6 believed that leaders of local nonprofits could leverage the Slack group to make concrete requests on behalf of their clients. This might also be a space where people are able to offer more than just donations, such as vacant Airbnbs (C5). C5 explained that "*people might have different ways that they can give something, and it would be cool to be able to have that offered.*" C10, a single mom, shared that receiving financial aid for rent and utilities from a dedicated group of individuals made her "*feel like I have a whole army of strangers that stands beside me and actually help me without even knowing my first name Help I couldn't get from even my own family it makes me feel loved and cared for [sic].*"

4.2.3 Access to Updated Information About Local Resources. C5, B1, C6, N2, C7, and C10 all wanted more information about local resources. C6, a member of the Slack group, wanted a "*wiki*" or list of resources that she could use in real-time when she came across vulnerable neighbors, and Mic mentioned that "*so many of the community advocacy apps are tied to police,*" but it would be helpful to have an app that has the state Crisis and Access Line and information about local resources, including shelter. C10 shared that she can go on Nextdoor and "*type in 'free food near me' and see hundreds of resource*", but that when she contacts these organizations, "*most places will just say 'we don't have fund right now' [sic]*" or if they do have resources, the locations are so far away that she is not able to take advantage of them. The dearth of reliable digital resources has convinced some community members that they need more analog options. N2, who runs a local nonprofit, felt that the availability of resources changes so quickly that it's better to have local people to call. B1 suggested creating a "*roster of people to call who have connections to resources.*" The idea would be that "*if we were to come into contact with someone who needs a specific type of help, we would have one place to go look for those resources.*" This type of infrastructure could empower everyday individuals to help vulnerable neighbors meet their needs. Unhoused members of the community also need in-person access to resources. C11, who has been unhoused "*on and off*" for the last 33 years, shared that many of the unhoused members of the Jackson Grove community cannot read, which is "*a lot of the reason why they can't email or Facebook and stuff like that.*" While C11 can read, she does not have a phone, and relies on library computers to go online. When she needs support with basic needs like access to medication, she goes directly to Mic's office or to a local church.

4.2.4 Community Training and Skill Building. In addition to information about local resources, C7 who is an organizer, felt strongly that people need to keep upskilling and "*learning hard skills as well as soft skills.*" By hard skills, she meant "*concrete things*" you can do, such as provide first aid or CPR or deliver Narcan. On the Facebook group, Mic posted tips for people who are interested in making sandwiches for the local food pantry (see Figure 4). C5 reflected that such skills are critical because if she ran into the mom and her son again, she still "*wouldn't know really how to help them*" and in fact, was nervous that without more training, she may actually cause harm as posting broadly on Facebook might lead people to "*get their kids taken away from them if they're unhoused.*" In addition to the hard skills, C7 also believed that it was important to help people build soft skills and understand "*why is this important? What is going on with this person?*" BL2, a business owner who was instrumental in launching the pilot program, shared that his motivation for this program came when he heard some business owners refer to the unhoused as "*cats… if you feed them they keep coming back.*" Providing training in soft skills was a priority for Mic and he often did so by trying to "*humanize*" a situation. For example, when contacted by a community members who referred to a client as "*that freaking homeless crackhead*", Mic responded, "*so what I hear from you is that an unsheltered person was acting in a way that did not make you happy or comfortable*" in order to "*personalize*" the issue and raise awareness that "*that thing they're complaining about is a person… and people should not be discussed as numbers or disposable things.*"

Another area of skill building focused on how to support the seven or eight individuals who had been in the neighborhood for a long time, were well-known, and for whom, "*this is their community. This is home for them*" (N2). For example, seven of our interview participants were concerned about "Robby" (anonymized for privacy), an elderly unhoused gentleman who can be hard to communicate with and can walk in the middle of the street during peak traffic hours. Five interviewees also expressed concern about "Mikki" who has lived in the neighborhood for decades and often requests money at the busiest intersection in the neighborhood. Mikki and Robby are widely known, and interview participants felt "frustrated" and helpless seeing them in the same situation every day (C1, BL2, C8). N1 summarized the challenge, "*as much as the community doesn't really love Mikki, I think if they were to pick the number one person they want to get help, it's also Mikki... She's lived here as long as I have, almost 20 years if not longer… as much as they've been bothered by her, they also realize she is in just a cycle of problems.*" N2, the leader of a local nonprofit, wanted to host a training about how to respond when Mikki or Robby ask for help, and C3 shared that it would be helpful to know, "*Hey, this community member's name is Robby, this is kind of how he is…. If he needs help, this is the proper*

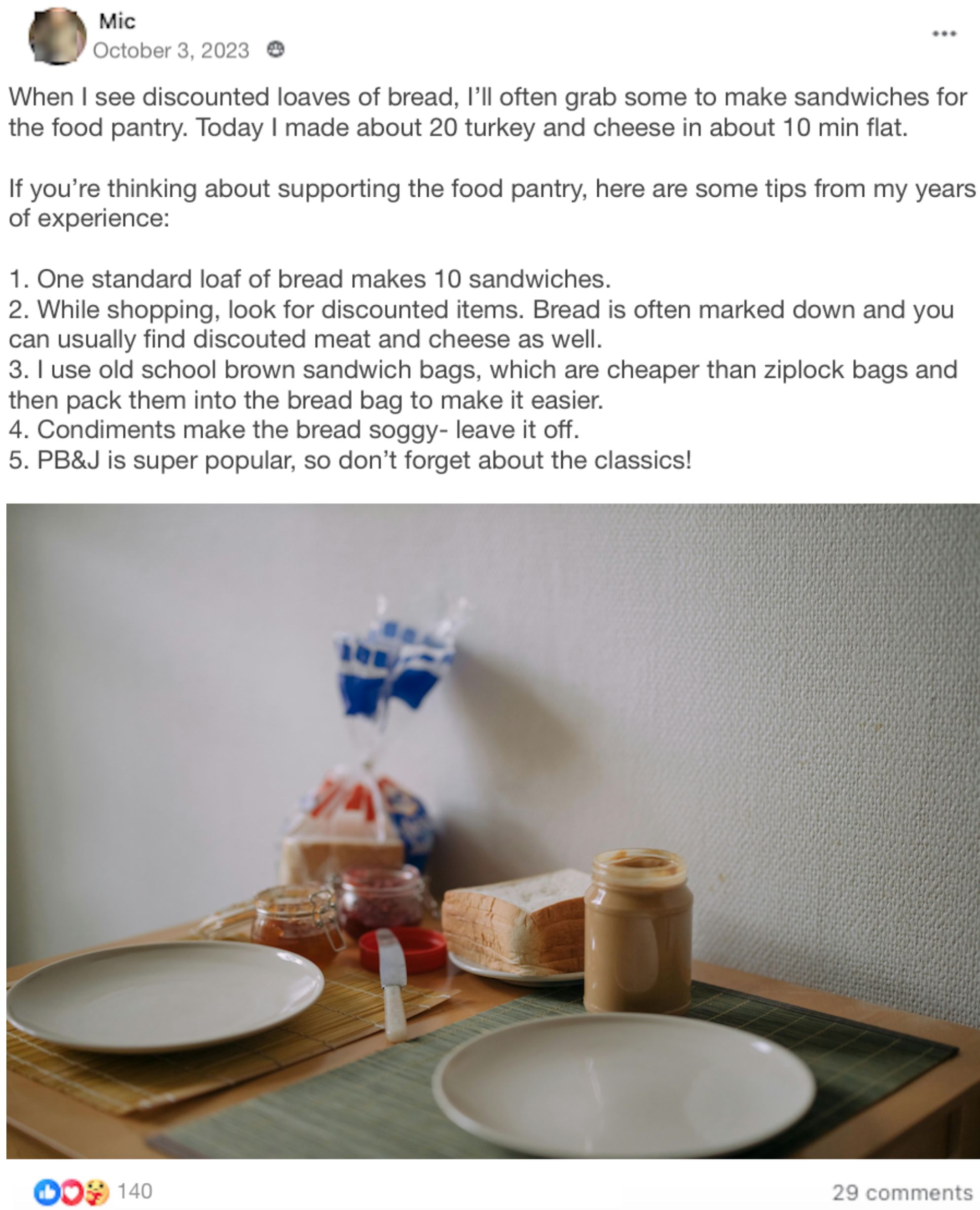

Figure 4: Mic's post sharing hard skills about how to make sandwiches for the food closet.

route for him. And it doesn't have to be Robby specific, but if he's a known member in the community."

Mic reflected on the goal of training and skill building and how it can empower an entire neighborhood:

> *"I'm not emergency services, and I'm one person. But by me working to educate the people here, I'm not one person anymore. I'm one person who has taught a community how they can advocate for themselves, and how we can avoid police interaction. We can connect someone directly to the services that they need, instead of getting them incarcerated overnight where nothing is going to be done."*

4.2.5 Summary. This vignette illuminates how addressing an emergency threat to a community member's safety (in this case, the mother and son in the cold) requires problem solving by a large group of concerned people. We surface challenges around such problem solving, including donation fatigue and forfeitures of privacy in order to gain community support and trust. This incident also demonstrates an opportunity for NSTs to 1) help organize a dedicated group of people to fulfill requests for support and exchange resources for basic needs, 2) provide up-to-date information

about local resources that can be communicated in real time, and 3) serve as platforms to share training and provide opportunities for upskilling. Furthermore, we see the importance of developing offline infrastructure given that online resources are challenging to navigate and not accessible for everyone.

4.3 A Threat to Personal Safety

In October 2023, John Sampson (anonymized for privacy) was arrested for seven charges including burglary, criminal damage to property, and battery against a police officer [1]. B1, the manager of a local bakery, called the police after John had "*thrown a pony keg through our [their] window and then thrown a wine bottle through the hole of the pony keg.*" This was not the first time that John had been arrested; Mic shared that John was stuck in the city's restoration process, which releases individuals who are deemed mentally unfit to stand trial [11]. He had been cycling in and out of prison since 2004, sometimes staying fewer than 48 hours [1]. When John was arrested in October, Mic messaged the district's city council representative and encouraged her "*to make sure that he's not released… And then we need to have a conversation with them about making sure the behavioral health needs are met.*" Along with other community members, Mic was frustrated with the existing restoration process and the issue of "*arresting people in severe unmet mental health need, and doing nothing*" to address the underlying needs or to protect the larger community.

4.3.1 Community Accountability. BL2, C8, and CL9 all pointed to the importance of identifying friends and family who could hold individuals like John accountable. Years ago, C8 had found John and then John's father on Facebook. A longtime resident, C8 periodically messaged John's father to share information about John's whereabouts in the hopes that John's family could convince their son to take medication for his mental health needs or find another solution to his violent episodes (see Figure 5). In another instance, when neighbors were concerned about a loud banging in the middle of the night, CL9 tracked down family members who he thought would have the most ability to influence the situation. This idea of building relationships and "*rapport*" and then leveraging those to hold individuals accountable is at the core of outreach work (Mic). Transformative Justice scholars refer to this as *community accountability*, a process of building self-reliance where people are intervening, interrupting, and shifting harmful behavior without relying on the criminal justice system [56]. N2, who runs a local nonprofit, shared that because she has built relationships with the unhoused members of the community, she is able to "*encourage and remind them*" to do their part to keep the neighborhood clean. Other participants who had built relationships with unhoused members of the community also served as "*bridges*" to Mic (N1, N2, BL2). N2, for example, spent one month building a relationship with Jorde (anonymized), a new member of the unhoused community. She shared that "*through that building, I was finally able to get him connected*" with Mic, who started the process of finding Jorde housing.

Identifying family or friends who could hold an individual accountable was preferable to calling the police, who were perceived as "*totally dysfunctional*" (C2) and ineffective (C1, C4). C8 reflected that in the past, the same police officer would be assigned to the neighborhood for six months or a year and "*they knew us, they knew all these guys*" but more recently, the police department has had so much turnover that they haven't been able to "*interact*" with the neighbors and so "*there's no sense of community*" anymore (C8). Because the police were no longer embedded in the neighborhood, they were less trusted and less effective at keeping the peace. Furthermore, participants felt uncomfortable with the idea of calling the police "*on this person, who is mentally ill*" (B1, also C4), and N2 shared that calling the police on the unhoused doesn't accomplish much besides "*putting yet another notch in that distrust. And it's like a lot of times it's starting all the way over again.*" C11, a member of the unhoused community, said that she does not really feel comfortable calling the police "*being a female and being on the streets and me having my issues.*" In the past when she's been harassed on the streets, she has called Mic and has also posted on the Facebook group, tagging individuals she trusts, who then stopped by and checked on her.

4.3.2 Building a Network of Relationships. In contrast to the police, Mic reached out and met regularly with many local business and nonprofit leaders (N1, B1, N2) because he felt that it was important to build relationships with individuals who regularly interact with the unhoused. N1, the director of a local nonprofit, shared that after he first tagged Mic on Facebook, Mic came to the nonprofit in person, "*got to know us a little bit and what we do here. And then, he exchanged his number, so now I just text him.*" Similarly, B1 said that Mic has stopped by her bakery a number of times and chatted with her about her concerns, shared his contact information, as well as "*the scope of his work and what he actually does and is able to do.*" These interactions have supported B1 and N1 to keep their corners of the neighborhood safe. For example, N1 explained that Mic is now able to provide context about Robby, who stops by his nonprofit on a weekly basis. If Robby has "*had a day where he's actively been using and thrown out of places, I probably need to frame how I talk to him differently than if he's super aware.*" B1 had noticed John Sampson becoming "*increasingly erratic and very unpredictable*" for weeks prior to his arrest; she shared that if she had built a relationship with Mic earlier, she would have definitely been updating him about John's behavior. Being able to share personalized context and information with local business owners and nonprofit workers creates a network of leaders who are able to adapt their day-to-day behavior to keep themselves and their businesses safe.

B1 wanted a "*smaller Facebook group for people who actually work in the area… and see this stuff on a daily basis*" in order to share and receive relevant information. B1 also believed that such a platform might be helpful to alert one another about threatening situations, such as John's release from prison. While prior NSTs use alerts indiscriminately [26], B1 highlights a specific use case in order to warn stakeholders who may be directly affected when there are limited other options.

While Mic was able to build relationships with local leadership in person, the online Facebook group was the only space to communicate with the residents of the neighborhood. Mic knew that Facebook was a valuable source of information—members often tagged him or shared information about his clients—but it was also challenging to build trust online. With over 10,000 members in the neighborhood Facebook group, including "*people that don't live*

Figure 5: C8 posts on the neighborhood Facebook group providing an update about John Sampson.

here" (C1), Mic felt that he had to be "*very careful and deliberate*" with his words knowing that individuals who read his posts may "*troll*," disagree, or question his authority. He felt that there were a lot of people "*complaining*" and some interview participants observed that Mic had to work hard to establish his authority and "*defend*" himself and his professional opinions (N1). Mic found this aspect of his role challenging because he's "*here to work with people on the street, not to be a social media manager for the work I do on the street.*" His experience suggests an opportunity for design to help local leadership signal their expertise and authority in large online spaces and help them manage their online presence.

4.3.3 Summary. Mariame Kaba wrote that "*you cannot have safety without strong, empathetic relationships with others*" [59]. This vignette sheds light on how building relationships and being embedded in a neighborhood creates trust and rapport that can then be leveraged to interrupt and shift unsafe behavior, a process referred to as community accountability. We surface an opportunity for NSTs to 1) facilitate personalized and contextualized information sharing for local leaders who regularly engage with members of the community who have unmet behavioral and mental health needs, and 2) help professionals such as Mic establish authority and credibility in large online spaces. Furthermore, this incident demonstrates that when the basic needs of an individual such as John are not met and that individual is not embedded in a network of relationships, there is a threat to others' safety.

5 Discussion

Historically, HCI researchers have conceptualized public safety as the protection of individuals and their property from external violence or threat. This is often implicitly defined, a taken-for-granted definition with little discussion of what is meant or should be meant by safety [47]. In this section, we leverage the work of Transformative Justice activists and scholars to offer two alternative conceptions of public safety, which shifts the focus from protection to 1) meeting basic needs, and 2) building relationships to enhance community accountability. Shifting the underlying conceptualization of safety can help designers reimagine NSTs as platforms with the potential to benefit entire communities, including the most marginalized members. We identify an emerging trajectory for the design and research of NSTs and discuss key design capabilities as priorities for designers to support.

5.1 Reconceptualizing Safety and NSTs

5.1.1 Reconceptualizing Safety as Meeting Basic Needs.

> "*Our opponents want to make our experiences of violence into opportunities to expand police, either justified by punishment or indefensible ideas that police, if properly trained and equipped, would prevent violence. We say stop building the infrastructure of punishment, and let's get people's basic needs met. That will increase safety.*"
> - Dean Spade, lawyer, writer, and trans activist [9]

Meeting unaddressed behavioral, mental, and physical needs enhances the safety of the individual in question as well as the broader community. In the first vignette, by focusing on the man's need for housing, Mic was able to support the man's safety as well as maintain the park as a green space for the neighborhood. The current conceptualization of safety as protection places a criminalizing gaze on the man in the tent; current NSTs might encourage users to inform the police, create an alert about a possible threat in the park, and/or encourage users to avoid the area. This type of lateral surveillance prolongs the experience of homelessness and frame individuals with unmet needs as threats to society.

Professor of law Barry Friedman shares a provisional typology of safety as access to: "*food, clean water and air, housing, a basic income, and the means to obtain that income through an education and a job. It might include health care, health insurance, and freedom from discrimination*" [47]. Prior work has found that increasing access to services which meet people's basic needs, for example by expanding Medicaid [115] or providing after-school programming [48], reduces the crime rate. At the same time, focusing on unaddressed needs allows us to account for the chronic conditions that

most impact people's welfare rather than just the discrete events of crime [54].

The shift from protection to meeting basic needs creates opportunities to reimagine the design of NSTs. Participants suggested features such as a frequently updated database of local resources, which could be accessed in real time to address basic needs; dedicated online spaces for committed community members to engage in mutual aid activities [106]; user interface elements that alert social workers to unmet needs; and platforms for hosting and sharing training in both hard and soft skills. P0 also described his desire for a "See Something, Say Something" app that guides users to respectfully share details about unmet needs that they notice in the neighborhood. "If You See Something, Say Something" is a national campaign [93] that was developed after September 11, 2001 asking citizens to monitor and report information about suspicious behaviors to antiterrorist hotlines, online forms, and smartphone applications [68]. Here P0 co-opts this language, asking users to instead notice unmet needs in the community. Lu and colleagues describe how this type of "*everyday noticing*" is an essential skill that enables a co-located group of individuals to keep each other safe. In contrast, technologies which encourage lateral surveillance train users to construct boundaries around subjects, isolating them from their context and relationships in order to contain and monitor them [77].

The Abolition and Disability Justice Coalition warns that even technologies aimed to support people in meeting their basic needs can become monitoring and surveillance systems when they regard people as a "*crisis to be managed rather than as people who, like all people, best thrive with supportive care systems*" [6]. For example, mandatory health check-ups can function as a form of surveillance, enabling those in power to restrict access to essential services—such as housing—until individuals meet certain requirements [6]. Instead, empowering community members who have prior contexts and relationships with one another to address unmet needs allows those needs to be situated, contextualized, and rooted in an ethics of care [77]. These practices enable a community to support individuals like C11, Robby, and Nikki, known community members who have lived in the area for decades. NSTs which afford mutual aid activities, noticing, skill sharing, and resource documentation towards meeting basic needs allows communities to develop diverse practices for fostering safety, in the absence of which, it can be easy to default to surveilling or policing one another.

5.1.2 *Reconceptualizing Safety as Relationship Building.*

> "*Violence and oppression break community ties and breed fear and distrust. At its core, the work to create safety is to build meaningful, accountable relationships within our neighborhoods and communities.*" - Ejeris Dixon, organizer and political strategist [33]

In the final vignette, John's behavior creates an unsafe situation for local business owners. The existing approach to addressing such an incident involves incarcerating John and alerting community members about the threat that he poses. While that approach improves the immediate safety of local business owners and residents, it also prolongs the experience of homelessness, creates distrust, and introduces harms that produce new unmet needs for John. Our findings suggest that while policing plays a role in keeping the neighborhood safe, it does little to improve John's safety and exacerbates the problem in the long-run; indeed, John's unmet behavioral health needs continue to cause harm whenever he returns to the neighborhood. A long-term solution acknowledges the interdependent nature of John's safety and the community's safety and aims to create strong, empathetic relationships that can interrupt and shift John's behavior without relying on external institutions, like the police, who use violence to enforce accountability [56].

NSTs can play a vital role in building neighborhood relationships and community accountability. They can support trained professionals in building new relationships, for example, by making social networks visible to case workers. Our findings demonstrate how N2's deep relationships with unhoused members of the community served as a *"bridge"* to Mic who could leverage N2's relationships to build trust and rapport. Prior work demonstrates that NSTs can strengthen relationships by facilitating information sharing and collective problem solving [32, 61, 73]. However, existing NSTs have facilitated relationship building in the form of community policing [62, 73, 102, 119], whereby privileged members of society monitor "disorderly populations" [14]. This raises a question of *who* is considered a valued member of the community and which relationships are being encouraged. In the context of safety, unhoused and racialized individuals have long been excluded. Michelle Alexander observes that, "*people of good will—and bad—have been unwilling to see black and brown men, in their humanness, as entitled to the same care, compassion, and concern that would be extended to one's friends, neighbors, or loved ones*" [7]. Designers thus have the opportunity to help communities build trust and relationships across race and class. Prior work has established that individuals experiencing homelessness *"vary widely"* in their use of information technology [69]. This necessitates adapting communication infrastructure to the needs and context of a particular neighborhood. For instance, some communities may benefit from low-tech solutions like community bulletin boards or shared phone lines, while others might require more robust platforms that offer tailored services.

5.1.3 *A New Trajectory for NSTs.*

Early research on safety technologies in HCI aimed to protect individual users from victimization, and later to support groups of privileged users in policing their communities [61, 104, 119]. These represent the first and second waves of research on safety technologies. We surface and name an emerging third wave of safety research which confronts the field's hegemonic conception of safety as protection and seeks to introduce a myriad of new conceptualizations [23, 32, 37, 77, 112, 116]. Table 2 summarizes this trajectory.

The emerging third wave of safety research offers an opportunity to reimagine NSTs as platforms that support collaboration, information and resource sharing, and community accountability through a network of relationships. In our study, Mic plays a central role in enhancing safety, primarily due to his specialized training in trauma-informed care for unhoused individuals and his authority as a licensed professional to place individuals on the Atlanta housing queue, a critical gateway to resources. At the same time, having multiple pathways to access basic needs can help distribute the workload and provide clients with more options. Expanding mutual aid services can not only increase emergency support but also empower individuals without professional licenses to contribute valuable resources. Additionally, nonprofits, with their diverse funding

Table 2: The Waves of Safety Research in HCI

	1st Wave	2nd Wave	3rd Wave
Technologies are designed to enhance the safety of...	Individual users	Privileged members of a community	All community members
Technologies afford users the ability to...	Decrease their risk of victimization by consuming and sharing information	Engage in community policing and lateral surveillance	Meet basic needs, build relationship and community accountability, notice [77], etc
Examples of features	Safety maps, crime alerts	Location sharing, documenting and sharing information with law enforcement	Community referrals, skill sharing for hard and soft skills

streams, provide resources that may otherwise remain inaccessible, underscoring the importance of a diverse ecosystem to meet basic needs. This suggests the need for NSTs to mediate information sharing across a broad range of stakeholders—trained social workers, community members, business owners, nonprofit leaders, and local officials—with the larger goal of connecting people to resources and information. While protecting users might remain a goal for designers, our results suggest that protection is most relevant when the basic needs of an individual are unmet and that individual is not embedded in a network of relationships. We instead highlight the following capabilities as priorities for designers to support in the third wave of safety research:

- *Make Referrals*: Community referrals serve as the gateway to identify and address unmet needs. Structured forms or apps can scaffold appropriate information sharing as well as discourage inappropriate information sharing (e.g., privacy-violating media or information). NSTs can direct information about unmet needs to relevant parties and facilitate joint collaboration. For example, the second vignette involving the mom and her son surfaces an opportunity to design a platform that routes information about the mother and son to a neighborhood mutual aid group for emergency support and an established case worker for long-term support.
- *Organize Groups*: Within the larger neighborhood, different groups had different information needs. Business owners, for example, wanted a private sub-group to share day-to-day updates and alert one another about critical information relevant to their workplace, while residents who frequently interact with the unhoused population wanted their own dedicated group to share resources, host trainings, and problem-solve around emergency needs. This suggests an opportunity to help users easily create sub-groups, share information, assign tasks, and inform local leaders about relevant information. Additionally, Mic had the challenging task of delivering the appropriate level of information to the appropriate group; concretely establishing sub-groups with tiered access to information would enable him and other local leaders to share different types of information to different groups, based on the roles they play in the neighborhood.
- *Reduce the Burden of Invisible Labor*: Frontline social workers supporting community health and well-being often discuss the invisible labor required to make sociotechnical systems function effectively [50, 95, 105, 109, 110]. Mic, for instance, was frustrated by the additional workload involved with establishing his credibility, addressing misinformation, setting boundaries, and managing community expectations—labor that is neither recognized nor compensated, yet is crucial to the program's success. Designers can help alleviate this burden by streamlining and supporting tasks. For instance, designers could offer a standardized UI as a part of the user profile where local leaders could answer questions about response times and data privacy in order to manage expectations and increase transparency around responses. An NST could also feature a landing page with pinned stories and data points to demonstrate progress. To further assist social workers in building their online credibility, designers could enable local leaders to create "professional" profiles from which they can post or add labels to their posts that clarify their roles within the community. Collectively, these design ideas aim to recognize and reduce the burden of invisible labor, thereby supporting the long-term success of these programs.
- *Build Relationships*: Relationship building is at the core of public safety work [32, 58, 98], but traditional NSTS have largely supported collaboration between privileged members of society. For example, 77% of users on Nextdoor are homeowners [8]. Designers thus have an opportunity to intentionally build platforms which support collaboration, connection, and trust across race and class lines. This may require, for example, the need to actively dismantle negative cultural stereotypes through the use of evidence-based strategies, such as by promoting counter narratives and embedding opportunities for media literacy training [32, 100].

We finally want to reflect on infrastructure beyond NSTs that are critical to a healthy ecosystem capable of meeting diverse needs. Our findings underscore the importance of investing in robust, place-based infrastructure to support the most vulnerable populations. Participants described the need for a "roster of people" to call because of the inconsistent availability of resources, while others

emphasized the importance of physical locations, such as a church, which reliably distribute resources, given that not all members of the Jackson Grove unhoused community are literate. Transformative Justice scholars have listed the importance of affordable housing, mental health treatment, safe needle facilities, and mutual aid groups, amongst others [106]. In areas with low literacy, digital or otherwise, or limited connectivity, NSTs may have little or no value. In other instances, NSTs may simply look like a phone tree or a list of resources. Thus, justice-oriented designers must adapt their designs for different neighborhoods, taking into account the unique infrastructures, resources, and needs of a place and it's people, a perspective that has also been voiced by other safety scholars [40].

5.2 Limitations

A limitation of this study is that we were not able to contact John, the mother and son, or the man in the park, and hence the perspectives of the central stakeholders in each vignette are missing. While we were able to interview individuals who have struggled with mental health challenges, substance abuse, and/or housing instability, those perspectives are in the minority. We see the need for future work to substantiate the initial themes of this study through ethnographic work, centering the experience of racialized and unhoused populations [27]. Our experience suggests that such work requires creative recruitment and payment strategies as well as specialized training so that participation does not result in harm.

A second limitation of our study is that we only collected data from individuals who chose to make a referral to Mic Lona, excluding those community members who opted not to engage with the program at all. As a result, we may be missing the perspectives of those who perceive such programming to be harmful. This is particularly significant given the neighborhood social work program's collaboration with the state and local authorities. We fully acknowledge that our conceptualizations of safety and the associated design implications are nascent; much work remains to understand the diverse needs and concerns of a neighborhood.

6 Conclusion

This study offers a new trajectory for designers and researchers of neighborhood safety technologies. Although existing technologies support a sense of safety for users, they also contribute to the policing and surveillance of racialized and unsheltered members of a community. We conduct a case study of a novel neighborhood social work program in Jackson Grove, Atlanta to understand the design implications of a justice-oriented approach to neighborhood safety. Our findings highlight an opportunity for HCI researchers and designers to reconceptualize safety from protecting users to meeting the basic needs of a community and building relationships to support accountability. We contribute to a new direction for designers and highlight key priorities for the development of neighborhood safety technologies that support both safety and justice. By further evaluating and building on these insights, the HCI community can help create a world where it is easier to love one another despite our fears and differences, moving us toward a more Beloved Community.

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