

### What is safety?

Safety means different things to different people. Although ending physical vulnerability is fundamental to safety, comprehensive safety also requires the psychological, economic, and spiritual integrity of an individual.<sup>1</sup> A person's understanding of safety is informed by a wide range of factors such as race, social class, sexual orientation, residential status, and other personal experiences.<sup>2</sup>

The Full Frame Initiative (FFI) defines individual safety as *the degree to which a person can be her or his authentic self and not be at heightened risk of physical or emotional harm.*

### Why is safety important?

Safety is a basic human need, strongly connected to overall wellbeing and quality of life. When a person's or community's safety is threatened, it leads to direct harm, and also challenges a person's beliefs that the world is just and fair.<sup>3</sup> The absence of safety can have severe mental and physical health consequences.

### What are the health and other implications of the absence of safety?

The effects of a lack of safety go well beyond the immediate physical impact of violence.

- ✦ When people are threatened, their nervous, endocrine and cardiovascular systems all react. They also often are on the lookout, or more *vigilant*, for additional trauma. These are normal, adaptive and protective responses. But if threats are ongoing and not resolved, or if a person remains vigilant for a long period of time, these helpful responses may increase the risk of diabetes and many other chronic physical and mental health conditions.<sup>4 5</sup>
- ✦ People who feel unsafe for long periods of time can develop symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is linked to a wide range of health problems including diabetes, gastrointestinal diseases, fibromyalgia, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.<sup>6</sup>
- ✦ Racism and discrimination have been linked to outcomes similar to those of people with prolonged exposure to trauma, such as a threatened sense of safety and higher rates of disease (e.g., cancer, diabetes, obesity and asthma).<sup>7 8</sup> In fact, disproportionate rates of disease and mortality may be better explained by experiences of racism and discrimination than socioeconomic status alone (e.g., infant mortality rates among Black women are double that of White women).<sup>9 10</sup>

#### Related Terms, Concepts & Definitions:

**FEAR:** Emotion induced by a perceived threat.

**TRAUMA:** A psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury. Trauma can describe an event where someone experiences, witnesses or is confronted with death, a threat to life, serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.

**VIOLENCE:** The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a person, group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation.

**ABUSE:** The mistreatment of people or animals. Abuse can come in many forms, including: physical or verbal maltreatment, injury, deprivation such as forced starvation or sleep deprivation, sexual assault, psychological control and manipulation, rape, coercion to engage in crime, verbal aggression, or financial exploitation.

**SECURITY:** The degree of protection to safeguard a person or group or country against danger, damage, loss and crime.

**ABSENCE OF HARM:** Individuals and communities who experience no physical or psychological injury or damage.

**RISK:** The potential that a chosen action or activity (including the choice of inaction) will lead to an undesirable outcome. Risk can also be the threat of adverse events.

**DANGER:** Exposure to injury, pain, harm or loss.

- ✦ Lack of safety can lead to depression. Depression has the greatest negative impact on health of all common chronic diseases, such as diabetes.<sup>11</sup> Depression has also been linked to a number of other health problems, such as arthritis, asthma, lost productivity, and reduced quality of life.<sup>12 13</sup>
- ✦ Children exposed to unsafe environments are more likely to have impaired physical health, cognitive development, academic achievement, and interpersonal relationships.<sup>14</sup> Children in unsafe conditions are also more likely to be anxious, angry and depressed.<sup>15</sup>
- ✦ Early and ongoing exposure to trauma in childhood has been linked to several leading causes of death in adults, including ischemic heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease.<sup>16</sup>
- ✦ Unsafe conditions in the present can lead to a lack of safety in the future. For example, exposure to child abuse, neglect, and/or community violence has been strongly associated with later involvement in crime.<sup>17</sup>
- ✦ People cope with the stress of trauma in many ways. Some ways of coping, such as smoking, alcohol/drug use, and risky sex,<sup>18 19</sup> may help in the moment, but create other problems, such as cancer, alcohol or substance abuse, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV/AIDS.<sup>20</sup>
- ✦ People exposed to chronic community violence may experience social isolation in addition to a decreased sense of personal safety and independence.<sup>21</sup>
- ✦ If a person feels safe in one context, it can lessen the damage from another, unsafe context. For example, a safe home environment may offset some of the adverse outcomes related to community violence.<sup>22</sup>

## How is safety related to other Domains of Wellbeing?

For comprehensive wellbeing, safety must be experienced along with social connectedness, stability, mastery, and meaningful access to relevant resources. For example:

- ✦ **Safety and Social Connectedness:** Social connections grow out of a sense of safety and trust of other individuals. Social connections also lead to safety. Social connections give people information, psychological support, and tangible assistance that help them cope and also expand their options.<sup>23</sup> In fact, connectedness is linked to positive health status (i.e., lower blood pressure and stress hormones) and may protect against the negative effects of community violence.<sup>24 25</sup>
- ✦ **Safety and Meaningful Access to Relevant Resources:** Individuals and communities that have meaningful access to relevant resources have an increased sense of safety. Individuals in unsafe conditions may have difficulty accessing critical resources, and in some instances available services may actually decrease someone's sense of safety. For example, adolescent mothers often have difficulty accessing prenatal care because they feel judged by providers and staff.<sup>26</sup> When individuals and communities do not have meaningful access to relevant resources there are direct adverse consequences for health and safety.<sup>27</sup>

*This fact sheet is one of a series on the Full Frame Initiative's Five Domains of Wellbeing — **social connectedness, stability, safety, mastery and meaningful access to relevant resources** — the universal, interdependent and non-hierarchical essential needs we all have. The Full Frame Initiative's mission is to change systems so that people and communities experiencing poverty, violence and trauma have the tools, supports and resources they need to thrive.*

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### Endnotes

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