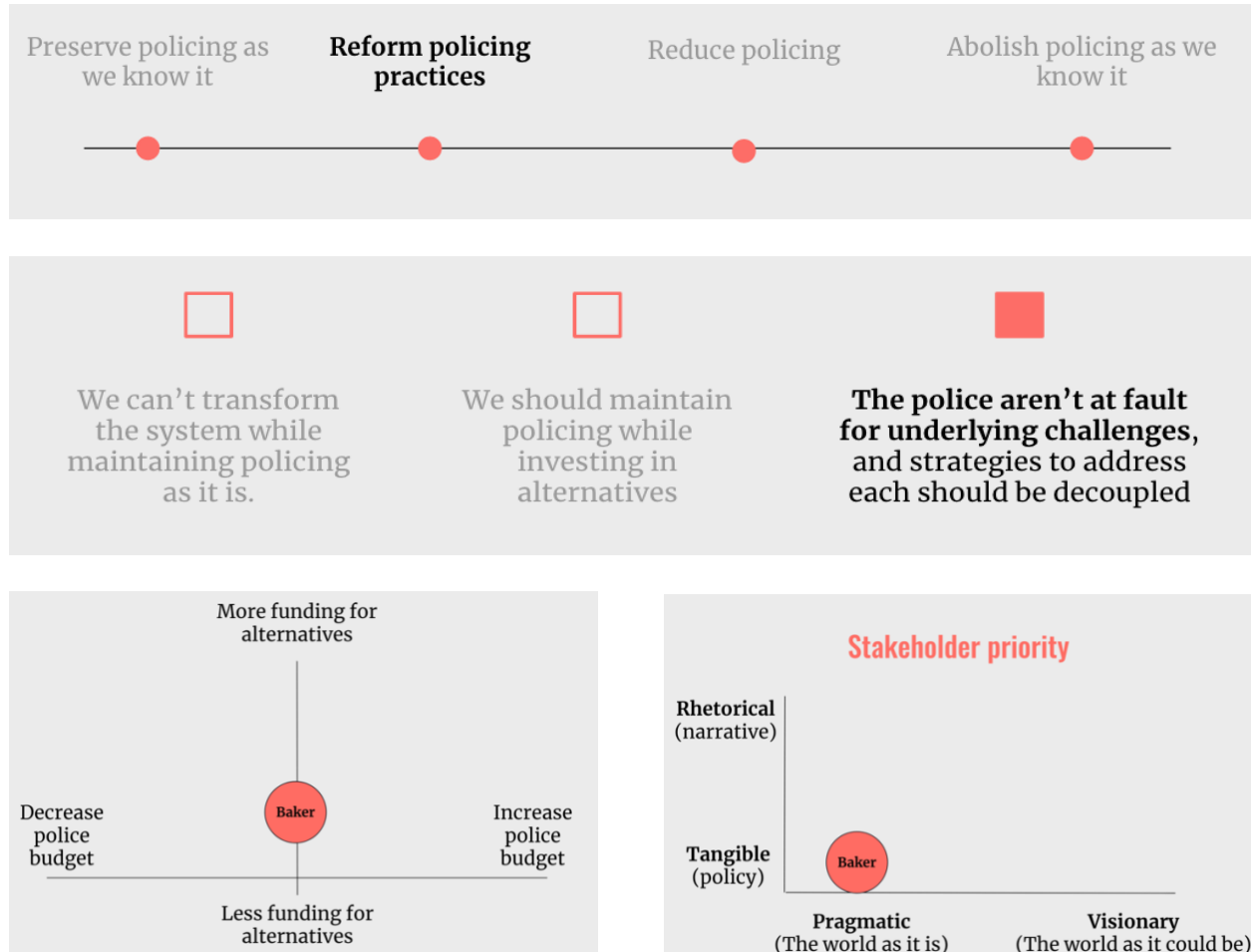


A narrative interview with Chanda Smith Baker

Vice President of Impact at the Minneapolis Foundation

Situating this conversation



Themes to lift up

- **We are trying to solve many problems at once.** Chanda notes that while questions of police accountability, criminal justice reform, and the need for mental health services are interrelated, they are distinct challenges that require different solutions. She makes the case for decoupling policing reforms from conversations about community needs.
- **Money won't solve all problems.** Chanda shares her concern that merely adding funding wouldn't resolve problems whose root is racism. She notes that it's immensely important to reshape the practices and policies that guide public systems of education, mental health, chemical dependency, and more.
- **Chanda believes that the current discussion focuses too much on policing.** Chanda, who has strong personal and professional connections to law enforcement, believes that policing has effectively become the scapegoat for problems beyond its control. Instead, she calls us to ask: "what does community need?"

Edited interview

Nathan: What brought you to the issues of policing and public safety, and what motivates you when you think about this current moment?

Chanda: I live on Minneapolis' North side. My family has been here for generations, as has my husband's family. We're deeply embedded in the community. I'm from a community that has largely been underestimated, that has been a topic of discussion, and where lots of disparities exist. That's fundamentally how I got into the work.

In 2011, I became the president and CEO of Pillsbury United Communities. The same week that I officially started, I had a cousin who was murdered. He had just graduated from the police Academy. He was shot and killed by someone that I knew in high school who probably needed some additional support. I had been familiar with community violence, but it was deeply personal and [my thinking] moved from, 'this is happening to people who are doing wrong,' to 'this could happen at any time.'

I came to the Minneapolis Foundation in 2017. Conditional to me leaving the CEO role that I was in were two issues [on which] I was non-compromising: the ability to continue to work on addressing community-level violence, and criminal justice. I've been working on those issues at the foundation since that point.

Nathan: I'd love to hear your thoughts on the path forward. How do we create a better system of public safety? What are the short-term and longer-term goals that you have?

Chanda: I would try to de-centralize the police in this conversation. I would unpack it a bit. You have the catalytic event, George Floyd, in which we have a police chief who fired those four officers the next day. The problem was that they weren't charged initially - it wasn't what the leadership of MPD did.

Ideas for 'reimagined public safety' don't address the problem of people like Derek Chauvin. They don't get to accountability, early warning signs... what they get to is how to have fewer interactions with [officers like] Derek Chauvin, but all you need is one that results in the loss of life. I think that these are separate issues with different strategies.

We have officer accountability. We have issues of justice, [we have] responding to 9-1-1 and being able to deploy the type of resources that community needs. They're all related, but they're very different strategies. And right now they're being developed and communicated as though they're the same.

With the proposal that Minneapolis Council Members Bender and Fletcher and Cunningham put out for an \$8 million cut [to the Minneapolis Police Department], there's \$8 million that's needed for what they're proposing. They could raise that money overnight in Minnesota. They predicated that on a reduction [in the MPD budget] because they're moving from a political position of defund police and not from a motivation of re-imagining public safety. If you're looking to

reimagine public safety and you communicated what was needed, I think that in these times, with how people are feeling, that money would come forward.

So I think there has to be a decoupling. There needs to be some education on terminology. I think there needs to be some vision casting, and there needs to be less reactive political figures. I get that they need to respond to their constituencies. It feels like we are living in a moment of, a little bit of grandstanding and urgency: the combination of a sincere interest in making things better, but using solutions that aren't well thought out or bought into.

Nathan: It seem that you're touching on a point of disagreement: can transformational change happen at the same time that the police budget is maintained or expanded, or are those actions oppositional? I've spoken with some folks who are on the side of police defunding and abolition talk about policing as a harmful presence in its own right, so that cutting it is a path towards increasing community safety. You've mentioned previously that you believe in the chief's leadership and are concerned that he's being cut off from resources that he needs to be effective. So my question is: what makes you confident that the transformational reforms that you are calling for can also happen while funding the MPD as it is?

Chanda: 'Confidence' is strong, but I don't have confidence that you can create an [entirely] new system. When people say 'let's abolish the police, but we still need to have someone that respond to issues'... So who are these people? Are you going to get them from a different United States of America and a different pool of people? You're not. You're still going to get people who come with their own set of biases. It actually feels scarier to me to have people who are untrained with weapons.

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- Chanda Smith Baker, Vice President of Impact at the Minneapolis Foundation

I have not been able to hear a vision from anyone in the Defund movement on what policing looks like without a police department. You're still going to need policing.

I understand [that some services] should have never been police services to begin with. I don't understand talking about mental health services and taking from a police budget when [mental health] is largely a county and a state-funded resource. I don't get the logic of that.

I don't know whether or not [these services] would ultimately reduce crime. I don't know what happens when we're in a pandemic and economic decline and you see a rise in crime. what is the response- do we assume that they're all mentally ill and chemically dependent?

I don't have enough clarity on how they're thinking. I understand emotionally why they're driving there: our hearts and our minds can't take watching another person die that way. I get that logically. But I need some vision casting that would allow me to see it.

Nathan: Looking at the short term question of how a city like Minneapolis should be spending its money, it sounds like you're supportive of increasing resources for the police?

Chanda: I don't know if it's about increasing as much as it's maintaining. I am not familiar with very many aggressive, significant change efforts that don't cost more money in the interim at any scale. It usually costs more money before it costs less. So I don't know why this would defy all the other changes that have occurred in every other system.

Nathan: Let's talk about the investment side of things. I'd love to hear your thoughts on what things you think are really important to invest in to support broader public safety at this moment.

Chanda: My position is that money won't solve [public safety]. I think that this has become a monetary argument - and I do there need to be deeper investments – but I don't think this [just] is a money issue. I think that racism is at the root.

That involves us having more ability to address the policies, the practices, and the behaviors that need to be stopped within all of our systems. For instance, in our school system, I don't think that literacy as a disparity is creating more criminals. I think that it's a school system that is not respectful and denies the identities of our students. There are structural issues that are pipelining young people into [bad] situations, that are reinforcing some of the narratives out there.

So my basic assumption is that we need to be very real about at each of our institutions. What are the ways in which we're operating that are creating harm and what do we need to do to stop it? I think it's an all-in exercise.

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Do we care for people who are mentally ill, and people who have chemical dependency? Those are things that even if we weren't in a conversation around policing [we should address]. Our jails are largely made up of people who are mentally ill and chemically dependent. We need to ask, what does this community deserve and what is the infrastructure to support it? We have to make investments and ensure that these essential services for our most vulnerable are not relegated to bankers' hours. What does a 24-7 annualized program look like and how expensive would it be? We can't just put more resources into broken systems.

Nathan: What would you say are the primary obstacles right now to making the changes that are necessary in these systems, whether that's new funding or whether that's policy and practice change?

Chanda: There's too much deficit thinking. Our mindset needs to be forward-looking. This moment is too centered on police and not centered enough on community. [We should be asking] 'what does community need?', not 'what does public safety need?'. What do we need to be able to be fully functioning?

The county, the city, the state, the feds, the schools all should be in the conversation. I do think that we need to get past the political moment. It's so politicized that it's a barrier. Hopefully that becomes less of a distraction so that we can get into the work. Because the conversation has been centered around policing, a lot of people are waiting to see what the mayor and the council members do. But we all own on a piece of the solution.

Nathan: Is there any thought you'd want to leave me with?

Chanda: In these conversations, we need to be asking: what is our state's commitment to supporting people with mental health issues? What is our state's commitment to supporting people with chemical dependency issues? What is our state's commitment to supporting young people? There are commitments and rights that if fully actualized, would get to what I think the defund moment is asking for. These have been disparities that have existed for years and years that we're centering around policing. We have never provided adequate services in any of these areas. To me, that's a bigger question. We can't be in a budget conversation every year around defunding the police so we can have adequate mental health services. Because you could take a lot of the budget of the police department and I don't think that those issues would go away.

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This is a narrative interview from the 2021 MIT research project *A Moral Document? Expanding conversations about public safety budgets in Minnesota in the wake of George Floyd's murder*. The full project can be seen [here](#).