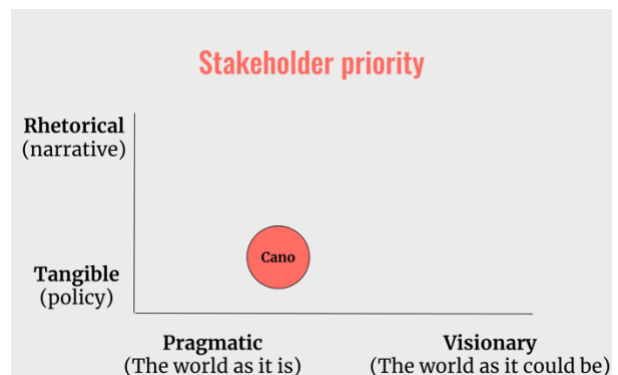
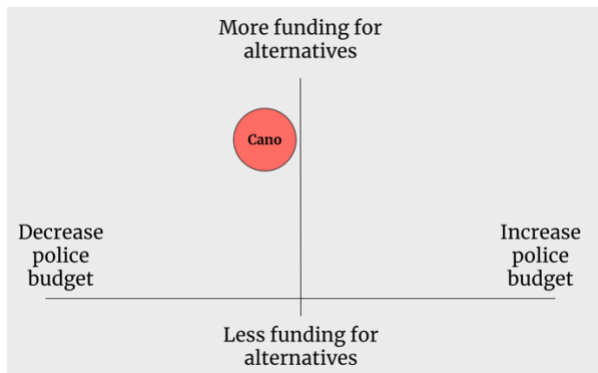
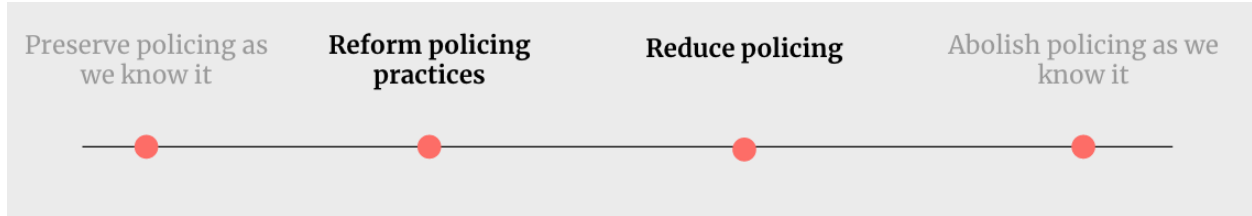


A narrative interview with Alondra Cano

Minneapolis City Council Member

Situating CM Cano's perspective



Themes to lift up

- **A surge in violence in CM Cano's district has shifted her priorities.** CM Cano was one of the nine Council Members to pledge to dismantle the Minneapolis Police Department in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Months later, following a rise in gun violence, sexual assault, robberies, and other crimes in her district, she is most focused on the immediate need to address the rise in violence.
- **The City of Minneapolis faces major fiscal pressures, which limit its ability to innovate.** COVID-19 and the economic downturn have produced a projected \$32 million budget deficit.
- **Intergovernmental coordination is a big challenge.** CM Cano described the difficulty of coordinating with other City Council Members, the mayor, and County officials on providing the comprehensive, long-term services that residents need.

Edited interview

Nathan: I'd like to understand how you got involved with the movement to defund the police. What motivates you?

CM Cano: In college I was involved with anti-police brutality cases, including through 'prosecute the police' campaigns and others. I didn't really become familiar with the terminology 'abolish the police' until earlier this year, when [George] Floyd was killed.

I've been on the city council for seven years. Prior to this year, people from Reclaim the Block were the only organizers who were coming to city hall to ask for a redirection of funds from the police into mental health responders and other social service outreach efforts. But they never asked us to abolish the police.

Two years ago, we put together a package of a million dollars to take money away from the police department to put it into youth violence prevention programs and other things. We did it because it made sense to try new things. But there weren't so many eyes on that decision.

Most of the work [on policing] was focused on reform, and Minneapolis has done reform very well. Our body camera compliance rate is almost a hundred percent. We are diversifying the workforce like crazy. Unfortunately, those are the people that we're going to lose when we continue to defund the department, because they don't have seniority and as much union protection as employees who have been there longer.

So Minneapolis isn't new to redirecting funds from MPD to other things, and Minneapolis isn't new to reform.

After Floyd was killed, I remember thinking to myself that I couldn't possibly issue another press release talking about how horrible this was, and how we're going to do more training, and how we're going to buy more gadgets to make sure we're doing the right thing.

It felt to me that something was missing. It was something we weren't going to be able to fix [through reforms] anymore. I remember feeling that there was something about the informal culture of MPD and the way policing works - that it was going to have to be disinvestment from that entire structure to set the table in a different way.

For me, defunding means 'taking money away from.' Defunding has always been a strategy for a bigger goal. We were never really articulate or clear about what that bigger goal was. Reclaim the Block didn't do it, the Council didn't do it.

A day or two after [Floyd] was killed, I called [Minneapolis Council Member] Jeremiah Ellison and I said, what would it look like if we took an abolish the police vote? We're tired of the system that seems to be irredeemable and we can't keep throwing money at it to fix it. He agreed we should do it. We started to brainstorm, and I remember thinking to myself 'this is a moment

to be an organizer. This is not a moment to be a policymaker. What would I do as an organizer in this moment?’

I knew that whatever I did had to have enough people behind it, so that it would show strength and power and momentum.

We met with Reclaim the Block and Black Visions Collective every night to plan this potential event and announcement. We worked on language together. We had about four or five nights of organizing with them.

At Powderhorn Park, the nine of us decided to say reform is not enough. We want a new path. We want to abolish our current policing system. We want to engage our community for a year to figure out what safety looks like for people. And we want to take immediate steps to demonstrate that that's the direction we're moving in.

Nathan: I heard the interview you had on Vox’s Today Explained podcast a couple of days ago. To quote something that you said: “it's fine to talk about what you don't want, but I think what's more valuable, more strategic and more important is to double down on what you do want, what things you can invest in now, that can be the systems that carry your city forward.” I’d like to spend the rest of this interview talking about what we do want. What sorts of short and long-term investments do you think that Minneapolis needs to make to respond to the crises elevated by George Floyd's murder?

CM Cano: This is a complex question. There is a lack of data, research, knowledge around what causes gun violence, for example. We don't have any data that shows that ending homelessness is going to end gun violence, because I don't think we understand scientifically what causes gun violence.

Right now we are experiencing a high level of gun violence. It has gone up dramatically. It's now common in areas of the Ninth Ward where it didn't exist at all before. It is killing a lot of people of color. On 38th and Chicago alone [where George Floyd was murdered], we've had five people shot and killed.

There are people who believe in abolishing the police department because they want to live in a world where there is no capitalism, and where there are no arrests, and where there is no carceral system. That's one group of people. I'm never going to be able to reconcile myself with those people because I don't align politically in that direction. We can probably agree on some things, but my goal is not to meet their standards. My goal is to meet the standards of the 30,000 people I represent.

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The bike shop on the Greenway has been broken into and robbed eight times this summer, and the business owner says he cannot open until things are better. The same thing happened to Jakeeno's [a pizza restaurant] on Chicago Avenue. The same thing happened to the Somali daycare that's four blocks away.

We're seeing that these problems are bubbling up now that we've sent a message to the general public saying [that] we're going to reduce our police force.

So I think that we need to figure out true and tried models to reduce gun violence, to address theft and robberies, to address violence against women.

That's different than saying 'I want to solve homelessness' or 'I want to provide mental health services to people.' I think those things are good, but I don't think they're comprehensive enough to get at the culture of violence. If we're in a project of abolishing capitalism through abolishing the police, then let's be real about that conversation. Let's not pretend that enough homeless shelters are going to end gun violence.

So it's complicated. It's not probably what you wanted to hear, but I'm in a really difficult space right now where the ebbs and flows of this conversation are having some really serious negative impacts on the very people that we claim to be helping in abolishing a policing system.

Nathan: I appreciate your honesty. It's interesting that you're mentioning things like programs to solve gun violence, robberies, violence against women. I understand that the city of Minneapolis already has efforts underway to address those concerns. Could you speak about which organizations or agencies are doing this work, and what you think they need to address it in the way that they have not been able to in the past?

CM Cano: When we're talking about helping a woman who has been forced into prostitution for the last 15 years of her life, there's inevitably going to be a wrap around series of interventions and supports that are needed, not just for a year, but for five to 10 years until that person is better... Supports around housing, supports around trauma, supports around health, chemical

dependency, children, familial supports, transportation issues. There's going to have to be some conversation about jobs training and what kind of a job this person could eventually do to sustain themselves without having to depend on the support systems. And potentially guided support over a long time in case they relapse or they go back into their old habits. So imagine that times a hundred for all of the individuals on Lake Street. And that's just talking about the American Indian women there.

You would need a lot of money and that money needs to be there for a long time. And then government jurisdictions would need to really collaborate at a deep level. That's a big challenge because there's 13 council members plus a mayor, and seven county commissioners and their county coordinator and a lot of us don't do the best job at coordinating.

You probably saw what happened with the city's community engagement plan, which we authorized five months ago. It hasn't gone anywhere. We have a pretend website that has been published, but it's not that great. I don't want to share it with people because I'm not proud of it. It's a challenge to have the dedication and support and attention that [these efforts] need.

It's hard to go at it alone as a city. We eventually will hit a ceiling because we are part of a much bigger system of criminal justice that is not only backed by laws, but also entire economies. We need some sort of national effort to address these issues, instead of assuming that if we only created enough homeless shelters, we'll figure this out. That's not serious enough for me. That's not a rich enough conversation for me to really buy into it. Morally, I understand it, but pragmatically, it just feels a little bit too naive.

We need to bring the capacity together to help [us] think through this in an organized, supported, coherent way, with goals and results. Otherwise, it just feels like people are sitting at their desks, thinking, 'what would be helpful to fund today to help the people in our community? What about more youth centers? Let's do youth centers.' There's no blueprint that where we as a society have gotten together to say 'this is what really makes a difference.'

Nathan: In the absence of that national plan, what do you think you and the council can do?

CM Cano: About two months ago, I led the charge to redirect \$1.1 million from MPD's budget into the office of violence prevention. This [came from] me going to neighborhood meeting after neighborhood meeting, hearing from my constituents about how they were forming community-based patrols to respond to the need. Their goal is to try to interrupt violence before it happens.

In East Phillips, for example, men in low-income immigrant families will stay up all night, patrolling their block because they are being inundated with negative activity. They don't get any sleep anymore. They are suffering from what I would consider post-traumatic stress disorder. They are always on alert, they are typically armed, and they use walkie-talkies to communicate on the block. I started hearing these stories of how constituents were coming together on their own to keep their block safe. I think we, as the city, should be paying you to do that work.

Right now we have a legally codified threshold for how much money the Minneapolis Police Department should get. If the voters next November decide that they want to change the charter,

Minneapolis could be in a position where they could take \$170 million from the police department and put it into [community patrols], group violence intervention, shelters, chemical treatment centers. It's hard to know how far \$170 million would take us. And then that would reduce the MPD budget to about \$20 million.

You could do the math and figure out how many officers that is. Which parts of the city would they be deployed to? I don't know if that's a reality we can count on because there are so many steps from here to there. So the real question is: 'where does the money come from for programs like this?'

During COVID-19, with an economic recession and \$32 million budget shortage next year, where do we get the money? The County isn't ponying up resources to help us through this. The state isn't either.

Nathan: It seems like a key challenge is not feeling that there is a blueprint yet. Are there other organizations or individuals in Minnesota who you feel like are helping shape perspectives on what this blueprint could look like?

CM Cano: One of the areas for learning would be the Little Earth Community [a residential housing area in Minneapolis with a high share of American Indian residents]. They've had a community protectors program for a while now, because there are a lot of young folks engaged with gang violence and gun violence. We should really focus on supporting and understanding it. What does this culture of violence look like? And what kinds of things can we do as a community to help?

It feels really overwhelming. There's not a lot of capacity at the table to go above and beyond the immediate fire in front of you. The privilege to look at the bigger picture and to clearly and soberly understand what the path forward is sometimes doesn't lend itself to us as policymakers. Maybe this is where foundations and corporations and other people who don't have to be in the fog all the time can step in and help guide and support those of us who are in the fog.

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So I wish we would have had a conversation with all of the organizers back in May to say, yes, we can divest from MPD, but first let's build the systems that have been proven to work, to end gun violence and address robberies and theft and all that before we pull the plug on the old system.

I can't keep voting to reduce the budget because I have to have an actual plan so my people aren't dodging bullets or being robbed every year.

It's a very grounding, sobering moment. I want us to go deeper into it instead of walking away from the complexity and continuing to hashtag and meme our way through it. The complexity is beautiful, and we should engage it and dive into it and figure it out.

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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](#).