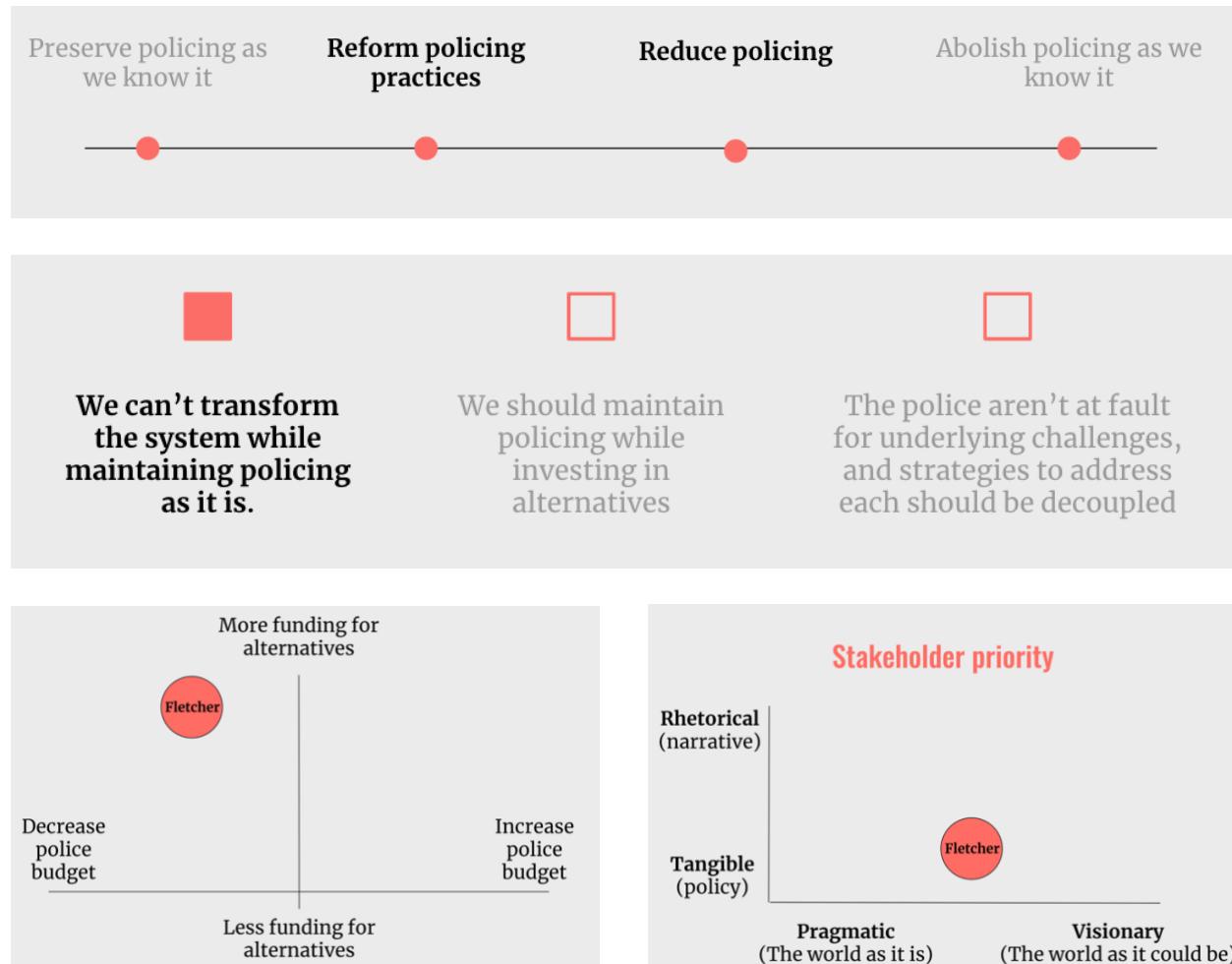


# A narrative interview with Steve Fletcher

Minneapolis City Council Member

## Situating CM Fletcher's perspective



## Themes to lift up:

- **CM Fletcher offers a potential definition for success.** Fletcher speaks of grounding his efforts to reimagine public safety in the event that ignited current conversations. He asks, would our new system have kept George Floyd alive?
- **Crime is not a monolith, and its solutions are multifaceted.** Council Member Fletcher identifies many potential catalysts for crime, and makes the case that mental health services, housing, and other supports need to be considered public safety strategies.
- **Public safety will be the defining issue of the 2021 elections.** Fletcher states that “there’s going to be a year-long discussion about public safety - that’s literally the only thing anybody’s going to focus on.” He also notes that while he feels confident in his position, he recognizes that some colleagues on the City Council may feel pressure to shift their perspectives to win re-election.

## Edited interview

**Nathan:** How did you get involved with the movement to defund the police, and what motivates you?

**CM Fletcher:** My experience with the issue goes back to my work as a community organizer. I was the founding director of a community organization called Neighborhoods Organizing for Change. We encountered constant harassment of the black men and women who joined our canvas teams. We would notify the precinct about where we were to try to minimize the harassment, because we noticed they bothered us less if we called them in advance. We should not have to do that in a democracy.

I also have an academic understanding of biases in the criminal justice system – I did a PhD program in American Studies at NYU.

When I ran for office [in 2017], even before I knew who the mayor and the chief were going to be, I was saying we can't just leave this to the mayor and the chief, the way Minneapolis has been for forever. The community really has to get involved and have more ownership of what's happening with law enforcement, because there are a lot of problems that need to be solved. The sense of legitimacy of our police force was diminishing, even in 2017.

**Nathan:** Could you describe how George Floyd changed your thinking to some degree on what the response is, to what you're seeing?

**CM Fletcher:** Watching someone in a Minneapolis uniform do that to another human being created a lot of pain and trauma, including for anybody who identifies with the city.

I think if the rank and file officers through the Federation had expressed remorse for it, had distanced themselves from it - if there had been a kind of peaceful and mournful response when protestors first showed up at the third precinct, I think it could have looked so different.

What ended up happening was a battle between the police and the people that I think just solidified for a lot of people a deep mistrust of the institution of the Minneapolis Police Department. There was no going back. I had [previously had] a vision of being able to incrementally reform and pilot some things, then gradually shift some responsibilities away from the department, but it would have been a fairly gradual and thoughtful city process.

A lot of people don't think they're going to be treated fairly [by the police]. It means that a police response right now is not often the most effective response to a lot of situations.

The steady drumbeat of national events have reinforced for everybody that our analysis isn't crazy. It wasn't just George Floyd, right? There's been this drumbeat of misconduct and new videos coming out that made people feel very connected to a national moment.

**Nathan:** What would you see as the short-term and the long-term actions that you hope for in this moment?

**CM Fletcher:** The first thing that we need to do is focus all kinds of community resources, including police, because we're still paying \$195 million for a police department, on the very urgent and dangerous violence that's happening in a really concentrated way in a couple of parts of our community. If we can't get that under control, people's fear is going to drive the conversation in a way that's just going to make everything feel impossible.

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Hopefully in this process we can model a lot of non-police interventions that show what kinds of creative solutions can be brought to bear.

It's a very hard moment. When the MPD is viewed as illegitimate, people don't contain their analysis to MPD. They view the whole government is illegitimate. They view the whole system as illegitimate. And that creates its own leadership challenge for mayors and council members and park board commissioners and everybody else who are all viewed as representatives of an unfair system. And we're the ones trying to lead change.

I represent Ward Three, which has some more affluent neighborhoods that are accustomed to a very high level of service from MPD and, can get very concerned about issues that frankly would never be addressed on the North Side. I think some people want a lot of police to come over and mess with [kids of color] who play in front of their condos. We've been trying to model other solutions by asking: how could we improve this situation without arresting people? Could you just go out and talk to people about how this is impacting you? Starting with a process to expand people's imagination about what's possible in those responses is going to be important.

Then there's a budget fight that is inevitably going to happen. That's the next touch point in this conversation. Because the charter amendment didn't pass, we are constrained about what kind of cuts we can make, which is probably fine because we don't have plans in place. The goal for me is to fund the replacement services. What are the things that we're currently piloting that we can

make permanent? Can we establish new programs to dramatically reduce calls that used to get routed to MPD and are now getting routed somewhere else?

Then we're in a place where we can talk to people about why we think we need fewer police than what the charter currently requires. We have to be realistic that people have anxiety that we're just going to cut [police], but not have a plan for answering 911 calls. I think it's critical that we have answers to 911 calls. I just think a huge percentage of them don't need a police response.

2021 is going to be a very interesting year, because there are going to be a lot of programs getting piloted around violence prevention and violence disruption and other kinds of services. And at the same time we're all up for reelection and the charter amendment will be on the ballot. It is going to be a year long conversation about public safety. That is literally the only thing anybody's going to be focused on.

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**Nathan:** I want to dig into the specific pilots that you think are interesting and valuable. Are there investments that you think are getting at these root issues?

**CM Fletcher:** There’s this tendency to [think of] crime as a phenomenon that you can understand as single thing. And then the response to that thing is police.

The truth is, crime happens for lots of different reasons. There is some amount of crime that would stop if we had good mental health and addiction services in our county, because it's related to people struggling with the financial challenges of feeding their addiction.

There’s a portion of crime that’s related to the challenges of living without stable shelter.

So the right response to those issues are not policing. The right response is mental health, the right response is housing. The right response is outreach to people to understand what social needs are not being met and connect people with services.

Another portion of crime is from people who are on the wrong path and need a much more direct intervention, but if they had it, they might go a different way.

Then there's some actual predatory crime, people who have decided that the way they're going to make their living is stealing high end bicycles and transporting them out of state. We need to stop those guys.

For me, getting as much of our response to non-violent situations, out of depending on law enforcement, is the critical thing.

So I'm really interested in pilots that can do mental health response. I'm really interested in pilots around temporary shelter, that are moving people into addiction treatment and into housing. I view those as a part of our public safety strategies. I'm really interested in rethinking how we do security that respond to people more proactively and with more of an orientation towards service.

There's a model of mobile mental health teams that could be the direct responders to 911 calls that we are excited about. We're hoping that [Hennepin] County wants to own that because they have a mental health response capacity already. We're trying not to reinvent the wheel. But if those negotiations fell apart, I think we would probably go ahead and pilot something within the health department.

It would be so easy to use the tragedy of George Floyd's death to just design romantic stuff that wouldn't actually prevent the next George Floyd from happening.

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We need to challenge ourselves to respond with some other response than an arrest or charge for someone who's accused of a misdemeanor. It's not automatic that we're going to get there. For me, that's how we judge if we get where we need to go: would we have not killed George Floyd? If we're not going to get there, we need to not invoke his name in this work.

**Nathan:** how do the prominent defunding or abolitionist advocacy groups fit into these discussions?

**CM Fletcher:** I've got a pretty good picture of which things they're excited about and which things they don't care about, which is helpful.

There was a real disconnect in the unrest. They came out with a demand that we cut the police budget by \$45 million. There was no universe where we even could do that in the mid-year

budget, even if we had wanted to. I wish that we had been more connected to them to help them craft a demand that would have been less demoralizing to their base when we just couldn't deliver on it. I'm hopeful that nobody feels so demoralized and out in the cold that they stop working on the issue or lose hope.

[Heading into the 2021 election,] I'm pretty clear about the position I've staked out. The reason I want this job is to finish what we started here. Transforming public safety in the city of Minneapolis is one of those legacy projects that probably isn't a one-year project. It's probably a 10 to 20 year project if we're really serious about it.

It would be a shame to leave what we started. I only want to win if I have a mandate to keep doing what I'm doing.

But I'm not sure that all of my colleagues are in that position. They've got some strategic choices in front of them, and I don't know what all of them are going to do.

That's the other interesting question: how does a movement relate to an election cycle? It's a weird and messy question. I don't know what's going to happen.

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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](#).