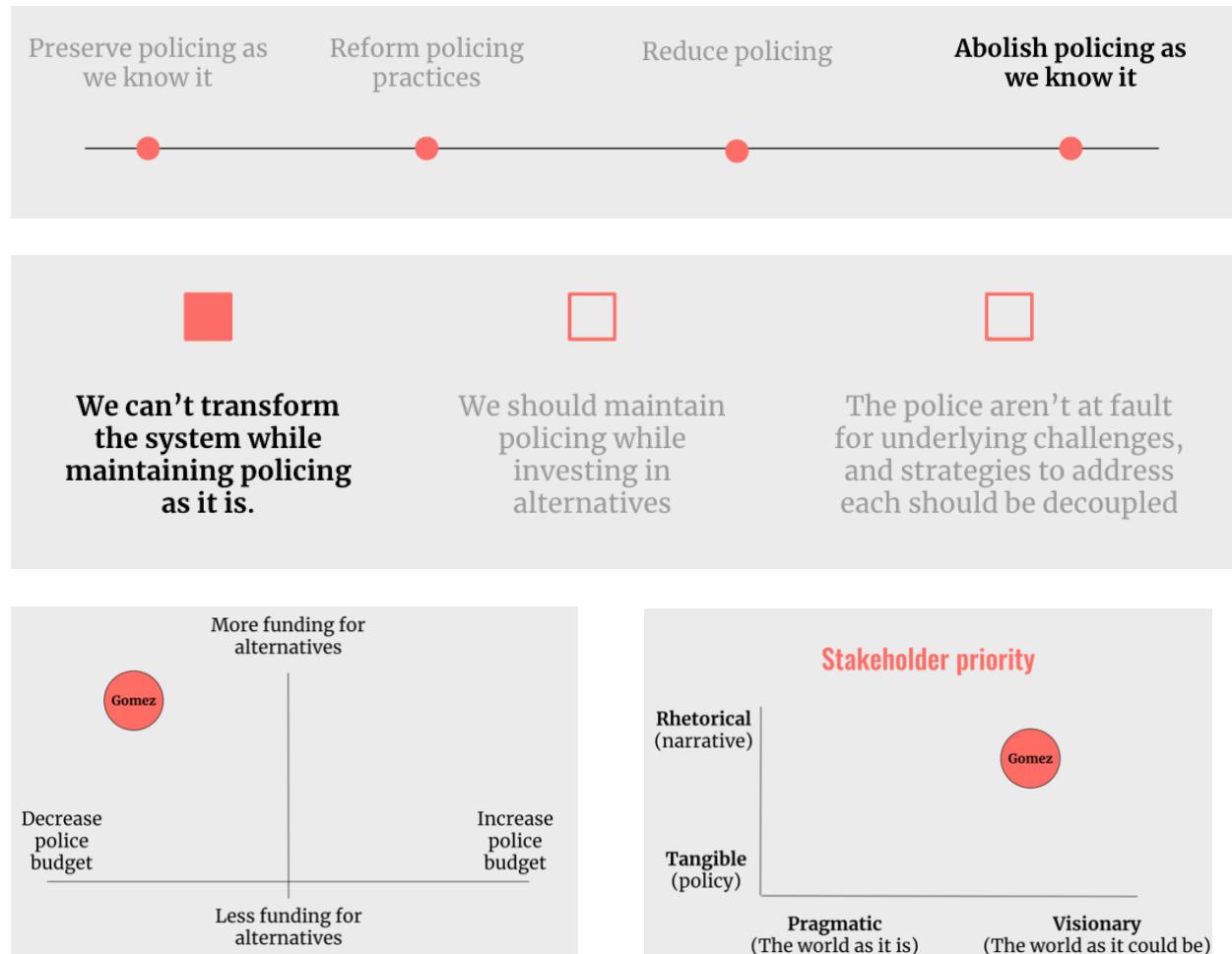


# A narrative interview with Aisha Gomez

Minnesota State Representative

## Situating Rep. Gomez's perspective



## Themes to lift up

- **Representative Gomez is one of very few state legislators in Minnesota who publicly supports police abolition.** Gomez speaks of her ties to the Minneapolis activist community, including lessons she learned from Ricardo Levins Morales and MPD150.
- **The state's political climate is much more conservative than the City of Minneapolis.** Gomez states that Republicans weaponized “defund the police” in the 2020 elections, leading with a law-and-order message. She describes the difficulty of making change in this antagonistic, politicized context.
- **The contours of the conversation about public safety are expanding.** Gomez notes that there is more space to discuss public safety now than there has been in previous years, and states that the laws passed this year went much further than would have been possible before George Floyd’s death.

Edited interview

**Nathan:** What brought you to these issues of policing and public safety? What motivates you?

**Representative Gomez:** In part it's personal experience. I had domestic violence happening in my house when I was young, and also was a victim of crime as a teenager. In those times when I needed police, the way that they showed up was not only not helpful, it was actually damaging.

I grew up in in South Minneapolis. Even as a high school student, on Lake Street, you knew that when you saw a squad car with a three [3<sup>rd</sup> precinct] instead of a five [5<sup>th</sup> precinct], they were rough aggressive cops. They always were known to be that way.

For parts of my life, I've lived in over-policed communities, where there was higher crime and higher police contact.

Also, I'm part of a radical tradition and politics in this country, and our social movements have always encountered these problems. Our communities of color have always had these problems.

The history of policing in our country is about quelling uprisings of enslaved people and doing the work of bosses against working class people. Police are part of the carceral state, part of maintaining social control for capitalism.

Believing in [police] abolition is an act of hope and vision that's really fucking hard in such a dark time. But as human beings...we have to be able to imagine and work for something that's better, that centers humans instead of money. I realize I'm one of like 50 people in the state who actually believes in police abolition."

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**Nathan:** Did George Floyd's murder shift your thinking on these issues and what your response could be?

**Representative Gomez:** I was working at the city when Jamar Clark was killed [in 2015]. I saw some really concerning things. Working in a council office [Gomez worked for Council Member Alondra Cano], you're at the frontline of hearing from community and from business communities. Council Member Cano represents a central area of Lake Street between 35-W and Hiawatha Ave, the area that for decades has been one of the places statewide where there's commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking happening openly. It's in the middle of low-income neighborhoods that have been disinvested in, and so it has crime problems.

If you look at the boilerplate police reform ideas, Minneapolis has done all of them. We did all the training and we did all the community policing and we did all the body cams at great expense. And what it resulted in was just more and more of our budget going toward the police.

The MPD150 project really crystallized observations that had occurred to me, but hadn't been synthesized in a really coherent way. Like a lot of activists around my age, [my views have been influenced by] years of being around Ricardo Levins Morales. He's taught us all these ways of being critical about our history and about the place that we find ourselves right now.

Believing in abolition is an act of hope and vision that's really fucking hard in such a dark time. But as human beings, we need to be able to look at the pain of our current moment and the way that people are suffering unnecessarily at the same time that there's this incredible explosion of wealth and accumulation. We have to be able to imagine and work for something that's better, that centers humans instead of money. I realize I'm one of like 50 people in the state who actually believes in police abolition.

**Nathan:** How have conversations gone with your fellow state legislators?

**Representative Gomez:** This conversation has been weaponized against Democrats and against people of color and against the cities at the state level. It's intense. The Republican Party spent millions of dollars sending pictures of the third precinct burning down across the state this year. I'm very open about my views and my colleagues on the other side of the aisle at the Capitol think I'm a kook.

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There's also a history of the right wing exploiting racial grievance. This isn't the first time that there have been images of African-American men, for example, used as a weapon. That's part of white supremacy and part of justifying some of the more draconian elements of our criminal justice and policing system. The law and order message is a cynical political ploy. They believe they can exploit it for political gain.

George Floyd was killed in my community. My community has expressed really strongly that they think that there are other ways that we can ensure the safety of everybody. Because if our public safety structure is not providing safety to a significant portion of its population, which is

one of the basic functions of government, then law enforcement has lost its credibility. Nobody wants that. Nobody wants the tension and strife that we are experiencing right now.

I do think that the conversations that we're having right now about public safety are different and more expansive than I've ever experienced in my life. It's been a very difficult six months, but there's also more space in this conversation than there's ever been before.

We passed a really good police reform package and I've spoken about my beliefs about the limits of a reform approach to this work. But there are things in that package that are absolute, unvarnished good, and will only have positive impacts on our community. Things that would have been absolutely impossible even three months before we did it.

The city council has a certain kind of political pressure on them around this stuff. At my level, at the state, there are 59 Republicans that I have to work with, who I have to have relationships with. They think I'm a kook, but when they get to know me, they say, 'oh, you're not as crazy as I thought.' I can't tell you how many times I've heard 'we thought you were insane and totally unreasonable and you're actually all right.' I have to find places of unlikely partnership in order to get shit done in that context, so there is a challenge to it, for sure. I'm trying to do my best to faithfully represent my community, knowing that I represent one of the most progressive districts in the state of Minnesota.

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**Nathan:** I'd love to hear what kinds of investments you think you could make in the state legislature.

**Representative Gomez:** I'm not on the criminal justice committee. I'm not going to be the person who knows all of the ins and outs of this. But I had a bill that was not included in the final deal [this summer] that established an Office of Community Public Safety inside the [Minnesota]

Department of Public Safety. It would have had some money to support community-led public safety initiatives. The data supports a public health approach to violence intervention.

Places like Minneapolis and around the country are making investments in alternatives to policing. I think that there's possibility within that. I think we'll see that moving a modest amount of money into 3-1-1 to take reports about stolen goods is just not such a scary thing. We need to start the practice of just interrogating what we're doing in order to make the next steps appear possible.

**Nathan:** Is there anything you'd like to leave me with?

**Representative Gomez:** This is the kind of change that is hard, but it doesn't have to be as hard as it is right now. And hopefully it won't be. There's been a huge shift in this conversation in our country this year because of George Floyd.

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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](#).