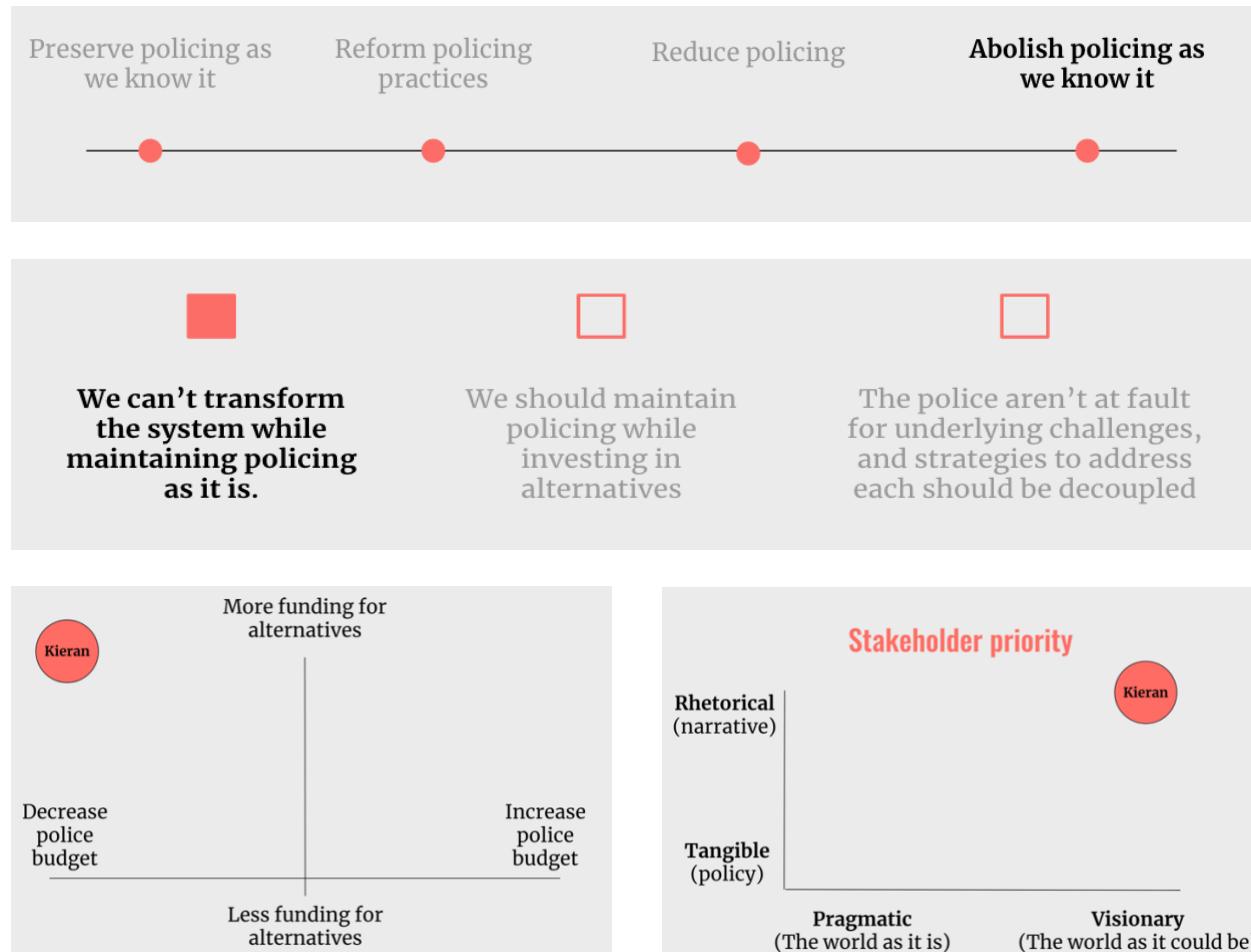


# A narrative interview with Kieran

Activist with the Worker's Defense Alliance

## Situating Kieran's perspective



## Themes to lift up

- **Activists like Kieran see the police as an actively harmful institution.** Kieran was explicit in stating that “to whatever degree the MPD is damaged, I think is a good thing. I think they're brutal.” Whether the police can coexist with new investments and new ways of meeting community needs has emerged as a central disagreement among people who seek transformative change.
- **Kieran believes in the power of grassroots organizing.** He sees community defense organizations, or hyper-localized amateur patrols, as having the potential to replace police and provide public safety, and neighborhood organizations as the most promising basis for democratic decision-making.
- **The existing city budget isn't enough to meet the needs of the community.** Kieran notes that “What we need won't come from just redistributing the money that's already in the city's budget. There is wealth in this community... but it's not distributed to the poorest people.” He makes a case that some of the state's largest employers, specifically, need to contribute more to meeting basic needs of poor people.

## **Edited interview**

**Nathan:** I'm interested to hear what brought you to issues of policing. What motivates you in this movement?

**Kieran:** I'm 49 years old and I've been involved in organizing my entire life. In part I'm driven by my view of what's wrong with the world and what is needed to change it. Personal experiences, too: I was brutally beaten up by the police when I was a teenager, and had many friends that were also beat up by the police. I had a classmate who was killed by the police several years after we graduated high school. So the police have always been an antagonistic force in my life.

If you want to make change, you have to organize for it to happen. I'm a member of the Worker's Defense Alliance, a group that comes out of radicals in the labor movement. After the Minneapolis uprising, it's recruited a lot of young people who don't necessarily have experience in the labor movement, but who agree with our principles and have a shared analysis that based on how they are structured, the police cannot help but be oppressive. There's not a reform that would change that baseline purpose of the police, so while certain reforms might be useful, none of them are going to change [policing's] actual function.

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Initially, abolition wasn't a popular concept. We used the term because we thought it was important for when you got into the nitty gritty of discussing [policing] with people: 'what do you want? What is your positive vision?' It became useful for us to talk about abolition, but we didn't use it as a sort of primary slogan in the movement. We talked about justice for Jamar Clark, and we talked about building up what we call community defense organizations. Communities need to be able to defend themselves or from the police, but also from internal contradictions and antisocial violence within the community. [We see] community defense organizations as the seeds of an alternative to the police.

In the meantime, some excellent work was done by different organizations to articulate the history of the MPD, the history of policing in this country, and to raise the concept of a world without police.

What our difference would be with groups like MPD150 is that they take out the part where there's going to be a struggle between people who don't want the police and the police. It's almost presented as if something can be changed through a vote of the city council. Our approach is a little different. Our approach is that we need to build alternatives and organizations of struggle within working class communities, and that'll be the basis for abolition. That said, a lot of the stuff that groups like MPD150 and Black Visions have put out has been very good.

**Nathan:** How have you developed your analysis of this situation? Were there certain organizations or people who influenced your theory of change?

**Kieran:** Politically, I was most influenced by the history of the Black liberation movement in the United States, including figures like Malcolm X and organizations like the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee]. I was also influenced by anarchism – the working class history of the anarchist movement around the world. Those are my two biggest political influences.

I've been a part of different organizations and collectives going back to the eighties that organized solidarity with strikes, against rape and sexual assault, and against neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. Through that, I met people in the Black community who organized against police brutality – there were some pretty big cases that happened in Minneapolis in the late eighties and early nineties.

It was very educational, even though I'd grown up in a multi-racial community, and my parents were involved in the Jesse Jackson campaign. Being part of a movement that comes out of Black communities is a powerful experience: you learn how the police work, how the media works, how all the politicians work, how different opportunists within the movement work, and how different perspectives are fought out over the direction of the movement. I feel a great deal of indebtedness to the Black community for teaching me many political lessons.

**Nathan:** I'd like to talk about the path forward from here. What are the things that you personally are working for in the short and long-term?

**Kieran:** What we're trying to do is popularize [alternatives to] the myths of the police. We're all inundated with police television shows... for me growing up, all the best TV shows were cop shows, you were taught to sympathize with police. That was a typical profession that you hear mentioned when kids say what they wanted to be growing up. And it was all based on that kind of stuff. There's this big myth of the police. I think part of what we're trying to do is to take on that myth and talk about the actual function of the police.

We're fighting for justice for the victims of police brutality. I think that's going to continue to be a flash point. We've been trying to build up those movements, make them sharp politically and also strong physically so that they are able to do things, to challenge things...

The other thing we've been doing is trying to build up community defense organizations in the Minneapolis uprising. There were a number of community defense organizations that popped up around the city. Some were part of the George Floyd uprising. Some were community groups

that came together because the police had just disappeared off the streets for several weeks. There was a need for social organization. We've tried to stay in touch with the groups that weren't white homeowner reactionary ones - if they were from communities of color or they had some kind of anti-racist perspective. We're trying to network these community defense organizations together. As we're talking about removing the police, [we're asking] what does community defense look like? And how do we get there?

**Nathan:** you mentioned making groups 'sharp politically and physically.' I'd be curious to hear any reflections you have on the physical part: what does that mean?

**Kieran:** [It means] a movement that's able to defend itself. During the uprising, there were thousands of people, mostly young, mostly people of color, but very multi-racial and, mostly poor people who were out in the street against the police and who took rubber bullets and tear gas. The medic hospital was attacked by the police, in a very sort of vindictive way. One of my son's coworkers was sitting on the curb, smoking a cigarette. He got shot by a tear gas canister and had to have surgery on his skull. There's quite a bit of vindictive violence by the police against the movement, and I think the movement has a right to defend itself.

Our approach is not a macho, tough guy vision of community defense, but we want communities to be organized. And the deeper our roots are in communities, the stronger we are.

We feel our role is to push in the streets and that that will have an impact on the policy discussions. We find all of the policy discussions inadequate, although some are better than others. Our organization is multi-racial, but it's majority white, and so we don't see ourselves as sort of leaders of this struggle overall, we see ourselves as participants in it, participants with opinions and proposals.

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To whatever degree the MPD is damaged, I think is a good thing. I think they're brutal. I think they are killers and to whatever degree an institution like that is weakened in my view is a good thing.

Now there's a whole bunch of questions [about the efforts to defund the Minneapolis police department] because there's been a spike in antisocial violence. Some of that is hyped, I think, but some of it is real. It hasn't just happened in Minneapolis. It's happened all around the country. and I think that there's a real need to try and take on this anti-social violence both in an immediate sense and in the long term – the bigger implications of why there's anti-social violence.

People who have living wage jobs aren't robbing people's houses. At some point we need to start talking about winning resources for poor people and working class communities. Ideally, that needs to be resources that are actually controlled by the communities themselves and not just doled out by politicians and nonprofits.

**Nathan:** You mentioned that you're less focused on the policy side of things, but I'd love to hear: what are the types of investments that you would like to see the city of Minneapolis or other cities in Minnesota making, instead of investing in policing as it is now.

**Kieran:** Poor people and working-class people need security. Security is the real basics: shelter, food, education, and employment. Right now, all of those things are precarious and have gotten more so during the pandemic and in the wake of the uprising. There should be a moratorium on evictions. There should be fresh food available in every part of the city and people should have access to it. There should be living wage jobs, real jobs that are unionized and pay enough money that people can have some safety and security.

I don't think those things can just be granted by the city without talking about the major corporations that control the life of this state and the wealth that [these corporations] hold. If you look at a corporation like Target that plays a major role in this state politically, socially, and culturally... Target has a huge footprint in downtown Minneapolis and has a huge amount of wealth and it has a huge number of employees in the metro area. What they want, they get.

We've got to expropriate some of the wealth that's been accumulated by the big corporations, like Target, 3M, General Mills, Medtronic, all these big corporations that are based in Minnesota. What we need won't come from just redistributing the money that's already in the city's budget. There is wealth in this community, there's a ton of wealth in Minnesota, but it's not distributed to the poorest people, the most oppressed people.

**Nathan:** I'd be curious to know what you think would be steps that are necessary to get to these goals.

**Kieran:** We need community groups that are actually controlled by everyday people. If neighborhood organizations are able to get funding, and can talk about development that isn't about gentrification and isn't about clearing the poor people out of the community. We also need to empower unions, which is the other type of organization that workers at least have the potential to control.

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With [the Bryant Ave neighborhood association] there was a real vision about creating a community center that would also be a training center. Helping to develop small Black businesses in the area, job training, land trusts to prevent gentrification and to keep people in homes. I think those are beginning steps. It's about changing the dynamics so that the grassroots is empowered to start making decisions about what happens in their own community and have some resources to actually put it into practice democratically. Protest movements could make those kinds of demands both on the city and on corporations.

If the city budget moves some money from the MPD to domestic violence, counselors, and other resources, that would be a positive thing. I would support something like that. It doesn't deal with the big problem overall, but it would be better than nothing.

**Nathan:** I'm interested by the question of community control. One example that comes to mind as a process that isn't effective community control are planning meetings, which tend to be non-representative. The people who lead those discussions tend to be wealthier, whiter, older homeowners. And as a result, they have these outsize perspectives in city policymaking. I'm curious to know how you think neighborhood association based community control could be done differently to be reflective of the needs of all residents within that neighborhood.

**Kieran:** I think it depends on momentum and organizers from the community. Something that is democratic and representative one day, could slide into being something that's corrupt and marginal a year from now. There's no perfect blueprint, but there need to be avenues that are participatory, that are open, and that have the potential to be democratic spaces. At times of mass interest in participation, like this summer, they really do become venues for democratic decision making in the community.

**Nathan:** Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

**Kieran:** This is an important moment. This summer, thousands of people, mostly young, mostly people of color, multi-racial, and mostly poor people who the system pretends don't exist really asserted themselves. It's to their credit that we're even having discussions about what to do about the police. I think there's a real chance to start talking about not only what's wrong with the society, but also what the possible alternatives are. I've been politically involved for 30 some years. This is a breakthrough.

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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](#).