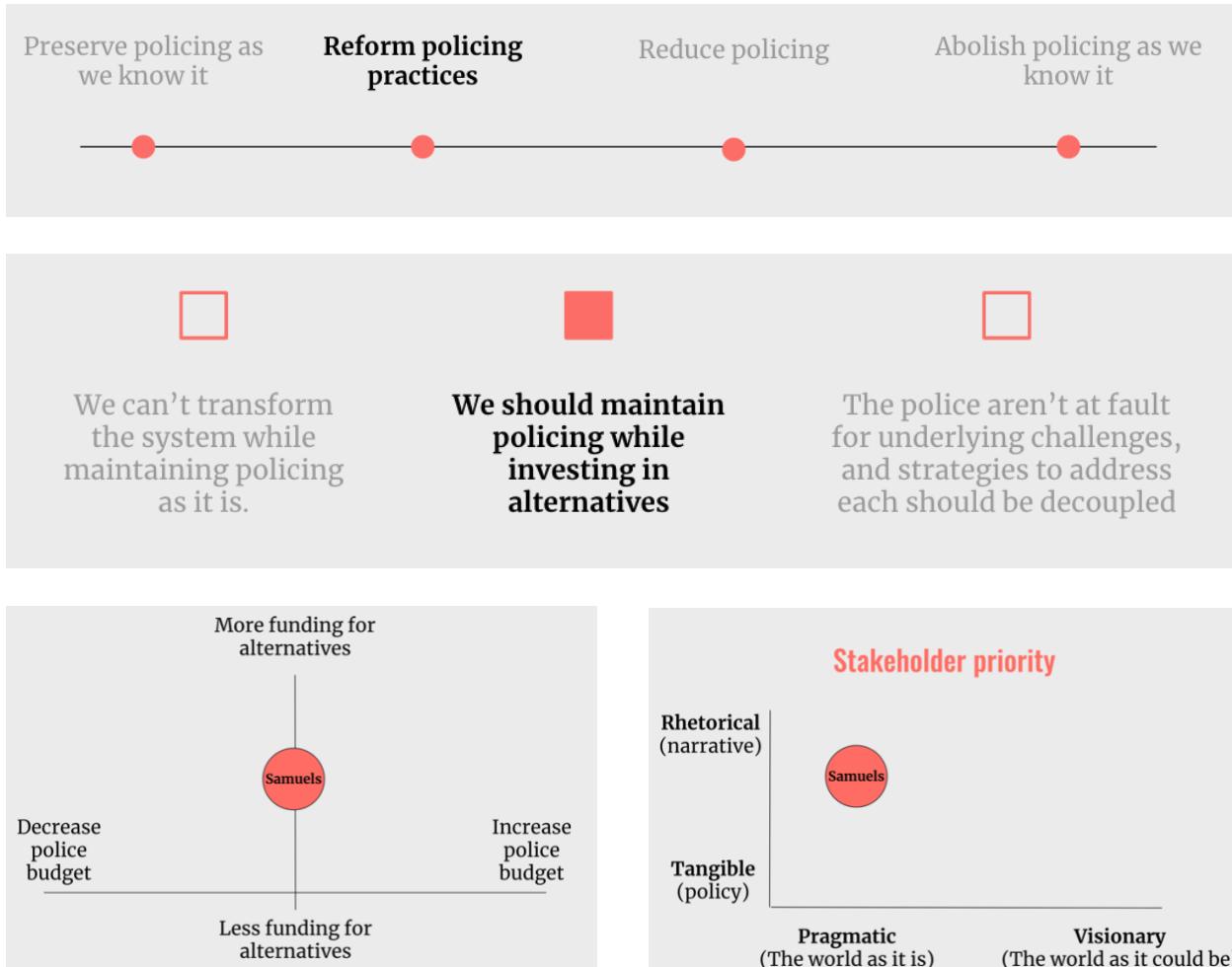


A narrative interview with Don Samuels

Former Minneapolis City Council Member and resident of Minneapolis' North Side

Situating Samuels' perspective



Themes to lift up

- **Policing as a secondary problem.** Samuels sees providing safety as a more urgent concern than addressing the abuses of power by the police department, which is why he filed a lawsuit to compel the city to return cops to North Minneapolis this summer. He states: “I got to the city council with eyes wide open and nostrils flared: we going to end this inferior quality of life that the city has condemned us to. I knew that there was disrespect from the police. But it was a secondary issue.”
- **Wealthier Americans' aversion to poverty is a root cause of challenges in communities like North Minneapolis.** Samuels, who was born in Jamaica, states simply that “the inequality of American society is largely based on the desire to get away from poor people.”
- **Economically diverse neighborhoods as an antidote to structural inequalities.** Samuels and his wife are middle-class residents in a largely lower-income neighborhood

due to their belief that the presence of people like them will help the neighborhood's other residents get the services and resources that they deserve. He believes that the government should do more to incentivize other middle-class families to return to underinvested neighborhoods.

Edited interview

Nathan: I'm interested to hear what brought you to the current movement around policing.

Don: I was born a black child in Jamaica, and I grew up in a low-income Pentecostal home in Kingston. I went to school with upper middle-class kids and developed a really a high degree of consciousness about inequality. As I grew up, I got the sense that things could be fair. I was magnetized to the Civil Rights movement and the fact that religious leaders were calling for equality. For me, equality and faith got very bound up together. I was very attracted to the whole concept of loving resistance.

Motivation is a huge thing for me. It's important because as all over the world, people ask for change and then replicate the oppressor. If the motivation is wrong, then the revolution can be wrong. The process itself can't be too morally unsustainable or flawed.

One thing I've learned is that the inequality of American society is largely based on the desire of people to get away from poor people. From that, you have white flight, then black middle-class flight and the hollowing out of inner city communities of their leadership class. And so you have this concentration of poverty, concentration of social services, concentration of failure in communities that often were healthier before.

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- Don Samuels, former Minneapolis City Council Member and North Side resident

I live in one of those communities: North Minneapolis.

The fact that the matter is [in North Minneapolis] you have low engagement, low voter turnout, low demand for quality services, low expectations from outsiders and even internalized low expectations. So people have more dysfunction in families and more policing. A third of the police are stationed in North Minneapolis, which is less than a fifth of the city's population.

So we have a lot of police, but because the black middle-class like me are not there in numbers, and because people cycle in and out of this neighborhood, the police are not as accountable for their behavior.

Because I'm middle class, I feel very empowered as a human being. I expect good policing for myself and my son. But I'm not here in numbers, right? People like me don't live in communities like this. And so the cops get a free rein to treat people badly and get away with it.

It's all related to fair housing laws. The exodus of the middle-class, the concentration of people who are not engaged, connected, or empowered, and then the insertion of these powerful agents to control them, who get away with bad treatment over time to the point where it's institutionalized.

I made a vow in college that I was going to live in low-income community all my life. I've lived in the Lower Eastside of New York. I lived in the low-income communities of Rhode Island and Massachusetts. I lived in Saint Paul near Selby and Dale when it was scary. And I'm in North Minneapolis. So I'm not naive. I might be stupid, but I'm experienced.

Nathan: You were a public official for a number of years and chaired the Minneapolis City Council's Public Safety Committee. What were your goals in that role?

Don: When I went to North Minneapolis to live, I owned my own business and was working at home, so I had this time to observe the social landscape. I got very involved in taking on drug dealing and violence. I was dealing with bad guys who worked for bad guys for bad guys who don't take shit from nobody. Back then a drug kingpin would come over to your house and say, 'Hey man, I hear you're calling the police. Aren't you worried somebody might burn your house down?' That's what I was experiencing.

[My neighbors and I] got active in dealing with intimidation, drug dealing, and so on, and we were so successful at it that my neighbors asked me to run [for City Council]. I got to the city council with eyes wide open and nostrils flared: we going to end this inferior quality of life that the city has condemned us to. Now I knew that there was disrespect from the police. But it was a secondary issue, not unimportant, but we were in survival mode.

We were very effective [on the City Council]. When I was public safety chair, we reduced crime by double digits for about six years in a row. Open street drug deals didn't happen in the city of Minneapolis anymore. That was some achievement.

But police brutality continued. We constantly got complaints from people who were suing the police, and we were constantly settling cases because it was too expensive to go to court, or because we thought we would lose.

We were constantly compromising the rights of the citizens by settling cases to avoid high court costs and the embarrassment of having [an abusive officer] come back and win in arbitration. If the officer does win, the chief has to take him back after firing him. And now he's this de facto insubordinate rehire, right? So the culture, the union contract, and the imperative to settle cases for the best financial outcome all conspired for us to create a department that coddled dysfunctional cops.

Nathan: What's interesting there is you're naming patterns of systemic bias, of police brutality, of lack of accountability, of unfair policing. But you've also spoken out very clearly against some of the organizations that are also talking about those issues and trying to change them. I would love to hear what led you to file the lawsuit that you did. How do you feel that adding more police will fix those underlying problems?

"I'm not trying to add more police. I'm trying to return the police that are missing... In North Minneapolis, we've got every vice being exercised. Now, do you have a solution for that? Because until you do, you can't tell me anything about taking cops away. Don't be naive. This is the real world here. That's what we're dealing with. For me, it has to be safety first."

- *Don Samuels, former Minneapolis City Council Member and North Side resident*

Don: I'm not trying to add more police. I'm trying to return the police that are missing. So you have to remember, I came to North Minneapolis in 1997... there were 35 bullet holes in the garage of the house behind me. Automatic gunfire was everywhere. People were getting killed on a regular basis... It was lawless. I know that reality, and it is dangerous.

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I don't know if these guys understand reality. They've constructed a world that seems to me like what my father preached about. I'm talking about heaven... I love that world, but this is not it. This is a dog eat dog reality in my community.

Nathan: it sounds like what you're saying is you're supporting returning cops to the streets, because you don't want it to return to the past.

Don: I'm supporting 'both and' reform. We had a moment: a brutal cop kills a man in slow motion, presumptuously staring into the camera. It was the most irrefutable evidence of police brutality that was directly related to African American lives. We had this moment to eclipse all of that compromising that the City Councils have done over the years, to eclipse the union's power because everybody knew that the union was defending bad cops. We had a moment and they squandered it by overreaching. Now, even the good cops are mad at them because they hate cops.

Nathan: I think what I'm still struggling to understand is, what would it look like to address the systemic issues that you're talking about?

Don: The whole world was looking at the whole system and agreeing that something needs to be done. It's an opportunity for us to seize the moment and transform [policing] when we had the upper hand in negotiation. I'm talking about getting rid of the cultural things that support bad behavior, I'm talking about getting rid of bad cops, I'm talking about empowering the citizen review board.

You got 20 somethings saying that they have a vision for the future that will eclipse anything you ever came up with in the past and create a whole - how could a 20 something figure that out and tell me that I will.. 'Just wait. In a couple of years, you're going to thank me.' That's what [a Council Member] said to me. [The Council Member] was on a call with one of our senior black leaders, a guy who invested in the North side, who said that we need the police because he has a business on West Broadway. [The CM] told him, 'I'm embarrassed for you.' So it's not just a clash of ideas. It's a deep disregard for wisdom. I'm telling you this is so insulting to a 71 year old Black man who for the last 50 years has lived in the nastiest communities in six different American cities.

Nathan: What's interesting is that a lot of the people you're disagreeing with also care about public safety, as well as addressing the systemic challenges that you're mentioning. I'd like to spend a little time talking about what your vision for the future would be. What are the different investments the City of Minneapolis needs to be making to broadly address the challenges that you're describing?

Don: The root cause [of systemic challenges] is the American dream. Fair housing laws passed, people moving out to get away from black people and poor people... that's why my wife and I live where we live. We live here [in North Minneapolis] because we know it was black middle-class flight that sealed the coffin on our communities.

"We live [in North Minneapolis] because we know it was black middle-class flight that sealed the coffin on our communities. There has to be a way to create economically diverse communities... We've got to put lower income people in communities that are homogenous, and we've got to incentivize the middle class to move into communities like mine."

- *Don Samuels, former Minneapolis City Council Member and North Side resident*

There has to be a way to create economically diverse communities. It can't just be racially diverse communities, because people begin to [self-sort] by class. We've got to put lower income people in communities that are homogenous and we've got to incentivize the middle class to move into communities like mine. It has to be facilitated in some way by government.

We have to create safe communities and we have to incentivize middle-class people to come [to lower-income communities]. It could be help with the down payment for cops or teachers. Right now, teachers don't live in North Minneapolis. I don't know if one cop that lives in North Minneapolis, even though 30% of the police force works there. I think two firefighters live there. These are all middle-class middle-income people paid by the city government and they come there to make their money. We have to change that. To me, it all begins with a different philosophy.

Nothing is going to work until we have a philosophical shift in what an American community looks like. Because so far it's been white people over here, black people over there... now you have pulling across class lines and it's all middle-class communities, low-income communities, upper income communities. It's the new American landscape. That is not workable! It certainly is not workable for low income communities. It leads to all kinds of disparities.

Nathan: To be honest, I'm a little bit skeptical that policies to try to build economically diverse communities will resolve the underlying structural issues that you were mentioning at the beginning of this interview – the way that cops are racially profiling, the ways that they are abusing their powers, the ways that police unions through arbitration prevent discipline. So what do you think are solutions for those underlying issues?

Don: The underlying issue is the separation of people along class lines. Police would not have gotten that bad if they were arresting middle-class men. That would have been clipped a long time ago, but because they were tamping down the lower classes, keeping them from coming over into certain neighborhoods, it was good. As long as we have this philosophy that 'I'm going to hang out with my people', it's going to be an ongoing struggle.

I'm not just saying this - I'm living it. I'm not just sitting around in a tweed suit talking. And I'm not sitting on the council dais philosophizing or dreaming. My wife and I moved into the community to make a difference and we did.

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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](#).