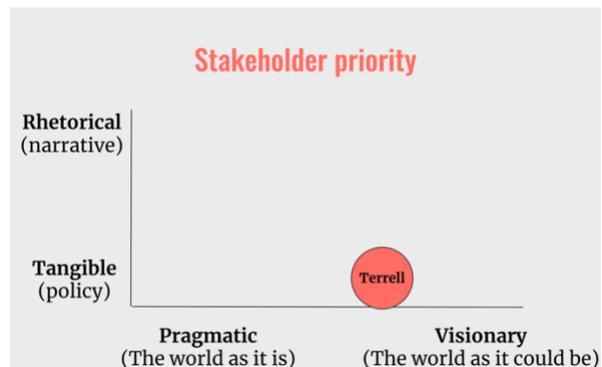
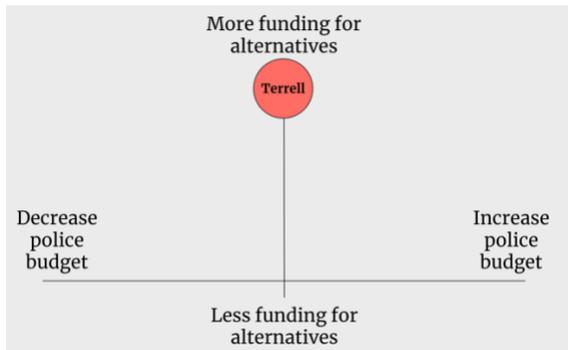
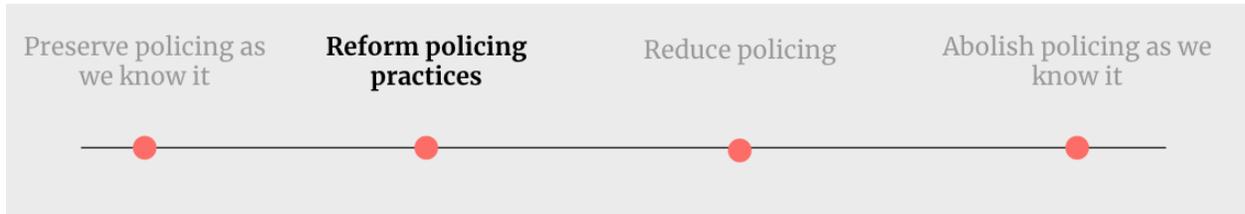


A narrative interview with Justin Terrell

Executive Director of the Minnesota Justice Research Center

Situating Terrell's perspective



Themes to lift up:

- **Perspectives on defunding the police vary based on exposure to violence.** Terrell observes that a left-leaning, white activist community in South Minneapolis is voicing more support for dismantling the city's police department than Black residents of Minneapolis living in the city's North Side, where neighborhoods face higher levels of violence.
- **Terrell notes that a sign of progress is whether new public dollars are spent on potential solutions.** He states that "there needs to be a strategy that ties public safety dollars to investments that empower communities to be able to protect themselves."
- **Terrell observes that conversations about policing need to extend beyond Minneapolis.** He notes that "the police kill more people in Greater Minnesota than they do in the Twin Cities," and makes the case that policing's failures affect more than just Black people.

Edited interview

Nathan: Justin, I wanted to start with what brought you to the issue of policing and the criminal justice system. What is motivating you?

Justin: So there's a long story and a short story. I grew up in South Minneapolis in a family in poverty. I was assaulted by a police officer for the first time at the age of 13, but my first ever interaction with policing was at the age of five or six. My father was arrested during a mental health crisis, which resulted in my family becoming homeless. So my experience with the criminal justice system since my childhood has shown me it has an overwhelming impact on communities, specifically communities of color, and on me.

I got involved in advocacy because, before Black Lives Matter, we had officer-involved deaths that were happening in the community that just weren't being tape recorded – it's the Adrian Maree Brown idea that 'things aren't getting worse, they're being uncovered.' Because I knew people in the community that died at the results of decisions by police, I decided to apply to join the Minneapolis Civilian Review Board in 2006. And I served on that board for six years.

And ultimately, I left that body because I watched how policy and the union and everything was just so entrenched in protecting officers who were making egregious misconduct. The majority of officers we worked with were great officers, and they would often reconcile with the people they interacted with in the community; you had these great experiences. But there were a handful of officers who were out of pocket. We could do nothing. We were powerless to get them to lose their job, for them to be disciplined.

There were some policies that went in place that really solidified that and I had to say that this is a waste of my time. Around the same time I became an organizer. I started working on criminal justice issues, specifically barriers to employment.

Nathan: You'd mentioned leaving the civilian review board after six years. What then led you to go into advocacy after that?

Justin: I spent the first 10 years of my career as an informal social worker. I was doing workforce development and work with the homeless. And I saw kids I was working with eight years ago showing up in the adult homeless population. And it was clear to me that these were structural issues... for them to show up in the adult system, I thought, there's something bigger at play here. So I studied policy through my master's program and in the midst of that program, I stumbled across this campaign manager job around fair hiring with Ban the Box and Take Action Minnesota. It was a wildly successful campaign because Target decided that to be a good partner with the community.

Out of that work came a lot of the current leaders were leading the defund the police campaign. Kandace Montgomery, who is one of the directors at Black Visions Collective, was the organizer that I hired for her first full-time organizing job, flew her across the country to work for me as an organizer at Take Action. A lot of the work to develop the infrastructure for the movement for

black lives Candice led as an employee at Take Action. A lot of the work at Black Lives Matter Twin Cities and Black Visions has come from her leadership.

After being an advocate for so many years, I left Take Action to lead the Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage and worked really hard to prop up Black-led organizations. After two and a half years to rebuild that organization I decided to leave for my dream job to work as an Executive Director leading the Minnesota Justice Research Center, which focuses on research, education, and policy to transform our justice system.

Nathan: Describe where we are right now; what’s your sense of the public conversation around defunding and policing in Minnesota?

Justin: It depends on what's the part of the public you're talking to. If you're a white progressive in South Minneapolis, you have a recently awakened activist community that wants to see radical change. People are being radicalized all over Minneapolis, white folks in particular. If you're talking to your North Side Black community, they are begging for the police to come back. I was talking to an officer the other day who said that on a Tuesday, we had 19 car jackings in one day. North high school has lost six students since school started to violence.

The Black community isn’t fully supportive of defund the police.

“In South Minneapolis, you have a recently awakened activist community that wants to see radical change. People are being radicalized all over Minneapolis, white folks in particular. If you're talking to your North Side Black community, they are begging for the police to come back.”

- Justin Terrell, Executive Director of the Minnesota Justice Research Center

We did a statewide poll and found that Black folks’ support for defund the police is around 60 percent. You have a small group of brilliant organizers in my opinion, who are doing an amazing job, forcing a conversation we should have had a long time ago. So what you have is a very complicated set of conflicting interests on this.

Then you have conservatives who are taking full advantage of the conflict and doing their best to paint a picture of the need for law and order. And honestly, the movement is really vulnerable for those folks to come out ahead.

At some point, and you're seeing this shift with the city council already, there is pressure to go running back to equip and fund the police because who else is going to stop the crime in the community?

Nathan: Going forward, what could be long term and short-term goals for this movement?

Justin: The first goal needs to be a robust statewide conversation. The reality is that our criminal justice system is not producing public safety. We are not getting what we think we're paying for, and that is true in the Twin Cities and in Greater Minnesota. All over the state, you can find that shared experience. My organization's goals are to lead part of that conversation by providing broad data to show what people pay for public safety. We need to have the conversation about what actually makes sense for our criminal justice system to provide.

We don't have a justice system in Minnesota. We have a crime and punishment system. We have a system that protects the profits and the property of the wealthy. And it divides and controls the rest of us.

Second, just looking at history – it's an uphill battle to draw a bright line and say defund the police. There will be more people on the side of funding the police, because there are bullets flying through their windows.

But if you look at another example: there's been a 40-year campaign to defund education, but school reformers never came out and said 'defund education.' They created charter schools. They created this entire alternative infrastructure to the public education system. And then they tied legislative dollars to it. Do you see where I'm going with this?

If 'defund the police' means 'put more resources in the community' there needs to be a strategy in place that ties public safety dollars to investments that empower communities to be able to protect themselves. If you can't solve the problem of violence in the community, you can't defund the police.

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If you really look at the different layers around defund the police, what you're really talking about is creating more infrastructure for public safety, which is a campaign that starts with black people. There are some organizations like Night Out For Safety and Liberation, where the sole focus is on bringing people together in the community to celebrate safety and liberation. There are Black-led organizing efforts in the country that are focused on building up public safety in

the community, but what gets the national attention is defund the police. Some people are married to calling it defund, but what I actually care about is public safety.

And the third goal is to start taking on big ideas. We asked about economic investments in a statewide poll we did. And one of the things I was surprised about is that 72% of Minnesotans that we polled support a guaranteed jobs program. We're not even talking about that at the state legislature. That tells me that there are big economic investment ideas that we can really start working on. Another idea is reparations. Prosperity Now put out a report that said it would take 242 years for the black family to catch up with white wealth in America. 242 years. There's no other way to deal with that other than reparations. We're not talking about what it would take to make up the wealth gap. We're not talking about the need to regulate the black market economy by legalizing marijuana. There are people ready to lead these conversations. We just need to stop ignoring them.

I'm just really excited to get to work. I want to work with black neighbors to start sourcing new ideas from their experience. As per usual, the white, liberal base in South Minneapolis – which is what makes South Minneapolis South Minneapolis, so no shade - tends to run a little bit ahead of where black folks are, leaving the problems and the residue behind for us to fix.

Nathan: Could you tell me a little bit more about why it's important to talk about justice on a statewide level. What are the things that you would like to see happen outside of Minneapolis or St. Paul?

Justin: The reason why we need a statewide conversation and not a Twin Cities conversation is because the police kill more people in Greater Minnesota than they do in the Twin Cities. This is not just a Black people's problem. It is a policing problem. And part of the issue is that we are always making issues exclusive to black people.

Now I understand that Black people disproportionately are impacted by the justice system, but last time I checked injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. If someone in Greater Minnesota is dealing with police brutality, that's a problem too. In general, you need a broad coalition to transform a system.

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The state controls peace officer licensing, it controls the prisons, it controls law enforcement. That is where those decisions are made. So trying to get it done at the city level isn't enough.

Nathan: Part of what that I'm working on is a budget analysis to understand police and corrections expenditures. I'd love to hear your thoughts on budgets and what changes you'd like to see us make.

Justin: When you're doing an analysis on budgets, you have to break things down and understand how the money is spent. When the City Council moved a million dollars out of the Minneapolis police department budget [in 2018], they got rid of all the things that we'd been fighting to put in place: procedural justice, which gave way to the policies that recognize the sanctity of life.

You need to be careful when you go after budgets, because what you don't want to do is strip away the policies that have the ability to influence the practice.

To your second question on what investments I want to see: we need to make some investments in juvenile justice. It is not news that 13 to 28 year olds are more likely to have violent behavior. Let's just make a plan to keep 13 to 28 year olds really busy. We need jobs for juveniles. We need meaningful investments for families to protect against things like bankruptcy from medical debt. Housing is a huge issue in Minnesota, where we have 22 percent homeownership rate for Black folks. I like the street outreach teams like MAD DADS and A Mother's Love. I think they're great. You have to invest more in those groups. But also there's a whole group that goes unrecognized. Churches that have been feeding hundreds of families since COVID-19 hit and they haven't seen a dime.

I think we need a broad strategy to make meaningful investments in civil society and the Black community.

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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](#).