

A grayscale background image of a large crowd of people at a protest. Many individuals are wearing face masks. In the foreground, a person is holding a sign that says 'WE CAN'T'. The overall scene is one of a large-scale public demonstration.

# **CONVENING OF MINNEAPOLIS COMMUNITY LEADERS: REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY**

**APRIL 2021**

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## PRIORITIES AND LESSONS

*The following summary captures the conversation of a group of twenty-five community leaders from Minneapolis, hosted in April of 2021 as the foundational meeting of a collaborative effort to reimagine public safety. The group explored both immediate changes and long-term solutions for achieving effective, equitable public safety in all communities.*

*The importance of affinity spaces for Black people was underscored throughout. What was originally organized as a strategy session quickly became a venue for exploring shared trauma and paths to healing in the wake of the police killing of yet another unarmed Black man, Daunte Wright in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Park just days prior to the convening.*

*Issues explored ranged from legislative, to programmatic, to budgetary, but the overarching message was simple: Black communities must be empowered - both through policy and direct financial investment - not only to contribute, but lead efforts to define and achieve public safety moving forward.*

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## INTRODUCTION

On April 13, 2021 – two days after the police killing of Daunte Wright in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Center – a working group of Minneapolis community leaders gathered to explore how best to reimagine public safety in the jurisdiction. This working group was planned well in advance of the shooting of Mr. Wright, though the tragic killing of yet another local Black man at the hands of the police lent a renewed sense of urgency to these already critical discussions.

In the wake of the police murder of George Floyd in May, 2020, Minneapolis is exploring a host of public safety reforms. The Minneapolis Foundation and the Policing Project are developing a framework to ensure that the redesigned public safety system is built on a foundation of data, evidence, and community perspectives and priorities. This working group was intended to serve as the foundation of the organizations' efforts to understand community perspectives and ensure they are centered in the development of a re-designed public safety system.

Although the group explored these topics in detail, given the immediacy of the police killing of Mr. Wright, the discussion expanded to support honest and open conversations about the need for transformative change and collective healing.

## I. BACKGROUND

The Minneapolis Foundation and the Policing Project at the New York University School of Law have partnered to reimagine public safety in Minneapolis. The Minneapolis Foundation is funding the Policing Project to include the city as a site for a series of research and learning projects to understand:

- The public safety needs of Minneapolis communities
- For what reasons people in the city call 911 for help
- What resources are available within the jurisdiction to address public safety needs
- How best to address many public safety needs without the use of force or enforcement
- What public agencies can and should do to support improved, equitable public safety outcomes
- How communities can be empowered to define and lead public safety efforts

These efforts are part of a broader Policing Project initiative to learn from and work with jurisdictions across the country who are seeking to reduce the police function and redesign public safety systems to address the needs of communities adequately and effectively. This work will take place over the next 18 months. Minneapolis is one of several sites where this research and learning will occur. At the conclusion, the Policing Project will develop a national template, including how Minneapolis in particular can implement the framework.

## II. DISCUSSION OVERVIEW

### CHECK-IN

Chanda Smith-Baker, Senior Vice President of the Minneapolis Foundation, kicked off the discussion by encouraging attendees to share what was on their heart in the wake of the police killing of Mr. Wright. Participants named a range of emotions from grief, heartbreak, anger, and angst, to feeling numb and exhausted. Some noted feeling continuously under attack. They expressed skepticism that the types of change that are desperately needed ever will be realized. They shared an immediate need for reprieve, healing, and a “whopping dose” of joy in the face of so much sadness.

An overarching message that many participants repeated was the importance of being in a safe, nourishing space with other Black people to explore these issues, and the importance of being in community in these moments. One participant shared about being in a predominantly white space the day before to discuss public safety issues, and no one acknowledged the police killing that had occurred less than 24 hours before. Participants expressed frustration with discussing these issues in multi-ethnic spaces. There was a concern that well-meaning white people have consumed the time and energy of Black communities and other communities of color in an attempt to be helpful, but they then opt out of doing the work when it gets difficult. One participant said “this is not just a problem of the right. Part of the problem is white, progressive communities. They get the money to do the work, we get the misery. Imagine what we could do with that kind of support.”

There was a particular concern for young Black men in the community, both for their safety in the face of police brutality, and for the message these tragedies send about the perceived value of the life of a young Black man this country. One participant asked, “How do we support young people in this moment when the world is telling them that they are unloved?” Participants regularly expressed worry for their children. Participants also noted that young Black men were “catching it from every angle,” criticized for

protesting while simultaneously being harmed continuously by police.

Still, even in the face of so much pain, participants noted they were ready and eager to continue contributing to the creation and implementation of solutions. As one person said, “I feel powerless, but I know we’re not.” Participants mentioned the simultaneous need for immediate next steps and mitigating strategies in the face of continued police killings, as well as long-term sustainable solutions.

### PRIORITY ISSUES/IMMEDIATE REFORMS

Participants identified a host of issues and needed change, including:

- **Accountability/legislation.** Participants discussed the need for greater accountability measures for the police, and a skepticism that current reform legislation being discussed in Minnesota would go far enough. One participant noted they were part of a prior iteration of a civilian review board but quit because it was ineffective absent subpoena power. Participants explored the importance of front-end – or democratic – accountability to ensure communities have a meaningful say in how they are policed.
- **Administrative reform.** Participants discussed the need for basic administrative reform related to driver’s licenses. Youth between the ages of 16 and 18 in Minnesota who wish to have a driver’s license must pay for a driver’s ed class first. Many of the young people seeking licenses need them to be able to drive to work to contribute to their household income, and need the job to afford driver’s ed. They end up driving without a license, being fined, and needing to drive to work to pay the fines. The cycle continues, and they rack up enough infractions to be ineligible for a license without driver’s ed when they turn 18.
- **Fines and Fees.** Relatedly, participants discussed the need for sweeping reform around fines and fees. There currently is legislation pending regarding fines and fees reform in the state. Participants discussed the disconnect between the state’s estimate of income generated through fines and fees (\$2-3 million annually), and the actual revenue (\$250k annually). They also discussed a recent study that found that individuals represented by a public defender were



significantly more likely to have a collections-related event than non-public defender cases.

- **Qualified Immunity.** Participants briefly discussed the elimination of qualified immunity, which protects officers from being sued in their individual capacity. They discussed the limitations of this approach in motivating a change in officer behavior given the frequency with which officers are indemnified by their department or municipality. Participants discussed the utility of recent legislation in Colorado, which eliminated qualified immunity as a defense and established personal liability up to \$25,000. They expressed frustration with the current system, in which the city paid over \$47,000,000 of taxpayer money in civil suits in the last few years. One participant asked “We’re paying them to harm the community. Where is the accountability and where are the consequences?”

- **Pretextual Traffic Stops.** Participants expressed great frustration with current traffic stop policies and practices, noting the disparate impact of these practices on Black people in the jurisdiction, particularly Black young men. Participants explored a law passed recently in Virginia that imposes limits on pretextual police stops for minor infractions as a promising place to start (though likely not restrictive enough).

- **Use of Force.** Participants discussed a lack of disincentives for officers using deadly force and the lack of accountability for officers who use it inappropriately. One participant noted that perhaps an officer who has had to use deadly force – even if warranted – should no longer be employed as a sworn officer, as the act of taking someone’s life would likely fundamentally change them. Participants also discussed a model use of force statute the Policing Project has developed.

Participants expressed doubt that as to the likelihood that necessary legislation would be passed, given that Minnesota is the only divided legislature in the country (with a Republican Senate and a Democratic House). They noted the complexity of trying to achieve state-level reforms to address persistent problems in urban areas when so much of the state is made up of rural counties. Participants discussed whether the House might be able to push reform legislation by refusing to vote on the budget unless the reforms are passed.

### III. REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

Participants then turned to reimagining public safety in Minneapolis. The goal was to understand the public safety priorities in the community and to explore promising non-enforcement solutions. This discussion occurred against the backdrop of the history of policing and its roots in slave patrols and white supremacy. As one participant said, “We can’t strategize about what they should be doing without being honest about what they were designed to do.”

The group discussed briefly the complexity of language that has emerged around the defund and abolitionist movements. Some participants spoke up against the concept of abolition, pointing to the immediate and critical need for enforcement with regards to violent crimes in their neighborhoods. Some participants shared their own experience with violent crime and the need for enforcement. One participant noted “If you want to hear a room full of elders go off, say ‘abolish.’”

Still, participants explored the deeply rooted and persistent problems with policing in Minneapolis, especially as directed at the Black community. One participant’s house was raided three different times by SWAT growing up, and each time officers found nothing but legal prescription drugs. Another noted that they would never ask police to come into their community, even in the midst of community violence. This tension was evident throughout the discussion: “I care about bullets coming through my house, but I also want police to stop killing us.”

Ultimately, most participants focused on the need to fundamentally change how public safety is achieved in neighborhoods, including a narrowing of the policing function, significant reform of policing, and a notable expansion of the role of communities in achieving public safety. What is needed is “a public safety model where everyone sees themselves in it.”

## COMMUNITY NEEDS

Many of the priorities participants identified overlap with social determinants of health, highlighting the shared outcomes of public safety and public health systems and the importance of coordinating the two moving forward.

- **Violence prevention:** Firearm violence is pervasive, and there is a significant need for immediate solutions. “I work, live, play, pray here – what do we do to create safety now?” Still, solutions must recognize that the current system traps young Black men through a series of minor infractions, which ends up contributing to individuals engaging in violence. In many cases, violence is a cry for help from oppressed people. There is too little attention paid to understanding what drives people to violence in the first place.
- **Mental Health Support:** Communities have shared exposure to trauma with little access to the mental health support that will be critical in the healing process.
- **Victim services:** There are limited services available to support survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. There also is insufficient support for Black men and Black boys who are victims, and their victimization rarely is recognized.
- **Services for marginalized communities:** Under-represented and marginalized communities – such as immigrant and transgender communities – are experiencing high rates of victimization and need basic services. Accessible, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed services are lacking.
- **Substance use treatment:** Addiction is prevalent in certain communities, and people living with substance use disorder are not receiving treatment. Instead, they are traumatized by enforcement actions.
- **Jobs/Economic mobility:** Perpetuation of violent crime and drug markets is linked to a lack of meaningful employment and economic mobility. Investments are needed to provide meaningful alternatives to criminal activity.
- **Real estate ownership/affordable housing:** The number of individuals requiring affordable housing in the city far exceeds the amount of affordable housing available in Minneapolis.
- **Education:** Black Minnesotans are proportionally

under-represented in the state university system, which also negatively impacts economic mobility and job prospects.

- **Childcare:** There is a lack of affordable childcare, which limits the ability of families to pursue what limited opportunities exist for economic stability and mobility.
- **Transportation:** Safe, reliable access to transportation – either public transportation or access to licenses to operate private vehicles – are critical for accessing other needs such as education and jobs.

## PRIORITY SOLUTIONS

- **Communities as pro-active participants in public safety:** Empowering communities to be pro-active participants in the creation of public safety is paramount. Significant funding has gone to external organizations and those funds are not showing up in communities themselves. Similarly, some functions of government agencies are better suited for community-based organizations, which should receive public funding. There are many examples of successful community-based interventions that could and should be replicated – they just need the funding to do it. The transformative justice model offers a promising framework for exploring these community-based interventions.
- **Affinity spaces for healing and mission alignment:** Intentional spaces for Black communities are greatly needed. These spaces must be intergenerational and include both youth and elders within the community. Listening and education sessions both can support collective healing and help communities become aligned with regards to public safety priorities and how best to achieve them. There is a need for these discussions to happen in safe Black affinity spaces.
- **Freedom Fighters as the archetype of a public safety officer:** The Minnesota Freedom Fighters joined together to provide security in Minneapolis’ north side neighborhoods during the unrest after the police murder of George Floyd. These individuals largely are from the communities they seek to protect. They focus on de-escalation and promoting peace. This model of individuals from the community, for the community, could serve as an archetype for public

safety officers moving forward, and ensure that the government is not solely responsible for community security.

· **Young Black men as leaders in the new model:**

Young Black men are significantly impacted by police activities in the jurisdiction, and deserve a leadership role in determining how public safety is achieved. Giving young people ownership of aspects of public safety will empower them to play an active role. They should be compensated for their contributions.

· **Social media as a catalyst for good:** The way people share information on social media is contributing to escalations in violence, especially among young people who are escalating encounters with each other for improved social media status. The same technology could and should be leveraged to achieve public safety and connect young people to becoming part of the solution. Also, social media education could help prevent young people from posting content that likely will harm them in the future, either through criminal liability or limiting job prospects.

· **Technology as a vehicle for capturing experiences:** Participants noted the pivotal role access to technology has played in cataloguing police brutality, and briefly explored whether there might be a way to equip young people to better capture and share their experiences with the police.

· **Personal experiences as agents for change:** White people who do not have the same interactions with police that Black Minneapolis residents do may struggle with understanding the pervasiveness of these issues, and consider what they see on widely circulated videos as isolated incidents that only happen to certain “types” of people. An education campaign highlighting the experiences of Black Minneapolis residents may be effective in helping others understand the extent to which these issues exist.

· **Creating space for Black joy as a vehicle for healing:** Black people in Minneapolis and in the country as a whole have faced perpetual trauma, trauma that has been especially heightened since the police murder of George Floyd. Community festivals and celebrations would create space for Black joy, healing, and honoring the shared bond of what it means to be Black in this country.