



# **The Square One Project in Oklahoma**

## Mabel Bassett Correctional Center Roundtable

### Report and Recommendations

## **Background**

The Square One Project at the Columbia University Justice Lab asks a central question: if we set aside traditional responses to violence, which center policing and prisons, and ask how we might build truly safe communities—if we could start from a new “square one”—how would justice policy be different? We invite people, organizations, and localities to reckon with this question, and to develop and undergo a narrative change process with the goal of changing how society creates safety and responds to harm and violence. We define narrative change as the intentional effort to shift people’s language, attitudes, and behaviors. Applied to justice, we hope to challenge dominant narratives around ‘public safety’ that are harmful and inaccurate, and create new narratives that are more inclusive, empowering, historically accurate, and truthful.

To this end, The Square One Project has organized a series of Roundtable convenings around the country since 2018. Each meeting has brought together a diverse group of participants—including people directly affected by the criminal legal system, organizers, policymakers, academics, funders, business owners, and nonprofit leaders—to critically analyze current justice policy, and to collectively consider better ways to promote public

safety and address harm. These convenings have built relationships and understanding among participants, and also led to writings, blog posts, op-eds, and video recaps that people working in the justice space can use as advocacy and educational tools.

In 2021, Kris Steele, Founder and Executive Director of the reentry organization The Education and Employment Ministry (TEEM), invited us to bring our project to Oklahoma. We accepted this invitation, and started working with various partners to shift narratives around punishment and to expand notions of safety in the state. After almost two years of Square One-facilitated discussions, we reflected on the progress we had made toward our goal of centering people most closely impacted by the criminal legal system. Although a number of our participants were formerly incarcerated or impacted by the criminal legal system, we also wanted to learn from people who were currently incarcerated. Guided by this goal, the Square One Project facilitated a panel discussion inside Mabel Bassett Correctional Center on August 10, 2023. In this panel discussion, participants from Mabel Bassett shared their stories and connected with other Square One members. This event could not have happened without the meaningful relationships TEEM had already built with incarcerated people through their organizational programming.

Subsequently, our project team built on this panel by hosting a first-ever Square One Roundtable discussion inside a prison. On Wednesday, November 29, 2023, people who were incarcerated at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center came together with Square One staff and other stakeholders in Oklahoma to discuss justice and safety in the state. Almost 50 people were present for the Roundtable as observers, participants, and volunteers. There were approximately 25 Roundtable participants, 20 observers, and 5 volunteers (please see page 3 for a full participant list). With permission from Mabel Bassett administration, reporters from *The Oklahoman* attended the roundtable, hoping to share the stories and learnings with the broader community.

The theme of this Roundtable was *Catalyzing a New Narrative of Community Safety and Reimagining Justice in Oklahoma*. The Roundtable began at 10:00 a.m. with a large-group discussion, in which all Roundtable participants and observers introduced themselves. Then, the whole group together considered the harsh realities of Oklahoma's criminal legal system and opportunities for transformation. Next, at 10:45 a.m., Roundtable participants and observers broke out into five small group discussions for deep dives into the following topics: narrative change; values and faith; accountability, punishment, and repair; reckoning with history; and new systems of safety. Attendees took a break for lunch, provided by TEEM, before returning to their seats at 12:15 p.m. for a summary of the small group discussions and a reflection on new, non-carceral ways to respond to harm and violence. At

the conclusion of the Roundtable, participants were invited to describe their hopes for safety and healing in a collective art piece, pictured at the end of this report. Notably, the time allotted for the Roundtable, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., was not sufficient for the ambitious agenda, and the meeting was extended by one hour.

## Roundtable Participant List

Aisha Elliott	Doreatha Poland	Megan Hammers
Amber Andrews	Erica Bonner	Melissa Anderson
Amber Hall	Gina Richie	Melvin Battiest
Anamika Dwivedi	Iva Stojanovic	Michaela Clarke
Angela Burk	Jabee Williams	Michelle Walker
April Wilkens	Jasmin Sandelson	Raye Smith
Ashwin Marathe	Jessica Moore	Sheyda Brown
aurelius francisco	Katharine Huffman	Tiffany Crutcher
Briana Cooper	Kathryn Hicks	Tina Brown
Brittany Payne	Kimberley Neal	Tracy Nelson
Bryanna Ivey	Kimberley Perigo	Tyalea Britt
Carmita O'Bryant	Kimberly Wenthold	Tye Shafer
Clarence Prevost	Kizzy Johnson	Veronica Bruner
Crystal Avilla	Kris Steele	Victoria Hooper
Danelle Lee	Lindsey Wilff	Yvita Crider
Delores Roach	Lisa Botone	Zana William
Dicy Poore	Margie Hannah	

Below, we share key takeaways from each of the five small group discussions. We then outline recommendations from Mabel Bassett participants for future Roundtable convenings.

# Key Takeaways

## Discussion 1. Creating a Narrative Change Infrastructure

### *Facilitated by aurelius francisco and Tiffany Crutcher*

#### **Existing narratives around crime and community safety in Oklahoma are harmful.**

During their discussion, participants identified several narratives they viewed as pervasive in Oklahoma, and considered how these narratives were incorrect and harmful.

- Participants identified a ‘tough on crime’ narrative—exemplified by phrases like “comply or die,” “do the crime, do the time,” or “he looked like a bad dude”—that frames punishment as a necessary response to crime.
- Participants pointed out that women tend to be held to a higher standard in Oklahoma, getting harsher sentences because “they should have known better.”
- Many participants said they did not see calling 911 as a safe or helpful option when they were in trouble, despite the narrative that 911 exists to help.
- Likewise, a popular narrative suggests that resources exist to help people in trouble or in need, but participants did not believe that these resources and systems actually worked.
- Participants agreed that existing narratives do not center redemption and second chances in Oklahoma.
- One participant said they themselves had believed in the pervasive narrative that the criminal justice system works and that justice prevails, until they got in trouble, and became stigmatized. At that point, truth and nuance became insignificant.
- Participants questioned the narrative of “innocent until proven guilty.” Discussants believed that the inverse was more often true; they all found themselves perceived as guilty the minute they got arrested.
- One younger participant stressed that the system was unforgiving towards young people; instead of thinking, “This is all they ever knew” system actors think, “This is all they will ever be.” This narrative labels young individuals as “unsalvageable.”

- One participant questioned the idea that with a jury you are “judged by a group of your peers.” They pointed out that their jury consisted of people from a completely different social class and background to them. They believed that jurors with more opportunity, jobs, and money struggled to understand someone who was raised in poverty with little education.
- Participants agreed that it felt like there are two justice systems in the United States, dependent on race and wealth. This divide called to mind Jim Crow laws. Participants agreed that the failure to address the vestiges of slavery and white supremacy in the legal system whitewashes history.
- Discussants felt that the Oklahoman public lacked understanding about poverty and how it affects people’s lives.
- There was an agreement that the legacy of slavery in Oklahoma remains unspoken and unaddressed. Some participants expressed that they wanted to learn their own family’s history regarding slavery, but found it difficult to do so.

**Shifting narratives will require people to use language intentionally to lift up human dignity.**

The discussion ended with participants considering better narratives around crime and community safety.

- One discussant expressed frustration about being referred to as “prisoners” during the college classes they were taking. They stressed that they were hard-working, with most of their peers working full-time jobs while completing their college degrees. Many of the participants currently incarcerated said that they wanted to be treated as people, not “inmates.” Someone pointed out that the bathroom sign, which read, “inmates only,” reminded them of “coloreds only” signs during Jim Crow. They discussed what “people first” language would look like.
- Participants wanted to shift people’s stories beyond labels of what they have done. One participant highlighted the beauty of the people in the center, noting that they are all worthy of redemption and a second chance. They hoped that Oklahomans on the outside would get more opportunities to meet them and hear their stories.
- The conversation concluded with the idea that everyone is ‘failing forward,’ or a work in progress. The people inside Mabel Bassett are more than what they have been labeled.

## **Discussion 2. The Role of Values and Faith in Oklahoma's Criminal Legal System**

***Facilitated by Clarence Prevost and Vered Harris***

### **Faith heavily influences the criminal legal system in Oklahoma.**

Participants discussed the large influence of faith in Oklahoman society, and considered the relationship between religious values and punishment.

- Participants felt that even though not everyone shares the same faith, faith underlies many of the ideas that our systems put into practice. This leads to “forcing Christianity” on those who may not believe in it.
- Participants agreed that the “mercy and grace” associated with faith communities is not reflected in the state’s criminal justice practices, which are harsh and punitive.
- Discussants considered the idea that the Bible and other religious texts have been used to justify harmful practices, like the death penalty.
- The group concluded that institutions of faith in Oklahoma do not emphasize the values associated with justice, like forgiveness, mercy, and providing second chances.

### **A person’s faith practice can influence their perspectives on justice.**

Participants self-reflected on how each person’s faith shapes their views about justice.

- Participants reflected on how their own faith has changed or endured while experiencing incarceration; many agreed that they have lost faith in religion while being incarcerated.
- One participant noted that racism is not absent from faith communities.
- Another participant stressed the struggles of raising a half-Pakistani, half-Muslim daughter; many times, harmful stereotypes about her faith are used to discriminate against her.

**Many churches have failed to provide adequate social services to folks before, during, and after incarceration.**

Participants questioned how well churches offer support before, during, and after incarceration.

- There was consensus that the church community in Oklahoma “is not a forgiving” one, as people are harshly judged for mistakes they have made in the past.
- The “culture of politeness” within churches is not extended to those who are incarcerated; the church often shuns incarcerated individuals instead of supporting them.
- Many participants felt that the church “forgot about them” once they were incarcerated.
- One participant noted the hypocritical nature of the church’s emphasis on love, given its abandonment of incarcerated people in Oklahoma. As one person said, “God lives in my heart. But I live in Oklahoma.”
- Churches have failed to provide adequate social services to those reentering society.
- The conversation ended in a hopeful manner, as the group strategized how churches could help people find housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment in the future.

**Discussion 3. Accountability, Punishment, and Repair**

***Facilitated by Aisha Elliott and Yvita Crider***

**Accountability can exist without punishment.**

Participants discussed what accountability means to them.

- The group supported the idea that accountability is best when it emerges from an “internal perspective,” as people self-reflect on how their actions have caused harm.
- The judicial system attempts to impose accountability by sentencing and punishing people according to their crimes. These sentences, however, are many times unjust.

- Participants felt that we must also hold the judicial system accountable. It should apply punishment and accountability not based on individuals' reputations or "who you know." Rather, it should be a standard that is carefully thought about. Sentences should be more equal within the judicial system to ensure fairness and accountability.
- Accountability in sentencing would involve efforts to "understand individuals," ensuring life histories are taken into account. Relatedly, we must consider people's environments, and the root causes of violence.
- "The system" often does not let people move on from crimes they have committed, even though people change and deserve a second chance.
- People who face abuse are often punished for defending themselves; this is not accountability.

### **Accountability depends upon having just legal representation.**

Those in power within the judicial system must be held accountable. The decisions they make are often made "quickly" without proper consideration of the circumstances of all the people involved in the harm.

- "Secret meetings" between district attorneys, judges, and lawyers change laws without proper awareness. These discussions exclude input from incarcerated people.
- People from a "poverty background" rarely receive adequate legal representation and are held accountable in an unfair manner.
- Participants stressed that it's crucial to "demand follow-up" in the judicial system.
- Participants expressed concern that the judicial system has "something personal against women" due to the large disparity in sentencing of women in Oklahoma.



## **Discussion 4. Reckoning in Action and Creating a Culture of Repair**

***Facilitated by Kym Cravatt and Michaela Clarke***

### **Social change movements must center hope and human dignity.**

The group stressed that all people must be “seen as human” before justice can be achieved.

- Justice involves people hearing each other’s stories and learning from one another.
- Communities must understand the “people power” that exists within them; any change will involve communities coming together.

### **Oklahoma’s racist history influences current systems.**

Participants reflected on how Oklahoma’s racist history impacts daily life today.

- Participants shared personal stories of being called racist names in public places, showing the continued impact of racism in Oklahoma.
- Oklahoma’s history involves racist practices against indigenous tribes, like the Trail of Tears, which relocated indigenous tribes thousands of miles away from their homes. Similarly, the Tulsa Race Massacre continues to have lasting effects on Black communities in Oklahoma.
- Members discussed an important root cause of racism in Oklahoma—white supremacy—which has been a lasting “power structure” in the state’s practices.
- Any reckoning with history must include a “healthy, honest conversation” that includes people’s authentic experiences.

### **Systems actors have a role to play in creating a culture of repair.**

The police and district attorneys have considerable power to set criminal justice policies. These actors should use their power to engage in change-making to benefit hurt communities.

- People in power must be willing to “give power up” to enable others to speak and break the traditional power structures that currently exist.

- Prosecutors, DAs, judges, and other actors should use their positions to “advocate for change.” DAs must be held accountable for their decisions to execute innocent people.

### **Creating a culture of repair must address the harmful generational impact of incarceration.**

People shared personal stories of intergenerational trauma—including giving up custody of children—to illustrate how incarceration has a sustained, negative impact on families.

- It is crucial to share stories of generational trauma to ensure people understand its impact on families.
- Participants stressed that separating mothers from their children should be viewed as a form of violence against women.

## **Discussion 5. Imagining New Systems of Safety and Social Inclusion**

### ***Facilitated by Kris Steele and Tina Brown***

#### **Access to resources, not police, makes people feel safe.**

Participants questioned what a “good” form of public safety looks like, and considered current challenges to public safety facing communities.

- Participants considered the question: “What makes you feel safe?” Common answers included access to housing, education, healthcare, and public services.
- Participants discussed the often tenuous relationship between the police and the community; “Officers don’t see you,” one member said.
- Involvement with the police can result when people do not know about “places to get help.”
- The group reflected on how businesses and philanthropy can play an important role in ensuring a cohesive community.

## **Imagining a world without police requires meeting communities' needs.**

The discussion considered how to support communities without relying on the police as a mechanism of control.

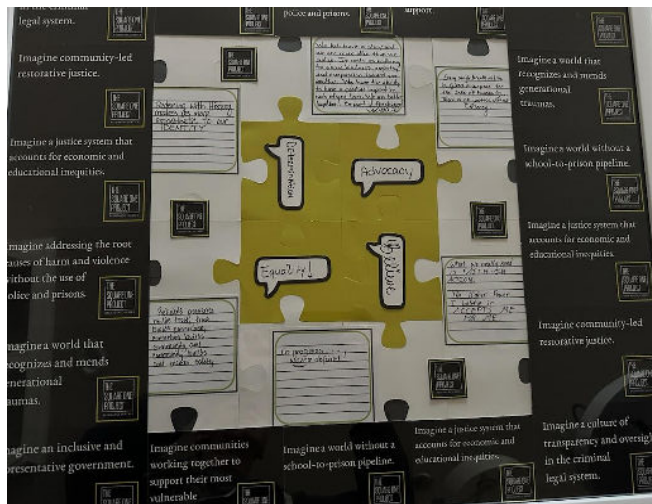
- Smaller conflicts may “cease” as a result of reduced police presence.
- People may be allowed to “self-correct” instead of being punished by police.
- Participants discussed an idea akin to “adult time-out;” this would involve training, support, and healing instead of incarceration.
- Programs like Women in Recovery in Tulsa illustrate the importance of community organizations in building communities of support.
- Grassroots organizing can be a useful way to bring people together and involve the entire community.

## **Community involvement should be central to promoting and creating new systems of safety.**

The group discussed different ways that community organizations can engage local citizens.

- It is important to involve people directly impacted by the criminal justice system in community outreach; this ensures that “criminal justice money” is reinvested from incarceration back into local communities.
- Effective community outreach will involve “going to where the people are.”
- Promoting education and community service can be an alternative to incarcerating people.
- Centering “human dignity” will help promote community safety, protect people, and give everyone the opportunity to thrive.

## Collective Art Piece



## Recommendations for Future Roundtables

After the Roundtable discussion, Warden Tamika White hosted a feedback-seeking debrief with the participants residing at Mabel Bassett. Tamika then shared that feedback with the Square One team; we have summarized their insights below. At the debrief, participants shared a high degree of interest in continuing to have conversations about justice, safety, and punishment at Mabel Bassett. They offered the following recommendations for future Roundtables:

- Co-design the agenda with people residing at Mabel Bassett.
- Hold the Roundtable in a setting with an effective sound system.
- Provide more time for discussion, and allow participants to engage deeply in more than one topic.
- Make the Roundtable accessible to people on the outside to humanize incarcerated people and educate non-incarcerated participants. If possible, air the Roundtable on public television.
- Offer ways for Roundtable participants who reside at Mabel Bassett to connect with non-incarcerated participants and conveners.

- Offer similar discussions to the younger population at Mabel Bassett and for people who reside in different types of units.
- Create opportunities for Roundtable participants to share feedback directly to the conveners.

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