



The Square One Project in Oklahoma

Summary Analysis of Participant Interviews (Wave 3)

Overview

Following the second and final Roundtable in Oklahoma, Square One participants were interviewed for a third time between January and March 2024. In these interviews, we invited participants to reflect on some of the values and themes at the heart of the Square One Project. This report summarizes responses from fifty-two participants to questions about justice, accountability, community safety, and narrative change.

“Justice Score” & Explanations for Score Choice

Respondents were asked, “On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate how ‘just’ Oklahoma society is, with 1 being not just at all, and 10 being very just?” The average ‘justice score’ given by participants was 3.

Participants explained factors underlying their ‘justice score,’ including:

- Oklahoma continues to be a highly punitive state
- Oklahoma continues to use the death penalty
- Oklahoma has restrictive laws that harm queer and non-binary kids
- Oklahoma’s harmful treatment of Black, Indigenous, and Arab people
- A deepening polarization of political parties
- The growing support for right-wing political agendas

Many participants felt that little has change, since the prior interview several months ago. One participant stated, **“I don’t think anything’s changed. We haven’t moved the needle either way, in my opinion.”** Similarly, another stakeholder stated, **“I don’t feel like I’ve seen headlines that have improved it [the score].”** Others identified overall negative changes, including the increased use of the death penalty. One participant stated, **“[W]e’re planning to have... half of all the executions in the United States happen in our state this year. We are... going in the wrong direction.”**

Others, however, mentioned areas of increasing justice, creating a sense of optimism. One participant noted, **“A lot of those [high incarceration rates] are from drug incarcerations... And now, Oklahoma has medical marijuana, and those that have a medical marijuana card can legally have marijuana... So, that makes a lot of difference.”** Another participant noted, **“I’m probably more positive in my thinking right now... The criminal legal system, in my experience since the last time we spoke, it has improved, at least in the federal system.”**

Hopes for the "Future of Justice" in Oklahoma

When asked "What are your hopes for the future of justice in Oklahoma?" participants' answers fell largely into the following categories:

- Increased equity
- Coalition building
- Improved education
- Concrete reforms

Many participants identified their primary hope for the future of justice in Oklahoma as equity. Specifically, they hoped for a system that works for everyone regardless of their identity. As one participant noted, **"Everyone needs to be able to have their voices heard, no matter what color, no matter what tribe they come from, no matter their background. They need to be able to come to the table and say, 'This is what we're looking at for our community.'"** Another stakeholder said, **"I can't tell you how much I would love to see more diverse agencies. I'd love to see more women, I would love to see more ethnic backgrounds, people of all different walks of life... more people of color, more religions, more ideas than your traditional values."** Another member said, **"My hopes are that everyone is treated fairly and equitably... it shouldn't matter, the color of one's skin, their race or ethnicity, their religion. Everyone should have a fair chance and be treated according to the merits of their actions, innocent until proven guilty, not given harsher sentences just because of who they are."**

In terms of coalition building, participants hoped to see people breaking out of silos to tackle interrelated problems related to the criminal justice system. As one participant expressed, **"My hope for the future of justice is for everyone in their different silos to come together... to understand how we're all interrelated. Because they're all related. And right now we're still treating them as separate."** Participants expressed a desire to see durable and bipartisan coalitions. As one member noted, **"I like to say that the left wing and the right wing are part of the same bird. And so we have to start figuring out how this bird is going to fly, as opposed to just stretching each other completely apart and doing nothing."**

Stakeholders also hoped to see improved education and greater public awareness of issues, such as how Oklahoma's criminal legal system operates, and how it affects local

communities. Participants highlighted a lack of awareness around Oklahoma’s criminal legal system and related social inequalities. They also hoped to inform system actors, and indicated that change and education should include prosecutors and others working in the justice system. As one member noted, change **“comes with education, of those that are serving in our justice system. That includes our DAs or prosecutors, everybody.”**

Finally, stakeholders identified concrete reforms they wished to see. One such reform was reduced sentences. As one stakeholder explained, **“One of my hopes that I think is pretty realizable is sentencing reform. And we’ve passed several bills that have improved how sentencing happens in Oklahoma, [but] we’ve got a long way to go.”** Similarly, participants hoped to see mental health issues and addiction decriminalized, and handled instead through restorative justice, social workers, and diversion programs. As one member expressed, **“My vision of justice does not include anyone who is struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues [being] incarcerated in any form.”**

“Redesigning the Criminal Legal System”

When asked, “In your own words, if you could go back to Square One and design a new criminal legal system, what would that system look like?” participants’ answers converged around three ideas:

- Restorative justice
- Community justice
- Mental health care

Many stakeholders centered restorative justice in their ideal systems. One participant said they desired, **“a restorative justice-based system, a system more concerned with good outcomes for all than with retribution and getting even with people.”** Participants desired a system that **“makes space for the gray”** and understands the nuances of each individual situation. They imagined a **“truly restorative instead of punitive”** system.

Participants frequently mentioned community when imagining a new justice system. One participant envisioned **“a society where communities know each other, and the people in the community know each other,”** while another explained they wanted to see the system

“villagenized,” or made into small communities of people looking out for each other. Justice would look like **“community taking care of community... If there was a conflict within the community, or a crisis within the community, the community took care of it... I don't even think it will be called the criminal legal system. It would simply be about community; community safety, community commitment, community abundance, community resources.”**

Finally, stakeholders imagined a system that responds to mental health issues with therapy, social services, or medication, rather than incarceration. One stakeholder explained, **“There would be no county jails, there would only be resource centers, wellness centers, and mental health support... We would have resources in communities, where we saw each other as people and we felt responsibility for one another's success and responsibilities for one another's failure.”**

What “Justice” Means to Participants

When asked, “What does the term justice mean to you?” answers converged around:

- Fairness and equity
- Balance
- Religious values
- Ending harm

Stakeholders frequently mentioned fairness and equity. As one participant explained, **“Justice for me, is equitable. Justice... pays attention to the needs of the individual as well as the needs of the society. Justice... centers first the victim, but also the person who transferred harm, so that there is an opportunity for viewing humanity differently.”**

Participants also commonly described the ideas of balance and **“giving and getting what is deserved”** to make amends in the aftermath of harm. One stakeholder explained: **“I guess it means that people get what they're owed, with a positive connotation... I think justice is maybe a communal offering of what people are owed, what people need to survive, thrive.”** In other words, **“Justice is giving every [person their] due... [it's] when**

there's some sort of a synergy, or sameness, between a wrong and what happens after." Similarly participants spoke of justice as **"being in right relation with each other."**

Many stakeholders connected the idea of justice to their religious values. For instance, one said, **"When I hear the word justice, I often think of Jesus, from my religious views... Jesus was firm, he was assertive, but he cared about people."** Another stakeholder explained, **"To me... it's a religious term. And it means that everyone would have the same opportunities. People squander opportunities, because people are free to do that. But justice means that there is an evenness to a society. It's not tilted one way or the other. It doesn't mean retribution in my head, because that's not what it means as I studied to preach and teach... It just means equity and equality and access."**

Finally, respondents emphasized the importance of ending harm and making people whole. One participant explained, **"It means abating harm, stopping the harm. It means repair, respect, restitution."** Another said, **"If you have been abused or punished or suffered or harmed, justice to me is being made whole."** Another explained, **"When something harmful is done there is an equitable fashion in which the harm is addressed. The person who has caused harm is held accountable and punished. The person who harm has been done to is able to hold said parties accountable. And collectively as a community, we figure out ways in which the person who has been harmed is able to abate said harm and move forward with the support that they need."**

What "Accountability" Means to Participants

When asked, "What does the term accountability mean to you?" stakeholders frequently used the word *responsibility*. They also defined accountability as:

- A form of restorative justice
- A chance to repair harm done
- Showing care for a person
- Individualized atonement
- Understanding the circumstances that led to harm

Many participants connected accountability to responsibility. One expressed that accountability is not about punishment, but rather about assuming responsibility. Similarly, another participant emphasized that accountability entails, **“holding people responsible for their actions. And that’s all the way from the top to the bottom.”**

Accountability, participants noted, takes place within relationships. As one stakeholder said, **“You’re responsible for your actions. And... [there] are people that are holding you responsible for the actions... [They] are people that hopefully love you, and care about you and want the best for you.”** Another member spoke similarly: **“Accountability should be community-led... a circle of accountability partners. It should be organic, authentic, and non damaging.”**

Relatedly, stakeholders emphasized accountability as an act of care. One said, **“[I]f we’re held accountable... whenever I think about being held by something, I think of that being... a caring, kind of protective thing... There’s intentionality behind it to... create something good... versus just us[ing] it as a... form of punishment.”**

What “Community Safety” Means to Participants

When asked, “What does the term community safety mean to you?” respondents emphasized protection and the ability to live without fear, while also asserting the community’s right to determine its own needs. Answers also included:

- Acceptance and inclusion
- Addressing social factors like food insecurity and employment opportunities
- The ability to be one’s self and feel comfortable and secure in community
- The ability to prosper

Many stakeholders mentioned the role of the community in determining what keeps members safe. As one participant noted, **“Community safety means that our community has decided on what measures are acceptable for safety. I know some people believe in guns, some people don’t. I know some people believe in fences, some people don’t. So I say that that would be a community thing, where each community gets to decide what safety**

looks like for them, whether it'd be patrolled officers, or it'd be... neighbors that... patrol their own neighborhood."

Participants also emphasized the importance of being responsible for fellow community members. One stakeholder stated, **"Maybe if we... thought about who our neighbor is, and if we found out that our neighbor was someone who... is really struggling, then... we do things to maybe help that person out, like take extra things in our cupboard to that person, or recommend them to a church... For me, it's... knowing your community, knowing each other [and] helping our fellow [people]."** Here, stakeholders underscored their belief that building a strong community hinges on understanding and offering a helping hand.

Similarly, another stakeholder noted, **"Community safety means that... we look out for each other. Community safety means that we help each other get their needs met, when they're not being met. Community safety means that we have spaces where our kids can play on the playground outside and don't have to feel like they're gonna get shot. Community safety means that... I can have an advocate that looks or feels like me, supporting me, and I can also have an advocate who doesn't look or feel like me, supporting me, to be able to get my needs met, [even] if I have done something that's caused harm."**

Finally, stakeholders mentioned the ability to prosper. One participant stated, **"Allowing people to prosper in their own environment. A good community that's safe and just and hold[s] everyone accountable is like the best place to grow up."**

What "Narrative Change" Means to Participants and How Narrative Change Happens

Participants were asked, "What does the term narrative change mean to you?" and "How would you say narrative change happens?" Stakeholders frequently described narrative change as a shift in culture and in the way things are talked about. To this end, participants emphasized the role of storytelling in changing mindsets.

Respondents repeatedly referenced storytelling, and the power of being able to tell one's own story. One participant said, **“[N]arrative change would mean that the person, the organization, the family, they would get to... tell their story. And... we wouldn't have so many editors. If we could change that, to where people weren't trying to polish, alter, or modify what the real story is, if we were able to highlight some of the most beautiful aspects of a person's narrative and story... that's what narrative change looks like to me.”**

Similarly, another stakeholder stated, **“The stories we tell about how the world works define... what the world is going to turn into. I think everything is a story and none of us are capable of... actually knowing all of the complex details of the world, so we turn things into stories that capture some facet of it. And those... stories that we end up telling are really powerful.”**

Other participants spoke to the importance of diversifying available narratives. One stakeholder said, **“Narrative change to me means putting stories on the table that are not already on the table. I don't know that you can completely erase narratives that have already been established... [B]ut it does mean that new stories and new ways of thinking, new ideas can be louder.”**

Narrative change, participants noted, means changing how people think, act, and speak. As one stakeholder noted, **“[N]arrative change means a shift in how we think and speak about people who are impacted by our system... about people that are targeted by our system, about neighborhoods or communities that are targeted by [the] system... They're not criminals or degenerate or deficient in whatever it may be. But... they're just like us.”** Similarly, another stakeholder said, **“Words matter. Words have power. So... in this conversation, you and I haven't said criminal justice. We've said criminal legal reform. I haven't referred to the women at Mabel Bassett as inmates... [W]e're changing the narrative. And the more that we change the way that we talk about things, the more we change the way that we see things, and that's powerful.”** This type of change, participants noted, can add to a **“paradigm shift in culture.”**

When reflecting on how narrative change takes place, stakeholders noted the power of education to change discourse. They also spoke about:

- Influential people using their voices

- People who have been impacted by harmful narratives sharing their stories
- Narrative change as a community-led initiative
- Understanding the role of history

Many participants emphasized the power of thoughtful and careful conversations to contribute to high-level narrative change. One participant noted, **“I think [narrative change] happens through proximity. People getting to know folks. I think it happens through education. I think it happens through disseminating other messages.”** Another member spoke similarly: **“A lot of impactful narrative change comes from conversations... individual-level conversations are really, really impactful.”** Relatedly, stakeholders frequently mentioned the role of the community in guiding discussions that facilitate narrative change.

Whether and How Participants Engaged in Narrative Change

Participants were asked, “Are there ways you feel you have engaged in narrative change in either your current or past work?” Most stakeholders answered strongly in the affirmative. Some, however, felt uncertain about whether they had participated in narrative change. Those who said they had engaged in narrative change work emphasized:

- Their language, words, and writing
- Their service to underrepresented communities
- Their efforts to bring about greater dialogue
- Speaking the truth

Many participants relayed changing the language they used based on things they had learned from Square One, or helping others to do the same. As one stakeholder noted, **“I think... for me, the easiest way that I’ve been able to do that is just through language. The more I learned the different language to describe things, the more I use it in my everyday life, and the more that I’m able to educate others on why I’m using certain language.”**

Other participants described having or facilitating challenging conversations to bring about narrative change. One stakeholder said, **“A lot of the narrative change I have participated in has really been on the individual level... taking advantage of the setting that I'm in, with being in college... and talking with classmates and talking with my friends and with my professors about things that I've learned. And I think I'm the only person in most of my classes who [has] actually been inside of a prison. And so taking the opportunity to say... I have actually been here and the stereotypes that you hold are not true.”** Another stakeholder spoke similarly: **“As an educator... we have students on this campus who are justice involved, and I have a Dean who referred to a justice involved student, as a ‘crook.’ Language matters... Part of the narrative change I've engaged with is really how I interact with people when I hear them using language like that...and really speaking up and trying to correct the language.”**

Stakeholders also underscored the connection between narrative change work and community engagement. One member said they engaged in narrative change work **“every single day, all the way down to knocking on the door, and educating people about the work we do and asking them about what they want to see for their community... So I think it's just a part of who we [stakeholder's organization] are. And not just talking about it, but modeling and being about it.”**

Finally, some participants explained that the idea of narrative change has shifted how they go about their work. One stakeholder noted, **“I have definitely [engaged in] narrative change, trying to make sure that I don't walk around with my hammer, and see every problem as a nail. I understand that I may not have the tool that's going to fix anything... I have definitely participated in narrative change by understanding that I don't know everything, and that I'm willing to be flexible on what I know.”**

Conclusion

While stakeholders expressed concerns about legislation and policies that hamper justice in Oklahoma, many felt optimistic about the future, and drew hope from the number of people willing to fight for equity in the state. The above summary testifies to the diverse, meaningful work being undertaken by stakeholders in Oklahoma seeking to effect change. It also points to shared understandings of injustice, and identifies pathways to building a more just state for all Oklahomans.

Report Authorship

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