



The Square One Project in Oklahoma

Summary Analysis of Stakeholder Meetings and Public Roundtables

Overview

From March 2022 to December 2023, The Square One Project convened local stakeholders in Oklahoma to reimagine justice in the state. Participants met for eight small-group meetings and gathered for two, two-day Roundtables.¹ This report summarizes the evolution of participants' discussions and ideas over the course of their work together.

Summary of Meetings

In Year 1, participants were divided by their professional affinity into six stakeholder groups: Business Leaders, Coinciding Social Sectors Leaders, Cultural Leaders, Faith Leaders, Government Leaders, and Movement Leaders. Each stakeholder group met four times, with discussions focused on the following themes:

- Meeting 1: *Hopes for the Future of Justice*
- Meeting 2: *The Racial History of Oklahoma's Criminal Legal System*

¹ YouTube videos are available for [Day 1](#) and [Day 2](#) of the first Roundtable (Feb 2023), and for [Day 1](#) and [Day 2](#) of the second Roundtable (Nov-Dec 2023).

- Meeting 3: *Violence and Punitive Excess*
- Meeting 4: *The Oklahoma Standard and Creating Thriving Communities*

In Year 2, participants were reassigned into new stakeholder groups, based on their geographic areas of interest: Rural, Suburbs, and two Cities groups. These new stakeholder groups met to consider the following discussion topics:

- Meeting 1: *Reflecting on Year 1 and Planning for Narrative Change*
- Meeting 2: *Planning for Narrative Change and Aspiring towards Community Safety*
- Meeting 3: *Community Safety, Gender-Based Violence, and Building Narrative Power*
- Meeting 4: *Reckoning with History and Creating a Culture of Repair*

These meetings culminated in two Roundtables, open to the public and live streamed on YouTube, in which stakeholders extended and consolidated their discussions. The goal at these Roundtables was to consider, in the words of Bruce Western, ways **“to make really fundamental change... to reduce racial inequality and make the system fairer for everyone.”** To this end, as Kris Steele reminded Roundtable participants, the goal of our conversation was **“not tinkering around the edges but going back to square one and reimagining our approach to justice, to safety.”**

Methods

Coding and Analysis

The eight waves of stakeholder group meetings—as listed above—as well as the two Roundtables were all recorded, and the conversations transcribed. The Square One research team closely read through these transcripts, using inductive coding to generate this report. Inductive coding is a ‘ground up’ approach to summarizing or analyzing data, wherein themes and narratives are permitted to emerge organically from the text under review.

Quotation and Attribution

The two public Roundtables were open to the public. As such, any direct quotations from the Roundtables that appear in this report are attributed to their speaker. By contrast, the eight stakeholder group meetings were off-the-record conversations; given this, direct quotations from stakeholder meetings appear without attribution.

This report features direct quotations wherever possible, seeking to minimize the voice of the research team and instead center the words, insights, and ideas shared by

participants. Still, generating and editing any summary involves authority, and by necessity excludes many strands of thought. As such, this report is less a definitive overview of everything discussed, but rather one of many possible summaries of the fruitful discussions among stakeholders in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma, Past and Present

Throughout our work together, participants grappled with fundamental questions about justice, safety, and community. These conversations were grounded deeply in the local context, and we sought to center Oklahoma’s unique history, politics, and dynamics.

Welcoming participants to one of the Roundtable convenings, for instance, Melvin Battiest explained that *Oklahoma* is a Native word from the Choctaw people. *Okla* connotes *people* and *nation*, and *homa* means honorable; *Oklahoma*, the honorable nation. Building on this reminder, Yvita Crider encouraged participants **to “dream of a better Oklahoma for all of us, envisioning that beloved community that embraces the values of dignity, balanced power, connectivity, restoration, and accountability.”**

Reckoning with History

Participants agreed that Oklahoma’s past has profoundly shaped its present. Much like the United States—which, George Young noted, has a history **“characterized by exceptional levels of violence. It was founded by colonial occupation and the genocide of First Peoples and sustained by an economy of enslaved people”**—Oklahoma, too, has a long history of racial violence and exclusion. This includes the Trail of Tears, the forced displacement of tens of thousands of Native people in the nineteenth century, in which, as Gene Perry explained, **“tribal nations were removed at the barrel of a gun.”** It also includes the 1921 Greenwood race massacre in Tulsa, in which white supremacists, among them government officials, murdered residents of the prosperous neighborhood known as Black Wall Street and destroyed homes and businesses. These collective traumas are foundational to Oklahoma’s current political and legal systems, which remain deeply unequal. The impact of these historic harms, members noted, remains evident today. As one participant explained, the railroad tracks that divided the Black neighborhood, Greenwood, from the rest of Tulsa still exist, as does the racial segregation the tracks have historically symbolized. In addition, **“Greenwood is still burning;”** residents of the community now face disproportionate police violence as well as socioeconomic harms including poverty and housing scarcity. As Kenneth

“K-Roc” Brant noted, the city of Tulsa has **“one map”** for countless negative outcomes, all of which concentrate in Greenwood.

Despite the ongoing influence of the past on the present, the harmful parts of Oklahoma’s history are frequently unacknowledged. Many people do not know, for instance, that the institution now known as policing began with slave patrols in the 1700s. Nor do they know about the Greenwood massacre or the forced displacement of Indigenous people. Many people, Tina Brown explained, are **“blissfully ignorant... They have no clue.”**

Yet this ignorance is not innocent, members agreed. Rather, history is often hidden, whitewashed, and censored. History, noted Kym Cravatt, is something **“we have trouble looking in the face.”** Tamara Lebak explained that officials are attempting to **“legislate the truth”** by erasing history from school curricula and public discussions. Histories of violence and cruelty are compounded by the refusal to acknowledge these harms.

Members agreed that reckoning with the past is essential to making positive change. As George Young said, **“The fruit is what we’re trying to deal with, but I don’t know if we can do that if we don’t deal with the root.”** Education and acknowledgement are essential first steps in a long process of repair that might lead to true healing and positive social change.

To this end, participants considered avenues for truth-telling and reckoning with history outside of official channels. They outlined ways, as Tonnia Anderson said, to **“push back the pushback.”** Members considered community-based truth-telling as a source of wellbeing; as Yvita Crider explained, **“teaching our history and passing it down is a key to our liberation.”** Members considered various settings for this type of community education, including community centers, schools, and after-school programs, as well as the church. JD Baker cautioned, however, that **“the church hasn’t always been a refuge, especially for Black queer people.”** As such, moving forward, communities should remember **“the state doesn’t have control, but neither does the church have control to tell these stories.”**

Present-Day Harms

Throughout our conversations, participants identified several overlapping and interrelated systems of harm, disenfranchisement, and inequality. **“Criminal justice is part of a much larger system of exploitation, oppression, [and] dehumanization,”** Tonnia Anderson noted.

White supremacy, which members identified as a root of systemic inequality, reaches through all spheres of life. It gives rise to a punitive legal system as well as structural socioeconomic inequities and outcomes. It also impacts people’s sense of self. Throughout

our conversations, many people spoke of the shame and trauma related to experiencing racism; members shared personal stories of the **“symptoms”** of growing up in a white supremacist society, including the psychic harm of narratives about Black and brown people’s criminality, as well as psychological wounds like constant anxiety and the need to be **“twice as good”** to get by.

“We are swimming in the waters of systemic racism, white supremacy, capitalism,” noted aurelius francisco. These durable structures powerfully resist change; they have formed social and economic realities that support a punitive legal system. Members noted, for instance, that politicians often feel obligated to be **“tough on crime”** to win votes. Likewise, carceral facilities are key to **“the economic survival of these local communities”** in which they are situated. Over and again, participants drew attention to what Reggie Hines called, **“the economics of this whole situation.”** Just as **“slavery was all about economics,”** we must consider the reality that prisons provide **“an economic boost”** in many rural areas, offering correctional careers and local prosperity to local residents. Members also discussed how the legal system enacts economic harm on impacted folks, including by levying fines and fees on justice-involved people. This causes many people to leave the system **“with a black cloud over their head, of the fines and fees they’re going to be paying the rest of their lives”** as Leslie Osborn put it.

In addition to systemic racism and the imperatives of capitalism, members considered the role played by patriarchy and misogyny in the legal system. Women in Oklahoma, participants agreed, are often punished for abuse they and their children experience. Members spoke about unjust **“failure to protect”** laws, in which women experiencing domestic violence are criminally prosecuted if their abusers also abuse their children. Women are frequently held to higher standards than men, participants suggested; they are punished not only for crimes but also for perceived deviance from norms of femininity. Women can be punished for **“stepping out of place,”** members shared, or for **“being a bad mother.”**

Oklahoma’s high incarceration rate of women leads to cycles of generational harm, where children of incarcerated mothers are subjected to the formative early trauma of parental separation. The incarceration of women also sheds light on the interrelation of systems of harm; owing to the long history of racialized police violence, many women experiencing domestic violence do not feel comfortable working with systems that have criminalized their families and communities. This often leaves women with few options to escape dangerous situations.

Rewriting Harmful Narratives in Oklahoma

In each meeting, participants considered the narratives that exist in Oklahoma about crime, safety, and punishment. Narratives reflect people's shared interpretations of how the world works, and justify policies and systems that shape people's lives. Together, participants identified the narratives used to enable harsh policing and punishment, and considered new narratives that could transform our approach to justice, safety, and community well-being.

Harmful Narratives about Crime and Punishment

A dominant narrative in Oklahoma, participants agreed, is the idea that being 'tough on crime' is the only way to defend the community from danger and violence. Oklahoma, members noted, is framed as a **"safe, salt-of-the-earth-place,"** an idyll that must be defended. In this narrative, safety is defined as **"freedom from dangerous strangers,"** something won through aggressive policing and incarceration; as Tina Brown put it, by **"keeping certain people off the streets."**

The media helps perpetuate these narratives. It stokes a fear of crime and of 'criminals' through clickbait social media depictions of crime rates, and TV shows that glorify policing known as 'copaganda.' Moreover, media narratives are deeply racialized; as Tonnia Anderson explained, the **"marketing that we see on Fox News"** shows Black people as **"beasts"** and Native people as **"savages;"** these tropes establish a threat and a solution in the form of a punitive legal system.

Most current narratives, members reflected, **"equate public safety with the carceral system."** This version of public safety relies on mass fear, which is often stoked, especially around elections, to make people support punitive policies and politicians. People are made to fear any type of reform, and led to believe that **"If we let off even a little bit, the whole world will catch on fire and I'm going to lose it all."**

Yet excessive punishment and mass incarceration actually undermine community safety and well-being. First, incarceration creates cycles of harm and violence. It not only harms people who spend time in carceral facilities, where they are often exposed to trauma and violence, but can also break up family relationships, taking a lasting toll on children's wellbeing. Relatedly, it undermines the very type of neighborhood stability and relationship continuity—what Vered Harris called **"propinquity"**—that makes communities safe. In addition, these narratives ensure high levels of continued spending on police and prisons, at

direct cost to the types of community investments that—as discussed below—can cultivate truly safe neighborhoods and cities.

Another harmful narrative that participants identified was **“individualism.”** An individualist narrative reduces crime to simply an individual shortcoming, promoting the idea that **“there are irredeemable, violent criminals in our state”** rather than considering how crime takes place in certain situations and contexts. The idea that people should **“pull themselves up by the bootstraps”** and **“make good choices”** pervades all sorts of policy decisions. This includes the reluctance to give people government support and assistance, as well as the harsh punishments imposed on people who have **“made poor choices.”**

Individualism means that people who are poor or struggling or justice-involved are often blamed for their own hardships; rarely do people seek to understand the long-term, structural, and historic factors that shape someone’s trajectory. Moreover, by denying historic and systemic forms of harm, individualism also enables racism by eliding the past and ongoing power of white supremacy. These narratives support and enforce the current regime of excessive punishment in the state.

Faith in Oklahoma

In multiple meetings, participants considered how faith and faith-based ideologies shore up the punitive legal system in Oklahoma, a state colloquially called “the buckle of the Bible Belt.” The state suffers, Cece Jones Davis noted, from **“poor theology.”** She noted, **“In a state where something like 70 percent of Oklahomans identify as Christians, and 80 percent of those identify as Evangelical, I don’t believe we can move the needle on criminal justice reform, health care, education, or anything else until we deal with our bad theology.”**

The belief in a punitive, vengeful God is used to justify excessive punishment, many participants noted. As Jon Middendorf explained, **“We suffer because of evangelical theology that understands God as a punitive God and the law as the ultimate expression of faith.”** Adam Luck similarly noted, **“the death penalty doesn’t exist... in spite of Christians, it exists because of Christians.... Without the church, the United States could not do what it does with capital punishment.”**

A selective interpretation of holy texts enables the use of theology in a way that ignores and even perpetuates gender and race-based inequities within a legal system designed and run largely by white men. Lawmakers, noted Clarence Prevost, **“use faith to justify their decisions... They misrepresent the Word.”** Other participants considered the **“unholy relationship between money, power, and faith,”** including the fact that

“throughout history, power and religion have been attracted to one another like bugs and lice.” Other participants spoke to this affinity: the colonization of America, including the genocide of Indigenous people, was justified by the Catholic Church’s **“doctrine of discovery.”** Slavery, too, **“was justified with Bible verses,”** noted Tamika White.

Yet at various points, other participants pushed back, insisting on the value of faith. **“I believe if folks do not have a faith, they don’t see anything bigger than themselves, it’s hard for them to be connected to humanity,”** one participant said. Another spoke of the historic importance of the Church to Black and brown communities: **“as far as support systems, especially in the Black and brown community, it has always been the religious communities who have been able to provide different things but also to advocate for change a lot of times.”** Some members also shared personal stories of how faith enabled them to persevere through adversity, including incarceration. Faith, Maria Morris explained, **“made me believe in something bigger than myself. It gave my life purpose again.”**

Other members, however, noted that faith is not the same as religious tradition; Cece Jones-Davis encouraged specificity with language, and an understanding that unlike faith, which lives in minds and hearts, religion is **“an institutionalized set of ideas”** that has **“been at the forefront of most of the massacres throughout human history.”** Encompassing *both* the reality that faith can offer meaning, purpose, and community membership *and* the fact that religious values are used to uphold harmful, racist, and punitive systems, she called for attention to the **“difference between the damage that religion has done and the faith we want to exude.”**

In addition, participants noted that religion also holds the potential to contribute powerfully to new narratives. As Clarence Prevost noted, **“Most of the Gospel is about redemption.”** As such, ideas that are already essential to many religious traditions—including grace, forgiveness, and mercy—could, if they were taught and adopted more broadly, support a system focused on rehabilitation, redemption, and second chances.

The Oklahoma Standard

Another topic about which participants debated was the notion of the ‘Oklahoma Standard,’ defined as **“a particular standard of care, most often after disasters,”** a standard rooted in acts of service, honor, and kindness. The Oklahoma Standard has been part of the state’s self-image for decades, most notably since the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing.

Members all agreed that such a standard is not **“extended to folks who for one reason or another are assumed to be responsible for the disaster they find themselves in,”**

including justice-involved people. Kris Steele explained, **“We like how [the idea of the Oklahoma Standard] makes us feel, but... we have to be honest... We apply it in limited circumstances, not consistently.”** We do not apply the standard, Kris noted, to victims of state-sanctioned violence, of poverty, to victims of racism and trauma. Members pointed out the hypocrisy—the **“triteness,”** as Tonnia Anderson said—of espousing values of respect and honor given the active and ongoing harm and violence perpetuated by the state against many of its most vulnerable members. Tiffany Crutcher spoke similarly: **“Can we say these are our values... when we haven’t dealt with the historical harms inflicted on Black and brown people in our state? How can we say that... when your zip code determines what type of education you get?”**

Everybody agreed that the standard was not applied across the board. Participants also considered further limitations, including, as JD Baker explained, the fact that the notion originated as a crisis response, which—much like punishment itself—is reactive and not proactive. **“How do we proactively give acts of service? How do we proactively honor the dignity and the humanity of other people?”** he urged us to consider.

Given these limitations and shortcomings, members debated whether to advocate for its broader enforcement, or to start over with a new set of guiding aspirational principles. Some participants advocated doing away with the idea itself. Much like the Constitution of the United States, the Oklahoma Standard **“was written with certain people in mind,”** Cece Jones-Davis noted. It also parallels, she suggested, the idea of American exceptionalism: **“It’s rooted in this idea of we’re the best. God loves us the most... I think we need to throw it away. I think we need a brand new model.”** NegroSpiritual121 said, **“The Oklahoma Standard has been a good-old-boy system: nepotism, poor education, over-incarceration, old money, controlling everything, hoarding stolen wealth, stolen land, stolen resources, and football. That’s the Oklahoma Standard.”** Another participant noted, **“As it comes from our current governor, there is no standard other than... how do we protect white life and white riches?”**

Yet others insisted on its potential value. **“I don’t think the words are flawed,”** noted Ayana Lawson. **“I just don’t think it’s being followed... Is it wrong to teach the fundamentals? What is wrong with honor, service, and kindness?”**

A related conversation considered the inadequacy—and even the sinister potential—of espousing ‘niceness.’ Participants spoke of a neighborly ‘niceness’ in Oklahoma that can actually prevent people from engaging in challenging conversations that might translate into real reckoning or political change. However, in a moment of hope, some

participants reflected that while Oklahoman niceness can hide many sins, it can also indicate a sincerity and openness to dialogue.

Throughout our conversations, members reflected on the potential of a refined Oklahoma Standard, one that, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s model of a **“beloved community”** centers mutual aid, support, and care. Participants over and over again emphasized our responsibility to one another, and underscored our need, as Francie Ekwerekwu noted, **“to be each other’s keepers.”** They shared ideals like, **“Each one, reach one; each one, teach one.”** To build an inclusive, safe beloved community that underscores the dignity and humanity of all people, Necona Pewewardy urged us to **“Keep telling everybody what the beauty is inside of them... [so that] everybody feels everywhere that they are family and community.”**

New Narratives: Community Safety

As well as drawing on religious notions like mercy, grace, and redemption, and applying key tenets of the Oklahoma Standard to ensure that each person is treated with dignity, members outlined other narratives that could transform how the state responds to harm and violence.

A key narrative that participants hoped to change was the very definition of safety. As discussed above, members expressed that despite the prevalent fear-based narrative that defines safety as freedom from ‘violent criminals,’ true safety comes not from police or prisons, but rather from connections and relationships. Safe communities are communities that have employment opportunities, living wages, healthcare, access to food, public spaces like parks, transportation, quality affordable housing, equitable access to education with culturally competent teachers, clean drinking water, sidewalks and streetlights, after school programs, and more.

By investing in communities, we could address the conditions that can give rise to interpersonal violence; proactively creating safe communities would be a better, more humane, and more effective response to harm than the reactive state violence of policing and incarceration, many participants agreed. We need people to understand, aurelius francisco said, that by **“investing in policing, investing in incarceration, we’re throwing our dollars away.”** We need, participants argued, new narratives that fundamentally transform our understanding of safety, and which justify mass investment in social systems rooted in human flourishing.

To bring about these new narratives, members noted, people need to **“know how bad the system is.”** This would help galvanize people to commit to making change. To this end, we need not only more robust public education about historic and ongoing inequities and harms, but we also need to shift the narrative away from the idea that we have a **‘broken system’** and towards the idea that the system is fulfilling its goals and in fact working exactly as it was intended to work.

Some participants hoped to see better public education on ideas related to justice and the social contract. Others pushed back against this idea, given current censorship in educational settings, and pointed out how the public school system is itself often a site of punishment, exclusion, and harm for Black and brown children.

As well as bringing greater awareness and more data to members of the public, many participants spoke specifically to their own professional experiences to consider how targeted awareness-raising could help transform the punitive legal system. Examples ranged from educating legal practitioners including judges, prosecutors, and attorneys about ACE scores, trauma, addiction, and mental illness, to ensuring that people who staff state agencies **“know the communities they’re serving.”**

Responses to Harm

Members discussed how changing our narratives about safety could radically change our understanding of the police. The role of policing drove a keen debate at one roundtable. **“What is the role of law enforcement? Do we see there being a role for law enforcement in safety creation?”** asked Anamika Dwivedi.

On the one hand, some participants called for improving existing police forces, including by bringing greater training and diversity to law enforcement. **“Do we need police? Yes. Is it working right now? No,”** argued Janiya James. We need to **“teach police how to police,”** she suggested, ensuring police are there to **“protect and serve.”** Pushing back, however, Tiffany Crutcher, said, **“Training has been a very expensive failure.”**

Some participants noted that policing is essentially reactive, often responding after the fact of harm, rather than working to prevent it. Reggie Hines noted that while police currently train on **“reactive measures like handcuffing, takedown procedures,”** he would like to see more funds allocated to proactive programs including de-escalation. To this, however, T Sheri Dickerson noted that even de-escalation training is filled with bias. aurelius francisco further noted, **“Police have proven to be inept at de-escalating situations.”** He continued,

“The primary function of policing, of the carceral state, is to control and exploit communities... it’s not to serve and to protect, but to control. To maintain order. What kind of order? A white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal order.”

While discussing the role and value of policing, members considered the difference between individual officers and the institution itself. Wayland Cubit talked of the pressures facing Black officers, many of whom are labeled **“traitors”** by their communities. He said, **“There’s a lot of Black officers that joined for the same reason we’re sitting at this table: justice.”** aurelius francisco responded, however, that, **“Any cop can be great but we can’t have individual arguments for an institutional problem.”** Relatedly, JD Baker pointed to important intersectionalities: **“I still don’t trust a Black cop to save my queer self. I don’t trust a Black cop to respond to me when I’m in a bipolar disorder episode.”**

Members also discussed the extravagant funding given to police, money that is often spent on new equipment that reflects increasing militarization. Reggie Hines expressed that **“In law enforcement, we like those bells and whistles,”** while others pointed out that militarization predictably leads to dehumanization.

While discussing questions of funding, Reggie Hines cautioned that many people **“switch off”** when you talk about defunding the police. Relatedly, Gene Perry said, **“We need to be real that Oklahomans in general are very supportive of the police.”** Given this, participants considered the possibility of reallocating funds into programming and into communities. What if, one participant suggested, we could **“shift resources that are going toward the justice system toward investment in ... communities themselves?”**

Despite the areas of tension, participants generally agreed that police are too often tasked with actions outside their expertise; as Gene Perry noted, **“We don’t have first responders when there is a mental health crisis or a poverty crisis.”**

Participants offered new ways to **“truly take care of one another through community-based solutions.”** Yet members noted that despite a narrative vaunting **“local control,”** the state often resists community-based efforts to respond to harm. Too often, communities are told, as Kris Steele explained, **“you’re not allowed to develop solutions when it comes to issues of reconciliation, justice, and healing.”**

Nonetheless, participants considered different models for harm response, including restorative and transformative justice paradigms, many of which are informed by Native and Indigenous practices. These models **“seek to respond to harm and violence without creating more harm and violence.”**

In such models, which consider context, history, personality, and more, all parties impacted by harm come together and agree on how to make things as right as possible. The emphasis is not on punishment, but on restoration and in particular on restoring relationships. Some members spoke of the potential of faith leaders to create a palatable, theologically-grounded narrative of restoration.

Participants agreed that better responses to harm would center dignity and humanity. As Doug Shaffer emphasized, **“Recognizing humanity has got to be a centerpiece to anything that the justice system does.”**

Community-based responses to harm would reduce the trauma and violence that justice-involved people often encounter in the system. It would also help people reintegrate into their communities. **“Every single person has the capacity to redeem themselves, to do better,”** noted aurelius francisco. **“And we have to ask ourselves if prison is the right place for them to do that work.”** Rather than exposing people to the violence of incarceration, burdening them with financial costs, and undermining their ability to work after release with demanding supervision conditions, alternative responses to harm could work to help people flourish and avoid future involvement with the legal system.

By spending less money on police and prisons, most participants agreed, we could invest in people, neighborhoods, and communities. In so doing, we could address the root causes that give rise to crime and violence, and bring about meaningful safety.

Accountability

Closely related to the idea of restorative or transformative justice is the notion of accountability. This multilayered concept came up in several conversations over our two years of discussions.

Individual-Level Accountability

Instead of punishment, which is aimed at retribution and retaliation, many participants considered that a better response to harm lies in the idea of accountability. Whereas punishment is done *to* a person, and is as such fundamentally passive, accountability is active; it requires a person to draw on their own agency to take responsibility for their actions, and for any harm they have caused. Our current legal system not only emphasizes punishment, but actually works to make accountability impossible, many members noted. Our current system does not support victims of crime or offer healing. It often prevents parties

involved in harm from being in communication and achieving any kind of reconciliation. Relatedly, when faced with mandatory minimums in an excessively punitive system, our current laws disincentivize people from being honest about harm they have caused.

Prioritizing accountability rather than punishment could help heal victims of crime while ensuring that people who have caused harm take responsibility for their actions.

Democratic Accountability

Many of our discussions considered stubborn political realities in the state of Oklahoma, and the need to hold public officials accountable. Political change must be a central goal of justice work, many participants reminded us. **“To change this whole infrastructure, we’ve got to look at the politics,”** Reggie Hines explained. This is no easy task, given entrenched political realities including punitive DA’s, conservative politicians, and powerful police unions. While some people noted that removing harmful officials is of limited utility, given the enduring and foundational systemic problems, others spoke to the power of democratic mobilization and the importance of achieving better demographic representation.

Along with social movements that work to hold police and elected officials accountable, many participants spoke about the importance of voting. As Ololade Yerokun explained, **“We the people need to take accountability for the people we elect.”** Others argued that, **“Maybe our folks would have a different government if more of us would participate in it,”** or spoke of the importance of registering people to vote, and cultivating a political consciousness among younger generations. Yet some participants shared conflicting views about the power of voting. It is hard, they noted, to make a difference in a state when many or even most people hold racist views; **“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,”** one participant suggested, quoting Audre Lorde. Relatedly, suggesting that voting can solve systemic problems risks, as Francie Ekwerekwu said, **“putting the burden on marginalized communities as voters to end their oppression.”**

Nonetheless, participants outlined ways that community members could become positively and proactively involved in the legal system. This includes serving on juries whenever possible, attending court as a court watcher, and sharing information about elections for judges.

Relatedly, people advocated for exerting pressure over the use of public funds; as Hannah Royce reminded us, **“Budgets are moral contracts.”** When faced with difficult realities—like the fact that Oklahoma spends more money on incarceration than on education—we need to advocate for an approach to spending that aligns with our vision for

community safety. As Doug Shaffer noted, people are outraged about canceling student loan debt, but happy to spend money locking people up: **“which is the better investment there?”** he asked.

Reparations

Related to the discussion about the use of public funds was the topic of reparations. Participants considered ongoing local debates about the possibility of reparations for descendants of the Greenwood massacre, in which along with the brutal violence and loss of life was the destruction of intergenerational wealth. Reparations, members considered, could take many forms, from legal recognition to symbolic financial reparations to significant community reinvestment and financial aid to address the community’s needs.

Members had mixed opinions about the possibility and efficacy of various outcomes. One member said reparations are, bluntly, unlikely to happen. Another insisted that an apology is not good enough; any legal or official recognition must be accompanied by reparations in restitution for the losses. Yet some debts cannot be repaid, one member asserted. The scale of loss and the consequent multi-generational struggle cannot be undone. Given this, what does healing look like?

Any such efforts, members agreed, would need to be led by people close to the problem. **“It’s so important to listen to those impacted about... what they seek for reparations, what they seek for justice, rather than being an outsider prescribing that,”** one member said. Meaningful alternatives to direct reparations could involve community healing initiatives, like mental health support and trauma-informed care to address the community’s generational and historical trauma. Other members tied this movement to the Land Back movement in Native communities; the primary goal, in the aftermath of devastating historical trauma and loss, is to ensure that people today have safety, opportunities, and the ability to build good lives in the present.

Making Change

A recurrent theme throughout the conversations was how to translate discussion into action. Reggie Hines said, **“As the old saying said, ‘I’m tired of being tired.’ It’s time for us to do something. We need movement.”** Many members spoke of their desire for tangible action and change; narrative change, one participant reminded us, must be rooted in community organizing, otherwise it risks becoming **“elevated comms.”** To this end, the group shared

several ideas or recommendations to bring about the type of change participants would like to see in Oklahoma.

Stories

Participants repeatedly spoke to the value of sharing stories. As Kris Steele said, **“Storytelling may be our most powerful weapon right now to change the narrative in the state of Oklahoma.”** Whereas data can be useful, it is human stories that can most often break past rigid ideological beliefs. Instead of talking with friends and neighbors about abstract political issues, members encouraged one another to put names and faces to concepts under discussion. Similarly, Tina Brown suggested a **“‘What’s your story’ campaign”** to **“uplift people’s voices, tell their stories, and humanize people who have been criminalized.”** Stories can help refamiliarize people with the values they already have; as Tonnia Anderson reminded us, most people already believe in forgiveness.

This connected to another aspect of the work that members underlined: the enjoinder to *make it personal*. Even at our own tables, people shared wrenching personal experiences that motivated their own commitment to justice. This helped foster solidarity and connection, fortifying the group for the work ahead.

Language and Dialogue

Relatedly, members repeatedly considered the importance of language in making positive change. We not only discussed language that feels more apt and accurate—including the term ‘criminal *legal* system’ instead of ‘criminal *justice* system,’ for a system that too often feels devoid of justice—but also considered how to limit the harm we cause with our own speech. Routinely, members held one another accountable for using terms or words that could be hurtful or marginalizing, including for people convicted of certain types of crimes or people with various mental health conditions. Participants encouraged one another to similarly act as **“language warriors”** in their own circles, noting that language is a key facet of narratives about justice, harm, and safety.

Participants also considered the political implications of using certain words. Many words, including ‘defund’ come with political baggage that can, in Oklahoma, be conversation-ending; members spoke of the need to talk **“in a language people understand.”** NegroSpiritual121 said, **“Certain keywords and triggers just turn [people’s] eardrums off.”** As an example, he relayed replacing the term “white privilege” with **“BIPOC disadvantages”** because some white people, especially those who have experienced

intergenerational poverty or hardships related to substance use, don't feel privileged. Attention to language, many members noted, can help extend our ability to reach across the aisle and have challenging conversations that might lead to change.

Yet there was not always agreement on the value, possibility, or potential of having such difficult conversations. While some participants expressed gratitude for the ability to have these Square One convenings with a group of people largely **"on the same wavelength,"** others wished for more generative conflict and disagreement. **"Some of the people that need to be here are missing. They need to hear the truth that was told,"** Reggie Hines suggested. In many meetings, participants considered how to expand the conversational circle to bring more people in, without losing the ability to have honest, engaged, and caring discussions.

A language-based moment of narrative change in our own convenings took place at the second roundtable, when members discussed how the conversation itself had helped people change their understanding of the term 'violence.' One participant said that not until the roundtable did they conceive of violence as **"anything more than physical"** or realize that violence can include **"segregation and hunger and homelessness"** and other forms of harm enacted by the state, including the violence of the criminal legal system. Another participant spoke similarly, sharing their new understanding that violence does not only take place between individuals. Rather, **"When community-building resources such as education, food, health supports, economic opportunities are allocated to certain communities to the exclusion of others, usually communities of color, that's also violence."** In fact, some members articulated, **"Oftentimes, individual acts of violence are predicated by the structural ones, the lack of resources, the lack of opportunities."**

Building Diverse Coalitions

People working in social justice often operate in silos, members noted. Faced with the uphill struggle of making positive change, people need to share their power and identify basic things they agree on and can work together to pursue.

To this end, a repeated refrain was the idea of **"marketing."** **"Liberal people don't like to market. The conservatives do,"** Tonnia Anderson noted. However, part of the work at hand, as Hannah Royce explained, is to **"craf[t] our campaign... the long game of love."**

We discussed how to make people care about problems that they don't believe impact them. Some participants shared a wish that everyone would care about inequality as a moral, human issue; Laynie Gottsch asked, **"How can we make people say, 'I don't need to**

see myself in this to want it to change?” Yet Tina Brown said, **“Do we wait for that?... I would love everyone to have humanity at the core of their hearts, and want to do the right thing. But the reality is some of these folks are not going to be moved by your social arguments. And so it is figuring out, when you are in these rooms, what is going to move them.”**

In seeking to make positive legislative and political change, members discussed **“building a big tent.”** One participant noted, **“Our reasons don’t have to be everybody’s reasons.”** For example, even if legislators don’t care about mass incarceration as a moral issue, perhaps they care about it as an economic inefficiency. Perhaps taxpayers, too, could be mobilized to oppose mass incarceration by relaying the enormous associated costs.

Some participants suggested that diverse messaging is essential. As Ayana Lawson said, **“You can’t sell the same thing to everyone.”** Tina Brown spoke similarly: **“If you are having a meeting with the police, and you are going to the business community, and you are going to a non-profit, if your pitch is the same in all those rooms, you are doing it wrong.”** Adding to this, Cece Jones Davis said, **“You’ve got to be able to speak in tongues. You have to be able to speak different languages to different people.”**

This paralleled other discussions about movement ecology, and the diversity of roles available for people seeking to make change. **“Not everybody’s in the street with their fist up. Some people are in the courtroom. Some people are in the corporation. Some people are in the prisons doing data collection,”** one member said. **“You can’t fight in other people’s armor,”** said another. **“We all have a role to play, whatever it is, big or small,”** Tiffany Crutcher reminded us. In pursuing our goals, we should be guided by our strengths and our authenticity.

Members also outlined some common pitfalls that—along with stubborn political realities—can inhibit movement progress. This included the way that individual ego can interfere with progress, and the risk that people who work to change systems from within can grow jaded and end up perpetuating the same systems’ harm.

Funding

Members spoke about the pragmatic reality of needing funding to support their work. Often, this need leaves organizers vulnerable to the whims of **“philanthrocapitalism”** in which people **“mak[e] money off of poor people’s problems,”** and through which some **“organizations mimic some of those same harms”** caused by the state. In addition, some participants explained, philanthropic organizations can cultivate a scarcity mindset that makes groups compete for funding. To mitigate this, we should cultivate what one member

called a **“a solidarity economy,”** rooted not in competition but in collaboration and connection.

Participants also described the importance of funders working *with* communities and not *on* them. They underscored the need to avoid micromanagement and **“white savior complexes,”** because, **“People might be well-meaning but not particularly competent.”** Over and over again, members agreed that the people closest to the problems must also be the closest to the solutions, and these people must be empowered with resources. Funding should support—instead of seeking to change—community-based organizations and local, grassroots work.

Staying Hopeful

Many members expressed the difficulty of remaining optimistic and energized given the nature of the battle at hand. Yet as Tiffany Crutcher said, **“Hopelessness is the enemy of justice.”** aurelius francisco similarly warned against apathy: **“That is the point. To wear us down to a point of apathy, of hopelessness.”** Yet it is our **“moral imperative... to say, ‘We do have a choice, we do have power in the masses... we can make a change.’”**

Participants shared the sources of hope that enable their continued work. They spoke of hope in collaboration and solidarity; Cece Jones Davis said, **“Things are incredibly bleak, and things are incredibly hopeful because of the people power.”** Other participants spoke similarly. **“The source of the optimism is in the work,”** one member said; **“I believe in the people. I believe in us, the doers, the community members, and the power we have to make things happen,”** said another. Others expressed gratitude for the Square One process, for **“these moments we’re turning to each other,”** or relayed feeling **“fed energetically and spiritually by... just a glimpse of connection.”**

Perhaps above all, participants enthusiastically described the inspiring energy and focus of young people. Members advocated for mentoring and investing in these young people, and for developing future generations of local leaders.

Many participants also underscored the importance of self-care in this grueling work. The goal, one member said, is to stay hydrated, to **“work harder than the villain... which is a lot of overtime.”** When faced with burnout, exhaustion, and even hospitalization, Tiffany Crutcher implored the group: **“We have to start incorporating healing and wellness into movement building work.”**

Conclusion

Through two years of discussions, stakeholders considered historic and ongoing harms in the state of Oklahoma. They considered how the punitive criminal legal system exists within broader structures of white supremacy, capitalist exploitation, and patriarchy, and is enabled by conservative politics, religious doctrine, and ideological individualism.

To replace the punitive legal system with a true system of justice—one that emphasizes repair and community flourishing—members underscored the need to acknowledge past harms, reckon with history, and treat each and every person with dignity.

As members considered how to change the narratives that prop up the legal system, they considered values that should take center-stage in justice work. These include solidarity, inclusivity, authenticity, and a deep commitment to one another’s well-being. Participants also discussed practices—including storytelling, care with language, building diverse coalitions, constructing diverse messages, and recognizing everybody’s strengths and contributions—that can help bring about urgent change.

Above all, participants emphasized the value of the relationships built at these tables. They expressed the desire to continue the conversations, and to keep working together as they seek to make Oklahoma truly safe, and truly just, for everyone.

Report Authorship

This report was written and edited by Jasmin Sandelson.

Appendix A: Participants

Aaron Cosar | Academy Manager, Prison Fellowship

Adam Luck | Chief Executive Officer, City Care

Adam Soltani | Executive Director, Council on American Islamic Relations

Alicja Carter | Wellness Director, Gateway to Prevention and Recovery

Andrea Bruner | Justice Reform Advocate

Antoinette Jones | Mentor, Coach, and Social Advocate, Justice for Julius Campaign

aurelius francisco | Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director, Foundation for Liberating Minds

Ayana Lawson | Vice President of Community and Lifestyle Services, Oklahoma City Thunder

Carol Bush | Representative for District 70, Oklahoma House of Representatives

Cece Jones-Davis | Founder and Director, Justice for Julius Campaign

Charity Marcus | Founder, Charity Marcus LLC

Clarence Prevost | Pastor, Community Baptist Church

Damion Shade | Executive Director, Oklahomans for Criminal Justice Reform

Dan Straughan | Executive Director, Homeless Alliance

Derrick Scobey | Pastor, Ebenezer Baptist Church

Doug Shaffer | COO/CVO, J.E.M Foundation

Erica Jackson | Court Advocate, Women in Recovery

Erika Lucas | Entrepreneur, Stitch Crew

Francie Ekwerekwu | Assistant Federal Public Defender, Western District of Oklahoma

Gena Timberman | Founder, Luksi Group, LLC

Gene Perry | Manager Government Relations, Cherokee Nation Businesses

George Young | State Senator District 48, Oklahoma State Senate; Pastor, Greater Mount Carmel Church

Gina Richie | Case Manager, The Education and Employment Ministry (TEEM)

Hannah Royce | Social Media & Marketing Coordinator, Arnall Family Foundation

Jabar Shumate | Vice President, Urban League of Greater Oklahoma City

Jabee Williams | Executive Director, LiveFreeOKC

James Wall | Training Specialist, Work Ready Oklahoma

Jan Peery | President and CEO, YWCA Oklahoma City

Janiya James | Student, Langston University; Member, National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice

JD Baker | Platform Manager, Cortado Ventures

Jentri McPherson | Student, Oklahoma University

John Budd | Chief Operating Officer, George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF)

Jon Middendorf | Senior Pastor, OKC First

Justin Jones | Former Director, Tulsa County Family Center for Juvenile Justice

Kenneth 'K-Roc' Brant | Community Organizer, Terence Crutcher Foundation

Khalil Moore | Coach, Oklahoma City

Kris Steele | Executive Director, The Education and Employment Ministry (TEEM)

Kym Cravatt | General Counsel for Health Services, Chickasaw Nation

Lacy Mize | Student, Oklahoma State University

Lathonya Shivers | Coordinator of the Public Service Program, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

Laynie Gottsch | Program Officer, Sarkeys Foundation

Lee Roland | Executive Director, Hope United

Leslie Osborn | Labor Commissioner, Oklahoma Department of Labor

Leslie Rainbolt | Former Member, OU Regents

Letina Itaman | Student, Langston University

Linda Capps | Vice-Chairman, Citizen Potawatomi Nation

Lori Ross | Student, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

Lori Walke | Senior Minister, Mayflower
Congregational UCC Church

Lucie Doll | Program Director of the
Parenting and Jail Program, Family &
Children's Services

Luke Cantrell | Student, Junior Economics
and Psychology major, University of
Science and Arts of Oklahoma

Mackenzie Steele | Student, Oklahoma
State University

Malika Cox | Founder and Director, Mend
Flourish

Maria Morris | Founder and Head Chef,
Carabelle's Eats and Treats

Marquess Dennis | Founder and Executive
Director, Birthright Living Legacy

Maudene Jackson | Community Leader

Melvin Battiest | Founder, Native Wings
Like an Eagle

Millicent Newton-Embry | Former Director
of Communications and Outreach,
Oklahoma Department of Corrections

Mimi Tarrasch | Chief Program Officer,
Family & Children's Services Women's
Justice Programs

NegroSpiritual121 | Executive Director,
Racism Stinks

Ololade Yerokun | Student, Langston
University

Quintin Hughes | Strategic Advisor for
Community Development, Echo
Investment Capital

Reggie Cotton | Deputy Chief of Police,
Muskogee Police Department

Reggie Hines | President, RDH Correctional
Consulting Services

Regina Goodwin | State Representative for
District 73, Oklahoma House of
Representatives

Sache Primeaux-Shaw | Director, REF
Reading Clinic; Ralph Ellison Foundation

Samone Thompson | School Logistics
Manager, Millwood Public Schools

Sarah B. Edwards | Attorney, Hartzog Law

Shakiya Morris | Founder and
Organization Director, TPOH Futures

Sheyda Brown | Deputy Director, Terence
Crutcher Foundation

Sue Ann Arnall | President, Arnall Family
Foundation

Susan Diaz-Meshijian | Educator, Sante Fe South High School

Susan Sharp | Presidential Professor Emerita of Sociology, The University of Oklahoma

T. Sheri Dickerson | Pastor and Executive Director, Black Lives Matter Chapter, OKC

Tamara Lebak | Founder/Chief Unlearning Officer; Restorative Justice Institute of Oklahoma

Tamika White | Square One participant

Tiffany Crutcher | Founder and Executive Director, Terence Crutcher Foundation

Timmy Young | President, Dunbar Heights Community Association

Timothy Tardibono | Executive Director, Oklahoma County Criminal Justice Advisory Council

Tina Brown | Program Officer, Arnall Family Foundation

Tondalao Hall | Community Leader

Tonia Anderson | Director, Center For Social Justice And Racial Healing, The University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

Travis Flood | Director of Community Engagement, Community Renewal

Travis Mikado | Community Advocate

Tyler Fisher | Pretrial Release Case Manager, The Education and Employment Ministry (TEEM)

Tyler Green | Ministries Coordinator, Hobby Lobby; Founder, Flourish OKC

Vered Harris | Rabbi, Temple B'nai Israel

Wayland Cubit | Director of Security, Oklahoma City Public Schools; Retired Police Lieutenant, Oklahoma City Police Department

Yvita Crider | Former Director of Statewide Engagement, Oklahomans for Criminal Justice

Zamya Darthard | Student, Langston University; Member, National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice

Zana Williams | Founder and CEO, Mindful Resolution