

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Changing The Mission of the Criminal Justice System

Speaker 1 (05:00):

Good afternoon. And thank all of you for joining us for this conversation that we're about to have on policing and changing the mission of, uh, the criminal justice system or the criminal legal system, as some people have, have taken to calling it. Um, I'm going to introduce very briefly our two panelists. The first thing I wanna let y'all know is that the panelists bios are available on the website. Um, and both of our panelists today have long and distinguished careers. So I'm just gonna give you a sentence or two on each one of them so that we can get into the meat of this conversation. Um, but if you want to read more, uh, that's available, uh, on, on the website, um, we have, uh, St. Louis, uh, mayor Jones. Who's been the mayor only, uh, now for less than a year, uh, less than six months if I have it. Right. Um, but she has a long background of, of working for, for advocacy and for justice, uh, in the St. Louis community's graduate of Hampton university and St. Louis university school of public health. Uh, I'd like to welcome, uh, mayor Jones to the screen.

Speaker 2 (06:11):

Amazing. It's great to be here.

Speaker 1 (06:14):

Thank you very much. Uh, and I also wanna welcome, uh, professor Rodriguez. Um, he, uh, is a, uh, emeritus associate professor in the Mexican Mexican American studies department at the university of Arizona, where he has taught from 2008, uh, until the present. Uh, he was born in Mexico, raised in east Los Angeles, and he has a forthcoming book, uh, that has just apparent, I think, has just come out in the last day or two. Uh, and it's called writing 50 years more or less amongst the gringos professor Rodriguez. What,

Speaker 3 (06:54):

Uh, hello? Um, I'm um, actually right now in east LA, I, I actually live in Mexico right now, but I'm here in east LA for this conference. Um, and, uh, anyway, glad to be here and, uh, look forward to engaging in a little dialogue.

Speaker 1 (07:11):

Great. Well, thank you both, uh, mayor Jones. I'm gonna, uh, start by asking you a question and I should just say this up front as well. If you all end up having questions that you wanna ask one another, at any point in the process, feel free to do that as well. We can make this as conversational as possible. Um, but my really first question to you is, so now you're new to this job, and of course, as a mayor, policing and public safety are gonna be central to the, to the mission of any mayor of any city. Um, and I know that one of the first things that is on your agenda is having to identify select and hire and appoint a new police chief. And I guess I'm curious, you know, as you look at the history of policing in this country, um, both, you know, the harm that it's caused, the benefits that it has provided, uh, and the moment that we're in now as a nation, um, and in your city, what are some of the characteristics that you are looking for in a police chief? Uh, and what are some of the things that, that frankly you might wanna avoid?

Speaker 2 (08:22):

Yes. Uh, well, again, thank you for having me is the pleasure to be on this power pack panel, um, to celebrate 60 years of SNCC, um, as we are searching for a new police chief who will retire after 35 years of service to our city in, uh, February, um, we are looking for someone who's going to lead, um, with, uh, an eye for transforming our public safety department and our police

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department, and lead with an eye towards prevention. And how do we, um, deploy the right professional to the right call from things that we are starting to change in St. Louis? Um, recently as we started a program called cops and clinicians that sends out a licensed clinical social worker or other behavioral health professional with a licensed officer, uh, to certain calls, um, and also that, that makes sure that we are trying to divert people from emergency rooms, divert people from jail and pair people up with the services that they need, cuz when people call nine one, one, they call for help.

Speaker 2 (09:24):

Um, and, and we wanna make sure that we are sending the right resource when they call for help. And then stepping out of that. We also have to upgrade our 9 1 1 uh, response system. Um, now everybody has a cell phone, so it's a simple law of supply and demand. And how do we staff up our nine one one call center to be able to answer all the calls that come in in a timely fashion, as well as train our 9 1 1 operators to again, deploy the right professional to the right call. And we're gonna have a series of town halls and open discussions. Uh, we have a survey on our website right now asking people what they wanna see in their next police chief. So this is going to be an open and transparent, uh, process and people will get a chance to, uh, let us know what questions they wanna ask of, of the potential applicants.

Speaker 1 (10:15):

So mayor Jones, I really appreciate that response. Um, in terms of thinking about this new police chief, and one of the things that you mentioned in it was this idea of having the right responder at the right time and that that was a real priority in your city. And that's, that's something, I think that's part really part of the national conversation, right? That, you know, 9 1, 1 was created in the late 1960s. And we have over a 50 year period, basically got into a pattern where if you have, if you need help or if you need enforcement or if you need care, you dial the same number, right. Regardless of what your needs are, right. And overwhelmingly the response that you get when you dial that number is an armed officer, which is sometimes what people want, but not always what people want. So now the question is how do we create, cuz it took long time.

Speaker 1 (11:19):

It took a long time, right? We've had 9 1, 1 for 50 years and we, so we've built this system up, we've built up a mentality that you call 9 1 1, uh, whenever you have a problem. So there's part of it is our thought process as citizens. Part of it is what the city is able to provide in response. As you think about changing that, right? As you think about transforming both the systems in government and then the mentality amongst the public, what do you see as your top priorities? What are, what are the things that you think right off the bat? Well, you know, we could change this, we could change this. What, what are those things for you?

Speaker 2 (12:00):

Well, number one, we can hire more behavioral health professionals within city government, and we are working to do just that. We made some changes in our budget recently. Uh, that's gonna allow us to hire 28 social workers in our department of health department of human services and victim support services. Um, and so we'll use those social workers and behavioral health professionals to again, make sure we're deploying the right professional to the right call and to make sure that we are responding in a way, um, uh, that, uh, that leads with compassion. Um, and we can be compassionate and enforce the law at the same time. Those two are not opposite ends of the, of the spectrum. I see them as part of the same, uh, same response. And so also I, I

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know that there are a lot of officers who are concerned that, you know, this move is defunding the police. It actually takes a lot off of their plate because when we train police in our academies, we're not training them to be social workers. We're not training them to be behavioral health professionals. We're training them to solve violent crime and respond to violent incidents. So making these changes, uh, by deploying, uh, the right call, the right professional to the right call by hiring different types of professionals to be deployed, instead of police actually takes a lot of work off their plates and prevents, uh, bad interactions of as we've seen, uh, in recent years.

Speaker 1 (13:29):

And I appreciate that. And I wanna ask you one last question about just this, this, this question of defund that you just raised and then professor Rodriguez, I'll, I'll, I'll bring you into the conversation. So you said mayor Jones, if I'm hearing you right, you said, well, one of the things that sometimes officers say when, when, when they, you make the suggestion of, well, we're gonna have the right professional come, is they say, wait, is that, are you, is that defunding the police? Or are you attacking the police? And I hear your response to be, no, no, that's not what we're doing. We want you, the officers to be able to do what you are best equipped to do, which is to respond to violent incidents. And, but we wanna take some of the things that right now you're being asked to do. The music is playing too loud.

Speaker 1 (14:16):

Somebody is half clothed on the corner and they're just like singing in another language. And it sounds like maybe they're mentally ill. I don't know what's going on with this person, but they're walking in the street and you're saying, okay, well that person, they don't, we don't need an officer necessarily to respond there, at least not first and foremost. And that all makes sense to me, but I guess what I'm, and I don't know, maybe this is, you know, you're an elected official, I don't know whether you can really kind of go here or not, but it does seem like to one extent you are talking about over time, some reallocation of resources, because if we, if we have fewer police, if we need police to respond to fewer calls and we want to give some of those calls to another agency at some 0.5 years from now, at some point down the line, aren't we gonna say, well, we need a somewhat smaller police force given now we've, you know, narrowed down what you're doing. We're gonna, we are gonna have a smaller police force under this model that you're describing of alternative responders. Isn't that right?

Speaker 2 (15:27):

Well, I, I, I can't deny that. I mean, think about, I mean, when you think about that, that argument, um, and especially in St. Louis where we have more police per capita than every city, our size, um, and, and it's not about, um, and this is one of the arguments we have all the time. It's not about the number or needing more police. It's about proper deployment of our existing resources, um, and our director of public safety and our chief both believe that, uh, we have enough, we just need to deploy them in the right way. And then also adding different professionals, uh, to the mix. Uh, I would say helps our public safety, um, and helps transform our public safety response, um, tremendously in the long run.

Speaker 1 (16:14):

Thank you. I appreciate that. Um, uh, mayor Jones, I'm gonna jump to professor Rodriguez to bring him into the conversation, but I'm gonna, um, be circling back to you as well. So, uh, so, so, so be ready for me. Uh, professor Rodriguez welcome, uh, invite you into joining this conversation. And I guess I wanna start with you, um, you know, one of the things, when I think

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about the movement, when I think about the, the civil rights movement, right? I think about SNCC. I think about the 1960s, there was always, especially with SNCC, a very local focus, right? SNCC was an organization that believed in being in community, being with community, helping to build up the strength and the resilience and the power of local communities, right. SNCC defined itself, not as well, we're coming in from the outside. And we're gonna tell you what to do, but rather we are going to be part of you and help you develop the strength in the capacity so that you can fight this fight even after we're gone.

Speaker 1 (17:17):

Right. So SNCC was a very local organization at the same time, I think about my own father, right? And by the late 1960s, early 1970s, he was traveling a lot international. You know, my, my middle name is, is Lamumba after Patrice Lamumba. And, and that was a signal right. Of his, uh, and my mother, uh, dinky Romley, their, their international focus, right? So you start to see a lot of civil rights organizations and civil rights leaders, you know, go into Tanzania, go into China, go into the UN right, developing relationships with movements across the Globes. And I, and, and the reason why I wanna say that introduced, leading in that introduce, leading into you is, as I understand from your research and from your work, doing things internationally is a big part of your focus and a big part of your agenda. Um, and, and I even, I don't wanna put words in your mouth, but I even wonder whether part of you, here's the conversation that mayor Jones and I were having, and whether part of you thinks, you know, what, that's all well and good, and I wish you the best, but the bottom line is those changes that you're describing at the local level.

Speaker 1 (18:48):

They may not happen, or at least they may not happen with a lot of, without a lot of international pressure. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your idea of working internationally and how you see the international and the local connecting to one another.

Speaker 3 (19:07):

Yes. Um, I don't think they contradict each other. Of course, you know, they, they compliment each other. Um, I, uh, I think I've mentioned this before in the bios and all that, that I was almost killed by police in 1979. So I've studied this literally since 1979 and was aware of it even before sixties with all the killings, including 1970, they killed a journalist when salat down the street from where I grew up. So I have been, again, this for me, this is like 40 50 years of observing, studying, et cetera. I think all the reforms are good. They're all necessary. Now the part two to that is like, is it enough personally? I don't think so, because I, I believe that unless you put an officer, a guilty officer in prison for 30, 40, 50 years to life, that's the only thing that's gonna alter this, because right now, if, I mean, it's, the, a conviction is beyond rare.

Speaker 3 (20:07):

And, but it, when you have a conviction, they put him in jail for like nine months. I think that happened to the killer of Oscar grant as one example. And what is, what is nine months? And when you talk about a life, you know, that's like nothing. So for me, in what I've seen in this country, again, I think all the reforms are good and necessary. I think on top of that, that the international criminal court was created when you have a, a society in which the judicial system does not function. What do you call a system when you have 99.9, nine, 9% impunity? You know, and that's both at the level of law enforcement and at the level of immigration, you know, and even including murdered and missing indigenous women murdered and missing African

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American women and migrant women, it's total impunity. So in my, in my mind, it's like, what, what else can we do?

Speaker 3 (21:03):

Cuz we're already using the courts and they're not functioning. So the criminal court was created for that purpose. We've never gone there. We've gone to the convention on racism, you know, the UN convention on racism. And they say, oh, the system in the us is racist. Like no kidding. Of course it's racist. What we need is convictions. You know, and I don't, I'm not naive. I don't think that'll happen today. You know, like, like in the next year or two, uh, in fact we have, uh, the mechanism of the organization of American states. They also have a committal court, but the us is not a signator. If anything, I can see perhaps that with Biden in there, maybe all of us that do this work can pressure him to become a signer because if the UN won't do it, maybe OES, I, I, you know, we have a prima FAIA case, hundreds and hundreds, what cases I, I was part of a study and we're actually concluding within a few weeks, a study of all the killings in the year 2000.

Speaker 3 (22:05):

And it numbers 34,000. And you could imagine it's lopsided, it's people of color that are being killed. Um, you know, we're, we're 40% of the population combine all the people of color. We're 40%. Whites are 60%. The killings are the reverse 60% people of color, 40% white. And it's even actually bigger because part of the study that I did, or that we did shows that a lot of like brown people were put into the unknown category, the other category, or simply unidentified. And one day I actually looked into the databases and started to see that Goza Ramirez Lopez in the white category, white other, or unknown. So I think that the, the numbers are way off. That's why the importance of data, uh, it's all, you know, as you known, FBI is supposed to do this, they've never done it. It's all volunteer for, and I think what we're showing improving is that we have a system that's out of con it's always been out of control it's and it's intentional. I mean, it was never, we, we were never meant to receive justice. You know, we're simply controlled, you know, control populations. We're supposed to shut up.

Speaker 1 (23:18):

Can I ask you a follow up question on that? Because yeah, what I hear you, what I hear you saying is that until people go to prison for a long time, nothing is gonna change. And you wanna go to the international court, the international criminal court in particular, to try to get that. And I guess I'm wondering this, right? A lot of, a lot of people, a lot of young people today are not just part of the defund movement that that mayor Jones referred to, but they're also part of the PR prison abolition movement, right? And their me, their message is that we're not gonna solve any of society's problems, as long as we're wedded to the idea that locking people up who have done harm is gonna be the solution. And I guess I'm wondering doesn't some of that logic apply to police officers as well, which is to say, if we don't think that locking people up for 30, 40, 50 years makes sense in general, why would we say that police officers should be locked up for 30, 40, 50 years? Don't we need to have a different mindset of how we respond to harm. Even when the person creating the harm is the officer.

Speaker 3 (24:37):

Well, look, we could easily say they should all be killed in other words, death penalty, right? We don't, I don't believe in the death penalty, people that I work, we don't believe in that. That's why that's the next step

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Speaker 1 (24:51):

I see. So that's where you draw the line. That's where you draw the line.

Speaker 3 (24:54):

Exactly. I mean, it'd be nice if they all got therapy and all that, but you know, I, I look at it, they should get therapy in prison, you know, not in other words, the whole point is to take 'em off the street, if they're that bad, if they're convicted, if there's reason, you know, putting them for nine months in a golf course, you know, a, a minimal that, that doesn't work. See the whole point is what's that word? Disincentive, what is the disincentive of an officer that kills and sees that like, oh, I'll be off in nine months if I get that far, usually, you know what, the worst thing that happens is that they get to, they just get fired and then they apply for the position, the next county over, you know, the next city over. And so it's, it's nothing. So in other words, there's zero disincentive.

Speaker 3 (25:41):

Once, once that happens, people will, I mean, at the police themselves are gonna say like, oh, like you, you think I, I wanna do 30, 40, 50 years in prison. I don't think so. And I think that's the only thing that will reduce things. If the us system will not do that, because this is the judicial system, not the police, the judicial system that's complicit there and the politicians that permit that, you know, and so that means that's what has to change. Uh, other than that, I don't really see anything. I mean, cuz I've seen it all for 40 50 years, you know, I, man, what happened after Rodney king, that was gonna be the end of police brutality. You know, who can I tell you? 20, 30, 4,000 after the year, 2000, there is no solution yet, but there can be

Speaker 1 (26:29):

Mayor Jones. What do you think about that? You know, uh, uh, professor Rodriguez is arguing for really two things. As I hear it. One is much longer sentences for police officers who are convicted of brutality or he in particular I think was talking about police killings. Um, and then also this idea that you want to go to the inter the way to get there is by going to international courts. Now I know that's a little bit farfield from, from your work as a, as a mayor. Um, but I was just wondering if you had, um, if you had any kind of reflections or, or, or response to, to what he had to say.

Speaker 2 (27:07):

Well, I absolutely do think that, uh, officers should be held accountable when they break the law. Just like, uh, regular citizens are held accountable when they break the law. Uh, we just heard yesterday that, uh, the Senate, um, the Senate members and the house members are reached an impasse because they could not agree on getting rid of qualified immunity, um, when it comes to, uh, police misconduct, um, and somehow or another, they are the only class of, of people who, uh, cannot be held accountable when they break the law. Yet. When a doctor, um, kills a patient, uh, uh, intentionally or unintentionally his or her medical license, um, is at stake, uh, same thing with nurses and nurse practitioners and other medical professionals. Um, there is all, and in every profession there is a level of accountability. Um, and it just seems like, uh, police officers just don't have that.

Speaker 1 (28:07):

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Hmm. Mayor Jones, let me, uh, kind of switch gears a little bit and go back to, um, so we've just now been talking about kind of the tail end, right? The sort of the punishment piece. Um, and, but I wanna go back to where we began, where we were fo talking a little bit more about prevention and right, you were talking about this alternative responder model. Um, another thing that I've been hearing a lot of talk about lately, and I wonder whether, uh, whether you're, whether this is part of your vision in St. Louis, um, is this idea of alternative responses to violence and violence, interrupter kinds of programs. So when you and I were first speaking a few minutes ago, you know, we were talking about maybe people with mental illness, what you might, what some people might call nuisance offenses or quality of life type offenses that right now get a police response.

Speaker 1 (29:10):

And we're saying, well, what about a mental health care worker or a behavioral health specialist, but there is another category right? Of, of, of things that produces a police response. And those are acts of violence. Now I understand you to be saying, look, we're gonna need to have police responding to acts of violence. That's not that we're not, that's not gonna change. But one thing that might change is reducing the number of acts of violence that occur. So you have less violence in the community. You have fewer 9 1, 1 calls, you have less black and brown people who are disproportionately victims of violence, right. Being harmed. And how do we achieve that? Well, in a lot of cities, I hear people talking about violence, interrupter models, and incredible messenger programs and, and, and cure violence. And I was wondering, is that something that is on part of the conversation in St. Louis? And if so, um, for people who are on this call, who might not be familiar with, uh, those words that I just, uh, kind of uttered, could you talk a little bit about what, what that work looks like?

Speaker 2 (30:29):

Yeah. So in St. Louis, we have deployed, uh, cure VI the cure violence strategy in about three or four neighborhoods, uh, to interrupt violence before it begins. And we're also using all of the tools in the toolbox. Uh, we're also using focus deterrents, uh, because it's one thing to try to convince someone, not to commit a crime, but what are you, what are you providing for them to provide for themselves and provide for their families? So we have to, um, we have to deploy all of the violence interruption tools in the toolbox in order to make our neighborhood safer. Um, one of the other things that we're doing is we are a part of a 16 city cohort with the white house that are using American recovery act funds, uh, to fund our community violence intervention programs, like cure violence and focus deterrents. So we are laser focused on trying to prevent crime before it starts and using our community partners, uh, to do so and, and, and really connecting people to opportunities, uh, to pick up a paycheck instead of picking up a gun.

Speaker 2 (31:36):

Also, I might add that our, our hands are somewhat tied and these are the only options that we have, uh, because our Missouri legislature, um, has consistently relaxed gun laws over the past several years and also have passed preemption laws that prevent us from, uh, from passing common sense gun legislation in our own backyards. And so, uh, now they, they have these special hearings. They have this special committee now on St. Louis regional issues where they're pointing at St. Louis city and saying, well, what are you gonna do about a crime? And I point the finger right back at them and said, well, what are you, why are you, uh, making me try to, uh, fight gun violence, uh, with both of my hands tied behind my back as a chief executive of

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this city, you have stripped me up a lot of power in order to respond to, uh, com to respond to gun violence and pass common sense gun VI gun safety laws.

Speaker 1 (32:33):

Hmm. Yeah. Thank you for that. Can you just say, just, cuz I wanna make sure that everyone, you know, watching really knows what we're talking about when you say you have cure violence working in three or four of your neighborhoods and when you say you have focus, deterrents, could you just spend just a minute or two talking about what that is? Cuz those are terms that I'm familiar with. You're clearly familiar with them, but, but most people don't know what that means.

Speaker 2 (33:01):

Right? So cure violence is a program that uses, um, uh, neighborhood interrupters to literally canvas neighborhoods to see where the violence is happening and, and trying to, um, uh, interrupt violence before it begins. So they may hear of, of a shooting in the neighborhood and then go and talk to, uh, the people who are involved without police. So they are trying to, uh, have a neighborhood approach to, uh, to interrupting violence before it begins or before it continues. Um, and focus, deterrence, uh, uses, um, all of the, sort of, all of the resources, all of the tools in the toolbox to, uh, deter people from, uh, from a life of crime. So how can we, uh, take a gentleman or a young lady who, um, is in danger of, of, uh, committing crime because of something else that happened in their neighborhood. And so they know that, you know, this person is related to a, a crime that just happened and how can we offer that person resources, be it a job or mental health or whatever they need to deterd them from, uh, engaging in continued acts of violence.

Speaker 1 (34:17):

Hmm. Thank you, professor, uh, Rodriguez, I'm wondering, now you heard another part of this conversation, right. With, with mayor Jones and, and I'm wondering, you know, if you were a close confidant or close advisor, uh, to mayor Jones or to another, you know, big city mayor, um, thinking about this from the perspective of all your years of research, um, and, and all of your engagement right in the community, uh, in particular, you know, in the Mexican American community, but, but really in all the communities that you've been a part of, what, what, in addition to going to the international criminal court, right. And seeking longer sentences, what are some of the things that you would wanna put on the plate for mayor Jones and say, listen, listen, I haven't heard you talk about this yet, but I really think it needs to be on your radar screen. What would that look like for you?

Speaker 3 (35:18):

Well, two, two things, basically one is it's counterintuitive. But remember when, when I was almost killed, my skull was fractured. I was bleeding from everywhere. My, my forehead, my eyes, my nose, my mouth. And I reached out to a, some, a carload of young girls passing by. And my first instinct was to like help call the cops. But I froze. In other words, how could they call the cops when it was the cops? So the question becomes is the actual problem we're talking about, who do we call? So if anything, a mechanism needs to be created, because if you call the cops, they're not gonna do anything. Cuz they're the ones doing it to begin with. So that has to be figured out. I mean, there must be some kind of hotline independent of the police and technically the 9 1 1 isn't the police, but that's where the calls get routed when it's violence.

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Speaker 3 (36:09):

Right? So that never works. Now there's other, there's other thing that I don't know that there's a, a solution, but I can tell you what a problem is. That is, it's what we call dehumanization. In other words, as long as, uh, people of color are viewed as less, less than human or not human at all, then you're gonna see dial in roof kills nine African Americans. He's given a hamburger, you know, what was burger king? You know, you had that written house guy from Wisconsin in Illinois. He shoots up people and walks by with his rifle, uh, right past the police. Now look at Tamir rice, you know, within seconds, a split second he shot, there was a guy in Bakersfield, Francisco Serna. He had a crucifix in his hand, he was shot like on the spot. In other words, that's called dehumanization. You know, if they were again, if they were white, they probably would've said, Hey sir, Mr.

Speaker 3 (37:04):

Serna, what do you have in your hand? You know, instead it's like, like Tamir rice, right? They jump out the car and boom, they shoot 'em. How do you fix that? Is there a reform for that? I think it's something huge and fundamental until that changes. Cuz you know, the reality is that we've been living at, especially the last four or five years that some peoples are seen as legitimate that some of us belong here and others do not belong. Some of us are in the way again, how do you do a reform to that? You know, it it's fundamental. And you know, I think a lot of us remember Martin Luther king used to speak about that, you know? And not that it ever stopped. People have been talking about that forever. You know, we, that's the fundamental issue in this society. All of us have to be treated as full human beings. I, again, I don't know of a reform that will do that. We need to be guaranteed our full human rights. How do you do that in the society that doesn't look at us as human, that we don't even belong in this country?

Speaker 3 (38:03):

Yeah.

Speaker 1 (38:04):

Well mayor Jones, I, so I asked professor Rodriguez as you're close confidant to put some things on the table for you and the Mo you know, the, the, the second point that he made, you know, he said up front, he said, listen, I'm gonna state a problem. I don't necessarily have a solution for you. Um, I know as a local mayor, you know, solu you're in the business of solutions, you're in the business of solving problems. And I know that the problem of the dehumanize dehumanization of, of black people and of brown people and of people of color generally, right. And of, of women of color and, and not taking their, their pain seriously. Right. And we've, we've, we've seen that issue just even raised up over the last week as there's been this relentless focus on, you know, media attention of, um, of a young white woman who goes missing and people are, you know, saying, look in every city that we live in, you know, there's, there's multiple black women, women of color who are missing and nobody there's no CNN camera crews, there's no national searches.

Speaker 1 (39:19):

Um, and so this is a profound, and it's a deep issue. And it's one that's been with us for a long time, right? The people who are the SNCC veterans, right. Who were there 60 years ago, who are the reason for this reunion, right? They were, they were fighting in, in some ways fundamentally, um, for this same recognition of just the basic humanity and the dignity, seeing people as, as full

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people, right. Those famous, I am a man, right. Those famous posters that we've all seen from Memphis in 1968. Uh, and of course now we would expand that language, um, beyond man. Um, you know, I am a person, uh, and obviously as a mayor, there is limits to what you can do, um, on this. Um, but as you hear professor Rodriguez kind of state this problem, and as you think about, you know, young people in your city, what are, what are some of the things that, that you would try to do in response? How do we, how do we, how do we humanize, you know, help to humanize people who had been dehumanized for, you know, hundreds of years in this country?

Speaker 2 (40:37):

Right. Well, I think professor Rodriguez stated it. So plainly that, that is the original sin of this country, right. Um, that took land from the indigenous people who lived here and then brought people here, um, from, from Africa and didn't think, and didn't declare them as human as three fifths of a person in the, in the, uh, in the constitution. Um, and so those are things that I don't think we can legislate because it's been the stain of this country for, for hundreds of years. But I think what we can do, um, is we can, um, we can vet our police officers a lot more. We can offer them a lot more training or, or before they enter our academies, how are we doing psychological exams, um, to ask the right questions that, that let us know whether or not this potential candidate, uh, to be a police officer sees black and brown and indigenous people as human.

Speaker 2 (41:34):

I think that that's, that's some something that we can do. And then also we've sort of gotten away from some old, uh, tried and true methods of community policing when our police used to live in our communities where they were your next door neighbor or, um, or police athletic leagues, where they were coaching kids, um, in our neighborhoods to become back in basketball and football and coach and track while some of those programs still exist. I think that they have been defunded over many generations. Um, and, and, and, and to, and to, uh, to, uh, drive this point home. When I became, when I was considering a run for mayor, I wasn't even mayor yet. I was having a conversation with my 14 year old son, and he's standing at six foot two now. So he, he is not viewed as a little boy, even though he's my baby.

Speaker 2 (42:27):

Um, he was asking me, well, what does a mayor do? And I talked about all of the different departments that report to the mayor's office. And then he said, well, do you do the police report to you? I said, yes. He said, oh, that means I'll be safe. And immediately it hit me like a ton of bricks because his mother shouldn't have to become mayor in order for him to co concede that he will be safe, um, with interactions with law enforcement, he should feel safe with interactions with law enforcement at all times. So, um, obviously we had a, a, a discussion, a, a nice discussion after that, but, um, but how many kids does that happen to in this country? One in, you know, 300 million my child. So, uh, we have to, I think we have to bring back some of those old things that we used to do that we don't do anymore. And we have to vet our officers, um, in the, in the beginning stages before we hire them, um, because they are, they have the, uh, the, they can choose life or death. They have the choice to kill somebody or not to kill somebody. And we wanna make sure that we are hiring officers that lead with compassion and respect,

Speaker 1 (43:41):

You know, that that was, uh, such a powerful response. And it's so moving, uh, and really devastating thinking about that conversation that you had with, with your son. Um, and, you know, I just want us to, you know, sit with that for a second. Um, and, and, and let that be heavy,

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uh, you know, on our minds and on our hearts, it is our mind. Um, and I wanna ask you really, just kind of a small question based on everything that you just said, but you were talking about vetting officers, you know, before they even get on the force. And I'm wondering, you know, could you just say something about kind of what that looks like, and, and in particular, I mean, this, I don't know, I don't have the national data and I don't have the say Louis data. I don't know if you do, but I know that there has long been a history of recruiting police officers from among, uh, military veterans.

Speaker 1 (44:40):

Mm-hmm <affirmative>, uh, and that's, you know, a well-established, um, pipeline just the other day I was driving. I live in new Haven, Connecticut. I was driving to, uh, down to campus and I passed, uh, um, a bit a van, a new Haven police van, and the back, the whole back was painted. And it said we're hiring new Haven police. And it had two images. It had a new Haven police officer in their uniform, and it had a soldier in their uniform. Uh, and I have utmost respect for anybody who, uh, chooses to serve our country, um, as a member of the armed forces, uh, and the sacrifice that they give. But I also know that if you are in the military, in some ways, that's somewhat the opposite training that we would necessarily want to give somebody who want, who we want to be a community guardian. Um, if we're, if we're, you know, one of the concerns is that, that, you know, Baldwin and others have pointed out for many years, right, is that the police officer can work, you know, walk through Negro communities to use Baldwin's language from the 1960s, you know, as an occupying force, you know? And so it seems to me we wanna move in another direction. Um, but I'm wondering if you agree with that. And what's your, what's your take about this relationship between the military on the one hand, um, and police officers in terms of recruitment?

Speaker 2 (46:24):

Well, I, as a daughter of someone who was, who served in the, in the armed forces, my dad was a Vietnam veteran. Um, he still deals with PTSD to this day. Hmm. Um, and a lot of our veterans do. Um, and do we, and, and, and just like you, I respect our veterans. I've had several in my family. Uh, I think we are a military family, all, you know, all the way back to my great grandfathers who served, served in both these war wars. Um, but do we want, um, someone who has, who still is not well internally, who has not dealt with their PTs to be out on our streets potentially, um, in a, in a bad interaction with the community. And, and that's what I mean by vetting. Like, are we really getting to know the, uh, the candidates that we want to protect and to serve cuz that's what's on, on all of the police vehicles, right.

Speaker 2 (47:23):

To protect and to serve. So we, I think we need to, uh, get more serious about our hiring procedures and our hiring policies when it comes to, uh, officers. And then also again, um, how do we develop alternative response response methods? Um, the city of Denver, you have police fire EMS, and you have the fourth option with the star program, uh, that sends out a licensed clinical social worker and, uh, an EMT, uh, to certain calls because they don't require police response. And the, in the over 1400 calls that this particular unit has responded to, none of them have required a police backup. So they know something in Denver, uh, and also in Eugene, Oregon with the Coots program, uh, that, uh, the police response is not always the appropriate one,

Speaker 1 (48:15):

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Mayor Jones. Thank you for that, uh, response about, um, you know, police hiring and, and hiring, uh, former officers. I think it, it's so important that we really think carefully about who we're bringing into these positions. Um, I just want to thank both of you for, uh, a fabulous panel. Um, I, I really appreciate your, your honesty and, um, your willingness to get really deep into, um, important and complex issues. Um, and I'm just gonna ask and give each of you an opportunity to offer, uh, a closing reflection, anything that you want our audience to be thinking about, um, as they, as they walk away from this panel, uh, and I'm gonna start with you, uh, mayor Jones.

Speaker 2 (49:00):

Uh, the one thing I wanna leave, um, your audience with is, is something I've said different ways during this entire discussion is that police are not the only solution to public safety. And it takes a multi-pronged approach and dedication to writing historic wrongs in order to make our city and public safety better for everyone. So as we go forward in St. Louis with transforming public safety, we're leading with three principles using smart on crime strategies to prioritize innovation and achieve better outcomes, prioritizing healthy communities. And the last one is, uh, centers on responsive governing that listens to the demands of the people and develops real solutions to meet community needs. Because one of the things I always say is that the people closest to the problem should be closest to the solution. And so we're gonna lead with engaging our community as we go forward to transform our public safety system, but also knowing that police are not the only solution.

Speaker 1 (50:04):

Thank you. I very much appreciate that. And for all of the, uh, SNCC, uh, freedom fighters and veterans who are watching this one thing that I just want everybody to know, which I know you already know, but, but your work is very much not in vain. When I look at mayor Jones and I hear her talk, uh, and I reflect back on the histories of, of mayors in St. Louis and in so many cities in this country, the one thing I know is that there would not be a mayor Jones, um, but for, uh, but for your struggle and for your commitment. So thank you for that. And now professor Rodriguez, I would like to give you an opportunity to offer your final reflection.

Speaker 3 (50:48):

Okay. Um, I, I think there's a couple things. One is always remembering that when it comes to people of color, and again, I always talk about indigenous black and brown that they're patrolling our bodies, but they also patrol our communities. I have been exposed to people who say, no, this is just the issue of citizens versus the police. And I said, no, actually it's not, it's not a police. Uh, just like the mayor said, it's not a police issue per se. You know, um, we're treated as, uh, less than human. And the solution is precisely that that is we have to ensure that this society guarantees are full human rights because we're full human beings. Um, I wish that this problem was over like say, uh, this year coming up, you know, next year that this is something that's been with us, I've believe because of my research.

Speaker 3 (51:43):

I strongly believe on this continent. This issue began in 1492. So in other words, I'm not naive thinking it's gonna be over tomorrow, but I think it does begin. All of society has to do whatever they can to value each and every one of our lives, all of us are full human beings. And so whether it's the church, whether it's the schools, the media, you know, they all have to take part in this because I mean, why, like I said, it's not the police per se. I always should say, if teachers were

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given batons, they would use them on their students. You know, actually they used to use them paddles, but when, what, what I'm getting at is that social workers, they would do the same thing if they were given a different weapon or different tool. So I, I, I just believe that if we have a lot of work to do, you know, it's like the mayor said, it's not police reforms that we need only that's, that's where we start, but we have to begin again with humanizing, all of us. We all deserve that.

Speaker 1 (52:46):

Thank you both. Thank you both very much for those fabulous closing comments. Um, and with that, uh, our session, uh, has come to an end. I hope everybody will stay on and participate, uh, in the next session. And thank you very much for watching.