

Changing the Mission of the Criminal Justice System

SNCC 60th Conference

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Speakers Include:

James Forman Jr - Professor of Law at Yale Law School

Tishaura Jones - Mayor at St Louis, Missouri

Roberto Rodriguez - Emeritus Associate Professor, Mexican American Studies Department, University of Arizona

What some see as a solution, others see as a problem. This paradox is at the heart of many issues related to policing, community safety and criminal justice. What are possible pathways that ensure security and justice.

James Forman Jr: 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 the criminal justice system or the criminal legal system, as some people have taken to calling it. I'm going to introduce very briefly our two panelists. The first thing I wanna let y'all know is that the panelist's bios are available on the website. 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. But if you want to read more that's available on the website, we have St. Louis Mayor Jones. Who's been the mayor only now for less than a year, less than six months if I have it, Right? However, she has a long background of working for advocacy and justice in the St. Louis communities. A graduate of Hampton University and St. Louis University School of Public Health. I'd like to welcome Mayor Jones to the screen.

Mayor Tishuara Jones: Amazing. It's great to be here.

James Forman Jr: Thank you very much. I also wanna welcome Professor Rodriguez. He is an emeritus associate professor in the Mexican American studies department at the University of Arizona, where he has taught from 2008 until the present. He was born in Mexico and raised in east Los Angeles[CA], and he has a forthcoming book that has just apparently come out in the last day or two. It's called *Writing 50 Years más o menos Amongst the Gringos*, Professor Rodriguez.

Roberto Rodriguez: Hello? I'm actually in east LA[Los Angeles]. I actually live in Mexico right now, but I'm here in east LA for this conference. Anyway, glad to be here and look forward to engaging in a little dialogue.

James Forman Jr: Great. Well, thank you both, Mayor Jones. I'm gonna start by asking you a question, and I should just say this upfront 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. But my 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 mission of any mayor of any city. I know that one of the first things on your agenda is having to identify, select, hire, and appoint a new police chief. I guess I'm curious, you know, as you look at the history of policing in this country, both, you know, the harm that it's caused, the benefits that it has provided, and the moment that we're in now as a nation and in your city, what are some of the characteristics that you are looking for in a police chief? And what are some of the things that, frankly, you might wanna avoid?

Mayor Tishaura Jones: Yes. Well, again, thank you for having me is a pleasure to be on this power pack panel to celebrate 60 years of SNCC[Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], as we are searching for a new police chief who will retire after 35 years of service to our city in February. We are looking for someone who's going to lead with an eye for transforming our public safety department and our police department and lead with an eye toward prevention. How do we deploy the right professional to the right call from things that we are starting to change in St. Louis?

Recently 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 to certain calls and also 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, because when people call 911, they call for help.

We wanna make sure that we are sending the right resources when they call for help. And then stepping out of that. We also have to upgrade our 911 response system. Now everybody has a cell phone, so it's a simple law of supply and demand. How do we staff up our nine one-on-one call centers to be able to answer all the calls that come in in a timely fashion, as well as train our 911 operators to again deploy the right professional to the right call? And we're gonna have a series of town halls and open discussions. 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 process, and people will get a chance to let us know what questions they wanna ask of the potential applicants.

James Forman Jr: So, Mayor Jones, I really appreciate that response in terms of thinking about this new police chief. One of the things that you mentioned was the idea of having the right responder at the right time, which was a real priority in your city. That's something. I think that's really part of the national conversation, right? That, you know, 911 was created in the late 1960s. 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? Overwhelmingly, the response that you get when you dial that number is that of an armed officer, which is sometimes what people want but not always what people want. So now the question is how we create it because it took a long time.

It took a long time, right? We've had 911 for 50 years, and we've built this system up; we've built up a mentality that you call 911 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 the things that you think right off the bat? Well, you know, we could change this. What are those things for you?

Well, Number one, we can hire more behavioral health professionals within the city government, and we are working to do just that. We made some changes in our budget recently that's gonna allow us to hire 28 social workers in our Department of Health, Department of Human Services, and victim support services. 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 that, that leads with compassion.

We can be compassionate and enforce the law at the same time. Those two are not opposite ends of the spectrum. I see them as part of the same response. Also, I know that there are a lot of officers who are concerned that 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 crimes and respond to violent incidents. So making these changes by deploying 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 bad interactions, as we've seen in recent years.

James Forman Jr: I appreciate that. I wanna ask you one last question about just this question of defund that you just raised, and then Professor Rodriguez, 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 you make the suggestion of, well, we're gonna have the right professional come, is they say are you saying 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.

Somebody is half-clothed on the corner and they're just like singing in another language. 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. That all makes sense to me, but I guess, and I don't know, with you being 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.

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 narrowed down what you're doing. We are gonna have a smaller police force under this model that you're describing of alternative responders. Isn't that right?

Mayor Tishaura Jones: Well, I can't deny that. I mean, when you think about that argument, and especially in St. Louis where we have more police per capita than every city, our size and it's not about, 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 the proper deployment of our existing resources, and our director of public safety and our chief both believe that we have enough; we just need to deploy them in the right way. Then also adding different professionals to the mix. I would say it helps our public safety and helps transform our public safety response tremendously in the long run.

James Forman Jr: Thank you. I appreciate that, Mayor Jones. I'm gonna jump to Professor Rodriguez to bring him into the conversation, but I'm gonna be circling back to you as well. So be ready for me. Professor Rodriguez, I want to invite you to join this conversation. I guess I wanna start with, you know, one of the things, when I think about the movement, when I think about 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 the community and helping to build up the strength, resilience, and power of local communities right. SNCC defined itself not as well; we're coming in from the outside. 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.

Right. So SNCC was a very local organization. At the same time, I think about my own father, right? By the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was traveling a lot internationally. You know, my middle name is Lumumba, and it is after ¹Patrice Lumumba. And that was a signal, right? Of his and my mother, Dinky Romilly[Constancia Romilly], there, 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[United Nations] right, developing relationships with movements across the Globes. I want to lead with that introduction because, as I understand from your research and your work, doing things internationally is a big part of your focus and a big part of your agenda.

¹ Patrice Lumumba- A congolese nationalist leader who served as the Democratic Republic of Congo 1st Prime minister for a short time from June to September 1960, until he was forced to step down and was later assassinated..

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. 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.

Roberto Rodriguez: Yes. I don't think they contradict each other. Of course, you know they complement each other. 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 the sixties with all the killings, including 1970, when they killed a journalist when salat was 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, part two to that is like, is it enough? Personally, I don't think so because 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, a conviction is beyond rare. When you have a conviction, they put him in jail for about nine months. I think that happened to the killer of ²Oscar Grant as one example; what is nine months when you talk about life, you know, that's like nothing.

So, from what I've seen in this country, I think all the reforms are good and necessary. I think, on top of that, that the International Criminal Court was created when a society in which the judicial system does not function was created. What do you call a system when you have 99.9% 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 American women and migrant women, it's total impunity. So, in my mind, it's like, what? What else can we do?

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 the system in the US is racist. Like, no kidding. Of course, it's racist. What we need is convictions. I'm not naive. I don't think that'll happen today. You know, like, like in the next year or two. In fact we have the mechanism of the organization of American states.

² Oscar Grant-A 22 year old African American man who was murdered by police officers on New Years Day in 2009 in Oakland Calif.

They also have a committal court, but the US is not a signatory. If anything, I can see perhaps that with Biden in there, maybe all of us who do this work can pressure him to become a signatory because if the UN won't do it, maybe OAS[Organization of American States], we have a ³prima facie case, hundreds and hundreds. 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. It numbers 34,000. You could imagine it's lopsided, it's people of color that are being killed. We're 40% of the population combined, all the people of color. Whites are 60%. The killings are the reverse: 60 people of color, 40% white.

It's even actually bigger because part of the study that we did shows that a lot of brown people were put into the unknown category, the other category, or simply unidentified. One day, I actually looked into the databases and saw that Gonzalez Ramirez Lopez was in the white category, white, other, or unknown. So, I think that the numbers are way off. That's why the importance of data. That's all. You know, the FBI is supposed to do this, but they've never done it. It's all volunteer work. I think what we're showing improvement in is that we have a system that's out of control; it's always been out of control, 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.

James Forman Jr: Can I ask you a follow-up question on that? 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. I guess I'm wondering this, right? A lot of young people today are not just part of the defund movement that Mayor Jones referred to, but they're also part of the prison abolition movement, right?

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. 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, or 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 on how we respond to harm? Even when the person creating the harm is the officer.

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

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

³ Prima Facie- The terms means "at first sight", regarding criminal law the terms refers to evidence presumed to be true when first viewed.

Roberto Rodriguez: Exactly. I mean, it'd be nice if they all got therapy and all that, but you know, I look at it, they should get therapy in prison. You know, 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 the reason, you know, putting them for nine months in a golf course. You know, minimal that doesn't work. See, the whole point is, what's that word? Disincentive? What is the disincentive of an officer who kills and is off in nine months if I get that far?

Usually, you know what the worst thing that happens is that they just get fired, and then they apply for the position, the next county over, you know, the next city over. So it's nothing. So, in other words, there's zero disincentive. 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 and the politicians that permit, you know, that means that's what has to change. Other than that, I don't really see anything. I mean, because I've seen it all for 40- 50 years. What happened after ⁴Rodney King was gonna be the end of police brutality. You know, who can I tell you? 34,000 after the year 2000, there is no solution yet, but there can be.

James Forman Jr: Mayor Jones. What do you think about that? You know, 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, was talking about police killings. Then, there is also the 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 your work as a mayor. But I was just wondering if you had if you had any kind of reflections or responses to to what he had to say.

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

James Forman Jr: Hmm. Mayor Jones, let me switch gears a little bit and go back to it. We've just now been talking about the tail end, right? The sort of the punishment piece. 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. Another thing that I've heard a lot of

⁴ Rodney King- An African American man who was a victim of police brutality in Oakland California on March 1991.

talk about lately, and I wonder whether this is part of your vision in St. Louis, 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, 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. We're saying, well, what about a mental health care worker or a behavioral health specialist, but there is another category, right? Of things that produce 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 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 911 calls, you have fewer black and brown people who are disproportionately victims of violence, right? Being harmed. How do we achieve that? Well, in a lot of cities, I hear people talking about violence interrupter models and incredible messenger programs that cure violence. I was wondering if that is something that is part of the conversation in St. Louis. And if so, for people who are on this call and who might not be familiar with those words that I just kind of uttered, could you talk a little bit about what that work looks like?

Mayor Tishuara Jones: Yeah. So in St. Louis, we have deployed the cure violence strategy in about three or four neighborhoods to interrupt violence before it begins. We're also using all of the tools in the toolbox. We're also using focus deterrents because it's one thing to try to convince someone not to commit a crime, but what are you providing for them to provide for themselves and provide for their families? So we have to deploy all of the violence interruption tools in the toolbox in order to make our neighborhood safer. One of the other things that we're doing is we are part of a 16-city cohort with the white house that is using American Recovery Act ⁵ funds 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, using our community partners to do so, and really connecting people to opportunities to pick up a paycheck instead of picking up a gun. Also, I might add that our hands are somewhat tied, and these are the only options that we have because our Missouri legislature has consistently relaxed gun laws over the past several years. Also have passed preemption laws that prevent us from passing common-sense gun legislation in our own backyards. So now, 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 pointed the finger right back at them and said, well, why are you making me try to fight gun violence with both of my hands tied behind my back as a chief executive of this city, you have stripped me up a lot of power in order to respond to gun violence and pass common-sense gun safety laws.

⁵ American Recovery Act- Also referred to as the Stimulus package, passed in 2021 to provide economic and financial relief for Americans during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

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

Mayor Tishaura Jones: Right? So Cure Violence is a program that uses neighborhood interrupters to literally canvas neighborhoods to see where the violence is happening and try to interrupt violence before it continues. So they may hear of a shooting in the neighborhood and then go and talk to the people who are involved without police. So, they are trying to have a neighborhood approach to interrupting violence before it begins or before it continues. Focus deterrence uses all sorts of resources. All of the tools in the toolbox to deter people from a life of crime. So how can we take a gentleman or a young lady who is in danger of committing a crime because of something else that happened in their neighborhood? So they know that this person is related to 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 deter them from engaging in continued acts of violence?

James Forman Jr: Hmm. Thank you, Professor Rodriguez. I'm wondering if you heard another part of this conversation. With Mayor Jones, I'm wondering if you were a close confidant or close advisor to Mayor Jones or to another big city mayor thinking about this from the perspective of all your years of research and all of your engagement right in the community, in particular, in the Mexican American community, but really in all the communities that you've been a part of. 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, 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?

Roberto Rodriguez: Well, there are two things. Basically, one is that it's counterintuitive. But remember when, when I was almost killed, my skull was fractured. I was bleeding from everywhere. My forehead, my eyes, my nose, my mouth. I reached out to a carload of young girls passing by, and my first instinct was to 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. 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, 911 isn't the police, but that's where the calls get routed when it's violence. Right? So, that never works. Now there's, there's another thing that I don't know that there's, 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 people of color

are viewed as less than human, or not human at all, then you're gonna see Dylan Roof kills nine African Americans.

He's given a hamburger, you know, what was Burger King? You know, you had that Kyle Rittenhouse guy from Wisconsin in Illinois. He shoots up people and walks by with his rifle right past the police. Now look at ⁶Tamir 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 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. Serna, what do you have in your hand? You know, instead, it's like Tamir rice, right?

They jump out of 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. The reality is that we've been living, especially the last four or five years, that some people are seen as legitimate, that some of us belong here and others do not belong. Some of us are on the way again. How do you reform that?

You know, it's fundamental. You know, I think a lot of us remember [Martin Luther King](#) used to speak about that, you know? Not that it ever stopped. People have been talking about that forever. You know, that's the fundamental issue in this society. All of us have to be treated as full human beings. 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 a society that doesn't look at us as human, that we don't even belong in this country?

James Forman Jr: Well, Mayor Jones, I asked Professor Rodriguez, as you're close confidant, to put some things on the table for you, and the second point that he made, he said up front, he said, listen, I'm gonna state a problem. I don't necessarily have a solution for you. I know as a local mayor, you know, you're in the business of solutions, you're in the business of solving problems. I know that the problem of the dehumanization of black people, brown people, and people of color is generally right.

Of women of color and not taking their pain seriously. Right. We've seen that issue just even raised up over the last week as there's been this relentless media attention of a young white woman who goes missing, and people are, you know, saying, look in every city that we live in, there are multiple black women, women of color who are missing and nobody there's no CNN camera crews, there are no national searches. So this is a profound, and it's a deep issue. It's one that's been with us for a long time, right? The people who are the SNCC veterans are right. Who were there 60 years ago? Who is the reason for this reunion? They were, they were fighting, in some ways fundamentally, for this same recognition of just the basic humanity and dignity, seeing people as, as full people, right.

⁶ Tamir Rice- A 12 year old African American boy who was killed by police officers in Cleveland Ohio while playing on a playground with a BB gun.

Those famous, I am a man, right. Those famous posters that we've all seen from Memphis in 1968. Of course, now we would expand that language beyond man; you know I am a person, obviously. As a mayor, there are limits to what you can do on this. 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 some of the things 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?

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

I think that's something that we can do. Then, we've also sort of gotten away from some old, tried-and-true methods of community policing. When our police used to live in our communities where they were your next-door neighbors or police athletic leagues, where they were coaching kids 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. Driving this point home, 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 is not viewed as a little boy, even though he's my baby.

He was asking me, well, what does a mayor do? I talked about all of the different departments that report to the mayor's office. Then he said, well, do you do the police report to you? I said yes. He said, oh, that means I'll be safe. Immediately, it hit me like a ton of bricks because his mother shouldn't have to become mayor in order for him to concede that he will be safe in interactions with law enforcement; he should feel safe in interactions with law enforcement at all times.

So, obviously, we had a nice discussion after that, but how many kids does that happen to in this country? One in 300 million, my child. So, I think we have to bring back some of those old things that we used to do that we don't do anymore. We have to vet our officers in the beginning stages before we hire them because they can choose life or death. They have the choice to kill somebody or not to kill somebody. We wanna make sure that we are hiring officers that lead with compassion and respect,

James Forman Jr: You know, that was such a powerful response. It's so moving and really devastating thinking about that conversation that you had with your son. You know, I just want us to, you know, sit with that for a second. Let that be heavy, you know, on our minds and on our hearts; it is our mind. 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. 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 St 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 military veterans.

That's, you know, a well-established pipeline just the other day, I was driving. I live in New Haven, Connecticut. I was driving down to campus, and I passed a bit of a van, a New Haven police van, and the back, the whole back, was painted. It said we're hiring New Haven police; it had two images. It had a New Haven police officer in its uniform, and it had a soldier in their uniform. I have the utmost respect for anybody who chooses to serve our country as a member of the armed forces and for the sacrifices that they make.

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 wants to be a community guardian. 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? So it seems to me we wanna move in another direction. But I'm wondering if you agree with that. What's your take on this relationship between the military and police officers in terms of recruitment?

Mayor Tishuara Jones: Well, I, as the daughter of someone who was, who served the, in the armed forces, my dad was a Vietnam veteran. He still deals with PTSD to this day. A lot of our veterans do. Just like you, I respect our veterans. I've had several in my family. I think we are a military family, all the way back to my great grandfathers who served in both these wars. But do we want someone who has, who still is not well internally, who has not dealt with their PTSD to be out on our streets potentially, in a bad interaction with the community? That's what I mean by vetting. Like, are we really getting to know the candidates that we want to protect and serve because that's what's on all of the police vehicles, right?

To protect and to serve. So, I think we need to get more serious about our hiring procedures and our hiring policies when it comes to officers. And then again, how do we develop alternative response methods? In the city of Denver, you have police fire EMS[Emergency Medical Service], and you have the fourth option, the Star program, which sends out a licensed clinical social worker and an EMT to certain calls because they don't require police response. 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[Colorado]and also in Eugene, Oregon, with the Coots program that the police response is not always the appropriate one,

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

Mayor Tishuara Jones: The one thing I wanna leave your audience with, something I've said in different ways during this entire discussion, is that police are not the only solution to public safety. 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.

The last one centers on responsive governing that listens to the demands of the people and develops real solutions to meet community needs. One of the things I always say is that the people closest to the problem should be closest to the solution. So we're gonna lead by engaging our community as we go forward to transform our public safety system, but also knowing that police are not the only solution.

James Forman Jr: Thank you. I very much appreciate that. For all of the SNCC freedom fighters and veterans who are watching this, one thing that I just want everybody to know is that I know you already know, but your work is very much not in vain. When I look at Mayor Jones and I hear her talk and I reflect back on the histories 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 but for your struggle and for your commitment. So thank you for that. Now, Professor Rodriguez, I would like to give you an opportunity to offer your final reflection.

Roberto Rodriguez: Okay. I think there are a couple of things. One is to always remember that when it comes to people of color, and again, I always talk about Indigenous, black, and brown people, 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. I said, no, actually it's not; it's not a police, just like the mayor said, it's not a police issue per se. You know, we're treated as less than human. The solution is precisely that we have to ensure that this society guarantees our full human rights because we're full human beings. I wish that this problem was over, like, say, this year coming up, you know, next year; this is something that's been with us, I believe, because of my research.

I strongly believe in this continent. This issue began in 1492. So, in other words, I'm not naive in thinking it's gonna be over tomorrow, but I think it does begin. All of society has to do whatever it 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 given batons, they would use them on their students. You know, actually, they used to use their paddles, but what I'm getting at is that social workers would do the same thing if they were given a different weapon or different tool. So 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 where we start, but we have to begin again with humanizing, all of us. We all deserve that.

James Forman Jr: Thank you both. Thank you both very much for those fabulous closing comments. With that, our session came to an end. I hope everybody will stay on and participate in the next session. And thank you very much for watching.