

Mayor Melvin Carter
Testimony to the United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary
June 16, 2020

Chair Graham, Ranking Member Feinstein, Minnesota Senators Klobuchar and Smith, and members of the Committee on the Judiciary;

My name is Melvin Carter and I serve as mayor of Saint Paul, Minnesota. I am honored to testify today in support of the Justice in Policing Act of 2020.

My family has been in Saint Paul for over 100 years, since my great-grandparents fled here to escape racial violence in the Deep South. My grandfather, Melvin Sr, was a Navy veteran who played his trumpet for four U.S. Presidents. Working on the railroad, he was denied even the right to his own name, as all Black men were just called “George”¹, to spare white passengers the inconvenience of having to learn their names.

George Floyd’s murder is so personal because every black teacher, electrician and mayor knows that we are all “George”, and no amount of money or accomplishments can change that fact.

My father, Melvin Jr, served 28 years as a Saint Paul officer and sergeant after a court order² integrated our department. Because of that integration order, my friends and I grew up surrounded by superhero officers who knew us by name, were invested in our future, and solved local problems in ways that literally no one else could.

Still, I grew up with a set of rules that did not apply to my white classmates: they could drive a decent vehicle, admire a nice house, jog through a business district, or glance into a passing squad car without fear of being stopped and questioned by police. Experiences like these, which are common among black and brown Americans, breed distrust and resentment which hurt us all, as research³ shows that people

¹ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103945861>

² <http://www.spphs.com/history/griffin/chapter2.php>

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228242160_Psychology_of_Procedural_Justice_and_Cooperation

who trust law enforcement are more likely to cooperate with officers, report a crime in progress, and step forward as witnesses.

It's time we challenge our country's long held myth of public safety as a simple function of police, prisons and prosecutors. We spend nearly \$200 billion⁴ on law enforcement and corrections annually, to maintain the highest imprisonment rate⁵ on the planet. Yet, despite steady increases in public safety budgets⁶ over three decades, Americans feel less safe⁷ every year.

The reason is clear: our country's enforcement-heavy public safety strategies aren't designed to address the root causes of crime, only the symptoms. We deserve more than a swift response after a crime is committed, we deserve investment to reduce the number of times we have to call police in the first place, and we need to know that our officers are here to protect and serve all of us.

In Saint Paul, we've spent the last few years walking this talk.

- We've rewritten policies governing use of force⁸ and police dogs⁹, and terminated five officers¹⁰ who willfully failed to stop an assault in progress.
- We've embedded social workers¹¹ with officers to co-respond to individuals in crisis, employed restorative justice circles¹² for nonviolent offenders, and focused capital investments¹³ to drive safety goals.

⁴ <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/police-and-corrections-expenditures>

⁵ https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wppl_12.pdf

⁶ <https://populardemocracy.org/news/publications/freedom-thrive-reimagining-safety-security-our-communities>

⁷ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/268283/describe-problem-crime-serious.aspx>

⁸ <https://www.twincities.com/2018/03/21/st-paul-police-release-finalized-use-of-force-policy-which-increases-focus-on-de-escalation-and-when-an-officer-can-use-deadly-force/>

⁹ <https://www.twincities.com/2019/07/14/after-accidental-bites-and-a-year-of-review-st-pauls-k-9-unit-revamped-to-focus-on-tracking-for-the-most-violent-crimes/>

¹⁰ <https://www.startribune.com/five-st-paul-police-officers-fired-for-failing-to-intervene-in-assault/511254182/>

¹¹ <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2018/12/24/st-paul-police-already-want-to-expand-new-mental-health-unit>

¹² <https://www.minnpost.com/metro/2019/07/as-st-paul-rolls-out-restorative-justice-program-for-first-time-offenders-officials-encounter-a-skeptical-public/>

¹³ <https://www.twincities.com/2020/02/13/st-paul-mayor-calls-on-community-to-submit-ideas-for-making-the-city-safer-through-environmental-design/>

- Last year, we reduced our police department’s authorized strength¹⁴ in favor of evidence-based investments¹⁵ in youth, social supports, and a public health approach to violence prevention.

Mayors are leading with similar reforms across the country, but we need your help. We fire officers only to see them shielded from accountability, reinstated through arbitration, or hired into another agency that has no knowledge of their past. We build trust with constituents, only to see our local relationships damaged again and again by events in other states and jurisdictions.

With the Justice in Policing Act of 2020, we can establish a national standard of policing to curb brutality, end racial profiling, and eliminate qualified immunity. We can invest in community-policing programs, as well as needed alternatives for safety beyond policing. We can prevent officers from avoiding accountability by moving from one department to another. And we can send a strong message to our children and to the world, that America will no longer accept these cycles of violence against her black and brown civilians.

Undoubtedly, you will be pressured by powerful friends who will paint these critical reforms as hostile to law enforcement, but our work to restore Americans’ faith in our justice system is a lifeline for officers who serve in good faith. One local officer said it best: *“The actions of other officers in other cities keep on making my job here in Saint Paul that much more dangerous.”*

Just as we grew up wanting to know where our parents were in critical moments like Pearl Harbor and Freedom Summer, our children and grandchildren will call us to account for our actions today. Simply measuring the problem and incentivizing voluntary action will not suffice. This moment demands the decisive measures in this proposal.

Like Emmett Till, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks and many others, George Floyd commands the attention of the world because of the unacceptable conditions under which he died.

¹⁴ <https://www.twincities.com/2019/08/15/st-paul-mayor-proposes-4-85-percent-tax-levy-increase-few-frills-in-budget/>

¹⁵ <https://www.twincities.com/2019/11/20/st-paul-mayor-proposes-3m-public-safety-initiative-with-focus-on-youth-not-policing/>

The anger across our country will only grow until we address the unacceptable conditions—like hunger, homelessness, and police abuse—under which far too many Americans still live.

Thank you.