A Reform Perspective on Public Safety: An Interview with Tahir Duckett, Director of Georgetown's Center for Innovations In Community Safety

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Introduction

Since its founding in 2020, the Center for Innovations in Community Safety (CICS) at the Georgetown University Law Center has made strides in advancing reform and reimagining public safety.[1] One of its flagship initiatives, the Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE) program, has implementation in over 400 law enforcement agencies across forty U.S. states and three Canadian provinces.[2] These ABLE agencies, which include approximately 158,000 officers, serve around 100 million people.[3] The ABLE program supports law enforcement officers in preventing misconduct and promoting a culture of accountability, providing training and tools for officers to intervene effectively and ethically in critical situations.[4]

Another key program is the Police for Tomorrow (PfT) Fellowship, which has now completed its fourth cohort.[5] This workshop-based initiative brings together law enforcement professionals to explore the historical, social, and scientific contexts of policing.[6] The fellowship aims to equip officers with the knowledge and skills necessary to transform the culture of policing from within, promoting more community-centered and equitable approaches to law enforcement.[7] PfT workshop topics include police use of force, implicit bias and institutionalized racism, over-criminalization and mass incarceration, among others.[8]

Beyond these longstanding programs, CICS is dedicated to addressing the overreliance on policing and incarceration to solve societal issues which have often caused harm and undermined public safety. As part of this effort, CICS provides technical assistance to Alternative First Responder (AFR) programs and Hospital-Based

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[1] Geo. Univ. L. Ctr., *Center for Innovations in Community Safety*, https://www.law.georgetown.edu/cics/ (last visited Oct. 30, 2024).
[2] *Id.*
[3] *Id.*
[4] *Id.*
[5] *Id.*
[6] *Id.*
[7] *Id.*
[8] *Id.*

Violence Intervention Programs (HVIPs).[9] AFR programs, established in municipalities across the country, utilize peer responders, clinicians, and other specially trained behavioral health responders to handle a range of non-criminal service calls, helping to shift away from police involvement.[10] CICS hosts events and conducts research to foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing among practitioners in these emerging responder models.[11]

Additionally, CICS supports HVIPs, which offer comprehensive services to survivors of interpersonal violence, including safety planning, legal and medical support, and trauma-informed care.[12] One of the key elements of HVIP success is building trust as soon as participants arrive at the hospital, ensuring that they receive the necessary support to recover and prevent future violence.[13] CICS works closely with HVIP programs in the Washington, D.C. area, offering technical assistance and research expertise to help improve outcomes for survivors of violence.[14]

Tahir Duckett is the Executive Director of CICS and a professor at Georgetown Law.[15] Originally from Atlanta, Georgia, Director Duckett graduated from Emory University, where he began actionizing his passion for social change, before attending Georgetown Law.[16] During this time, he founded ReThink, an organization focused on preventing sexual violence by fostering a culture of consent and emotional awareness among adolescent boys, without relying on punitive criminal justice responses.[17] Before starting ReThink, Duckett spent eight years organizing within the labor movement, most recently leading the AFL-CIO's young worker program.[18]

Prior to his current role, Duckett was an attorney at Relman Colfax, a leading civil rights law firm known for its work on discriminatory policing, housing, lending, employment, education, and public accommodation.[19] He also helped found Law For Black Lives-DC (L4BLDC), which provides legal and policy support to the Movement for Black Lives in the Washington, D.C. area.[20] Through this work, Duckett has facilitated numerous trainings, teach-ins, and discussions

[9] *Id.*
[10] *Id.*
[11] *Id.*
[12] *Id.*
[13] *Id.*
[14] Id.
[15] Center for Innovations in Community Safety, *Tahir Duckett*, GEO. UNIV. L. CTR., https://www.law.georgetown.edu/cics/our-team/tahir-duckett/ (last visited Oct. 30, 2024).
[16] *Id.*
[17] *Id.*
[18] *Id.*
[19] *Id.*
[20] *Id.*

around community safety and justice reform.[21]

In addition to his professional work, Duckett has written extensively on topics such as policing, masculinity, and labor, with his articles and essays frequently cited in discussions about sexual violence, criminal justice, and social justice movements.[22]

In this interview, Director Duckett discusses his professional journey, shares his CICS work highlights, and offers insight into the importance of policing reform.

INTERVIEW

1. Tell me your story. Why you do what you do?

It's hard to figure out exactly where to start. So, law is my second career. I came out of undergrad and started working generally in politics, found myself in labor organizing, and spent nearly a decade in labor organizing. I helped organize for the Obama campaign back in 2008 through his reelection in 2012. I did a lot of organizing at that time of white, working-class voters in the Midwest, because that was an area that was really of strength for the labor movement. It helped us not only in terms of winning the Presidential elections in 2008 and 2012, but also midterm elections. I went to law school thinking that I would become a labor lawyer, come back to the labor movement, and continue to work my way up through the ranks that way. But a few weeks into my first year, George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin. Infamously. That was the night that Alicia Garza wrote the letter that Patrisse Cullors shared with "#BlackLivesMatter." I think was a real sort of awakening for a lot of the Black folks of my generation. I don't think we were naive enough to think that we were done with our civil rights fight, but I think it was a reminder of how vulnerable we continued to be in the eyes of the law when followed up with the murder of several unarmed Black men by the police in the next few years.

A real explosion of interest in the criminal legal system was sparked around this time, alongside the release of books like Michelle Alexander's *New Jim Crow*. We also had in that period, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, and we had films like *13th* that brought this focus back into the mainstream of how Black folks continue to be really underserved and discriminated against by the criminal legal system, from policing through incarceration into supervision. So, I think all those things were really happening, growing, and emerging into not just the public consciousness, but also for a lot of young Black folks, it really crystallized during this era, while I was in law school. I started

[21] *Id.*
[22] *Id.*

organizing in law school with Law for Black Lives, an organization here in DC that was providing legal and policy support to the Movement for Black Lives, organizations that were on the ground in the district. I really found myself drawn specifically towards doing civil rights work—for the first time in my life, specifically wanting to focus on civil rights work. I think that as I looked at the criminal legal system, I was especially interested in policing. It felt like a part of the system that we were not paying enough attention to in terms of its general contribution to the discriminatory way in which the rest of the system operates. We're looking at all of the people who are in jail or in prison, who are prosecuted. Every single one of those people comes through a police officer first. So, if we want to reduce those numbers, police felt like an important place to start. Also, police are doing a whole lot of harm in our communities isn't necessarily even showing up in those numbers. Police can do harm in community without arresting anybody, without anybody getting charged, without anybody going to jail, and without killing anybody.

For me, that meant operating our entire public safety infrastructure on policing meant operating a system that took for granted that a lot of harm was going to happen in the first place. At the same time that I was doing that, I also got into a sexual violence prevention work. I think nowhere is the failure of the criminal legal system more obvious than in the realm of sexual violence prevention. We're talking about harm that is incredibly common, incredibly traumatic, almost never reported. If it is reported, almost never prosecuted, if it is prosecuted, almost never convicted. Yet we continue to think that the way to deal with this is to continue throw more money at that part of the system and basically spend almost no money, no resources on prevention. That, to me, felt like all of these things were coming together. We have built a system that takes harm for granted. It doesn't prevent harm; it generates more harm in our communities. Why do we have this? There are actually alternatives. We could build a system that does all of this differently. Everybody would be happier. So, I found myself wanting to dedicate my life to that.

2. *What do you value the most? How do you further these mission and goals?*

I think a few things—two external and one internal. I will say internally, I come out of a Black Protestant religious tradition that has really held and driven my personal interest in social justice for my entire life. This is the way that I was raised—it is a religious value for me to be dedicated to improving the communities in which I live. That's the internal one that's a driver for me. Then I think that there are two

external ones as well. The first is that I think it is important to be rooted in the communities who are experiencing harm and to be accountable directly to those communities. I think that that's something that we don't always do well as lawyers, and especially as lawyers coming out of elite institutions. People tell us that we are smart. We tell each other that we're smart and that we can figure out the answers to questions. Even in my law career, I've experienced being a smart person sitting in a room with other smart people talking about other people's problems and how we should solve them without any input from those people. I think that's a very dangerous place to be. I think that there is a rich history, particularly in social justice lawyering, of that process leading to really awful and short-sighted outcomes. Ones that put lawyers at the very center of the story, instead of the people who are actually in the fight, day to day, for their lives. So, that's something that I seek to remain rooted in. Then the last thing I would say is that I also feel an accountability to my team, to the people who work for me. An accountability to build a workplace that reflects the kind of world that I hope that we are building in the first place. To help them build lives and careers that are sustainable and fulfilling for them as well.

3. What parts of your work are the most satisfying to you?

Building a team and watching that team grow, develop and function without me—that's really fulfilling for me. Even as I was coming in this morning, I happened to have a glance at my legal fellow and one of our legal interns on a call with one of our other staffers and other people. I had no idea this meeting was happening. But there is something productive and interesting happening in that next room, and it is happening not because I had to do it myself, it is happening because there's this team that is building the work, not completely on their own, not isolated from me, but independently. That's super valuable to me. One of the reasons I'm really excited about doing this work here at Georgetown is that I'm really hopeful we can help build a generation of students who are going to come into this work and think about this as their work. Not just civil rights generally, but specifically around policing and around community safety. This is a field in which people can develop expertise and skills. It's a field we need more people in, to the extent that folks find themselves pointed in that direction—that feels exciting to me as well.

4. Is there a moment in your career that you would pinpoint as particularly rewarding?

Hmm. I feel like I'm lucky enough to where I can say that there are multiple times throughout my career. I can think back to the night that

that Barack Obama was first elected in 2008, and I was at the AFL-CIO (The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) Building on 16th and I St. right across from the White House. I was part of like this organic group of people that went to the White House, saying goodbye to George W. Bush at that time. I remember the night of his reelection in 2012, walking back into my house after it had been called for him and just breaking down into tears because of how hard we had all worked to get to that place. Obamacare had just been passed, and it felt like if we lost that election, the Democratic party would never do anything on healthcare again. It felt like a really important thing to do to ensure that like this didn't get rolled back.

I can think of as a civil rights litigator when I settled a case for a little girl. She's now in college, but at the time she was in high school and had been discriminated against based on her disability by this neighborhood association. Getting to closure and getting them to back off was incredible, that felt so important to me. I feel like I've been really lucky to be part of some big systemic wins, some small ones over time. I think it's one of the reasons I really encourage folks to do public interest work, because you can point back to these kinds of things over the course of your career and think this was good not just for me personally, but for the world.

5. What would you like to be remembered for?

I don't care if I'm remembered. I want our work to be durable. I want every city in the country to have a department of community safety in 30 years. I want to work towards that. I don't need people to think, "This is because of Tahir Duckett's leadership." I don't care about that at all. But I would like to see the way that cities reframe the way that they think about and do public safety. I'd like to see that change in my lifetime. I'm hopeful that that change ends up being durable and that in 50 years we think about the approach we take to community safety in 2024 almost like we think about redlining today. Or maybe like we think about the medical profession using bloodletting and leeches. "What a primitive approach that they that they relied on all the way back then. I'm so glad that we don't do anything like that anymore." That's the world that I'm hopeful for.

6. What do you wish your younger self had known?

I would love to go back to the young version of me and tell him that his value and his self-worth weren't tied up in a very particular conception of masculinity that I had. For example, somebody saying "no" to you does not have to be a reflection of your value as a human

being. Like asking a girl out, and she says no to you—that doesn't have to hurt you forever. It doesn't have to hurt your deepest soul. It's just "no." I would like him to be able to develop genuine, loving relationships with other men. I didn't have those relationships with men until I was in my mid-thirties, because I just didn't think that I could have them.

I would like to go back to an even earlier version of me and tell him not to let the racism of the white folks that were around me to let that affect my own self value and the way that I saw other Black people. I grew up in a mostly white suburb, and it wasn't until my mid-twenties that I realized that I was suffering from internalized oppression, from the way that all of the white folks that I grew up with had treated me and other Black folks. It took me a little while to find my way back to a healthy relationship with who I was.

I'm sure that those things might have had other implications, perhaps for my career. When I was eighteen, I would have never imagined that I would have wanted to work in civil rights, specifically on behalf of Black people, and that I would have felt comfortable and excited. Because when I was eighteen, I was kind of "meh" on the idea of that being my community. It hadn't really been my community at that stage. The community that I did have was kind of antagonistic to the idea of that being my community—the heyday of "I don't see color." The people in my high school were saying things like that. So those are some of the things that I would have told to a younger version of me.

7. What do you wish more people were aware of generally?

I wish that more people were aware of and empathetic towards the things that other people are struggling with. I think that too many people are in their own heads, seeing things from their perspective and not necessarily recognizing the really difficult things that other people have gone through. People are really easy to judge other folks for the positions that they're in and the decisions and mistakes that they've made without recognizing how vulnerable we all are towards different pathways we might have ended up on had things broken a little bit differently for us at any individual time. I could think of that in in a whole bunch of ways. There are folks in wealthy suburbs who look to people who are in lower income communities and can't understand why they make the decisions that they make and why they're struggling with the things that they struggle with.

Sometimes it cuts differently. I remember when I graduated from college and my first job was at the Democratic Party of Georgia. I worked there for essentially a full election cycle, and at the end of the election cycle, political parties tended to downsize. I knew, even in

September, that I was going to need a job by the end of the year. So, I started applying. I applied for hundreds of jobs and could not find and could not find anything. I got really close, during that period, to applying for jobs with the Atlanta Police Department and the FBI. There is some alternate version of me that goes that route. Eventually, I ended up finding a job, so I don't end up going that route. But if I had gotten a little bit more desperate? I was unemployed for a while. I was working at a Chili's waiting tables. If I had gotten just a little bit more desperate, I could have very easily ended up in that situation where I was working for a police department. And people who say, "all cops are bastards," might have been saying that about me. Who knows what kind of awful things I could have ended up doing or being involved in. What path would I have been on? A drastically different path and potentially a place where I would have ended up doing a lot of the same harm that I'm critical of these days. The fact that I ended up on this path is not because I'm a better person. It's just because things broke this way. So, I want us all to be empathetic for the places that folks find themselves and recognize the power of systems to end up being determinative for the places where a lot of people end up.

8. What keeps you up at night?

I worry that our systems as a whole might be death spiraling as a society—that our political systems, between politics, capitalist media, and the incentives of social media companies, that all of these things might be contributing to a conservative radicalization cycle that I am worried that our institutions may not be durable enough to withstand, that all the incremental changes that we're trying to build and make could get swallowed by a rapid conservative, reactionary radicalization that is happening. It's fed into political systems that aren't responsive enough, because of things like the filibuster, the electoral college, and the United States Senate in general—they're minoritarian, they're not majoritarian. So, it means that even if you have 55% of the country that wants us to do XYZ thing, that's just not enough for us to do anything. That that leads folks to more radical beliefs about what it is that needs to be done, what can and should be done. Whereas, if we were able to kind of create a government that served people's needs, maybe it would dull that effect a little bit. Obviously, the incentives of the corporate media take us that direction, the consolidation of the media into these entities that are owned by hedge funds and billionaires that are driving for profit motive rather than journalism that that informs and challenges. Then, obviously, there's social media. I don't have to say much about that, the way that across a bunch of different social media platforms algorithms reward appealing to people's basic instincts. That's what keeps me up at

night.

9. What would you most like to see accomplished in the future?

Keeping with my answer to the last question, I actually think that we need some real democracy reforms at the federal level. I think that we have to get rid of the filibuster. I think that we need to reform the Senate. It's an absurdity of human rights violations that there is no federal representation for residents of the District of Columbia. I think it's one of the great human rights violations of our time, and nobody talks about it. So, at least DC statehood and ideally representation in the Senate.

Then, I think court reform—the Supreme Court. There's a variety of different options out there. I'm not married to any particular one, but the Supreme Court as an institution is absolutely, deeply broken at this moment and cannot be allowed to stand in the way of progress in the way that it has for the last 10 to 15 years. I think that for me some of those are near the top of the list.

10. What are you most excited about?

I am very, very excited about the steps that cities are taking to shift the way that they're thinking about their public safety. That's honestly the thing that that really keeps me keeps me going, despite what's happening on the federal level. I think that cities are doing really interesting and successful things and creating really powerful models. I feel hopeful that future that I described earlier is very much within reach, that that's not a pipe dream of cities that are really oriented around comprehensive safety—not just safety, but care, delivery mechanisms for their residents. That would be a fundamental reshaping of the way in which the state more broadly relates to its residents, and for everything that the federal government can't seem to do right now. [I'm excited] that it's possible that cities can do a lot of that.

11. What advice would you give young people who are going into policy work or law enforcement work?

Stay zoomed out on the overall picture. If you think about things in six-month or one-year increments, things will feel like they are getting worse. If the only way in which you looked over the course of the last five years was if you looked at the conversation in 2023 only, you would think, "We are right back to 1991." But we're not. We're miles from there in terms of the tenor of the conversation, in terms of the policy solutions that are very much on the table, and even in terms of what policing looks like, as bad as policing is right now. It is not as harmful as it was in 1991, and that means something. It means something for our

praxis. Because people will mistake the fact that bad things are still happening for the wrong conclusion that bad things are happening just as often as they always have. Even lawyers will make that jump. You'll see it. "This officer got de-escalation training, and he didn't de-escalate in this situation. So, we should have never done de-escalation training." That solution doesn't follow logically. So, you have really got to zoom out when we're talking about systemic reform. Individual instances can be storytelling mechanisms. But we shouldn't mistake storytelling mechanisms for being determinative of policy. It would be very easy to have looked at 2023 and thought, "Okay, we're in a really bad place." Here we are now in late 2024. Everybody recognizes that crime is going down. All of a sudden, it's like the tenor of the conversation has changed again. You have just got to be able to weather those tough periods in order to see the long periods of growth and change. That would be top of my list.