

Just Building Trust Between Police and their Communities

Introduction [00:00:01] RTI International's Justice Practice Area presents Just Science.

Introduction [00:00:08] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode four of our National Case Closed Project supporting best Practices and investigation Season, Just Science sat down with Michael McKissick, founder of the Mikey23 Foundation, Reverend Rodrick Burton, St Louis Metropolitan Clergy Coalition's Chairperson for Public Safety, and Dr. Stacy Sechrist, Research Public health Analyst at RTI International, to discuss the importance of building trust between law enforcement and community members and ultimately improving gun violence investigations. In many cities in the United States, there has been a growing mistrust between law enforcement and the communities they serve, which can negatively impact violent crime investigations and public safety. In response, community organizations are working to bridge the gap between law enforcement and community members to form connections that are rooted in love and understanding. Listen along as Mike, Reverend Burton, and Dr. Sechrist describe recommendations for law enforcement to positively engage in their communities, how to navigate anti-snitching sentiments and fears of retaliation, and the importance of police reaching out to victim's families after a homicide. This episode is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may have exposed responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here are your hosts, Julia Brinton and Stacey Sechrist.

Julia Brinton [00:01:36] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Julia Brinton, with the National Case Closed Project, a program of the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Here to join me as co-host is Dr. Stacy Sechrist, the community outreach lead for the National Case Closed Project. On today's episode, we will discuss how law enforcement can engage with the communities they serve to help reduce gun violence. Here to guide us in this discussion is Mr. Michael McKissick, founder of the Mikey23 Foundation in Lansing, Michigan, and Reverend Rodrick Burton, lead pastor at the New Northside Missionary Baptist Church in Saint Louis, Missouri. Welcome, Mike and Reverend Burton. Thank you so much for talking with us today.

Rodrick Burton [00:02:19] Appreciate it, Thank you for your interest.

Mike McKissic [00:02:20] Thank you for having us speaking about this very important issue.

Julia Brinton [00:02:23] And thank you for agreeing to host the session with me, Stacy.

Stacy Sechrist [00:02:26] Absolutely. Thanks, Julia.

Julia Brinton [00:02:28] So to kick us off, we're going to start with you, Mike. Can you talk to our listeners about what the driving force was for you to start the Mikey23 Foundation?

Mike McKissic [00:02:38] It started August 1st of 2015 when my son Michael was murdered. We, as a family and a community wanted to keep his legacy alive, and we started the Mikey23 Foundation to combat some of this gun violence in our community. We worked with young adults and at-risk youth. One of the things that we do with the Mikey23 Foundation, we teach kids a building trade. We teach them how to, electrical

plumbing, HVAC, roofing, siding, running small equipment, concrete stone, stonework. We teach them that, you know, our model is always simple as I tell everyone, you know, instead of picking up a gun to commit gun violence, you know, pick up a hammer and build up your community. And so we learned teaching our youth in the city of Lansing, in the houses that we do rehab, we go around to neighborhoods that need a little love. We kind of say like if we pick a house and a neighborhood that needs a little love, then all the other neighbors will put love into their homes and then it will be a better neighborhood and be a safer neighborhood. And the Mikey23 Foundation, when we teach in our youth, we try to bridge that gap between law enforcement and our community because it's needed. And so, Mikey23 just don't do that. We have, also we have a scholarships for high schoolers. and what they have to do, they have to write an essay, a minimum of 500 words, how they will stop the violence in their community. And we give them a \$2500 scholarship. And now whoever the winner, we have judges that not a part of Mikey23, choose which best essay that won that particular contest. And so what we try to do, because our youth are involved or their peers are involved, it sometimes is gun violence, and so we always thought, listen to our youth, let's listen to them and see what kind of remedies they may have. You know, because the age factor is, what we're dealing with gun violence in the city of Lansing, it's a range from 13 to 24 years of age. So that's the age factor, is in the gun violence in our community. So therefore, that's the ages that we train and teach in a Mikey23 foundation. And so people think Mikey23 is just a program to teach kids how to build, which it's not, it's a mentoring piece to it, also, that goes with it. And it goes with that trust that we tried to get with our kids because they may have the answers, because we as an adult, think we have the answers but we have to really listen to our youth as in fact, they went through gun violence. So in a nutshell, that's what the Mikey23 does.

Julia Brinton [00:04:59] Thank you, Mike. I love the theme of love running through your approach to getting involved in the community. It's like the old saying, you kill it with kindness right in.

Mike McKissic [00:05:08] Indeed

Julia Brinton [00:05:09] So, Reverend Burton, I'd love to hear about how you started your involvement with gun violence prevention and response work, too.

Rodrick Burton [00:05:15] Just a little over ten and a half years ago, I started out in what I thought was just going to be, typical pastoral ministry as a leader of the church. But I ended up being in the Ministry of Public Safety, as I call it, because of proximity and necessity. And what am I talking about? Well, I've had six members murdered, five with firearms. We've had ten members of the church, or their family members been victims of violent crime. We've had at least nine shootouts on church property, most recently a shootout between a police officer and an escaped individual. Between 2020 and 2021, we had seven shooting within 25 yards of our front doors and five were fatal. We've had to pay all types of money for damage, HVAC units, Bullets in our buildings, And over the years, I found about 30 different shell casings. Most scary was that many of them were 7.62 or AK 47 rounds. And so, that has caused me to work on the issue of public safety for our church, and the neighborhood. Additionally, worked on gun safety campaign in the wake of a number of accidental shootings, which are [unknown] Pam Boyd called myself out and other clergy out. I served on a group, it's defunct, it was called the St Louis Initiative to reduce Violence, for that purpose, And I was the chair of the clergy part. Additionally, I currently serve as the Law and Order Committee chairperson on the St Louis Metropolitan Clergy Coalition [unknown] a third term. And all this because of just the experiential, the proximity to violence. And a year ago in October, I was called out to

respond to the shooting at the Central Visual Performing Arts High School. Personally, I pray to God on school shootings. So trying to minister, and trying to help the community have a safer environment. So those are the reasons.

Julia Brinton [00:07:14] Thank you, Reverend. Stacy Sechrist, would you like to introduce yourself as well?

Stacy Sechrist [00:07:17] Yes. My name is Stacy Sechrist. I work with RTI in the justice practice area. I've been engaged in the national Case Closed project where we are attempting to work with law enforcement agencies as well as communities to improve case clearance around fatal and non-fatal shootings.

Julia Brinton [00:07:35] Thanks, Stacy. All right, Reverend, I'm going to go back to you. I'd like to hear from you, why do you think it's so important that law enforcement engage and build trust within their community? And how might this engagement increase community participation in violent crime investigations?

Rodrick Burton [00:07:52] So I will give you a current history perspective. During my second year of pastoring, Ferguson happened, and the lessons that were not learned, which attributed to the incident, was that community policing and the trust of the community was not taken seriously. At the same time, there's a contrast. So where I'm sitting in my office, our church is bisected by the city of Saint Louis and the county of St. Louis. And so, in the county, the community represented is called Jennings. My wife in our family grew up not far from here, and during their formative years, Jennings was a neighborhood that black people didn't go into and the police were known to be abusive. And so Saint Louis County took over the policing of Jennings. And the commander whom I had the pleasure to work with, through the Saint Louis Initiative to reduce violence, was completely committed to community policing. And some of the things that he did, and I was a partner with, he invited me in as a partner, he did what was called walk and talks, When we went door to door and talked to people. And he passed out car survey cards, How are we doing? He communicated with his staff, The buck stops with him, And furthermore, they were going to have a posture of community policing. And so the contrast was, if you went down a West Florissant, you would pass through Jennings, there was a few boarded up windows. Then when you hit Ferguson, the difference was unbelievable. And it was because of the posture of community policing in practice versus no trust, limited trust in the community. Those are the lessons that I observed, how it can be done well. But then also when it's not done, you have potential chaos. You have cases not being solved. You have little to no communication.

Julia Brinton [00:09:39] Thank you, Reverend. And Mike, what do you think about Reverend's perspective of being involved with the community? Have you witnessed similar engagement in Lansing or has your experience been different?

Mike McKissic [00:09:50] It has. You know, so we're fortunate in in Lansing, that other organizations, we kind of partner up with each other. And we partner up with each other for the simple fact that with the law enforcement's, right? And so during that time, when Black Lives Matter started, I was invited to speak with the group. And at this time, we had a lot of uproar, What happened a few years ago, What happened to George, Right? And what happened was that everybody was angry. A majority African-Americans, they were very angry. And so I was invited to speak and, not saying I have all the answers, but my perspective was to tell them, we have to look at this in a perspective of how can we, as a community, do better to keep our community safe? Because what happens is, when a

crime happens in our community, the officers come, right? We want to prevent that. Our organization Mikey23 and other organizations, we're trying to prevent that. From even the officers coming to that point. And so, I would like to speak about, you know, when my son was murdered, right? And his case is unsolved. So, I don't have the best of pasts, right? I have a past that, these kids now, can relate to me now, which is a good thing when the kids aren't the kids I deal with on probation. So when my son was murdered, Michael, I was in a dark place. Mentally, I was in a dark place. And so as a father, I was just like my father reared me up. I was raised to provide for your family, protect your family. And so, if I felt a failure by my son being murdered, right? Because he lived at home with his mother and I, worked for the family construction company, doing very well. So when it happened, two days after I got a knock at my door, it was a retired detective. And I haven't seen him in like 37 years. He said, Michael, would you please let the law enforcement take care of this? You know, because of my past, right? He said, please, they'll take care of this. And I said, you know, that's what they're there for, you know? And so I shared his story with my kids, and I shared a story that I teach. And the story with my family when that happened, only because to let you know that law enforcement, they come and volunteer for the Mikey23 Foundation. And reason that I've seen that community engagement in our city with the law enforcement has been increasing, especially with the last two chief of police and actually I think law enforcements in our community and the nonprofit that we work on, gun violence, I think we're doing a fantastic job. It's just that what happens when you have a gun violence that happened a couple of days ago, you know, the media put the spotlight on that and it seems like the whole community is falling to pieces, but they're not. You know, they're really coming in together. They really are coming together. What I'm seeing. But I have seen it a difference in a community engagement. And we're going to need we're going to need more of that involved with that with our community.

Rodrick Burton [00:12:31] If I can add something on, one of the things that I had to do over the course of just my history of being a pastor, not only do we have Ferguson, but most people outside of the St. Louis metropolitan area are unaware that there was another case that came a year or two after Ferguson, in which a police officer whom his name would shock me, we got off from a shooting that would, you know, to everybody it looked like it was murder. And so that then had a whole other large protest that went on for quite some time. And so, there's been a lot of conversations around trust. And so where there is no trust, There's no security. But one of the ironies that I found we use and hearing the call of no justice, no peace, is that when community offenders, individuals whose actions offend the community are not brought to justice because of distrust, then there is no peace and the community continues to be victimized. Or what will happen is there will be retribution or a vigilante action to address that, because there's no justice. And so we need, you know, that trust has to be there so that there is communication, there is collaboration to bring peace to the community.

Mike McKissic [00:13:47] You know, one of the things that Mikey23 has done, and a few years ago, you know, we had a campaign on snitching, Right? And we kind of turned it on his head and teach the younger kids that S.N.I.T.C.H is Strong Neighbors Involved Together Create Hope, and that's simply what it means. For us. So we're trying to teach our youth that typically, when you see something wrong in your community, it's not being called a snitch. It's mainly because you're trying to keep your community safe. You keep your community safe by letting someone know if somebody is next door to Mrs. Davis house robbing her, or stealing from her, or whatever the case be, that needs to be reported. You know, that's not snitching, you know? And so we try to teach our younger kids, and we try to embed that in them. And so we are in a society that, you know, like my son's case is still unsolved. You know, we raised \$70,000, but still no one wants to come

forward, Right.? And so it's not about the money, what I think it's about is the community, if they seen something, they feel like they're obligated to say something.

Stacy Sechrist [00:14:51] You both have such incredible experience in building these partnerships and relationships with law enforcement in your community. And I think that the listeners would have a lot to learn. So, I just wonder if you could each take a moment to talk about, if you were to give advice to other community agencies, or other community based organizations who may be looking to establish or build a relationship with their local law enforcement, what two or three pieces of guidance would you give them in terms of how to start that? And I think, Reverend, you spoke of the need to also bring the rest of your community along with you. So, if you could just talk a little bit about that. And Reverend, if you don't mind, we'll start with you and then we'll kick it over to Mike.

Rodrick Burton [00:15:34] Sure. So as I said, having so many different interactions out of necessity, required me to be, you know, our church to be, proactive. And some of the things that I suggested that people can do here, you're looking to make a relationship with local law enforcers, number one, invite them. And so, we've invited our chiefs, our local precinct commanders, to come and introduced themselves to the community. Whenever there's been any cops on our property, we make sure to intentionally approach them, find out what's going on, introduce ourselves, invite them to various community events in. In St. Louis, we have, and in some parts of the Midwest, it's a thing called grills of glory, and every Saturday church, and have hot dogs, food. Being intentional. The other thing that I've done is I've been intentional about asking for a presentation. So the Internal affairs in Saint Louis County called the Bureau of Professional Affairs. We've asked them to come and explain to the community, how do you make a complaint? Additionally, you know, times that I haven't been asked the things that were around public safety, I've asked to be invited. You know, I've had said, hey, why don't you have any members of the clergy here? Or, you know, other times I've been invited in and I've shown up. So I would say the thing to be would be intentional about expecting law enforcement to have an ongoing conversation. And those dividends pay off, because I had a relationship with a former same city police chief, we had an incident on our lot where our daycare center is, where a gentleman came on the lot, he had a gun, was intoxicated, dropped the gun. We called 9-1-1. No one came. After 45 minutes, I forgo the chain of command. I called the chief and I said, hey, chief, what's the deal? You know, we're calling, we got a person with a gun here, We got witnesses, We have people who want to be witnesses. No one had showed up. And so I wouldn't be able to make that call without having a relationship. And so, unfortunately, we have a 9-1-1 problem and capacity, we'll talk about that later. But you need to be intentional on behalf of your community regarding public safety, so that people are not, the only time to have an interaction with a police officer is when 9-1-1 call, It's a terrible situation. You've got to have those interactions when there isn't an emergency.

Stacy Sechrist [00:17:58] Thanks, Reverend. How about you, Mike? Do you have anything to add to that?

Mike McKissic [00:18:01] One of the things I like to speak about is accountability, Right.? And the officer has to be accountable, and the community has to be accountable. Everybody has to be accountable, Right? And so an incident happened maybe about seven, six months ago. 14 year old kid was taking out the trash. In Lansing, what was happening was they're stealing KIA cars in the area. That's what they were doing in the city of Lansing. So apparently, this kid, that fit the same description as the kid was taking out the trash, the officer was seeing this kid taking out the trash, and what they end up doing was they handcuffed him and put him in the police car. So, that was one of the

things that officer made a mistake in doing that. He shouldn't have handled it that way, especially a 14 year old kid. The father came out to explain who he was. So the chief of police decided to make a press conference about what happened. That's not how the procedures goes, the officer made a mistake, and so accountability to let it known that when something happens in your organization, Mikey23, Any organization, law enforcement, the church authority, the Mosque or any place, you have to have accountability. Once that happens, you face up to what happened in your organization, a person from that aspect, then therefore, you have more of a respect and trust. Second of all, you know, we have officers that do not necessarily come and volunteer for the Mikey23 Foundation, but sometimes they'll be on their jobs wearing a uniform, driving their motorcycles or their cars, and they just stop by the Mikey23 Foundation just to say hi to the kids. Because some of our kids, one particular I'm talking about, before they joined Mikey23, they were intimidated by law enforcement, and only because of the color of their skin they was intimidated. And so therefore, what I end up doing was, I got a couple of officers to speak to her and she told them why she intimidated because she had a bad experience when she ran away from home. And so therefore, now she has a better understanding and now she doesn't feel the way she did now. But so to answer your question, Dr. Stacy, I believe that accountability is very important for any organization to say that we made a mistake and let the community know that and move forward.

Stacy Sechrist [00:20:06] Sounds like excellent advice. And, you know, obviously, to have gotten to the point where you both are with your relationships with law enforcement took some work and some effort, no doubt. So I wonder if you could speak to some of the challenges that you've encountered, and may possibly still encounter when working with law enforcement agencies. And along with that, have you come up with any solutions to those challenges? Reverend, may I start with you?

Rodrick Burton [00:20:29] Yeah. So I'll talk about a general and then more specific one. I'll say one of the general ones would be sort of just the us versus them mentality. And a general distrust, and a defensive posture. And so it should be understandable that why law enforcement may feel very defensive during this time. Ever since Michael Brown and George Floyd, I mean, they feel defensive. And a mutual sort of distrust. So those are some things that over time are going to have to be overcome. But I think the best way to overcome that is continuous engagement. And one of the other things that sometimes there will be an issue, is that the chiefs or politicians, they will say things, and the chief's wishes don't go all the way down to the sergeants in the trenches. And so oftentimes the concerns and the rightful accountability that the community wants, that can't just come from, yes, the talking heads at the top, but that's got to go to the commanders. That's got to go to your sergeants. Because on a day-to-day basis, the sergeants are the ones to run the police department. And so people have to understand that. And sometimes there's great anger because like, oh, well, this person, this chief is saying this, but yet on a day to day, we're seeing other issues on the street. So those one of the things that's frustrating and one of my greatest frustrations, and it was not the police fault whatsoever, the politics of our state is a very, very, very, very, very pro-gun state. And at one point, a politician did a state law which penalizes local law enforcement for working with federal law enforcement on gun issues unless there are laws on the books. And so during that time, I had some members who were just being terrorized. There were shootings going on, constant automatic gunfire. And when I called a local commander, she was frustrated, she could not approach anyone with a weapon. I called the chief, he was frustrated. And eventually, because of relationships, I end up calling federal partners whom, and they're not ones who just respond, they have to have long investigations, but I don't know what they did, but their piece came to that neighborhood. Those are something that can be

frustrating. Something outside can limit the police's response and then sometimes the community doesn't know the impact of various laws. And so that's one of the issues that we've had to deal with, which is more localized to us.

Stacy Sechrist [00:23:00] Thanks, Reverend. Very enlightening to have that additional context. Mike, do you have anything to add about the challenges that you've seen working with law enforcement?

Mike McKissic [00:23:08] I do. So from a perspective of, if you remember the murder that happened at Michigan State University, the three individuals. One of them, I know personally, as Mya, is the mother of Brian that was murdered on campus. And so I met her shortly after he was murdered at a Stop the violence event. And she found out who I was, And she said, I want to talk to you. And I sent my condolences to her because, you know, as a parent, it's not normal for us to bury a child. She told me she was frustrated with the police department. Now, you have Lansing to police department, and then you have East Lansing Police Department. East Lansing Police Department is on Michigan State campus. So that's who she was referring to. And she was frustrated because MSU, when something happens on campus, it's like an alert that happens. But the way the system ran that particular day, the kids didn't receive the information fast enough. So her son, they looked at his phone after he was murdered, he passed away, she got the phone. If it would have been 8 minutes sooner, if the system was working sooner, he would have missed the shooter that came into the school. So her frustrations, was with the East Lansing Police Department. And so what I did was, I did it intentionally, I hosted a Stop the Violence walk because Mikey23, just deals with the local law enforcement in our area with the Lansing, police department. So I did it on purpose with the Stop the Violence march this year, I combined the East Lansing and Lansing together, with their law enforcement as well, so that she can have that relationship with the local law enforcement in her area and have that communication, because she was very angry. The challenge is bringing all the other law enforcements, Right? because you just dealing with the local, we need to deal with, We have three departments. We have East Lansing, we have Lansing, then we have Lansing Township. The challenges is that we need to spread out.

Julia Brinton [00:24:59] Thank you both for your perspective on that. I'd like to shift gears just a little bit to talk about what you're seeing out and about in the community, especially for victims and witnesses of violent crimes and survivors, about why these people who have been subjected to violence over and over and over again don't participate in police investigations. So, Mike, I'll start with you if you can kind of speak to why you think community members, whether they know who might have shot their loved one, or been a victim of violent crime, or maybe they don't know, but a lot of times they are very much anti-police, and don't necessarily trust the police, maybe they don't have faith in the police to do right by them. And so they are not willing to engage.

Mike McKissic [00:25:51] Retaliation. That's what they worried about. They worried about somebody coming in to shoot their house up when that incident happened for them to come forward. Prime example, my son's case, eight years ago. We had a young lady that called me earlier this year. She says, Mr. Mike, you know, you don't know me, but the individual that's supposed to have done that, shot your son, They tried to give me the gun to hide, to take away, Right? She says, it's been on my conscious for the last eight years. She says, I'm going down to the police department and tell them what I know. And she was worried about what was going to happen to her. She was worried if she gives us information, what's going to happen? So now you got to you've got to be mindful that Lansing is so small. We know what happened to my son. We know, right.? And that's why

you had that old detective come by my house to say, you know, Mike, let the law officer, let them let them handle it. And she came forward because that individual supposed to have done that is incarcerated right now, still and is incarcerated. She felt a little safer to come forward to say, you know, this is what I know. So what happens is in our community, you have to instill in them safety, right? Because kids, they're only used to an environment of violence that continues to go on and it's a cycle. And so how can we, and the pastor and other organizations, how can we break up that cycle? And so, we are, for the Mikey23, we are working on, why I'm at my parents house now and that this is in a country, ten and a half acres of land now here, and we're trying to remove them from out of their environment and bring them to see something they have never seen. And I say that to say, because I experienced with these kids that, when I take them to see the point Michigan Adventure, which is out of the state of Michigan, when I take them to these places, they have never been there. And so therefore, the mental part of it, if you're constantly, the shooting and stabbing and negative, and all this stuff is embedded in these kids, you're going to end up having a negative result from this kid. When the kids get older, this is all that they know. So for us, you know, we looking at it in perspective, you know, let's get these kids out of that, out of that crazy environment that they're in, because that's all they know. So we, as a community, you know, I just think that we need to get them kids. And I call them kids because I'm 60 years old, get them kids and bring them out of that environment that they're in, and they're in such a destructive environment, and it's crazy because, you know, I got the McKissick Construction Company which is my father started. So that's why we do the building trades. So we have one guy that comes on, as far as McKissick Construction, and works for us to lay bricks and blocks on our family construction business. And him and his wife in their home, and their daughter came in, apparently the boyfriend was involved with individuals that he shouldn't have been involved with, and the guy that worked for the McKissick Construction, didn't know this and neither did the wife. He comes in the house, the daughter comes in the house, and next thing you know, half an hour later, the kids come by and shoot the whole house up. So this happened two years ago. They shoot the whole house up, and the guy that worked for the McKissick Construction, he's 67 now, one of the bullets went through his jaw. And so, I'm saying this to say that, you have to get these kids out of that environment and let them know that there's something better for you. And we have to give them hope. If you don't give a child hope, only thing they're going to see is destruction and destruction, and that's all that they know, and this is all this is working for them. So we always say that there's two type of webs in society. You have the web of the people that's doing crazy things, gun violence over here, and then you have the web of what the pastor's doing, and what Mikey23 and other organizations are doing. We got to catch him in this web over here. You notice a spider, it gets something caught, it's hard to get it loose. Same thing with the negativity over here, right? You got the negativity over here. If they get caught up in that web, it's hard for them to get loose. That's why we have to keep them over here. And I call them, we need more gardeners, because kids are like a garden and we don't take care of them and take care of our garden. The weeds will take over. And so that's why we need positive gardeners, because you can have a negative garden to do. You can poison it as well. So we need positive gardeners on our side.

Stacy Sechrist [00:30:05] So thanks, Mike. And there's a lot we could build from there, Reverend. But I was wondering, you know, in light of, fear of safety, concern about retaliation, all of that is real. So I wondered, from your perspective, what do you think that community leaders and organizations can do to encourage community participation in investigations? So, you know, knowing that safety is a real factor, are there ways for community organizations to become involved in a way that helps build that bridge between community members who hold information, and then sharing that with law enforcement? I

just wonder if you have any kind of thoughts or ideas around how community groups could be involved in that space.

Rodrick Burton [00:30:47] Right. The issue is that community violence has been institutionalized. One of the good things that has come from the Michael Brown protests, the George Floyd protests, has been changes in police accountability. Even though different incidents will happen. But overall, there's been dramatic changes in police accountability. And furthermore, you even hear, police and law enforcement saying, hey, look, we know we're not the solution, we can't be the only solution. But the issue is, there has not been a change. Matter of fact, there's been a more institutionalized posture of community violence, because many of the activist leaders believe that because of overincarceration, we don't need more accountability on the law enforcement side. And so, what that leads to is, continued cycles of violence, continued cycles of permissiveness for those who live in the community to terrorize anyone from speaking up. And so there has to be a big conversation within our community about what type of community are we gonna have, because we don't want the police to adjudicate, or be part of process adjudication. How do you address the violence? So on the police side, in communities where people are not cooperating, there's no other choice other than the use of more technology. There's really no choice. You got to have some sort of witness. And so the technology has to be the witnesses, when people really are threatened by potential violence. But the community needs to have questions about, look, what type of justice are we going to have in our communities? Furthermore, if the issue is, we need police forces to look more like us, then we need to we need to be stepping up and be a part of more of the process. So this is what I'm seeing. I'm seeing is great tension, And sometimes I'm hopeful, but sometimes I'm feeling disappointed because people are not answering a question. I've had six members murdered, Valerie Dent, lost her two boys, James and Stephen, a month after Michael Brown. And there was very little interest by my community in talking about it. And too often you have a disconnect between activists who are for accountability, and victims. Oftentimes, you won't see the people at the marches for their mothers or for the families. If Mike was in my community, you won't see some of the people who are advocating for police and court accountability at these rallies and at these shows of support for real victims of violence. And so those two things are going to have to marry up. The next conversation has to take place in terms, of course, police can do better, But I believe, this what I've been witnessing, that I've been at press conferences where we've asked people to come forward, and asked people to cooperate. And then I've had my own personal experiences. And so sometimes police have to be practical about when a person calls. So, I had a situation where on the off hours of our child care center, there was gang graffiti and I call the police. Well, no one was in the parking lot. So, all of a sudden all these marked police cars come, they come to talk to me. A day or two later, the local guys in the area who sold drugs were confronted me about, you call the police, you're a snitch. You know, I had a conversation with them about, I'm responsible for the safety here, on our facility. But the police should be better about, okay, how can we help to communicate and keep the people safe who have information? So those are some things that, you know, there's some serious conversation that we have to have internally, as we continue to hold law enforcement or courts accountable, to get away from institutional racism. But there's conversation we need.

Julia Brinton [00:34:33] Thank you. Reverend, I'd love to hear from your perspective. You started to touch on this, a little bit, about ways that law enforcement can build trust with the community. Do you think the perspective that law enforcement take might be different with a faith-based organization than they might with more of a, what feels like a grassroots based organization, like the Mikey23 Foundation?

Rodrirk Burton [00:34:56] Not necessarily. Again, I think it's around continuous interaction and familiarity. So for law enforcement, some of the things they can do is sometimes when there's a community meeting, they may feel more comfortable around a good crowd that leads in. But I would challenge you to say, bring people to the conversation who are ones who may be, you know, active [unknown]. Have that conversation, that space, because you're showing that you are truly concerned and you want to hear all people's perspectives. You know, a lot of times, police officers, they're willing to run into a building with gunfire, but sometimes they're afraid to hear the voices of people who have issues. And I would say, go ahead, show up here with the people [unknown] by the fact that you're there and you're listening to the good and the bad. That means something. Furthermore, I would say challenge people to say, hey, how could we do this better? You know, because oftentimes it's easy to criticize, but then when you're dealing with the actualities of, well how do we solve a crime? You know, and, hey, bring people into the room when there's a number of mothers and dads there who had children who have been killed violently. What answers do you all have? Okay, other than no incarceration or limited incarceration or no police. And so I think by bringing people into the space, let's deal with the reality of violence that's not institutional violence. Violence that's not by law enforcement. Folks have to come together. And so the last thing I'll say, I believe police officers, they could challenge folks that they end up locking up. That they know are good for stuff. Hey, look, when you get out, what can you do to make the community better? How can you fix this? I really think in those times where the interview was over, the person is going away to have a conversation with them and the challenge and hey, look, how can we meet again and it not be in this type of circumstance? You know, and so I just think that's some of the things I believe law enforcement could do to keep being challenged, because sometimes people who are persistent offenders are influential people, in a negative way. And so how can they turn people who are influential to the public safety of the community?

Julia Brinton [00:37:07] I think there can be champions on either side, right? Mike, do you have anything you want to add to the reverend's feedback?

Mike McKissic [00:37:14] Yeah, I do. You know, the reverend says something about technology. We do need more technology as far as our community's concerned. You know, and I say this from experience. It happened, I don't know, if like five or six years ago, that my wife and I heard this, We thought there were firecrackers outside the house, which wasn't. In my house, because I got equipment and stuff like that, I got surveillance cameras around my house, actually it was a gun shooting in front of my house. And so, we hear a knock at the door. The detective, he's seeing signs that I have surveillance cameras and he says, is your modem working? Can we take a look at it? And I said, Sure. So he took it down to the Michigan State Police lab. My camera caught the incident that happened. And so it was a young lady was shot by a guy, and she was pregnant and she was paralyzed but the child survived. And so, the prosecutor asked me when they was prosecuting the case, can I come and say that I didn't alter the video and nothing like that. Because you got you know, they wanted to prove their case. And so, what I did was, I end up taking some of my kids to see what you supposed to do when something happens like that in your community. This is what you're supposed to do, because this lady now is paralyzed from the neck down. She will not be able to hold her child, Right.? And so I took them to see me testify, saying that I didn't alter it. And I said, this is what you supposed to do. And so I think as ordinary citizens, we need to lead by example and show our kids this is the right way. But, yeah, we need more technology. And, you know, that's the technology I'm speaking about, the camera and stuff like that. Sometimes people don't like

them in their communities and stuff like that. But if I didn't have that camera, it wouldn't have, they couldn't have gotten a conviction.

Julia Brinton [00:38:52] Thanks for that input. That's really interesting about the piece of technology. And I think a lot of law enforcement would agree with you that they need more technology to help solve violent crimes as well. As we start to wrap up, I'd like to pivot to have each of you provide your top suggestions for law enforcement agencies who are listening to this podcast, who are looking to better engage their local communities. And I wonder a little bit about the long term support that they can provide for witnesses and victims and the community. Not the immediate stuff, but I think you could speak to this, Mike, as someone who is still grieving the loss of their son in this unsolved murder, you know, what does it look like for law enforcement to stay engaged with you and other community members who have year after year after year seeking justice for their loved ones?

Mike McKissic [00:39:48] Thank you for that. For me, as a family man who lost their son to gun violence, that's the most important question for me. Eight years, that we lost my son, Michael. Other family members do not have a Mikey23 foundation that is always on TV getting this attention. You have families they don't have that. They'll go right into their little corner and you'll never hear about them because they lost a loved one. But I lost my loved one, and I'm trying to keep his legacy alive and help the community with this gun violence. You hear about me, right? But you won't hear about them. And I just say that, if there are law officials listening to me, even though that their cases unsolved, make it a anniversary, when you find out that child's death, Find out the date of that child's death. Find out the date of that child was born. Mother's Day. Father's Day. And it doesn't cost that much to send them a card and say, we're thinking about you. You know, I know this is Michael's birthday. We're hoping that we will close this case, but we haven't forgotten about you. This is really, really, really simple. I mean, the reason that I bring it up is because, other family members that have unsolved cases, they tell me this is a day, just like, they forgot about us. They don't say nothing. So what happens is you're creating a non trust issue with the law enforcement and the community. You're creating something that shouldn't have been created and you could have grown from that. You understand? That law official could have grown and have a relationship. But instead, you have you having a division because you as a community, you're not talking to the individuals that lost their loved one. Because when you lose a loved one, when the birthdays come around, you feel some type of way. You feel depressed. Thanksgiving's coming up. Christmas is coming up. All of these holidays that you celebrate, you're feeling very sad. And then sometimes it can be to a point that, when a loved ones gets murdered in your family, it's a trickle down effect. The brothers, the siblings. And the reason that people embraced Mikey23 Foundation, this was a loving kid. This kid used to help elderly people out here, and we didn't even know one until he passed away. But the other family members don't have that. So, I will say this over and over and over again. Law officials, reach out to those loved ones, even though it was nonfatal still. If it was nonfatal, still reach out to them, to the family member, still reach out to them and speak to them. But the ones that's fatal, like for me, I wish the law officials would do a better job in doing that, because they reach out to me because I'm with the Mikey23, which we're blessed to be in the position that we are in, to help out the community. But some of those family members, they do not have that.

Julia Brinton [00:42:28] I hear that and it's nice to know that you even in the position of what you were kind of calling authority, you know, elevated status, because you have this established organization. It's just a small amount of effort from law enforcement. It doesn't

matter who you are, it's still a human to human connection. Reverend, do you resonate with what Mike is talking about?

Rodrick Burton [00:42:49] Yeah, absolutely. And so I heard some of the same thing. But I also heard that a lot of times the officers, when they don't have anything to report, that they don't want to connect with the family because they don't have anything to report. And I stated this at the convening, have someone to send, on the anniversary, just to send some communication. We have not forgotten. We're still here for you. We may not have anything to report, but to continue to, occasionally have cold case team, we're still concerned about your son, your daughter. I think that's something that if they're intentional about, that goes volumes to speak to, you know, hey, we're still concerned about justice in the community. I would say some issues to tangibles, collaboration. So law enforcement is in the in the job of law enforcement, you know, protecting and serving. And they can't do all the wraparound services. So get technology, you have an app and map who can do what. So when the beat cop shows up, or when the family has all the needs after an incident or even after a big sweep comes through, who are the different agencies, who are the Mikey23 in their community and others. Because what we found here is, we have lots of resources, but they aren't collaborating. And so, a former U.S. attorney started the ball rolling on having a convening. And so, find out who else can address some of the issues that come up, in the void when there's a violent crime. Secondly, I say they need to be intentional about asking to be present, asking to address. One thing that I'll never forget. Years ago, there was a book that was written about the Iran-Contra and about how the drugs were being sold in the community to facilitate that. The CIA director came to the hood and sat down and did not go ballistic. That said, a whole bunch for the director of the Central Intelligence Agency to sit down and answer these issues/ We never know what they did, they didn't, but that says a lot. And so to be present, I think is very important. Consistently to be present. And then the last thing I'll say would be, engage the people who you don't want to engage with. And so some of the people, at one point the former circuit attorney, our prosecuting attorney city had one of the main activist on a review panel over a shooting. And that activist being there, was instrumental in going back and pushing back on, there was a what he called. disinformation that was being spread by a lawyer retained by the family, which completely colored the case. And when this guy saw the facts, Bruce Franks was out there saying, look, people, family, this is not the way things are. So I would say, don't be afraid to engage with the community, even those who are calling for accountability, because it shows that you are truly concerned about equity, humanity and community and policing. And so I hope that was useful.

Julia Brinton [00:45:43] Well, thank you both for your candor and I am especially, personally, affected just by your approach to seeing the light in the face of so much darkness. Over and over again, showing up for community, continuing to talk to law enforcement, having situations that don't go well, and looking at it with optimism and a way to improve. And I commend both of you for your service, both of you to your communities. I would like to just wrap us up. Thank you both for your time talking with us today.

Mike McKissic [00:46:16] Thank you.

Rodrick Burton [00:46:17] Thank you, everybody.

Julia Brinton [00:46:18] If you enjoy today's episode, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources, please visit NationalCaseClosed.org. I'm Julia Brinton.

Stacy Sechrist [00:46:31] And I'm Stacy Sechrist.

Julia Brinton [00:46:32] And this has been another episode of Just Science.

Introduction [00:46:37] This episode concludes our National Case Closed project supporting best practices and investigation season. Tune in next season to learn about a road map to improving technology transition in forensic science. This project is supported by grant number 15PBJA-21-GK-04008-JAGP, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering and Tracking. points of user opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.