

Transform Justice

**Reframing crime and
justice: a guide to improving
communications**



Introduction

What is framing?

Framing is the choices we make when we communicate. What we leave out is sometimes as important as what we include, or what we emphasise. Each choice is framing.

Why do we need to think about our framing?

The way we frame our messages can help us achieve change. That is because good framing helps our audiences to understand our messages.

How we use language matters, because no one is a blank slate. Our brains jump to certain ideas when we hear certain words and phrases. For example, prison or crime. Each of these paints a picture. That picture is shaped over years of absorbing similar descriptions of each term.

It's worth deepening our understanding of the picture currently painted in the minds of the public on issues relating to crime and justice. It helps us to improve all types of communications from tweets to speeches and detailed reports.

How does this guide help me?

This guide will help you communicate more effectively. Language is an art. This guide provides the science to improve that art. It draws on the insights of extensive research from the Frameworks Institute into the public's beliefs as to why people commit crime and how to reduce it.

It gives us:

- 1. the knowledge of what beliefs about crime and justice people jump to first**
- 2. tips you can introduce to help your message e.g. repetition**
- 3. a detailed pathway to well framed communications**

Step One • Understanding people's beliefs

We all make lots of little decisions every day, without pausing to think about them. These decisions stem from beliefs that build up over our life. Our beliefs help us to make decisions faster.

The more we understand about people's beliefs the better we can tailor our work. We can emphasise ideas which resonate and avoid others which can have the opposite effect.

The public have some deep rooted beliefs on crime and justice. To keep your audience's mind on the change you feel is needed, avoid two key concepts that draw together many beliefs:
fatalism, and that crime is a result of poor decision making.

Fatalism



A common belief is that **there will always be people who will commit crime**. This is linked with the idea that **there is little that can be done to change that**. These beliefs prevent people seeing that change is possible.

Feelings of fatalism are often inadvertently reinforced by focusing on the system being continually at breaking point or in crisis, without talking about a way to improve the situation. The result of this is that people feel “it’s all too hard.”

We must remove these hurdles to show audiences a way through. Solution focused communications will help.



The Howard League 
@TheHowardLeague

"Solving the problem starts with the recognition that boys and girls who are exploited and lured into crime are victims, not suspects. Children's homes, social workers, police and the government must work together to put the needs of children first."

The key isn't to gloss over the problem, simply talk about it in a measured way, coupled with a solution. Change the crisis from being the focus of an argument, to a point of evidence for change.

Crime is a result of making poor decisions



Calls for longer prison sentences derive from the strong belief that it is a **rational decision to commit crime and people weigh up their choices before acting**. This focus on individual decision-making, void of context, reinforces the ideas that **harsh punishments will stop crime** and that **longer sentences will deter future crimes**. It also makes people more likely to think that the system is there to **punish people**.

Any of these unhelpful beliefs can be reinforced when we focus on individual decisions or use simple words like choice. Avoid case studies that suggest an individual got into and out of trouble totally of their own volition. Instead add context and, wherever possible, shift the focus to the bigger picture.



Rob Preece
@Rob_Preece

Let's not repeat the mistakes of the past. Let's get children out of places like Cookham Wood and start giving them the care and support they deserve. If we get this right, we can turn lives around and reduce crime.

Fairness – the double edged sword



The human brain can believe two contradictory things at once. One example of this is how we think about fairness. On one hand the public believes in **uniform fairness** – “an eye for an eye”. You may see it manifest around sentencing. People find it hard to understand why women should be treated any differently to men (fairness for them means equal and consistent treatment), or why any sentence should be subject to mitigation.

On the other hand we also believe in **contextual fairness** – the need to take into account someone’s upbringing, health and social background in thinking about how the justice system should deal with them.

You can help remind people about the need for context in fairness by describing the background of those who commit crime, and the actual circumstances of the crime.

“Half of all children sentenced to life in prison without parole have been physically abused; a fifth have been sexually abused. In handing these children extreme sentences, we are not accounting for the ways in which society failed to protect them. By showing children compassion and forgiveness, we demonstrate our values.”

Preston Shipp, Senior Policy Counsel for the Campaign for the Fairer Sentencing of Youth,
USA – from article written for The Independent, January 2020

Circumstances influence actions

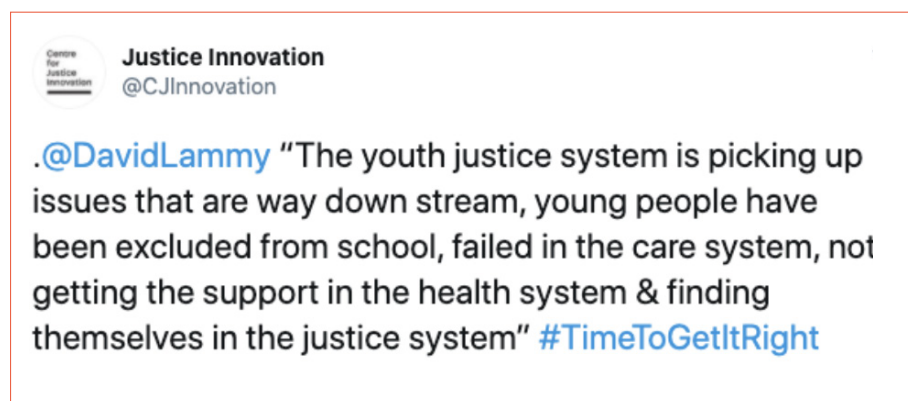


We don't make decisions in isolation. Research shows that people do understand that **influences, good and bad, can change the direction we take in life** whether that is poverty or a positive role model.

Switchback Trainees are five times less likely to return to custody.

Through consistent, motivational relationships with a Switchback Mentor on both sides of the prison gate, we support young Londoners to change their relationship with society.

Switchback, website homepage



Rehabilitation works and matters



Finally, shaping your messages around rehabilitation works. It may not be the first place someone's mind jumps, but research shows the public does support rehabilitation as one of the purposes of the criminal justice system. Using this belief will make your message more effective.



Why me?
@whymeUK

Investing in [#RestorativeJustice](#) is investing in dialogue, empathy, repairing harm, and helping people to move forward.

The greater use of Restorative Justice is an important building block in the creation of a more understanding, cohesive society.

“We need to invest in better rehabilitation, a more robust and credible system that gets many young people on the right path and makes us all safer.”

Vicki Cardwell, CEO, Spark Inside – speaking on BBC Big Questions, March 2020

Step Two • Ditch jargon, myths and labels

One key to improving our framing is making clear decisions on what we don't say.

Step one gave us insights into beliefs and some terms to navigate around. Step two is all about dropping language that could hinder your progress.

Jargon, labels and myths are all barriers to understanding. They often slip into our messages as they are quick and easy to use. However, this step will show you why cutting down these barriers is worthwhile.

Jargon



People want to feel part of something. Jargon pushes them away. Test your language with people outside of the sector. Does it make as much sense in the office as it does in the pub, with your family or those who speak English as a second language?

Here are some common examples of jargon and alternatives that may be helpful.

Jargon	Alternatives
Custody	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imprisonment• Prison• Held for a crime
Recidivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Likely to commit crime again
Desistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The journey people take to prevent them committing another crime• Moving on from crime
Rehabilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supporting people• Enabling new opportunities
Sentence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The punishment/ sanction received for committing a crime• People are sent to prison for a crime

Repetition and myth busting



There is power in repetition. So avoid repeating unhelpful terms and phrases already deep rooted like “prison is a holiday camp”, as every time you use it you reinforce it.

Equally, be confident about your messages; once you are happy with them repeat, repeat, repeat. You see this in politics a lot and it works. A shared sector language helps this further (see steps three and four).

See opposite a number of different organisations, all very different charities, reinforcing one concept: the potential of people. They all use the same value and that repetition strengthens the idea.

Unlocking Women's Futures:
Working together in Essex to
deliver better Criminal Justice
outcomes for Women

Clinks

**Releasing potential.
Inspiring employment.**

StandOut

"Everyone **deserves** to have a
sense of 'wellbeing', to feel
fulfilment and contentment.
Once their physical safety needs
have been taken care of, their
mental wellbeing is what will
support them to sustain a
positive, safe and a fulfilling life."

Joanna, Mental Health & Wellbeing Specialist
Safer London

Tapping into human potential

Safer London

**We believe a person's potential
is infinite.** We all have inherent
strengths and opportunities
available to us. With the right
support, we can all make positive
and lasting changes in our lives.

Changing Lives

**The positive impact of
seeing human potential**

Bounce Back

Labels



Labels do one key thing; they put people in a box. This action divides people. You then find yourself talking about us and them, which doesn't help. Avoiding labels can be challenging, but it is important. Labels conjure up unhelpful existing beliefs which we want to avoid. Some examples are below:

Label	Alternatives
Offender	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Person who committed a crime• Person leaving prison• Prisoner
Victim	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Person• Person who is harmed
Criminal	Person who committed a crime
Addict	Person living with an addiction
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Young offender• Youth• Juvenile	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Child• Young person• Teenager

Don't forget the visuals



Framing can also be evident in pictures. Take a moment to ensure the photo frames the topic in the way you want it to be absorbed. For example, a heavy focus on images of prisons leads people to link crime with prison even if your topic is broader. Equally, images which only show the backs of people's heads creates a disconnect between the viewer and the people in the picture.



Two men in HMP Liverpool reconditioning a wheelchair in partnership with Inside Out trust. © Andy Aitchison

Step Three • Give people a reason to care with values

Facts alone don't change people's views. People need to understand why something matters. The "why" in your message helps people to emotionally connect with your cause.

Values are a great way to draw out the "why" in your work. Lead with a value, and use facts or statistics or stories to back you up.

We've tested different values to see how they land. Three worked really well. You can see them on the following pages.

Other values can backfire! For example, don't use cost-saving to get support for criminal justice reform. If you say "use alternatives to prison because they are cheaper than prison", people react against the idea. Instead, use facts about costs to support one of the values above, but not as your main argument.

1. National Progress



This value gets at the big picture, or the ultimate goal of criminal justice reform. Show your audience how changes can **help move our society forward**, because less crime and more productive members of society will contribute to our social and economic progress. Focus on why it's good for us all.

"We need to change direction to tackle these issues, reduce crime and move forward as a nation..."

The solution begins with a commitment to scrap short sentences and put fewer people behind bars..."

Frances Crook, Chief Executive, The Howard League for Penal Reform

"A strong, dynamic probation system is in all our interests..."

Ultimately, this will help us to create a fairer, safer and better society, to the benefit of all of us."

David Gauke, May 2019, Secretary of State for Justice 2018–2019

2. Human Potential



Highlight how it is important for the system to ensure **everyone has the opportunity** to achieve their potential, so that they can contribute to society. This value works really well when you are reinforcing the benefits of rehabilitation.



@venturetrust
@venturetrust

#mondaymotivation

At Venture Trust we believe no one should be left behind because they are struggling with adversity, inequality or vulnerability. That is why we're supporting people gain the life skills, stability & confidence needed for a positive future. #NeverMoreNeeded

ABOUT CHANGING LIVES

At Changing Lives we believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to reach their potential. We know that life isn't straightforward. People's circumstances, lived experience or health can mean they face barriers to living a happy and fulfilling life.

3. Problem Solving



Show people how the options you're suggesting are practical and sensible. State what the problem is and help them see how the change you propose will solve it, joining the dots in a pragmatic way.



Why me?
@whymeUK

#RestorativeJustice can help people impacted by crime to have their say, get questions answered, and explain how the incident hurt them.

You can still access **#RestorativeJustice** during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The best way to reduce the supply of drugs into prisons is to reduce the demand for them”

“Staff time spent monitoring scanners would be better deployed in building relationships and working with people in prison to keep them occupied with work, education, training and exercise.”

Frances Crook, Chief Executive, The Howard League for Penal Reform

Step Four • Deepen understanding

Facts, metaphors and stories are all strong ways to deepen understanding. They are the evidence that proves the point you are making. They are not the focus.

Each can backfire if used in isolation. This is most obvious with personal stories. Whenever using individual stories to illustrate a point, draw your audience's thinking towards the bigger picture. Help them to see how changing the system matters, shifting the spotlight from the individual towards how that person's story slots into a bigger narrative.

Metaphors paint a picture that sticks in people's heads. They can feel clunky to use at first, but are worthwhile persevering with to help your audience better understand your work.

We've tested different metaphors and found three that work well.

1. The Current of Crime



Show how prison sweeps people into a powerful current of crime. We need to keep people out of this current in the first place. The key here is create a visualisation of the current overwhelming people and sweeping them along, without control.

“Child prisons are costly, failing institutions that are violent, unsafe and ineffective – sweeping vulnerable children and young people into a world of further crime from which it is impossible to escape...

...We need to think again and create alternatives that guide children to safer more stable shores and improve public safety for us all.”

Enver Solomon, CEO, Just for Kids Law

2. Dead End



Help people to visualise that prison is a dead end that prevents people who have committed crimes from moving towards a positive future.



Roma Hooper
@RomaHooper

Why do sentencers sometimes forget that many of our mothers in prisons have children who will often end up in care or live in v complex communities? They too can end up in the justice system. We really do need to care not just for them but for society too. Prison is a dead end.

3. Justice Gears



Talk about the different elements of our justice system as though they are gears on a bike or car. The system needs different levels for different situations. We must use the lowest gear possible for maximum effectiveness.

“If I drove my car in fifth gear most of the time, when the conditions didn’t suit, its performance would be affected. Imprisonment should be the fifth gear of the criminal justice system.

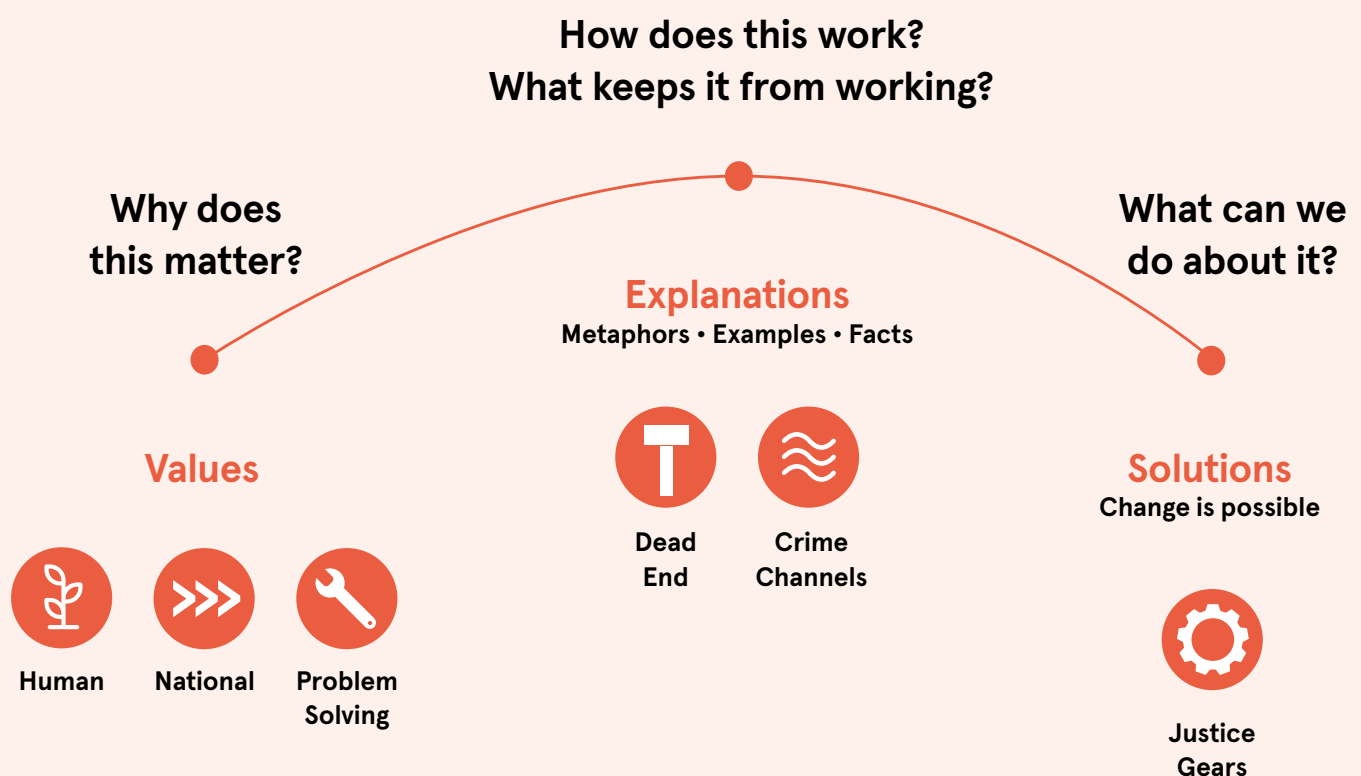
But the car’s been driven in fifth too often, with overuse of imprisonment, of the wrong people, with the wrong sentences...”

Anne Fox, CEO, Clinks

Step Five • Tell the whole story

Think of every story as having three parts to help you deepen understanding and convince people of the need for change.

1. Use tried and tested values to explain why it matters
2. Provide context with facts, metaphors or stories
3. Show people the solution – we can solve the issues we face



Five easy ways to improve your language today

Framing is a journey. Go at your own pace and with the right tools for you. Here are a few easy places to start your framing journey to better communications.

1. **Dial up helpful beliefs and dial down the tricky ones.** Look through your organisation's website – do you spot any references to fatalism or making bad choices? Update accordingly.
2. **Cut the jargon and ditch the labels.** Ask yourself would my uncle understand this article? If not, bring in more accessible language.
3. **Dip your toe in.** Try one of the values or metaphors in a press release, tweet or media quote. It may feel clunky at first. It will get easier. It will help people to understand the point you're trying to make.
4. **Look at how you use personal stories.** Are you providing context of systemic problems or are you reinforcing the idea it's all about personal choice?
5. **Meet with other organisations** to discuss how shared reframed messaging could help shift the public debate on key issues.

Need more information about how to use framing?
Contact us at: policy@transformjustice.org.uk
Check out: [#reframejustice](https://twitter.com/reframejustice) on twitter
Visit: <http://www.transformjustice.org.uk/reframing/>

Transform Justice

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