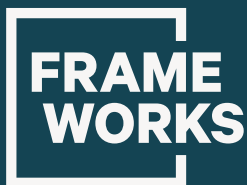


# From “*Them*” to “*Ours*”: Framing Strategies for Talking about Immigrant Youth

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# Introduction

For those working to support immigrant youth, communications can be particularly fraught. Any discussion about immigrants must contend with a deeply held, highly durable *Us vs. Them* mindset that leads to xenophobia and racism. This exclusionary thinking is compounded by the tendency to view adolescents as inherently “other.” The FrameWorks Institute’s past research has shown that Americans often perceive adolescents as wild, out of control, or fundamentally different from children and adults. This lens of otherness, when combined with anti-immigrant sentiment, can create a double burden for immigrant youth, painting them as particularly removed from societal norms and belonging.

However, American mindsets about adolescents and immigrants are complex and even contradictory. Alongside the assumption that adolescence is a time of danger is the perception that it is also a period of remarkable opportunity. Adjacent to zero-sum thinking about immigrants as “takers” is a strong perception that we are, at our core, a nation of immigrants. Activating those mindsets helps redirect thinking in a more positive direction and opens up productive discussions about how we make sure immigrant youth thrive.

This framing brief is a contribution to the effort to protect and build support for immigrant youths’ wellbeing. Grounded in the FrameWorks Institute’s extensive research on mindsets and reframing strategies, it draws on insights into how Americans think about both [adolescence](#) and [immigration](#). By identifying the narratives that perpetuate othering and offering tools to challenge them, it provides a framework for advocates to consistently activate a “we” mindset—one that reinforces belonging and shared fate, rather than division. The resulting strategy offers a more effective way of talking about immigrant youth that builds understanding about who they are, moves attitudes in more positive directions, and raises support for programs and policies that help them thrive. By using it together, we can work toward a future where immigrant youth are seen, valued, and supported.

# Framing Recommendations

Recommendation	Why it works
<b>Make it about healthy development</b>	Emphasizes immigrant youths' opportunities and potential over risk and vulnerability.
<b>Use <i>Collective, Community, and Common Needs</i> framing</b>	Builds a sense of collective responsibility by linking the needs of immigrant youth to all young people's needs, and to the wellbeing of the communities that surround them.
<b>Emphasize human dignity ahead of talking about rights</b>	Highlights our shared humanity and fosters an <i>Immigrants as Us</i> mindset.
<b>Offer humane <i>and</i> pragmatic solutions</b>	Activates our shared identity as problem-solvers.
<b>Move from crisis stories to policy stories</b>	Builds a sense of efficacy around solutions, without undermining the urgency of supporting immigrant youth.
<b>Shift away from sympathy toward lived expertise</b>	Connects firsthand perspectives to systemic solutions, inspiring collective responsibility while challenging harmful stereotypes and narratives.
<b>Always frame data</b>	Explains information so your audience understands cause and effect, instead of leaving them to create their own interpretations.

## WHAT IS FRAMING AND WHY DOES IT MATTER TODAY?

Frames are ways of packaging and making sense of information. They involve choices about how an issue is presented—what is and isn't emphasized, how it is explained, what connections are made, and which commitments are invoked. We make framing choices all the time—in both formal and informal communications—from the values we invoke to explain why something matters (e.g., community) to the types of stories we tell (e.g., immigrant youths' lived expertise). The frames we use shape how people make sense of and respond to what we're communicating. They affect people's understanding of an issue; affect people's attitudes about who is responsible and whether a problem can be solved; and shift their support toward more effective solutions.

In a period of polarization and upheaval, framing is still about activating people's core values and ways of making sense of the world. The frames we employ today lay the groundwork for broader public support and deeper understanding over time. Treat every communication moment—even reactive ones—as an opportunity to advance your long-term vision.

# Recommendations

Frames are not magic words—they are strategies that communicators can deploy while drawing on their own expertise about their own communication environments. Communicators should use the recommendations below creatively and strategically, adapting them to fit the needs, language, and cultural context of their specific audiences. Consider these recommendations as guiding principles that can be translated into messaging that resonates locally, aligns with organizational voice, and advances shared goals.

## RECOMMENDATION 1

### Make it about healthy adolescent development, not vulnerability.

Start off by talking about how we ensure immigrant youths' healthy development, before discussing challenges they face. Explain what healthy adolescent development is, how it works, and why it is critical for immigrant youth to do well as they become adults. Then describe the various programs and policies that support immigrant youths' development—including support for their families. Draw on the [Core Story of Adolescence](#) for framing guidance on how to frame healthy adolescent development effectively.

- **Before:** Immigrant youth need financial resources to access essential opportunities for success in adulthood. They often have limited access to scholarships and face work restrictions and financial insecurity within their families. Without resources, they may struggle to stay in school and achieve their goals.
- **After:** Access to financial resources is essential for the healthy development of immigrant youth. During adolescence we develop interests, passions, and goals that shape our adult lives. We explore our identities and our place in the world. But making the most of this period requires financial stability and educational and employment opportunities that immigrant youth may not have. We need to make sure that they have the financial resources they need to thrive, and we can do that in the following ways ...

### Why this works

Shifting the focus to immigrant youths' healthy adolescent development creates opportunities for more positive and constructive conversations about how to support them as they transition into adulthood. Instead of framing their experiences around their vulnerability and exclusion, this framing emphasizes opportunities and potential. The language of discovery and exploration helps people understand how development happens, and opens the door to discussion about improving youth-serving systems, such as education and health care, to better support their development and integration.

Using healthy development framing does not foreclose critical discussions about legality and status, however. Be explicit on how changes to the immigration system that provide immigrant youth and their families with stable immigration statuses lead to healthy development.



*Tip: Talk about how development of identity, purpose, and a sense of belonging are integral to healthy development.*

## BEFORE AND AFTER

The *Before and After* examples offered in this guide illustrate the different framing choices communicators can use to make effective arguments.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

### Move thinking from “them” to “ours” via *Community*, *Collective Benefits*, and *Common Needs*.

To build broader understanding and support, start communications by talking about how *Community Connections* strengthen not just immigrant youth, but the communities around them. Highlight how, when immigrant youth are connected and supported, everyone benefits from their contributions and civic engagement.

Make it clear that when immigrant youth thrive, we all benefit—both now and in the future—because their wellbeing is directly tied to the wellbeing of our communities and our society. Incorporate this framing throughout your communications and give examples of those benefits.

Link their needs to the developmental needs of *all* young people. While they may require additional or targeted resources, they ultimately need the same things other young people do: stable homes, strong relationships, and opportunities to achieve their goals. Use inclusive language such as “all young people,” “every young adult,” and “we all need” to reinforce this shared experience.

Examples:

- **Community:** Legal pathways for immigrant families enhance community wellbeing. By addressing systemic barriers and creating inclusive policies, communities can harness the resilience and talents of immigrant youth, fostering a more prosperous and cohesive society.
- **Collective Benefits:** When we support immigrant youth and their families, everyone in our society benefits. Immigrant youth are able to contribute and engage in civic life, bringing their talents and unique perspectives to our communities. This makes our communities stronger and more resilient.

- **Common Needs:** All young people need resources and supports to do well as they become adults. This includes financially stable homes, strong relationships with caring adults, and access to opportunities to achieve their goals. Immigrant youth need these same resources to thrive. We can create programs and policies that ensure all young people—including immigrant youth—do well today and in the future.

## Why this works

Immigrant youth are “double-othered”—perceived both as foreign outsiders and as destined to make risky or dangerous choices based on their age. The *Us vs. Them*, *Zero-Sum Game*, and *Dangerous Times* mindsets reinforce exclusion and fatalism. To combat this thinking, communicators need to make a strong case that immigrant youth, like all young people, are integral to our communities.

Previous FrameWorks research on [framing adolescence](#) shows that Americans strongly believe in the power of community when it comes to supporting young people. This value cues optimistic, future-oriented thinking about what young people can accomplish when they are connected to their communities, and vice versa.

In addition, language connecting what immigrant youth need to what every young person needs helps to move thinking away from stigmatizing and fatalistic assumptions about their fundamental differences from other young people. Use terms like “all young people,” “every young adult,” and “we all need” to reinforce this connection. This is not intended to gloss over the different experiences and challenges immigrant youth face, however. Detail the specific resources and supports immigrant youth need to thrive, and don’t avoid discussions about the impact race, socioeconomic class, and immigrant status have on outcomes if we don’t make sure they have what they need.

*Tip: Use “us,” “we,” and “ours” as often as possible.*



*Tip: Be careful not to overemphasize economic outcomes at the expense of social and communal benefits.*

*Tip: Expand the common needs framing to “all families” and “every community.”*

## RECOMMENDATION 3

### Shift from human rights toward *Human Dignity*.

Lead with an appeal to our shared humanity and inherent dignity rather than solely urging respect for human rights. When discussing rights, offer clear, concise explanations of what they are and how they work.

- **Before:** Every young person, regardless of where they come from, deserves the chance to grow, thrive, and contribute to their community. Immigrant youth are no exception. Recognizing their basic human rights means ensuring they have access to education, health care, and safety—fundamental rights that allow them to reach their full potential.

- **After:** Immigrant youth are an integral part of our shared community, and their humanity calls on us to ensure they have the opportunities to grow, thrive, and contribute. When we treat immigrant youth with dignity, we create systems that provide access to education, health care, and safety—conditions that allow them to flourish. By centering human dignity, we affirm their value not for what they do, but for who they are, building a society rooted in compassion and shared responsibility.

## Why this works

Previous FrameWorks research across various social issues, including immigration, finds that framing policy change around rights is largely ineffective. Americans hold a limited understanding of rights, primarily viewing them as freedom from government interference. For immigration, the view that undocumented immigrants are “law breakers” leads to an assumption that they don’t deserve rights. Rights-based arguments not only are dismissed but can inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes, activating mindsets that view immigrants as dangerous or “other.” While the concept of rights is important, it does not operate effectively as a stand-alone value in public discourse. Rights-based appeals often require additional explanation to resonate with audiences, as simply asserting rights without context can lead to dismissal or misunderstanding.

In contrast, using the value of human dignity emphasizes shared humanity and fosters an “immigrants as us” mindset. This approach avoids the pitfalls of the “worthy immigrant” narrative, which frames the case for supporting immigrant youth based on individual accomplishments or contributions and can quickly backfire. While it may garner support for an individual or particular immigrant group, it does not shift public opinion about the broader population. Human dignity instead makes the case for systemic change by asserting that all immigrants deserve humane treatment, not because of what they do or achieve, but simply because they are human.



*Tip: Advocates should not entirely avoid using the word “rights,” but they must frame it within a broader narrative that emphasizes the inherent dignity and shared humanity of all people.*

## RECOMMENDATION 4

### Offer humane, pragmatic solutions.

There will be times when appealing to human dignity will face pushback, particularly among people firmly entrenched in an *Us vs. Them* mindset. In these situations, respond with an appeal to our shared American identity as people who work toward solutions. Frame humane approaches to meeting immigrant youth’s needs as practical and achievable alternatives to punitive policies, highlighting concrete solutions that can be implemented.

Example of using pragmatism to respond to pushback:

- **Pushback:** The immigration system is broken, and too many young immigrants are coming here. They’re crowding our schools and using up resources our kids need. They shouldn’t be here.

- **Response:** We need humane, practical solutions to supporting the immigrant youth who are here and who may come here in the future. Supporting them is an investment in our nation's future because it ensures stable communities, a stronger workforce, and better wellbeing for not just immigrant youth, but all of us. We can do this by creating programs like [X] and policies such as [Y] ...

## Why this works

Combining a call for humane treatment and recognition of immigrant youth's inherent dignity with practical, actionable solutions shifts the conversation away from the opposition's terms and onto more constructive, solution-oriented ground. Appealing to our collective identity as practical, solution-oriented people fosters more effective thinking about how to address an issue, rather than getting stuck in negative or fatalistic assumptions. Talking about the need for practical approaches can restart the conversation on your own terms and open up discussion about solutions.

Appealing to pragmatic solutions in one contentious discussion is not necessarily going to move thinking or change support in that moment. Framing strategically means using the same proven, effective frames consistently over time throughout your communications and in coordination with your allies in order to shift mindsets and build support for meeting the needs of immigrant youth.



*Tip: Don't reinforce stereotypical assumptions and zero-sum thinking about immigration by repeating the anti-immigration arguments you face.*

*Tip: Never start a communication with a "myth"—doing so only strengthens default thinking.*

## RECOMMENDATION 5

### Move from crisis stories to policy stories.

Contrast humane and expansive immigration policies that support young people's healthy development with punitive policies that negatively impact adolescent development. Show how certain policies expose immigrant youth and their families to significant amounts of stress, which can impact adolescent development. Talk about how policies that provide pathways to legal status, protect families from separation, and allow access to health care, education, and social services create environments where immigrant youth can thrive.

- **Before:** Amid what many describe as a national youth mental health crisis, the current political climate places immigrant youth in constant physical and emotional jeopardy, forcing them to navigate a complicated present while facing an uncertain future.
- **After:** Policies that separate families, limit access to legal protections, and create barriers to education and health care compound stress and instability, exacerbating mental health challenges. Addressing this crisis requires policies that provide pathways to stability, such as expanding legal protections, ensuring access to mental health services regardless of immigration status, and fostering inclusive school and community environments that support immigrant youth and their families.

## Why this works

Crisis stories—narratives that highlight the severity of an issue without providing causal explanations or solutions—can be a missed opportunity to expand public understanding. While crisis stories may capture attention, that attention does not necessarily translate into sustained engagement or action. Instead, these narratives can leave audiences feeling overwhelmed, disconnected, or resigned to the idea that the problem is too big to solve. Without a clear explanation of how policies create harm and what solutions exist, people may react with sympathy but fail to see how the issue affects them or how they can contribute to meaningful change.

This is not to suggest that advocates should avoid emphasizing the severity of the current political environment for immigrant youth. It is essential to communicate the real and immediate harms caused by xenophobic policies, but these harms must be contextualized within a broader explanatory framework. By illustrating how punitive policies disrupt healthy adolescent development—through chronic stress, family separation, limited access to health care and education, and economic insecurity—advocates can help the public understand why policy change is necessary. Instead of just describing the suffering immigrant youth endure, framing should illuminate the mechanisms behind that suffering, making it clear that these are not inevitable outcomes but the result of specific policy choices.

Pairing these explanations with concrete, solution-oriented messaging helps people to see a path forward. When audiences understand how humane immigration policies can foster stability and positive developmental outcomes, they are more likely to see the issue as one that requires systemic change rather than temporary relief. Rather than just evoking empathy, effective storytelling should build public will for policies that prioritize the wellbeing of immigrant youth and families. Expanding narratives to include both the structural causes of harm and the transformative potential of policy solutions turns crisis stories from moments of despair into calls for action, engagement, and lasting change.



*Tip: Remember that even in a crisis situation, “crisis” is not the most effective frame. Instead, emphasize what needs to change and how that change is made.*

## RECOMMENDATION 6

### Move from sympathy stories to stories about lived expertise.

Stories about individual experiences are a powerful communication strategy, but how they are told significantly impacts their effectiveness—especially when the goal is to build understanding and drive support for systems and policy change. Rather than simply recounting what a person has experienced, storytelling should highlight how those experiences have cultivated deep expertise and unique insights into the issue at hand.

- **Before:** Like many other young people, Michelle is a survivor of an ineffective immigration system. She has experienced firsthand the harmful effects of lengthy legal battles, family separation, and constant uncertainty about her future. Michelle, who came to the country as a child, has struggled with the anxiety of not knowing whether she will be able to stay with her family. The trauma she has faced could have been alleviated by early access to immigration legal services or a more streamlined pathway for family reunification.
- **After:** Like many young people, Michelle is an expert in the realities of the immigration system. Her experiences have taught her the profound impact of lengthy legal battles, family separation, and constant uncertainty about her future. Michelle, who came to the US as a child, knows that her ability to stay with her family is always at risk. The anxiety she faces isn't theoretical; it's shaped by years of navigating an unpredictable system. She understands how these traumatic circumstances have affected her and other immigrant youth, and that it could have been mitigated with earlier access to legal support or more accessible pathways for family reunification.

## Why this works

Sharing personal stories is often encouraged to evoke emotion or create urgency, but this approach frequently backfires—reinforcing stigma, harmful assumptions, and blame. In contrast, elevating the deep insights and expertise gained through lived experience to inform policymaking and strengthen social systems has a powerful positive impact. Connecting firsthand perspectives to concrete systemic solutions not only inspires broad public action but also challenges toxic stereotypes and disrupts harmful narratives. Centering expertise is particularly important when it comes to immigrant youth, because it combats othering mindsets and creates room for agency and systemic change. Lived expertise can shift public thinking from sympathy to action, demonstrating not just the problem but also the solutions that those most affected know are necessary.



*Tip: Avoid calling the immigration system “broken.” This leads to further fatalism about solutions and our collective responsibility for building a more humane and practical system.*

## RECOMMENDATION 7

### Make sure to frame your data.

Always contextualize your data using effective framing. Whenever presenting data, highlight why this data is important; provide clear explanations about what your evidence conveys; and whenever possible, include a solution or call to action so your audience knows what they need to support to create change.

- **Before:** Since 2012, over 800,000 undocumented youth and young adults who arrived in the US as children have received a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) work visa. At any given time, around 90% of DACA recipients are employed or enrolled in school. DACA recipients' success demonstrates the high potential of immigrant youth when given the right support. Undocumented youth without DACA status, on the other hand, are much less likely to be working or pursuing education because fewer opportunities are available to them.
- **After:** As the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program shows, when undocumented immigrant youth are given the opportunity to live and work here legally, they thrive. Since 2012, over 800,000 undocumented youth and young adults who arrived in the US as children have received DACA, and at any given time, around 90% of them are employed or enrolled in school. DACA recipients' success demonstrates the high potential of immigrant youth when given the right support. Creating pathways for all undocumented youth to become legal residents will create a better future not just for them, but for all of us.

## Why this works

Data cannot tell a story itself. Instead, data should illustrate your argument and add texture to stories, not make the argument for you. Without context and explanation, readers fill in the story about data for themselves, relying on unhelpful mindsets about not just immigrant youth, but race, gender, poverty, and others. Well-framed data supports your arguments by building a better understanding of what is and isn't working and how we can change things for the better.

# Conclusion

The othering of immigrant youth is a product of deeply ingrained assumptions that paint immigrants as outsiders rather than integral members of our communities. This othering is reinforced by broader societal misconceptions about adolescence, making it essential for advocates to use strategic framing that counters these narratives effectively.

By adopting framing strategies that emphasize shared humanity, dignity, and practical solutions, we can shift public perceptions and build broader support for immigrant youth. Rather than reinforcing stereotypes through crisis narratives or focusing solely on economic contributions, we should focus our communications on adolescent development, community wellbeing, and collective benefits, and highlight the universal needs of all youth. This way, we can move audiences from division to shared responsibility.

Communicators can pivot from reactive defenses to proactive framing that champions the resilience, potential, and contributions of immigrant youth. Through these framing choices, we can reshape the public discourse and help create a future where immigrant youth are seen, valued, and supported as part of the broader “us.”

Avoid	Advance
Starting with risk and vulnerability when their needs are unmet	What immigrant youth need for their healthy development
Talking about immigrant youth as fundamentally different from other young people	The ways in which immigrant youth are integral to our communities and what they have in common with other young people
Beginning with immigrant rights	Our shared belief in human dignity and immigrant youths' inherent humanity
Reaffirming the opposition's point of view or using “myth-fact” communications	Practical solutions that activate problem-solving thinking
Using “crisis” as a frame	Explaining the harms caused by policies, and how better policies are the solutions
Reinforcing fatalism with “sympathy” stories	Telling stories centered on immigrant youths' lived expertise with systems
Leaving data unframed and easily misinterpreted	Contextualizing and explaining data

# About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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Learn more at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)

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