Integrating Issues

Framing for Racial Equity and Children
in Immigrant Families

FrameBrief prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the KIDS COUNT Network

We can't achieve racial justice without addressing the concerns of immigrant families.

Understanding that the experiences and life trajectories of immigrants are shaped by many of the same societal forces that shape racial equity and inclusion, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2017 *Race for Results* report will highlight data on the wellbeing of children in immigrant families, alongside disaggregated data on the health, education, and economic status of major racial and ethnic groups in the United States. In preparation for the conversations this data will spark among advocates, decision-makers, and communities nationwide, the Foundation invited the FrameWorks Institute to offer a research-based perspective to guide communications related to the 2017 *Race for Results* report, such as press releases, presentations, outreach materials, and social media posts. To arrive at recommendations for how to integrate the focus on children in immigrant families with the overall lens of race equity issues, FrameWorks' staff queried its research into public thinking and framing strategies on the issues of child development[1], human services[2], immigration[3], and racial disparities[4]. This brief distills the challenges inherent in connecting the issues facing established communities of color in the United States (especially African Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and US-born Latinos) and those facing

newcomer communities of color (immigrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, etc.), and points to several framing techniques that can help the public and policymakers consider this redefined issue in productive ways.

To navigate new terrain, it helps to have a map of public thinking.

Connecting the issues of immigration and racial equity makes sense in many ways, as this framing opens the door for broader coalitions, new alliances, and more powerful policy directions. Yet, the move toward communicating about these issues in the same breath also brings with it communications challenges. A systematic appraisal of these challenges is critical to developing the most strategic responses to misunderstanding or resistance. When the public lacks a way to think about a topic, the appropriate communications response is to fill in understanding. When the public holds strong models that are at odds with research and evidence, the situation calls for different tactics, such as reducing barriers to new ways of thinking and finding ways to channel attention toward more accurate understandings. FrameWorks' research suggests that when defining the issue of racial equity as including the concerns of people of color who have come here from elsewhere, communicators will encounter both types of challenges.

The first challenge is that the American public thinks of "race" and "immigration" as distinct topics. Advocates' analysis rests on an understanding of processes that wield influence on both established and newcomer communities of color—such as white privilege, implicit bias, and the systematically inequitable distribution of resources. The public, on the other hand, lacks ways to think about these common mechanisms, and instead thinks more in terms of static labels. In the public mind, "race" is about whether a person is white or Black. "Immigration," according to the people FrameWorks researchers interviewed, is about whether a person who lives here was born somewhere else, and whether they followed the rules when they moved to the United States. In fact, in conversations with hundreds of Americans of different walks of life about how they thought about immigration reform, people rarely mentioned the word "race." Reasoning from these label-like issue boundaries, the public will struggle to appreciate advocates' rationale for connecting the issues. One implication for communications: take extra care to fill in the "cognitive hole" in public thinking by naming and explaining the processes that are affecting multiple communities in similar ways. (See the section on redirections for more on how to do this.)

There are two critical ways in which these topics overlap. First, when considering problems and solutions related to either people of color or immigrants, public thinking readily moves toward the assumption that these groups have violated the ideals of self-makingness. The *Self-Makingness* cultural model is the belief that success or failure is due to individuals' traits, abilities, effort, and character. In this way of thinking, people who exhibit willpower, self-discipline, and hard work invariably do well, and those who fail simply don't try hard enough. The worst violators of self-makingness, according to this model, are those who try to gain success not through their own hard work, but by taking advantage of the efforts of others. The

dominant associations vary according to the group in question (for instance, African Americans are stereotyped as taking advantage of "taxpayers" by over-relying on assistance programs, while "Mexicans" are stereotyped as taking advantage of "citizens" by working under the table and depressing wages). But the underlying cultural model is the same—the public defaults to the explanation that *minorities freeload on self-making individuals*. The recommendations about attribution of responsibility and explanation of processes are designed to navigate and mute this toxic dominant assumption.

Another pattern of thinking that structures opinions about race and immigration is the belief that whites and people of color or immigrants and non-immigrants live in distinct worlds, are shaped by different forces, and are moving in divergent directions. The concerns of specific communities of color are understood as disconnected from the shared concerns and aspirations of the broader society. The notion of *Separate Fates* has the consequence of dampening dialogue about approaches that could result in a meaningfully improved system for all. Non-immigrants, for example, struggle to think about how improvements to the immigration system can benefit everyone. *Separate Fates* thinking has other important consequences for the public conversation about race: it makes it easier to characterize people of color as the "other" and, by definition, out of the system. It allows people to place the concerns of other communities "over there" and not connected to themselves. And it makes it much harder to make the connection between life chances for children of color and structural factors. The communications implications of this dominant mode of thinking are clear: communicators must consistently remind their audiences that addressing inequality will positively impact everyone.

To facilitate public interpretation of the data from the 2017 *Race for Results*, advocates need a framing strategy that bolsters understanding of how inequality determines outcomes for all children of color and that maximizes the sense that collective action is necessary and holds the promise of making a positive difference. Reframing efforts must foster a shared understanding of the problems highlighted in the report, build awareness of how proposed solutions would improve outcomes of interest, and shift attention from selective benefits to collective benefits if those solutions are implemented.

Some attempts to change public thinking are likely to backfire.

Some ways of framing an issue can ensnare public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments. Strategic Frame Analysis® identifies such communication traps, focusing on common habits that are so ubiquitous that they can be difficult to notice and even harder to avoid. These traps are popular techniques precisely because they are eminently plausible ways of framing an issue and respond logically to challenges that communicators have observed from experience. However, in light of framing research, it becomes clear that they fail to achieve their desired effect, or even turn out to do more harm than good. FrameWorks' research on how the public thinks about race, immigration, and human services suggests that communicators need to be wary of the following traps as they engage the public.

The *Worthiness* Trap.

Advocates sometimes try to convince the public that immigrant children are worthy and deserving recipients of public assistance, perhaps by highlighting children who came to the United States through "no fault of their own." FrameWorks advises strongly against this—as this strategy readily and regularly backfires. A worthiness claim works through an implicit differentiation from another group (US-born populations, other categories of immigrants, etc.) The claim may increase support for the "worthy," at least temporarily, but the claim is highly vulnerable to the counter-claim that the population is, in fact, not worthy; and even if the claim works, the resulting support probably comes at the expense of another group. (To avoid this trap, open with a tested values frame that applies more broadly, like *Human Dignity* or *Shared Prosperity* to express why the group "matters." Then move to data that shows how the value is being upheld or threatened with respect to the group.)

The *All Trees, No Forest* Trap.

Disaggregated data is an important tool for policy analysis and advocacy, as it reveals problems and solutions that may be concealed by overall averages. But if advocates present data points as if they are following a metronome, with one beat of bad news coming after another, the public and policymakers stand little chance of learning to sing along. Worse, when meaning isn't provided for them, people will attempt to make meaning for themselves—and are likely to begin by comparing one group's outcomes to another's, and rely on stereotyped thinking to explain the differences. To avoid the *All Trees, No Forest* trap, pay attention to interpreting disaggregated data in a way that points people to more generalized forces of inequality. These may include concepts like social exclusion, implicit bias, family separation, increased surveillance, or inequitable distribution of resources, such as housing, health care, employment, or education. The idea is to help people understand that racial inequality is an interconnected ecosystem, not a random collection of discrete disparities.

The *Broad Brush* Trap.

After disaggregating data, advocates sometimes group multiple data points from different racial and ethnic groups to make the point that race is a driving factor in inequitable outcomes. This *Broad Brush* tactic is a trap for two reasons. For one thing, it misses an opportunity to use the proven technique of explaining *how* racial disparities occur, which FrameWorks' research has repeatedly shown to be highly effective in building support for addressing racial disparities. For another, organizing communication as a pile of stark statistics for multiple demographic groups is likely to erase the distinctive experiences of specific racial or ethnic groups, and with it, the ability to hone in on approaches that take the complexity of race into account. For instance, immigrant families' fear of deportation has been shown to increase reports of mental health issues even in young children—but this particular social stressor does not impact all communities of color.[5] Arranging this data so that it appears near evidence that pre-school expulsions are disproportionately meted out to young Black boys[6] probably won't convince the unconvinced that race plays a role, but it likely will miss the opportunity to move potential allies toward appropriate remedies that take race into account.

With careful framing, communicators can use data to make a powerful case for equity.

The swampy terrain of public thinking on race and immigration is filled with unproductive ideas—and communicators who attempt to cross this terrain often end up stuck in the mire. But there is hope. If communicators can learn to navigate adeptly from the general to the specific—from why children of color matter to society and what is affecting their development to the data that points to a specific problem— then data-based children's advocacy can lead policy discussions to higher ground. The recommendations explained in the remainder of this memo offer tested techniques for "wrapping" data on indicators of racial equity in frames that help people understand them as intended. The specific pieces of advice add up to an overarching social change narrative structure that short-circuits unproductive thinking about people of color. By intentionally filling in public thinking about why an issue matters, how it works, and what can be done about it, communicators guard against the public's tendency to fall back on outdated, mistaken, and problematic understandings about issues of race, ethnicity, and who "belongs" in America. This narrative will, admittedly, do little to shift the thinking of people who are consciously committed to nationalist, isolationist, and white supremacist ideologies. But it can do a great deal of good in bringing along the "vast persuadable middle" segment of Americans who, depending on how the issue is presented, can either fall back on dominant cultural models *or* be brought to more expansive ways of considering race, equity, and inclusion. By filling out a frame completely, there is simply less room for unproductive thinking to creep into people's interpretation of the race equity data.

Lead with an aspirational appeal to values, not a stark negative evaluation of the status quo.

Crisis messaging sparks apathy more often than it moves people to action, so opening with a claim that "the outlook is bleak" is not advised. By opening communications with reminders of our shared values, advocates invite the public to engage as citizens. FrameWorks' controlled experiments test values-based messages to determine which value produces the largest measurable gains on specific policy issues. The recommendations for value frames presented here draw from studies focused on immigration reform and on racial disparities among children and youth.

When the topic involves a violation of human rights or other egregious affronts to life and liberty, open with a reminder of our moral obligation to uphold and respect *Human Dignity*.

> *Human Dignity: No matter the circumstances of a person's birth or how their life has unfolded, people are people. As a matter of morality, we must ensure that all people are accorded equal measures of respect, dignity, and fair treatment under the law.*

This value was tested specifically with respect to immigration reform policies and worked especially well on humanitarian aspects of the issue (deportation, detention centers, lack of due process, family separation, etc.). Subsequent analysis also leads us to recommend it here to talk about a subset of issues that affect established communities of color, but to restrict its use to frame topic that a non-expert might

think about as a humanitarian issue, such as the use of lethal force by police; family separation caused by incarceration, confinement, or child removal; or denial of language rights.

If the topic of the communication isn't about humanitarian issues, but is more focused on other issues that affect the health and development of children of color, FrameWorks' research finds that the values of *Human Potential* or *Shared Prosperity* are more effective overarching themes to use to orient the public.

> *Human Potential: All children possess unique skills and talents, but they need to be supported and fostered. We should be doing everything we can to make sure the potential of all children is supported in our communities.*

> *Shared Prosperity: When children are prepared for a productive and engaged future, they contribute to our future civic and economic prosperity as valuable employees, thoughtful leaders, and community members.*

Use a science-informed brain development frame to engage a broader audience.

Children's advocates have the enormous advantage of scientific backing for the social policies they wish to promote, and a complementary asset of a voluminous set of frame elements to translate and explain the science in accessible ways. These powerful assets can be recruited to the difficult task of making the case for greater racial equity and inclusion of immigrant families. *To talk about the intersection of children's issues and racial equity, rely on core concepts of "the brain story" to highlight universal processes of human development, and then show how development is being undermined by inequitable or exclusionary policies.*

Consider the following framing of the topic of family disruption: "*No child should have to live in fear of being separated from his or her parents.*" The use of *No Child Should* frames the issue as a matter of personal or organizational stance, and it calls the reader to agree with it or not. In turn, that choice prompts the reader to assess the credibility of the messenger: does the messenger have a legitimate claim to moral authority? Would it be wise to dismiss them as an idealist or a partisan? It offers no objective reason for preventing the fear of separation—and so, it is all too easy for the reader to fill in unproductive reasoning. Based on our interviews with the public, it's not hard to imagine this response: *In an ideal world, sure. But if their parents are here illegally, that's part of the risk they took when they chose to break the rules.*

Now consider an alternative opening to a section on family disruption. "*Highly stressful experiences can disrupt children's brain development—and few childhood experiences are more stressful than a long-term or permanent separation from a parent.*" This framing relies on statement of fact and, thus, is less vulnerable to rebuttal or rejection. Perhaps more importantly, the fact does some important work. The emphasis on development prompts people to think beyond the moment and consider a wider array of consequences: the issue isn't just that children may experience a moment of fear, but that the experience has longer-term negative consequences. The naming of a universal, biological process makes it less likely that the reader will put in the mental effort it takes to think of cases that don't "deserve" to be free of fear. By adopting a disciplined approach to explaining the universal concept of human development, communicators can,

over time, build public understanding of key tenets that are critical to a more progressive policy climate. If advocates use current opportunities to sow and tend the ideas that *our environment affects human development* and that *our policies shape our environment*, then these concepts will grow stronger and bear fruit in future seasons, when other social issues are before us.

Attend carefully to the attribution of responsibility when highlighting disparities.

Attribution of responsibility refers to the way in which information, emphasis, language, or sentence structure suggests who or what causes a problem, who is affected by it, and who is responsible for fixing it. Consider the following sentence: *The proficiency rate data reveal that more than half of fourth graders nationally are struggling to learn to read, failing to reach an important milestone on the path to success.* The phrasing does not directly argue that the children themselves (or their parents) are to blame for reading proficiency rates, but, since it does not name or suggest responsible actor(s), it leaves a blank for the public to fill in. Our research predicts that Americans will fill it in with little-picture explanations and individual actors: students who don't try hard enough, parents who don't instill discipline, or teachers who don't care. When the data is highlighting Blacks, Latinos, or Native Americans, the blanks also get filled in with stereotypes about lesser ability and priority for academic performance.

Now consider this alternative phrasing: *Given that more than half of fourth graders nationally are not reading at the levels needed to prepare the nation for an information-based economy, the proficiency data suggest that greater efforts are needed to strengthen the education system.* In this version, no words call personal effort to mind: nobody's *struggling* or *failing.* The consequences are shared (the nation won't be ready for the future) and the responsibility for preventing this undesirable outcome is also shared (we need to strengthen the system). In this framing, there is less room to lay blame at the feet of children and families of color. There is more room for people to see that they have a stake in the fate of "others."

There is no shorthand guide of words that attribute responsibility to systems and structures rather than affected populations. There is only the advice to *rephrase relentlessly.* Scrub equity-focused communications clean of words, images, or naming conventions that leave room in the public imagination to place the blame for disparities on the marginalized communities themselves. One way that *Race for Results* already demonstrates its sensitivity and commitment to using language carefully when it comes to racial disparities is to ensure that indicators are phrased and calculated in the affirmative rather than the negative, as in naming and tracking the numbers of infants born at a *healthy birth weight* rather than *low birth rate.* FrameWorks' recommendation is to extend this same type of logic and scrutiny of framing to the prose that reports, interprets, and publicizes the data.

When lifting up lived experiences, place people in a policy context.

In light of the number of restrictive immigration policies unveiled in recent months, advocates and the media have turned to people affected by these policies to share their stories. Because members of the public have very little knowledge about the policies, agencies, and actors in the immigration system, it is all too easy for them to make sense of even the most touching personal stories by relying on well-worn tropes about "outsiders" who game the system.

Consider this story: "*I was born on a farm near Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. When I was an infant, my parents decided to give up our farm and move our family to Texas. The United States is the only home I remember. I came to this country as a baby, but that didn't make my life here any easier.*" This opening may tug at heartstrings—people may feel a connection with the narrator—but without more context, there is little way for them to make their way to a public policy position. Furthermore, there are holes in this story—why did the parents "decide" to move, and why didn't they comply with legal requirements? FrameWorks' research shows that these holes will be filled with dominant models that lead people to conclude that lawbreakers must be punished as a matter of fairness and deterrence.

On the bright side, FrameWorks' research has demonstrated that people need not stay where they start. When immigration issues are framed in a way that provides broader context about why people immigrate, how flaws in the system make compliance difficult or impossible, and how restrictive or punitive immigration policies affect children, shifts in thinking, attitudes, and policy preferences are possible. To make the most of the advocacy power of first-person narratives, advocates can appeal to shared values and add explanatory power to these stories. Consider this reframed version of the previous story:

> *When we were growing up, my parents taught my brothers and me that, no matter what, people are people and should be treated with respect. They're very American that way— holding tightly to a moral compass that always points north, toward compassion. Which is funny, because they're farmers from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Like many of their neighbors and friends, they fled to the United States to escape the aftermath of civil war in search of safety and security for their family. I was an infant when we immigrated. The United States is the only home I remember.*

The revised version begins with an appeal to a value—in this case, the tested value of *Human Dignity*— that reminds the reader of the widely shared principle of humane treatment. By focusing on the moral compass of the parents and their goals for the family, the story emphasizes shared humanity and de-emphasizes the far-away origins. There are no cues for personal responsibility: rather than "deciding" to move, the parents were propelled by forces beyond their control. This narrative also provides deeper explanation by pointing to the sociopolitical context that shaped migration patterns from Central America in the 1980s.

With a more complete story about how immigration works, people are less likely to "otherize" immigrants, more likely to appreciate immigrants' positive contributions to US society, and better equipped to distinguish between more and less equitable immigration policies.

Show the processes of oppression and opportunity with tested explanatory techniques.

Advocates for a more inclusive and equitable America face a major communications hurdle: the public's incomplete understanding of the role of race and racism in creating disparities. Simply naming the issue doesn't do enough, because both the American public and the media tend to understand the term "racism" to refer to an interpersonal dynamic typically enacted through blatant and overt discriminatory actions. Merely adding a descriptor is also inadequate to shift public thinking—if they are simply name-

dropped, terms such as *institutional racism* or *structural racism* are likely to be interpreted as the sum of all racist interactions and discriminatory practices between individuals within an institution.

To convey the concept of institutional or structural racism, communicators must unpack and spell out *how* inequity is created, maintained, and reproduced in systemic and systematic ways.

A recent FrameWorks study identified how to explain how race creates disparities. FrameWorks researchers found that a fully articulated, cause-and-effect explanation of *implicit bias* was an especially powerful way of shifting public thinking about whether and how race matters. A brief explanation of implicit bias affected how participants thought about racial disparities in schools and led them to oppose the use of exclusionary discipline, express a preference for more restorative approaches to school discipline, and demonstrate a fuller understanding of how the intersection of school discipline and the juvenile justice system results in inequity[7]. This finding doesn't suggest that the term implicit bias is a magic word. Communicators must explain it, not simply name it. Explanatory chains should begin by naming sources of implicit bias and should explain negative outcomes. Here's an example:

> *Implicit bias—the absorption and accumulation of negative stereotypes from media and culture, and the flawed snap judgments that are shaped by those hidden beliefs—is one way that race influences outcomes and creates inequities.*

This core explanation can be adapted to a number of social issues that are relevant to race equity indicators, and is appropriate to connect to issues that concern either established or immigrant communities of color. Figure 1 offers brief explanations of four other tested explanatory frame elements that clearly communicate processes of opportunity and oppression.

Figure 1:
Metaphors to translate the drivers of racial inequality to the public

Prosperity Grid

A metaphor for structural
advantage and disadvantage.

There is a grid that supplies communities with the resources everyone needs to build economic security—the policies and programs that support meaningful employment, homeownership, access to fair and reliable credit, and so on. Historically, communities of color have been cut off from this network of resources, which has sapped prosperity in those communities. To live up to our ideal of equal opportunity, we need to repair, extend, and maintain the grid.

Constructing Wellbeing

A metaphor for the role of material
and social capital in driving outcomes.

Wellbeing is built, much like a house is built. Just as many types of materials are needed to build a house, wellbeing has many interconnected dimensions: people's financial, emotional, physical, and social wellbeing are intertwined, and each one affects the other. We should support the organizations and initiatives that help build wellbeing in our communities. When life's storms threaten wellbeing, people need access to supports that can repair or shore it up.

Resources that Stick

A metaphor that explains how community
context/place drives multiple outcomes.

Vibrant communities have many kinds of resources. They have tangible resources, like strong schools, good jobs, and reliable public transportation, and intangible resources, like civic energy, memories of the community's past, and diversity of thought and opinion. These resources "stick" to people—not only to individuals, but also to socioeconomic groups.

Charging Stations

A metaphor for access
to high-quality education and learning.

Opportunities to learn are like charging stations that power up children's knowledge and skills. Some communities are filled with powerful charging stations—free museums, well-stocked libraries, great schools. In other communities, connections are missing, patchy, or weak. We need to ensure that all communities support powerful learning—which means devoting more resources to the places where children can't plug into opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

The data in the *Race for Results 2017* report will help communicators pivot from talking about how inequality generally impacts children of color to detailing how context-specific policy environments perpetuate inequalities and structure children's life chances. Like established communities of color, immigrant children's outcomes are shaped by systemic racism. But that racism is reflected and refracted through policies that are specific to immigrant communities. By moving from the general to the specific, advocates can better explain how systemic racism and exclusion operate across populations and how policy change can improve life chances for particular communities.

The 2017 *Race for Results* report presents an opportunity to invite the public into a more nuanced discussion of our country's existing immigration policy through the lens of its effect on young children. The public is currently exposed to heightened levels of anti-immigrant rhetoric, making this task even more pressing. If carefully framed, data from the report can provide powerful rationales for more equitable and inclusive policies that consider the impact of restrictive and punitive policies on immigrant children while also continuing to make the case for greater equity for established communities of color. Advocates have the chance to tell a larger, more effective story about how environments characterized by racial inequality impact all children of color, whether they are newly arrived to the United States or from established communities of color. At the same time, communicators can deepen understanding of how specific *policy environments*, including immigration policy, affect children's outcomes. We hope this brief helps communicators accomplish these tasks.

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