



Glossary: The Swamp of Juvenile Justice

The FrameWorks Institute's research revealed the multiple, sometimes contradictory, default patterns of thinking that Americans use to reason about the juvenile justice system and child and adolescent development. These default habits of thinking, or "cultural models," are widely shared, deeply embedded cognitive shortcuts that our brains use to process information quickly, but which cloud the public's ability to reason productively about complex social issues. The Swamp of Juvenile Justice graphic is a visual summary of FrameWorks' cultural models research on juvenile justice. This accompanying glossary briefly explains the findings and their implications for communicators working in the field. For more detailed explanations, read the [Talking Juvenile Justice MessageMemo](#).

Causes of Crime

Crime = Rational Decision

According to this dominant cultural model, youth weigh the costs and benefits of committing a crime and choose their behaviors based on the likelihood of being caught. When reasoning from this model, the public concludes the only way to decrease crime is to make punishments harsher.

"Rotten Eggs"

When employing this model, the public reasons that there are "bad people" who are inherently predisposed to commit crime. This model discourages the public from thinking systemic causes and solutions, which decreases support for preventive efforts.

Parents, Negative Experiences

When using this model, a youth-specific interpretation of the "Rotten Eggs" model, Americans reason that some children are raised by bad parents who fail to teach them right from wrong, making them more likely to commit crime. As a result of this default, people tend to adopt a fatalistic attitude about crime, which depresses their support for innovative solutions.

Children and Youth

Family Bubble

The public holds a strong belief that young people's development is influenced exclusively by what happens within the family sphere, leaving out other factors like schools and community resources. This model limits the public's ability to envision solutions to juvenile crime that extend beyond trying to "fix parents," since programmatic and policy interventions are seen as irrelevant in the private domain of the family.

Tots or Teens, Nothing in Between

The public struggles to conceptualize children's brain development as an ongoing project, instead using a binary model in which children are either too young to know right from wrong or are teens whom they imagine to be old enough to be fully responsible for their actions. This model renders people unable to think productively about prevention, recidivism, and rehabilitation programs for children appropriate to their stages of development.

Juveniles Are Fully Developed

The American public largely believes that physical maturity signifies psychological maturity and is unaware that adolescence is a critical phase of brain development. This model supports the public's belief that part of a teen's "becoming an adult" is being held accountable in the same way as adults.

Teens Are Morally Defective Adults

A common default pattern is that today's youth are less moral and law-abiding than previous generations, a model that inclines the public to regard juvenile crime as typical behavior rather than as a deviation from a normal developmental trajectory.

Mental Health Is Emotions

In this model, mental health is the ability to control emotions through willpower and self-control, leading the public to reason that individuals are responsible for controlling their own mental health. This default obscures both the range of factors that contribute to mental health and the appropriate interventions.

Children Can't Have Mental Health

The public holds a dominant belief that children cannot have mental health because children's brains are fundamentally different from adults', a model that makes it difficult for the public to understand the importance of children's good mental health and to advocate for policies designed to support it.

Solutions

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The public is largely unaware of problems in the criminal justice system, which limits their ability to understand what solutions can improve the system or why any reforms are necessary.

The System Works Just Fine

When confronted with statistics about rising incarceration rates without additional explanation, the public tends to conclude that more people incarcerated equals better public safety. Reasoning from this model leads people to believe that harsher punishments are the best or only way to improve the system.

Fatalism

Americans express deep fatalism about government, believing that “nothing can be done” because the government is ineffective or corrupt. Invoking this model prevents the public from seeing how the juvenile justice system can be improved through changes to policies and practices.

Solution = Affect Decision Calculus

When reasoning from this model, which is closely tied to the Rational Actor model, the public concludes that preventing youth crime is a matter of making stiff punishments more common in order to incentivize young people to make better choices.

Fairness

Uniform

This dominant pattern of thinking about fairness leads the public to believe that the criminal justice system should function exactly the same way for everyone. Using this model, people assert that young people must be held to the same standards as adults and punished accordingly.

Contextual

When employing this recessive cultural model, people understand that context, including factors such as poverty and violence, should be taken into account when determining appropriate responses to youth. However, this model is often overshadowed by more dominant models of thinking like Rational Actor and “Teens Are Morally Defective Adults.”

Race

Historical Progress

The public tends to see systemic racism as a thing of the past and consequently blames inequitable outcomes on class disparities or corrupt individuals, like racist prosecutors. Because Americans lack a solid understanding of systemic racism in the criminal justice system, it is difficult for them to discuss structural reform designed to address racial bias.

Separate Fates

White Americans commonly understand African American youth to be culturally apart from mainstream America. When viewed through this lens, their inequitable treatment is seen to have little effect on society as a whole.

Minority “Culture”

White Americans tend to believe that minority cultures practice different values and do not teach their children the self-control necessary to “resist crime,” which reinforces the idea that bad parenting and innate differences among groups are to blame for juvenile crime and the race-based disparities in the system.