



————— Turning Talk into Action —————

Talking Juvenile Justice Reform: Using Strategic Frame Analysis® Can Shift Public Discourse

Renewed attention is now being paid to our criminal justice system. That offers juvenile justice reform advocates a critical window of opportunity to shift the public debate about how best to address youth crime and public safety: what young people need to do well, why juvenile justice is different from the adult system, and how we can implement solutions that work. The American public, however, lacks the understanding it needs to have an informed discussion about which policy solutions will most effectively help our young people stay on the right track and strengthen our communities. That means advocates and other communicators in the field face the challenging task of filling in the holes in public understanding about juvenile justice, in order to create the conditions for more robust public discourse and engagement in the issues.

These conversations can't wait—but without a carefully thought-out approach, they have the potential to go awry. Strategic Frame Analysis®, an evidence-based approach to communications on complex social and scientific issues developed by the FrameWorks Institute, is one way that juvenile justice advocates and child health professionals can foster discussions with the public about the science of childhood development, its relationship to the juvenile justice system, the best ways to keep young people out of the system to begin with, and how to align justice system policies and programs with children's and youths' developmental needs. Practitioners trained in strategic framing learn to make intentional, research-based choices about how to frame these issues for their audiences: how to start, what to emphasize, what to leave unsaid, and how to make the “whys and hows” of adolescent development and the juvenile justice system as “sticky,” or memorable, as possible. Strategic framing develops communicators' ability to link childhood and youth development to the “big picture” story of juvenile justice and the need for system reform, using tools and strategies shown to increase public understanding and support.

There's no substitute for participating in extended theory-to-practice trainings in strategic framing, but this article includes a sample of some key framing techniques. The research behind these recommendations draws on social science theory and methods and involved extensive testing. Researchers queried the thinking of more than 80,000 Americans on issues related to childhood development and

more than 10,000 Americans on issues related to criminal and juvenile justice and public safety; the research included expert interviews, literature reviews, peer discourse sessions, on-the-street interviews, large-scale surveys and usability trials. All told, these recommendations are informed by fifteen years of empirical communications research on how to translate expert knowledge about childhood and adolescent development, juvenile mental health, and the criminal justice system for the American public.

If You Can Predict, You Can Prepare

The first step to becoming a strategic framer is to recognize that the public will bring a strong set of default assumptions to bear on discussions about youth crime, the juvenile justice system, adolescent development, and related issues. These assumptions have implications for which policy solutions the public finds most compelling or “easy to think” and which ones it finds more difficult to understand. In other words, these perceptions can limit the public’s ability to support responses to youth crime that are developmentally appropriate for young people, that divert youth away from the juvenile justice system in the first place, and that adequately address the needs of young people who do enter the system in order to increase their likelihood of successful reentry and positive outcomes as adults. It is therefore imperative that communicators in the field know the default patterns of thinking that the public uses to reason about these issues, so that they can work with or around these defaults to engage the public’s support more effectively. Frameworks’ research revealed a number of dominant defaults Americans use to think and talk about juvenile justice and adolescent development. A few of these patterns are highlighted below. (The full list can be found in the “Swamp graphic”—a visual summary and glossary of these defaults—and in the MessageMemo, a report summarizing all of the research recommendations. Both can be found elsewhere in this toolkit.)

- ***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 default supports the public’s belief that part of a teen’s “becoming an adult” is being held accountable in the same way as adults.
- ***Crime is a rational decision.*** According to this dominant cultural default, 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.
- ***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.
- ***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.

Strategic Framing Offers Evidence-Based Tools for Effective Communications

Three powerful reframing tools—Values, Metaphors, and Solutions—can help the public to understand:

- why adolescent development is critical to young people’s long-term outcomes
- how development processes work
- how developmentally inappropriate responses to youth crime can disrupt those processes, with potentially lifelong consequences
- what we can do to divert youth from the system and to reform the system for those who do enter it
- the collective role communities can and should play to ensure developmentally appropriate responses and interventions for youth who need them.

Values Establish What’s at Stake

Values, or broad ideals about what’s desirable and good, act as a starting point on a topic, guiding the attitudes, reasoning and decisions that follow. Using a value to open communications about childhood and adolescent development and approaches to juvenile justice can orient people’s thinking on the topic, setting up for success in the interaction that follows. Among several values that FrameWorks tested experimentally, *Pragmatism* showed robust results in steering people towards productive conversations about these issues. The value description below captures the essence of the idea; it isn’t intended to be used verbatim.

Pragmatism

We need a commonsense approach to juvenile justice that focuses on effective interventions and solutions, in order to make wise use of our resources.

This tested Value can be used at the beginning of a conversation about the importance of investing in alternatives to detention for young people: “It doesn’t make sense to put young people in detention, because we know that increases the likelihood of their recidivism. Let’s put our resources towards proven interventions that work.” Or it can be used to illustrate how reforming the juvenile justice system will benefit everyone: “A practical way to improve public safety for all of our communities is to support diversion programs, improved access to mental health care, and mentorship programs for youth—keeping children and youth out of the juvenile justice system in the first place is feasible if we put in place the supports children need to do well.”

Whether used at the beginning of a conversation or elsewhere, values are a more effective way of engaging people in an issue than framing it as a response to a crisis or making the case that it will primarily benefit specific groups.

Explanatory Metaphors Explain the Problem and Build Understanding

FrameWorks research supports the findings of many other studies into public knowledge of childhood and adolescent development, child mental health, and juvenile justice: the American public simply doesn't understand how these things work or their relationship to each other. As a result, they easily revert to ways of thinking about youth and crime that contradict what experts know to be true about how the development process influences juvenile behaviors and how the current justice system interrupts and harms children's developmental trajectory. For example, many youth who enter the juvenile justice system have mental health issues, and two dominant models inform people's understanding of child mental health: first, that mental health is about controlling one's emotions, and second, that children don't have mental health. Taking a moment to reframe child mental health as a determinant of children's healthy cognitive development and long-term outcomes is therefore a critical step in every discussion about appropriate juvenile justice interventions and responses—it should never be taken for granted.

Metaphors are familiar to us all as literary devices, but FrameWorks' research corroborates what many other scholars have observed: they can also be uniquely powerful tools for thinking and interpretation. An Explanatory Metaphor is a simple, concrete, and memorable comparison that quickly and effectively explains an abstract or complex topic. It works by mapping an unfamiliar topic onto something common and familiar to the general public. FrameWorks tested several candidate metaphors for communicating about the problems with the juvenile justice system—likening the system to a complex maze with too many ways in and too few exits, for example. *Justice Maze* was one of the most effective and reliable in helping the public to think more expansively about treatment alternatives to detention that can keep children and youth out of the system and improve their outcomes.

Justice Maze

Our juvenile justice system works like a maze with too many entrances but too few exits, so youth get stuck in it. We need to redesign it with fewer entrances so we can reroute youth instead to more effective treatment options, like drug and mental health treatment.

The *Justice Maze* Metaphor moves the public away from thinking about individuals and instead helps them to see the juvenile justice system *as* a system—one that can be fixed in order to work better. The Metaphor illustrates for the public how young people can get stuck in the system and makes it easier to imagine solutions that both keep them out of the system in the first place and, for those already in it, create programs and policies designed to get youth the help they need to exit the maze permanently.

Like all tested Metaphors, *Justice Maze* communicates concepts in a succinct, easy-to-understand way. In particular, it sets up a conversation about how reforming the system and the policies that put children and youth into contact with the system can dramatically alter their life outcomes.

A Good Story Builds Support for the Right Solutions

Effective framing prepares the listener to see how the actions being taken will make things better. When communicators neglect to draw a clear link between a problem and its solution in ways that support non-experts' ability to understand the connection and what's at stake, a crucial opportunity for gaining the public's trust and engagement is lost. FrameWorks' research revealed that certain patterns of unproductive thinking were especially prevalent in talking with Americans about adolescent development and juvenile justice: in particular, the public's understanding of the issues is dominated by, on the one hand, a sense of fatalism that anything can be done to reduce crime and improve public safety, and on the other, the belief that the system works just fine. A conversation infused at its start with tested shared values, clear explanations, and simplifying metaphors can overcome this default thinking and help the public to reach more productive conclusions about appropriate, systems-level solutions.

This kind of preparation—inviting the public to think about the problem the way experts do—can move people toward whole-picture thinking, or a “wide-angle lens” perspective. Our research shows that giving the public the opportunity to think like the experts do about an issue increases public support for policy solutions. The public lacks a clear understanding of how children's and adolescents' brains develop, why juvenile justice interventions that treat them like adults—such as detention—negatively affect that development, and how fixing the system and increasing access to other kinds of pre-system interventions can improve outcomes. Few members of the public understand the science of childhood and adolescent development and the importance of addressing youth crime in developmentally appropriate ways. To gain public support for investing in high-quality programs that do this, communicators need to show why these are the right solutions. That means explaining how diversion programs, such as more counseling and mental health care in schools, better access to substance abuse treatment, and mentoring programs, can support young people's development and lead to better long-term outcomes. Values and metaphors are easy-to-read signposts that lead audiences to understand adolescent development and the juvenile justice system the way experts do. Building that knowledge base is an important step toward explaining the what, how, and why of juvenile justice reform in ways that make sense to a general audience.

Juvenile Justice Advocates Are Reframing the Public Conversation

As the juvenile justice community continues to work on the challenge of communicating about young people's developmental needs and the most effective ways to address youth crime, it's important to learn about what makes the difference between effective and ineffective outreach on this topic. There's solid evidence that some ways of framing these issues are likely to decrease public engagement and support—for instance, emphasizing the exclusive role parents play in how young people turn out. Instead, effective framing builds people's understanding of underlying causes and introduces them to well-matched, collective solutions, so that the public understands how to best address the problem.

The framing strategies in this toolkit are designed for use by juvenile justice experts and practitioners in the field who are engaged in efforts to improve outcomes for children and youth in the system and to

increase access to programs that prevent them from entering it in the first place. You can learn more about the research that supports these recommended strategies [here](#).