



Bridges from prison: making the case for jobs and relationships

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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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Introduction

The vast majority of people who serve time in prison will leave at some point. And, when they do, most will need support to enable them to continue with their lives and contribute to society. Evidence shows job opportunities and supportive relationships, such as family, are two of the most significant things that will help.

This report focuses on how best to make the case for the importance of creating these positive bridges from prison – to build understanding about why they are needed and to build support for action.

In 2016 we published research¹ about how to build support for alternatives to prison. This new research approaches criminal justice reform from another, equally important angle: while prisons do exist, we need to do things differently to help people do well after they leave.

In this new research, we looked at how the public tend to think about people in prison. We found that dominant patterns of thinking tend to get in the way of understanding the importance of positive bridges from prison. In particular, we identified two barriers:

- While people do think prison should rehabilitate people, they tend to think of prison as being more about punishment. When people are thinking about the purpose of prison being to punish people, they focus on *why* people should stay in prison rather than thinking about what it takes to enable people to live a better life after they leave.
- When people do think about rehabilitation, they tend to focus on who ‘deserves’ it (depending on what type of crime they committed). They tend to assume that how people do after they leave prison is up to the individual and believe fatalistically that some people are ‘naturally bad’ and will always go back to committing crimes or that their circumstances will force them to continue their ‘life of crime’.
- Furthermore, people tend to assume that people from minoritised ethnic groups (such as people from Black and Asian backgrounds) and those from low-income backgrounds are more likely to return to a ‘life of crime’ because ‘their communities’ are more disposed to commit crimes – rather than seeing the structural challenges and racism that affect people’s life outcomes.

We can overcome these obstacles in thinking by making particular choices about how we frame our communications. We need to:

- Shift focus from thinking about *individuals* to thinking about the *systems* that need to be improved.
- Build understanding of what support for people leaving prison could look like and why it’s needed.

Based on extensive research, this report details a number of framing strategies to achieve this shift. We recommend these strategies for use by anyone who creates content and communications about people leaving prison and what they need:

1. Talk about people leaving prison as *people* first to humanise the conversation.
2. Focus on making progress for our society to show why supporting people leaving prison matters.
3. Use the metaphor of 'bridges' to explain what supports are needed.
4. Emphasise that changing the way we support people leaving prison is pragmatic, to expand understanding.
5. Tell stories that show how solutions work to explain how we can do better.

With these strategies, we can counteract the tendency for people to think in fatalistic and individualistic ways about prisons primarily as a means of punishment for 'bad' people. Instead, we can open up thinking about rehabilitation, society's role in supporting people when they leave prison and how this approach can benefit us all.

Ultimately, we're making a case for a better way to support people leaving prison, which in turn will improve the way our criminal justice system works. We're telling a new story about practical solutions which make sense – and which will help our whole society to progress.

What is framing and why does it matter?

Framing is the choices we make about what we say and how we say it. It's what we emphasise, how we explain an issue and what we leave unsaid. These choices affect how people think, feel and act.

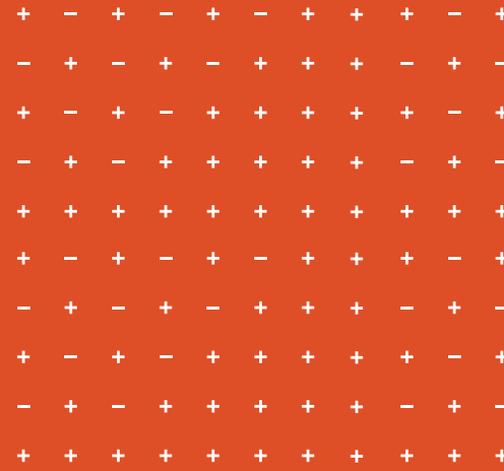
The way in which a communication is framed shapes how we interpret and respond to information. When new frames enter public discourse, they can shift how people make sense of an issue – how they understand it, how they decide who is responsible for addressing problems and what kinds of solutions they support. As a result, frames are a critical part of social change. By shifting how the public thinks about an issue, frames change the context for collective decision-making and can make new types of action possible.

Unlike a set of key messages, frames can be used and adapted to a variety of different contexts, enabling us to tailor communications for different audiences and channels while continuing to talk about our issue in a consistent way.

Our research

These recommendations have been tested and fine-tuned through rigorous research and analysis. From 2021 to 2022, FrameWorks researchers conducted a literature review of existing research on the issue, including synthesising the pertinent findings from FrameWorks' previous research on criminal justice in the United Kingdom; carried out qualitative research via two rounds of peer discourse sessions (a type of focus group) with members of the public; and conducted quantitative research via an experimental online survey with a nationally representative sample of the population in England and Wales. FrameWorks researchers also carried out a series of usability trials with members of the sector. Again, these are a type of focus group, this time focusing on the accessibility and practicality of the recommendations.

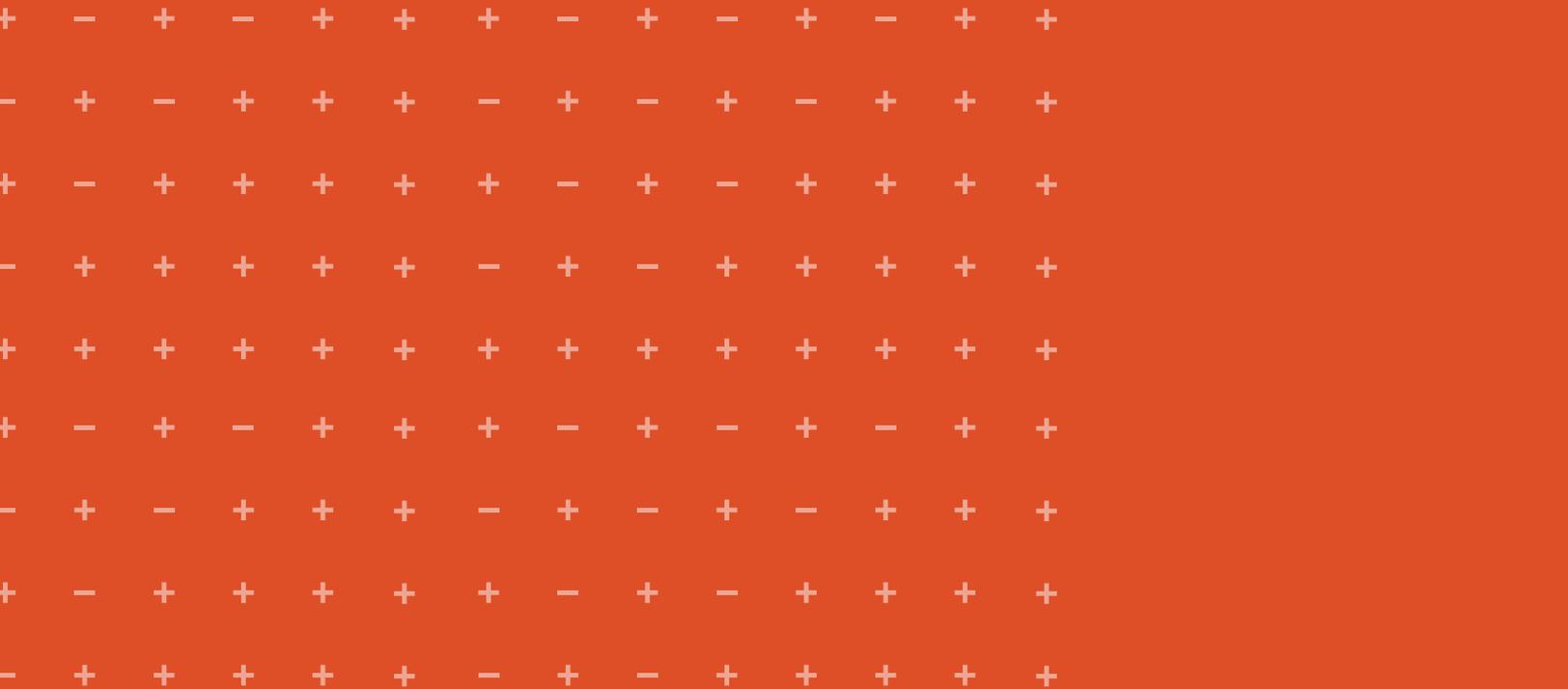
A fuller description of the methods and sample are available as an appendix to this brief.



SECTION TWO

Recommendations

How to make the case for jobs and relationships – building understanding and support for action.



Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION #1

Talk about people leaving prison as *people first*

Choose terms that humanise people leaving prison – laying the foundations for building empathy and shifting focus away from crimes.

What to do

- **Choose terms carefully** – such as ‘people leaving prison’ or ‘people who have been in prison’, rather than dehumanising phrases like ‘ex-offenders’.
- **Talk about** life ‘after prison’, ‘after release’, and so on, rather than using language like ‘re-entering society’, which suggests prisons are not part of our society.

Example

Instead of ...

Ex-prisoners are struggling to successfully reintegrate into society. The criminal justice system needs more resources to improve reintegration efforts and help ex-offenders find jobs so they're less likely to re-offend.

Try ...

When people leave prison, they often face obstacles, making it hard for them to adjust to this next stage in their lives. Offering support to find stable jobs is one way we can help people leaving prison – benefitting them and all of our society.

Why this works

Our research shows that people have a tendency to ‘other’ and dehumanise people who have served time in prison, so efforts should be made to avoid triggering this thinking.

They also tend to think of prisons as places where ‘bad’ people should be kept for long periods of time, separated from law-abiding people, which makes it hard for them to think about how prisons shouldn’t be ignored.

Talking about ‘ex-offenders’ marks people with the stamp of prison and implies that they will always be identified as ‘offenders’ no matter how long it’s been since they’ve left. Additionally, ‘re-entering society’ risks reinforcing a sense of othering and lack of responsibility to the people in and leaving prison.

To build understanding and expand empathy, refer to people leaving prison as people first. And to highlight that people leaving prison are part of our society, talk about what people do ‘after prison’ rather than talking about people ‘re-integrating’ or ‘re-entering society’.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Focus on making progress for our society to show why supporting people leaving prison matters

Use the idea of societal progress to highlight why it's important to support people leaving prison with jobs and relationships, and how the current system needs to be updated.

What to do

- **Expand people's understanding** of why people leaving prison should be supported by saying it's essential if we are to move forward and make progress as a society.
- Use the idea of progress to **highlight issues with the current system**, talking about issues as 'out of date' and 'holding our country back'.

Examples

- *As a society, it's important that we continue to move forward and make progress. But right now, our outdated criminal justice system is holding our country back, because it makes it hard for people leaving prison to get jobs and reconnect with their families.*
- *To fix our outdated criminal justice system so it does a better job of rehabilitation, we must give people leaving prison the chance to gain work experience and skills while serving their sentence and help them get jobs afterwards. We also need to help them connect with their loved ones while they are inside, so they have good support when they leave prison. By setting people up for success, we can make progress and move our society forward.*
- *Supporting people to get jobs when they leave prison is essential if we are to progress as a society. People need to be able to earn money and support themselves, rather than being locked into joblessness and poverty. We can't keep reinforcing these issues – we need to move forward.*

Why this works

This is an example of a 'values frame'. Values frames tap into the deep shared beliefs that guide our thinking and behaviour. They establish a common ground around an idea that we hold as important.

Using the idea of our society's progress positions the need to support people leaving prison as a matter that we all have a stake in. It takes the issue beyond the individual and gets people thinking about the systems that are in place, what's not working and how the systems could be improved.

Talking about progress in this way also expands people's understanding of the structural drivers of crime, such as poverty and inequality. The idea of societal progress can be used to explain how progress isn't currently being made in how the criminal justice system works, which can help people understand

how the current system unfairly and disproportionately affects people on low incomes and from minoritised groups.

This focus on progress for all of society shines a light on how, as a country, we are currently not doing enough to support people when they leave prison. But rather than focusing only on what this means for those individuals, it makes a wider point about what's best for our country and how we can create the right circumstances for everyone to thrive. This helps people understand why supporting people leaving prison is important and should be something we address as a society.

Progress vs prosperity

While enabling people to find stable work when they leave prison will mean they can better contribute to the economy, we found that focusing on economic prosperity didn't build support for changes in the way that talking about societal progress did. In fact, for people with experience with the criminal justice system, talking about the issue as being mainly about the economy undermined both their sense of collective responsibility and their understanding of rehabilitation as a goal of the criminal justice system. This is why we recommend talking about societal progress rather than economic prosperity specifically.

Example

Instead of ...

When people leave prison without skills and opportunities for employment, it's hard for them to contribute to our shared prosperity, and it holds us back.

Try ...

When our outdated system leaves people leaving prison without the skills and opportunities for employment that they need, it holds our country back.

Why talking about 'communities' can trigger problematic thinking

Talking about 'communities' in the context of crime can trigger classist and racist views. This is because the language of 'communities' seems to trigger existing mindsets that low-income and minoritised ethnic 'communities' have more violent or criminal cultures that make them more prone to crime. In our research, we saw 'community' being used as a euphemism for low-income and Black, Asian, and ethnically minoritised groups, which people often conflated as being one and the same.

In this way of thinking, people assume that 'culture' is to blame for disproportionate rates of imprisonment for people from Black, Asian, and minoritised ethnic backgrounds rather than systemic racism and inequalities. Furthermore, when thinking this way, people assume that 'returning to a community' means 'returning to a life of crime' rather than representing a new beginning.

Talking about society and societal progress rather than abstract 'communities' can help avoid this problematic thinking. And focusing on *why* societal progress is important in the criminal justice system – to address systemic inequality and racism and to support people leaving prison from diverse backgrounds – will help shift people's thinking towards more productive understandings.

Instead of ...

Supporting people leaving prison with opportunities to get training and find jobs is a positive step forward that will give their community a boost.

Try ...

Supporting people leaving prison with opportunities to get training and find jobs is a positive step that will help address inequalities and move us all forward as a society.

Note: This isn't to say that the word 'community' should always be avoided – but that we should be careful not to use it in more general or abstract ways which could unintentionally trigger stereotyping.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Use the metaphor of 'bridges' to explain what supports are needed

Use the metaphor of a bridge to explain what supporting people leaving prison looks like and build understanding that we, as a society, are responsible for making that happen.

What to do

- **Compare** leaving prison to crossing a river.
- **Focus on solutions** – the bridges (supports) that must be put in place to help people find jobs and maintain relationships – to bridge the gap between prison and the rest of life.
- **Establish roles** using the metaphor. Governments, and wider society, have a responsibility to build and maintain bridges, and people leaving prison need to be willing to cross over.
- **Resist the temptation to dial up the jeopardy** by focusing on how dangerous or difficult the crossing is, as this can fuel fatalism and detract from the solutions we're trying to promote. People already understand that leaving prison is hard, but they lack an understanding of solutions.

Examples

- *Leaving prison is like crossing over a wide river, and people leaving prison need bridges – such as employment opportunities and supportive relationships – to make their way to the other side and continue on their journey.*
- *Opportunities like education and training while in prison, and stable jobs to go to when they leave, bridge the gap for people leaving prison – allowing them to make a safe crossing to the rest of their lives.*
- *Supportive relationships are like strong and stable bridges for people leaving prison – keeping them above water as they start their new journey. And, just like bridges, these relationships need to be maintained. Access to family visits and communication help keep the bridge strong, so it's ready to be used when the time comes to cross over.*

Why this works

Metaphors give us new, yet familiar, ways to think about an issue. They provide a strong mental image, make abstract or complex concepts simple and concrete, and can provide a comparison which helps build people's understanding in a very immediate way.

While people can sometimes see the need for rehabilitation and have a basic understanding of how the criminal justice system *should* be about rehabilitation, they are unclear about how it works and what people leaving prison need. Moreover, rehabilitation is often understood in individualistic ways – that a person leaving prison is responsible for putting in the extra effort to succeed – rather than thinking

about the wider systems that are needed to make this possible.

The 'bridges' metaphor leverages this basic understanding of rehabilitation and shifts people's understanding towards wider responsibility for people leaving prison. By explaining what people leaving prison need – especially in terms of employment and relationships – the metaphor helps fill in the gaps in understanding what supporting people leaving prison looks like.

In the research, we also saw people extrapolating the metaphor to consider supports like housing – a promising sign that the metaphor got people thinking systemically, beyond the supports we had mentioned specifically.

The idea of connecting one place to another with a strong, supportive foundation was easy for people to grasp and helped them understand multiple aspects of the issue:

- People leaving prison need connections to society via employment/relationships.
- Leaving prison can be a hazardous experience without a clear pathway.
- Deliberate support constructed by people with resources and expertise is necessary to get people leaving prison where they want, and need, to be.

'Channelling crime' and 'prison as a dead end'

Previous FrameWorks research² (focusing on the wider criminal justice system and alternatives to prison) recommended talking about 'channelling crime' and 'prison as a dead end' to explain the negative effects of prisons on individuals and society and to build support for policies aimed at crime prevention. The 'bridges' metaphor addresses the issue of prison from another angle: what people need when they leave.

Use 'channelling crime' or 'prison as a dead end' to talk about prevention and alternatives to prison, and use 'bridges' to talk about rehabilitation for people in and leaving prison.

Use only one metaphor in a single communication to avoid confusion and make clear the points you want to get across. Used separately, each metaphor can help explain different aspects of what needs to change in the current criminal justice system.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Emphasise that reforming the way we support people leaving prison is pragmatic, to expand understanding

Use the idea of pragmatism – taking a practical, problem-solving approach – to expand understanding of what’s wrong with the current criminal justice system and build support for specific solutions.

What to do

- **Highlight** how the current system is not working as it should by appealing to pragmatism.
- **Make the case for** common-sense changes to the current system **by explaining** what practical actions need to be taken to support people leaving prison in finding and keeping jobs and maintaining relationships.
- **Present solutions** as practical answers to problems. And **connect** these changes to the benefit to all of society – for example, reducing reoffending.

Examples

- *When people leaving prison have supportive relationships like family and friends, they're far more likely to live positive lives. But the current system is making it hard for people to maintain those vital relationships while in prison. Practical solutions are possible, like making sure families are able to visit people in prison and spend meaningful time together.*
- *The vast majority of people who go to prison will leave at some point, and it makes sense for us to support them so they can contribute to society and live a good life when they do.*

Examples with more explicit reference to the structural drivers of crime:

- *Poverty creates huge stress, so it simply doesn't make sense that we expect people to turn their lives around after prison without support to find jobs that can lift them out of poverty.*
- *Giving people vocational training while in prison is a practical way to tackle the inequalities that arise from racism and equip everyone to lead positive lives when they leave.*

Why this works

Using the idea of pragmatism – that there are practical, common-sense ways we can fix the criminal justice system (and, crucially, explaining what those practical responses are) – expands people's understanding of the problems with the current system. This idea also helps people better understand the structural drivers of crime (poverty and inequality) and builds understanding of how those same issues are obstacles to rehabilitation.

This is another example of a ‘values frame’ – again, tapping into the deep shared beliefs that guide how we think and act. While our second recommendation uses the value of progress to show why this issue is important, here we are using the idea of pragmatism plus explanation to better expand people’s understanding of the issue.

This idea of pragmatism establishes common ground from which we can take people through solutions step by step and build understanding. And it sets up a story for telling people about the benefits of supporting people leaving prison – steering people away from unproductive ideas of who ‘deserves’ support.

While people can sometimes see that the current criminal justice system is overly punitive and doesn’t focus enough on rehabilitation, another common view is that the system works as it should, and that prisons treat people *too* well.⁵ And even when people can see that more needs to be done to support people leaving prison, they are often unable to think about specific systemic solutions and therefore fall back on individualised ones.

Moreover, talking about taking a pragmatic approach to rehabilitation helps build support for specific policy solutions, when they’re explained in detail, as a practical response to address the system’s current problems.

RECOMMENDATION #5

Tell stories that show how solutions work

Tell stories which show the positive impact of supporting people leaving prison with jobs and relationships – to build people’s understanding of what’s possible with the right supports.

What to do

- **Share stories** which show the difference jobs and relationships make to people leaving prison.
- **Use a step-by-step structure** to lead people through the story and make the causes and effects clear.
- **Include solutions** and demonstrate the **positive impact** they have (or could have) on people’s prospects after prison.
- **Highlight systemic solutions (and failures)** to avoid individualised views of grit and determination being the key to rehabilitation. Avoid ‘hero’ narratives.

Examples

(Jobs)

Michelle's story shows us how the justice system can help put people on a positive path after prison. While Michelle was in prison, she was given the opportunity to take part in a programme that allowed her to take classes and learn trade skills that interested her.

Because of this programme, Michelle was able to apprentice with a local carpenter when she left prison. She built her carpentry skills and made connections with new people – leading to her finding a good job in construction. Today, Michelle is thriving in her work.

(Relationships)

Before going to prison, Will had played an active role in his daughter's life; he loved taking her to the park and playing together. He really enjoyed being a dad, but he was worried that being in prison would mean he could no longer be part of her life.

While in prison, Will had support from a Family Engagement Worker to help him maintain his relationship with his daughter. He was able to take part in a parenting course where he learned more about his daughter's development, literacy and learning. He also attended special family days, where he was able to spend time with his daughter and put what he'd learned into practise.

Through these opportunities, Will was able to maintain his father-daughter connection while in prison. And, when he left, he had a strong relationship to focus on and keep building. Will has adjusted well to life after prison and looks forward to many more trips to the park with his daughter.

Why this works

People often feel fatalistic about the possibility of rehabilitation. They assume that some people are destined to become repeat offenders, because of either their own individual personality traits or the community in which they were raised.

Positive narratives about individuals' experiences with a criminal justice system that actually works for them can help overcome this fatalism and demonstrate how people leaving prison can be rehabilitated with the right systemic supports. These stories should, crucially, be used to highlight what works and doesn't work in the current system – telling a wider story, rather than purely sharing an individual's journey.

In particular, positive narratives that highlight the benefits of providing education, skills training, and job opportunities to people leaving prison can help shift people's thinking away from viewing people leaving prison as a 'risk' to employers to being understood as a benefit to society.

Negative narratives about the lack of support don't have to be ruled out. But for them to be more effective, we should include some explanation of what would have made a difference and changed these stories for the better. Solutions are key.

In our research, we found that both positive and negative narratives helped build an understanding of societal and governmental responsibility to support people leaving prison generally. But the positive narrative led to thinking about more specific systemic solutions and also helped people think about collective efficacy – making it a more effective strategy for enacting change.

Alternatives to ‘second chances’

Sometimes we talk about people leaving prison as being given a ‘second chance’. But our research suggests this is problematic because it feeds into the idea that some people ‘deserve’ a second chance while others don’t, and it individualises what needs to be done to support people in and after prison.

Instead, talk about ‘opportunities’ and ‘potential’. Connecting these alternatives with other framing strategies can be particularly useful. We recommend:

- Talking about how giving opportunities to people leaving prison helps our society to make progress.
For people to be able to contribute to our society and progress when they leave prison, they need opportunities.
- Talking about how it’s a practical approach to tap into people’s potential.
It makes sense for us to unlock people’s potential when they leave prison, not to waste it. It benefits us all.
- Using these ideas of ‘opportunity’ and ‘potential’ in the positive narratives about individuals being affected by systems that work, for example:
*Having the **opportunity** to train and gain stable employment made a huge difference to Alan’s life after prison. The support helped him – and many others – reach their **potential** and contribute to society.*

Conclusion

To make the case for supporting people leaving prison with jobs and relationships, we need to expand people's understanding of rehabilitation and avoid triggering negative assumptions about people in prison.

At the heart of this strategy is a shift from individual blame to systemic thinking, and an emphasis on painting a picture of what support is needed and why.

We need to talk about people in prison as people first – humanising them and making it clear they are part of our society. We need to show people why support with jobs and relationships matters by connecting it to our society's progress, and we can show what these solutions look like by using the bridge metaphor. We can build support for these solutions by employing pragmatism in our communications and explaining how solutions work. And we can build belief in solutions by telling stories which show their impact.

In doing this, we can tell a new story about the bridges we must build so that people leaving prison can cross over to safe and positive lives after prison – enriched by fulfilling work and supportive relationships which enable them to contribute to society.

Endnotes

1. O'Neil, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., & Volmert, A. (2016). *New narratives: Changing the frame on crime and justice*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
2. O'Neil, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., & Volmert, A. (2016). *New narratives: Changing the frame on crime and justice*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
3. Baran, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., Lindland, E., & Haydon, A. (2014). *'Like a holiday camp': Mapping the gaps on criminal justice reform in England and Wales*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.