Framing Community Safety: Guidance for Effective Communication

FrameWorks Institute

FRAME WORKS

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Introduction

Welcome to *Framing Community Safety*, a guide for nonprofits, community-based organizations, public agencies, and others who want to communicate more effectively with the public about community-led efforts to prevent violence and promote safety and healing.

The framing recommendations we offer here are research-based strategies developed by the FrameWorks Institute in partnership with **Prevention Institute**. These strategies are designed to do the following:

— Increase people's understanding of the systemic roots of violence

— Help people recognize that there are community-based solutions to creating safety

— Increase support for community-based public health approaches that emphasize what we do collectively as a society to ensure people's health and safety.

The Purpose of This Document

FrameWorks and Prevention Institute designed the framing strategies discussed here to help people communicate about community safety during a time when Americans' perceptions about crime and policing are increasingly divisive and fatalistic. With that in mind, the events of the past several years—the COVID-19 pandemic, uprisings following the murder of George Floyd and dozens of other Black Americans at the hands of police, and the recent rise in other types of gun violence—have also created openings for more productive conversations about how to create safety and address violence within communities.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance on how to communicate three key terms:

— Community safety

— The public health approach to community safety

— Social determinants of health and safety.

As communicators working on community-centered approaches to safety, you likely share the terms listed above with other organizations in this field, but you may also have different organizational structures, approaches, and audiences. The framing strategy outlined here provides guidance on how to frame effectively across organizations' communications, but you should tailor it to each organization's needs, whether a nonprofit or a public agency.

It is important that all your communications are explicit about solutions. However, this document won't tell you what those solutions are. The framing recommendations proposed here provide guidance on *how* to communicate but not *what* to communicate. The specific solutions that organizations working on community safety choose may vary depending on the messenger, context, and audience receptivity; regardless of their form, solutions should *always* be part of the message.

What is framing?

Framing refers to the choices we make in what we say and how we say it. Framing matters because it affects how people hear us, what they understand, and how they act. Using the same frames consistently helps move the conversation further and can stimulate action faster.

Methods

This framing guidance draws on two streams of research. First, we conducted a scan of media articles and organizational materials to identify common framing practices. Second, we analyzed other FrameWorks' research on criminal justice, including ongoing projects on culture change and bail reform, to inform our overall recommendations. We also drew on the findings from the internal interviews conducted by Prevention Institute and consulted with them on this guide.

1. Show people what community safety is.

Defining what you mean by community safety should be the first thing you do in any communication. Use that definition throughout and across your communications. The meaning of *community* might seem obvious to you, but people think about community in many different ways—their neighborhood, a shared identity, or a set of family and friends. Be explicit, consistent, and inclusive. Everyone should see themselves in your message.

Frame your own language.

You don't have to use the examples here word-for-word. Incorporate the framing in ways that suit your communications and feel authentic for your audience.

The word *safety* often leads people to think about violence, safety's opposite; what they consider to be dangerous and crime-ridden neighborhoods; and policing as the only solution. Media coverage on crime rates actively reinforces these perceptions. To avoid this, keep your message aspirational. Show people what you are going to create as a community first, before talking about what you need to prevent. This doesn't mean you should avoid talking clearly and honestly about the problems your community faces, but from the very beginning, you want your audience to know what you can achieve together.

❌ **Instead of starting with what community safety *isn't* …**

Community safety uses community-based actions to inhibit and remedy the causes and consequences of criminal behavior.

→

✅ **Always start with what community safety is:**

When a community is safe, everyone can go about their daily activities and access opportunities with comfort and without the fear, threat, or reality of violence harming them or their loved ones.

✕ Instead of using jargon and technical terms ...	✔ Show what you mean with plain language:
Community safety is a holistic, local approach to securing sustainable reductions in crime and the fear of crime.	→ Community safety is about children and families knowing they can live, work, play, learn, pray, and grow without the fear of violence.

Why is this important?

The most important reason to define community safety is because most people have never heard of the term and are unsure what it refers to. This uncertainty leaves room for people to fill in the blanks with assumptions that may lead them astray or tune out your message.

We caution against using the widely known term *public safety* because our research shows that specific phrase can backfire, reinforcing support for familiar measures, such as more policing, while limiting the support and understanding of broader community-based solutions that people may be less familiar with. Used alone, the term *public safety* has the potential to reinforce a narrow focus on policing as the only solution to address violence.

We also caution against the term *violence prevention*, as it can stigmatize those use violence prevention services by framing them as "violent".

Community, however, has strong, positive connotations for members of the public. People think of communities as places where people can come together and construct local solutions. Pairing *community* and *safety* can neutralize negative associations and create openings for constructive conversations about what we can do to prevent violence—as long as communicators take the time to define what they mean by community safety. Coupling community safety with a pragmatic tone, as some spokespeople for community safety solutions tend to do, reinforces the perception that violence is, in fact, preventable.

Important note: Communities should define their own *community* and what community safety means to them.

2. Clearly explain the *public health approach.*

Don't *tell* people that community safety can be addressed through a public health approach; *show* them what that looks like and how it works. Make it clear that this approach is an effective alternative to current practices, such as a larger police presence and enforcement in Black and Latinx communities, which often have unintentional, negative impacts on those communities.
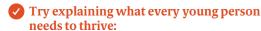
Importantly, you should also normalize community safety as an approach everyone can agree on so people see themselves as part of the solution. Emphasize that community-based solutions are something we *all* want and can work toward collectively. Words and phrases such as *common, widespread concern, and widely shared* support help normalize changing our approach to community safety.

In each sample message below, you will see an opening for you to fill in specific examples of solutions from your own work. These openings are spaces for you to describe programs that exist, give examples of programs that have been effectively implemented in other communities, and advocate for programs that you want funded. These solutions should be clear and concrete: The goal is to *show*, not just tell, what a public health approach to community safety looks like.

The first example of a reframed message focuses on explaining and raising support for a public approach to mental health. FrameWorks' research has found that we can make mental health services a more easily accessible entry point to productive conversations about alternate approaches to promoting community safety. In the reframed example, note how we can make communication more effective by showing *why* a new approach is needed—not simply stating that we need one.

✕ **Instead of reinforcing negative perceptions of adolescence and crime …**		✓ **Try explaining what every young person needs to thrive:**
Many people believe that youth violence is a greater problem today than ever before, and news coverage of youth crime adds to that impression. In fact, research doesn't support those claims. Instead, for many reasons, youth crime has declined steadily over the last few decades, and violent crime rates are still much lower than they were in the 1990s.	→	We need practical solutions that help all young people thrive as they reach adulthood. Years of experience show how to promote community safety and support young people's development and wellbeing by investing in proven strategies that build strong relationships with adults and provide opportunities to connect with their communities. *For example …*

❌ **Instead of telling people we need a public health solution ...**

Tell our elected officials to invest more in mental health services. Too often, people with mental illnesses do not receive a mental health response when experiencing a mental health crisis. Instead, people in crisis often come into contact with law enforcement rather than a mental health professional. People in crisis deserve better—they deserve a public health approach to public safety.

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✅ **Try showing why a public health solution is needed:**

In our community, people experiencing a mental health crisis often come into contact with law enforcement rather than a mental health professional. Common law-enforcement practices, such as the use of restraints, loud voices, bright lights, and other things that can lead to sensory overload, are the exact opposite of what a person needs when experiencing a health crisis. Tell our elected officials: People in crisis, their families, and our whole community deserve better—we need to ensure that mental health crises receive a mental health response from a mental health professional. *For example ...*

Media coverage increasingly presents *rise-in-crime* statistics and framing of community safety, and many of these articles juxtapose this data with justice reform efforts. As they have throughout American history, these rise-in-crime narratives reinforce and reflect us versus them ways of thinking, which are inextricably linked to racist modes of understanding crime and safety. Instead of reinforcing this narrative by refuting it, put forward stories about what everyone in every community needs and deserves to be safe and well.

Why is this important?

People generally don't connect violence to health, which is why it's been difficult for public health advocates and organizations working in the violence-prevention field to gain traction for addressing it as a public health problem.[*] People generally think of violence as an individual problem with individualized, criminal-justice-oriented solutions. As noted above, the public health approaches that you choose to communicate may vary depending on the messenger, context, and audience receptivity. Regardless of their form, your solutions for addressing community *safety* should always be part of the message.

vA public health approach is what we do collectively as a society to ensure people are healthy and safe. But the term itself, *public health*, doesn't convey that message to members of the public, even in the wake of the pandemic. Being explicit about what a public health
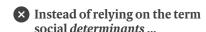
Frame your data.

Data doesn't speak for itself. People use their existing preconceptions to make sense of the information you give them, including statistics and visual presentations, such as charts and tables. To build understanding and avoid unintended conclusions, always start by explaining what the data means.

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* Additional resources on framing gun violence as a public health problem are available from the FrameWorks Institute by request.

approach looks like in practice as a violence-reduction strategy helps fill the gaps in understanding.

(For more information about the public health approach to community safety see "*Preventing Gun Violence with a Public Health Approach*.")

3. Name and explain *social determinants using plain language.*

When discussing the social determinants of health, safety, and wellbeing, plain-language explanations are critical. When talking about determinants of health, name the determinants immediately, and then illustrate the process through which they influence health.

✖ **Instead of relying on the term social *determinants* …**	✔ **Try naming the causes explicitly:**
To truly tackle gun violence, lawmakers should follow the evidence on what keeps communities safe and advance a broader set of investments in public health that fully address the social determinants of safety.	To truly tackle gun violence, lawmakers should invest in programs that address the root causes of violence, such as lack of access to jobs, a shortage of safe housing, and high levels of poverty and racial segregation. *For example, our community needs …*

To ensure people cannot interpret your communication as a suggestion that responsibility for a problem lies with the people experiencing it, make the attribution of responsibility clear. Point to the systems, structures, processes, practices, policies, and ideologies that influence outcomes, and name structural/systemic racism explicitly.

✖ **Instead of saying *disparities exist* …**	✔ **Try explaining how inequities lead to disparities:**
People of color are far more likely than white people to experience negative outcomes when they interact with the police. For example, people of color are more likely to be stopped by police and more likely to be killed by police.	In the context of racism, people of color disproportionately experience the burden of negative outcomes. For example, police are more likely to stop or kill people of color because law enforcement is more likely to perceive their behavior as violent or threatening. *Addressing this entails …*

To communicate the role of prevention in determinants of health, using the metaphorical language of *upstream* and *downstream* can be very helpful. This analogy helps people see conditions that exist upstream and are out of individuals' control, such as racism, segregation, and infrastructure that puts neighborhoods of color farthest from affordable mass transit. These conditions have negative effects on communities' ability to create safe and vibrant places to live. This analogy helps members of the public see that conditions, not individuals, lead to safety or violence and that these conditions can be changed through preventive measures. An example of this is using the metaphor to talk determinants of gun violence.

✅ **Try using the *upstream/downstream* metaphor to explain solutions to prevent gun violence:**

Gun violence, like many public health challenges, is preventable when we understand its causes. Specifically, we know that *upstream* social conditions, such as disinvestment in Black and Latinx communities, lack of critical services, and over-policing can have cascading effects *downstream*, making these communities less safe. We can make communities safer when we understand the causes and effects of violence, address them through *preventative measures upstream*, and offer *downstream* services that meet the immediate needs of communities. *Examples of these upstream solutions include ...*

Why this is important?

Although the term *social determinants* is widespread in the public health field, it is overly technical and inaccessible to most people. And since people don't connect safety and violence to health, this term requires an even larger leap in understanding. This is why you should always be explicit about the determinants you want the public to understand, and then link these root causes to effective, preventative solutions.

Conclusion

At the core, all these strategies aim to build the public's understanding of what causes violence, what creates safety, and how the status quo needs to change to create a more just society that promotes the wellbeing and safety of everyone. These explanations are crucial, but they can and should be communicated using your organization's authentic voice and communications style. Use these strategies in ways that make sense for your communications and the audiences you want to reach—they are designed to be flexible.

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.

Prevention Institute is a national nonprofit that promotes health, safety, and wellbeing through thriving, equitable communities.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

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