



FRAME WORKS INSTITUTE



Caning, Context and Class

Mapping the Gaps Between Expert
and Public Understandings of
Public Safety

A FRAMEWORKS RESEARCH REPORT

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Introduction

The research presented in this report was conducted by the FrameWorks Institute in collaboration with the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at the Harvard Law School, and Behind the Cycle, the criminal justice advocacy group. This report is part of a larger, multi-method project that seeks to develop more effective ways to communicate about the challenges facing America's criminal justice system and to provide justice reform advocates with specific recommendations for reframing the issue of public safety.

This particular report lays the groundwork for this larger reframing effort by comparing expert discourse on the topic with the ways that average Americans think and talk about public safety. Data from interviews with both groups are compared to locate and examine gaps in understanding surrounding issues pertaining to public safety. In addition to presenting these gaps, this report outlines their implications for communications. Future phases of this project will offer strategies to fill these gaps and address other aspects of public understanding by designing and testing tools that can be employed to effectively and efficiently translate expert and advocate information.

I guess with my image I get harassed a lot. Even being a passenger in the car, I'll be the one that gets all the questions. So, my theory of public safety is a little bit different, but it's hand in hand. I mean, one; we are protected, and another, I got to deal with a little bit of profiling.

-Cultural Models Participant

This report begins with a summary of foundational themes and concepts experts rely upon to understand, explain and talk about the issues related to public safety. It then turns to a discussion of the research conducted with American citizens through “cultural models interviews” designed to elicit the implicit patterns of thought that Americans share and bring to bear in thinking about and making sense of issues of public safety and criminal justice. These implicit patterns of thinking are referred to here as “cultural models,” in that they represent highly conventionalized, broadly shared modes of understanding shaped by Americans' experiences with media, as well as other mediums of common discourse, experience and culture. This discussion is accompanied by a presentation of the communications implications of these cultural models.

The final section of this report “maps the gaps” through a comparison of the expert discourse and Americans' cultural models. This analysis reveals specific gaps and overlaps between both groups' understandings. With improved knowledge of these features, we are then able to move toward the second stage of Strategic Frame AnalysisTM, which involves identifying communications strategies that build on these overlaps and close the gaps. In so doing, the larger goal of this research is to give Americans access to new ways of thinking about how we might improve public safety through reforming the criminal justice system.

Summary of Findings

I. An Expert Story of Public Safety and Criminal Justice

Experts on public safety and the criminal justice system note that the U.S. has the highest total and per capita rates of incarceration in the world, and that America's prisons are disproportionately filled with young African American men. They view the criminal justice system as fundamentally compromised by a series of structural flaws and biases that combine to undermine its fairness and effectiveness. Such flaws and biases include the disproportionate targeting and sentencing of young men of color and those with immigrant status, a lack of accountability of law enforcement officers and court prosecutors, and the denial of due process for those who must rely on an overwhelmed public defense system. Experts note that the system relies too heavily on punitive approaches to public safety, fails to account for ecological determinants of crime, and lacks a developmental perspective regarding juvenile crime. They note that the criminal justice system is often used as a proxy for social services, and they call for an introduction of evidence-based systems of data collection and management to improve its effectiveness. Such information, they argue, will allow for comparisons of policy effectiveness across the system, particularly in regards to alternative sentencing and programs for treatment and rehabilitation.¹

II. Cultural Models Interviews

Top-of-mind associations: Americans largely understand public safety in terms of the front-line responders they see in their everyday lives, including police, fire and other security personnel.

Government, communities and citizens are responsible: Public safety is understood through a dispersed model of responsibility in which the government, local communities and individuals are responsible for maintaining public safety.

Ideal vs. real: When asked to describe what each branch of the criminal justice system does, Americans perceive a disconnect between what the criminal justice system *should* be doing and how it *actually* operates.

Conflicting ideas about the causes of crime: Americans understand the causes of crime through the application of three distinct, conflicting organizational models. The first model attributes crime to individuals who fit one of a set of criminal "personality types." The second explains it as a result of ecological determinants, and the third model understands crime in relation to early experiences and developmental factors.

Rational-actor considerations: Americans' judgment of those who commit crimes hinges upon whether they see the person as being capable of making a conscious, "rational" decision. If the accused is categorized as a rational actor, prison time is an appropriate response, with the harshest punishments reserved for violent offenders. By contrast, if the accused is understood as incapable of logical thought, such as a child or someone who is mentally ill, Americans are likely to consider alternatives to prison.

Opposing logics of "fair" sentencing: Americans believe that "fairness" should determine sentencing, but they apply this value in two opposing ways. The *uniform* model of fairness posits that punishments for crimes should be fixed regardless of the circumstances surrounding the crime. The contrasting *contextual* model of fairness is premised on the idea that sentencing should consider the unique circumstances of the crime, including the defendant's upbringing, criminal history, mental health, intent and evidence of remorse.

Cultural models and solutions: FrameWorks' research suggests that Americans make use of the cultural models of causation and judgment in reasoning about effective solutions to issues of public safety and criminal justice. Most notably, when individuals employ rational-actor models, they tend to arrive at a very specific and narrow set of solutions that includes making punishments harsher and sentences more uniform. On the other hand, when individuals apply more ecological models to thinking about public safety and criminal justice, they arrive at contextual, policy and resource-based solutions to problems in these domains.

III. Overlaps and Gaps

Overlaps in Understanding

Experts and the public share several broad, worldview-level understandings of the causes, problems and solutions for public safety issues. These overlaps represent spaces that communications can strategically build upon to introduce new ways of thinking about problems and solutions.

- *The importance of ecological factors.* Both the experts and members of the general public recognize that ecological factors contribute to public safety, although members of the latter group toggle back and forth between this model and the more dominant rational-actor assumptions.
- *A seriously biased system.* Both experts and members of the general public view the system as flawed and unfair, but differ in their specific views of these problems, with experts pointing to biases affecting race and members of the public focusing on class distinctions.

- *A system with major problems.* Experts and members of the public also both note significant problems with the workings of the courts, from corruption to misguided priorities in sentencing, such as assigning prison time for non-violent crimes.²

Gaps in Understanding

While our research suggests that experts and the public share some important understandings of the criminal justice system and public safety in general, there are areas where they differ substantially in their understanding of this system, and in concepts of public safety more broadly. Such differences, or gaps in understanding, pose considerable challenges to effective communications.

- *Presence vs. absence of immigrants in the criminal justice system.* Experts cite several dilemmas resulting from the conflation of the criminal justice system with immigration and social services, whereas data from our interviews shows that, for members of the general public, criminal justice and immigration are two conceptually distinct issues. In other words, when the public thinks about criminal justice, they do not implicitly see immigration as a part of this topic.³
- *The problem of juvenile justice vs. what problem?* Experts identify serious problems within the juvenile justice system, but the public appears to have little to no idea about this system, much less the challenges that it faces.
- *Systems vs. agents.* Experts focus on how systems and policies are shaped and connected, whereas the public sees the world in smaller, more tangible and individualized parts. In this way, experts are more likely to focus on problems at the institutional and systemic levels, whereas the public tends to put the blame on individuals.
- *Quality vs. quantity.* While experts call for higher quality of intervention that must treat ecological and systemic factors in order to improve public safety, members of the public see solutions in terms of quantity, such as *more* police and *more* resources.
- *Lack of accountability vs. working systems.* Experts perceive a general lack of accountability and poor data collection and management within the criminal justice system, whereas consideration of accountability and efficiency of the criminal justice system are not top-of-mind considerations for members of the general public. Our interviews suggest that members of the public appear not to be in the habit of critically assessing aspects of the criminal justice system and display a blind trust that such systems are “generally” doing what they are supposed to.

IV. Implications for Communications

Attribution of responsibility: Communications about public safety must work to strategically shift Americans' understanding away from a model that places responsibility on policing and citizens' efforts, to one that encompasses government and all branches of the criminal justice system and holds them accountable to standards and norms of effectiveness. This will require a deft reframing, as the association with government brings its own baggage.⁴

The dangers of essentializing: By blaming crime on a collection of criminal "personality types," Americans are unable to envision a way to prevent these stereotyped characters from breaking the law. The only logical solution for maintaining public safety becomes segregating these people from society, effectively blocking receptivity towards innovative solutions.

Rational-actor thinking as a straw man: Communications that invoke rational-actor assumptions — or the idea that crime results from a conscious calculation of weighted costs and benefits — set up a single solution for crime, i.e., that harsher punishments will prevent more people from committing more crimes. This "airtight" logic will have to be broken.

The value of shared responsibility: Messages that highlight the contextual factors understood as contributing to levels of crime hold promise in garnering public support for criminal justice reform. These communications, however, should be carefully framed to avoid eliciting a suite of connected ecological factors understood to be present in communities with high levels of crime. Triggering this kind of association between place and crime will likely result in default modes of thought that attribute these conditions to the people who operate within them, or that the task of improving the public safety in these places is "too big to fix."

RESEARCH METHODS

I. Establishing the “Core Story” of Public Safety

Working in collaboration with the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at the Harvard Law School and with the advocacy group Behind the Cycle, the FrameWorks Institute was tasked with providing a systematic model for understanding and responding to the communications opportunities and challenges confronting criminal justice reform advocates. The process for developing this “core story” of the field was divided into two major phases.

Expert Materials Review

The first step in the process was to review a wide body of criminal justice materials to recreate the best approximation of a “public safety” core story, recognizing that this would not be “the” core story, but rather one of several that could be identified. This was not an attempt to decide which messages, frames or models are the “best,” but rather to provide a representation of the dominant frames currently employed within the field.

Materials were gathered by advocate submissions, Internet searches, and website and literature reviews. While the search was not exhaustive, it was extensive. As seen in Figure 1, FrameWorks’ researchers reviewed materials from over 60 advocacy organizations. Close to one-half were primarily not-for-profit organizations; about one-third listed academic institutions as their primary affiliation; and about one in five represented foundations. The majority of organizations used in the materials review had a national, or both a national and a local, scope. Less than 10 percent reported serving primarily local interests.

Convening on Public Safety

The second stage in the research process was a meeting on October 13, 2010, entitled *Reframing Criminal Justice and Public Safety Policy*, of experts and advocates invited to discuss the challenges confronting the field of public safety. Researchers from the FrameWorks Institute presented a draft core story that emerged from the materials review process described above, and solicited refinements, corrections and additions to that story from those gathered.

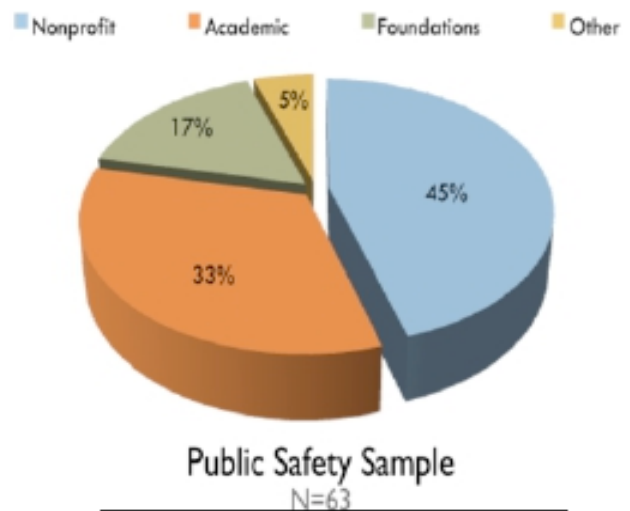


Figure 1: Organization Type

The conversation took place both in a collective gathering of all attendees, as well as a series of smaller break-out groups that specifically addressed the effort to develop a common set of messages that the field judged most important to communicate to the public and policymakers. The result of the meeting was a redrafting of the expert core story that included this expert feedback, culminating in an initial FrameWorks report entitled *Public Safety: Framing a Reform Agenda*, which provides the basis for the summary of the expert core story in this report.⁵

Cultural Models Interviews

To complete the other side of the comparison, FrameWorks conducted 20 in-depth cultural models interviews with members of the American general public in San Diego, Calif., Stockton, Calif., and Virginia Beach, Va., in December 2010 and January 2011. Informants were recruited by a professional marketing firm through a screening process developed and employed in past FrameWorks research. They were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process). Those working in fields related to criminal justice and public safety were screened out of the sample to avoid impeding our ability to gather data about how the general public, as non-experts, reason about target concepts.⁶

Efforts were made to recruit a broad range of informants in terms of age, political identity and level of education. In total, 11 women and nine men were recruited. Ten participants identified as Caucasian, five identified as African American, three identified as Hispanic or Latino and two identified as Asian. Six participants self-identified as “conservative,” four as “liberal” and the remaining 10 as “middle-of-the-road.” The mean age of the sample was 37 years old, with an age range from the early 20s to the early 70s.

We must note here that, although the sample was constructed to include as much variation as possible, it is not, nor was it meant to be, nationally representative in any statistical way. Issues of demographic variability and representativeness of the findings presented here are taken up in a subsequent phase of FrameWorks’ research, where such questions can be more appropriately and effectively addressed in a large sample size, and with more rigorous statistical sampling techniques.

Informants participated in one-on-one, semi-structured “cultural models interviews.” Consistent with interview methods employed in psychological anthropology,⁷ cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues — in this case, ideas about public safety, criminal justice and the ways these ideas might be connected. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Quotes are provided in the report to illustrate major points, but identifying information has been excluded to ensure anonymity.

Elements of social discourse analysis, cultural models analysis and grounded theory were applied to identify shared cultural models.⁸ First, patterns of *discourse*, or common, standardized ways of talking, were identified across the sample using a basic grounded theory approach to thematic analysis. These discourses were then analyzed to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, propositions and connections that were commonly made but taken for granted throughout an individual's transcript and across the sample. In short, our analysis looked at patterns both in what *was* said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was *not* said (shared, but taken-for-granted, assumptions). More detailed information about the specific methodology and format of these interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Expert View

As noted above, the FrameWorks Institute was tasked with identifying and distilling into a concise set of messages to be translated, a set of key points that members of the field of criminal justice believe are important for the public to understand and have access to in their thinking on social and policy issues. These key points represent how progressive experts and advocates in the field of public safety understand the importance, as well as the central challenges and failings, of criminal justice in America. In this way, the core story simultaneously represents the object that communications research seeks to translate, and the outcome against which the success of such translations is evaluated. This core story is presented in greater detail and with added components (such as the experts' own communications hypotheses) in a separate FrameWorks research report titled *How Public Safety Experts Present Their Story*.

The following is a summary version of the key assertions that comprise this field's core story. The summary is supplemented with citations and quotes (in italics) derived from the materials reviewed and as provided by experts at the meeting in response to the initial draft core story.

1. Systemic, ecological and community factors are important determinants of crime that are inappropriately addressed by current public policy. Experts argue that underlying community-level determinants of crime have not been adequately addressed by public policy. These determinants include factors of health, education, employment and social support. For example, experts note that lack of access to quality health care (including mental health and addiction services) increases rates of incarceration within a population.

Four times as many mentally ill people are in prisons than in mental health hospitals. We are warehousing mentally ill in our prisons.

Experts point to high drop-out rates in under-resourced areas as a factor that contributes to relatively high rates of incarceration in such areas.

Dropouts are three and a half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested.

They also cite high rates of unemployment, a general lack of economic opportunity, and the breakdown of social cohesion in communities whose inhabitants cycle in and out of prison as ecological determinants of crime that are currently un- or under-addressed by policy.

We are finding that high rates of incarceration may also result in counterproductive effects on crime. This comes about due to the high mobility in certain neighborhoods caused by people cycling in and out of prison. As a result, there is a fraying of social bonds between families and neighbors, and the loss of informal controls that normally contribute to public safety.

2. U.S. rates of incarceration are high in relation to other countries and certain populations are over-represented in these statistics. Progressive experts and advocates speak consistently to the fact that the U.S. has both the highest total and per capita incarceration rates in the world, and whose rapid growth rates over the past 25 years parallel the rise of the for-profit prison industry. Moreover, they emphasize that there are significant racial and class disparities in incarceration rates, that are further magnified among youth.

In the last 20 years, our nation has witnessed an unprecedented growth in its prison population, making the country's incarceration rates the highest in the world.

The U.S. penal system has become ubiquitous in the lives of low-education African American men ... and is ... an important feature of a uniquely American system of social inequality.

3. Current rates of incarceration represent an ineffective practice both in terms of reducing crime and in the use of public funds. Experts assert that the current high rates of incarceration are unnecessary and point to the existence of more cost-effective alternatives that can reduce crime and contribute to community safety.

Over the past 30 years, policymakers have increasingly shifted toward incarceration as the primary strategy for addressing crime in America, despite the fiscal demands this places on limited public resources, and despite growing evidence that such massive incarceration has resulted in diminished public safety returns.

Incarceration is the most expensive and least effective means of insuring public safety.

Smarter alternatives exist, that cost less money and are more effective at rehabilitating people while saving money, promoting safety and building communities.

4. Patterns in incarceration rates result from biases that are built into the criminal justice system and its policies. Experts note that the biases evident in incarceration patterns in the U.S. result from the fact that the criminal justice system fails to appropriately and equitably mete out justice. Race, age, gender, economic status and national origin are all axes along which the criminal justice system fails to achieve equity. Examples of policies and practices cited by experts that reflect such biases include the racial profiling of blacks and Latinos for traffic violations and other minor offenses, the disproportional punishment of crack vs. powder cocaine offenses, and harsher sentencing outcomes overall for people of color relative to whites.

Saying the U.S. criminal system is racist may be politically controversial in some circles. But the facts are overwhelming. No real debate about that.

The police stop blacks and Latinos at rates that are much higher than whites. In New York City, where people of color make up about half of the population, 80 percent of the NYPD stops were of blacks and Latinos. When whites were stopped, only 8 percent were frisked. When blacks and Latinos are stopped 85 percent were frisked, according to information provided by the NYPD.

In particular, experts point to the specific bias against African American youth in the criminal justice system.

Although the overall juvenile arrest rate has remained near a 25-year low, the disparities between white and black arrest rates in 2006 were at the highest point in a decade.

Even though white youth are more likely to report using drugs and 30 percent more likely to report selling drugs, African American youth are twice as likely to be arrested, twice as likely to be detained, and significantly more likely to be prosecuted in the adult court for drug offenses.

In tandem with targeting young men of color, experts noted a bias in regard to socioeconomic status within the court system, by which the Constitutionally guaranteed right to counsel is often denied to those who cannot afford representation due to the heavy caseloads of public defenders.

A major safeguard of the system, the provision of competent counsel is, more often than not, not provided. It's either you don't get counsel at all, which we're finding is happening in really disturbing numbers, or you get counsel that is so handicapped by lack of resources, whether it's too high caseloads, lack of training, etc., that they're not competent in the job.

Finally, experts speak consistently to the way that problems within the system disproportionately impact those with immigrant status.

We have 400,000 people being deported every year; 195,000 are called criminal aliens. But there's no definition of what a criminal alien is. You don't know, actually, what kind of offenses are involved. It's really a media campaign.

The definition for deportable crimes has expanded so much that it's crossed into an area where 10, 20 years ago, they weren't crimes of violence, but now they're categorized as crimes of violence.

5. The criminal justice system currently lacks accountability and transparency.

Experts argue that there is insufficient accountability in the policing and court systems, as both law enforcement officials and prosecutors who engage in misconduct are typically not held accountable for their actions. Without transparency, they argued, the system cannot be reformed.

... the lack of openness and transparency with regards to both police, but it particularly diverts to prosecutors who are also completely immune legally.

No one effectively polices the police and prosecutors; it would be in the public's interest to do so.

Part of the problem, experts explain, lies in the lack of systematic data collection, and that the information that is tracked is too vague to make an effective argument that correlates record-keeping to accountability. Experts agree that serious reform is needed in terms of how data is collected and managed.

Data collection is hard to come by in the prosecutorial context. There is a lack of openness and transparency among prosecutors and this undermines accountability.

You have to go all over the place to try and find it [data]. I mean, certainly, you start with the public defender office or system, but more often than not, you can't end there. You have to go someplace else, and you have to go to the courts. Even sometimes we get data from the prosecutor that's better than what's in the public defender system. But across systems generally, data is absolutely an issue.

Also the movement from criminal justice to the immigration detention system is also not tracked, so you go to Riker's in New York to look for your client, and he's been moved to Texas to an immigration detention facility, and there is no data until now.

6. The criminal justice system is poorly managed and averse to more effective alternatives. Experts emphasize that, if standards for the systems of evidence, data collection and management were to be improved, criminal justice policies and programs could be held accountable, resulting in a more just, efficient and affordable system overall. Moreover, the current system is averse to adopting alternative strategies in policing, sentencing and post-incarceration policies that have been shown to be more cost-effective than current practices and have better results in lowering rates of both crime and recidivism.

We need evidence-based, research-driven policies to really create safe communities, not policies driven on the politics of fear.

There's research that shows there are a number of things that, if police and prosecutors would simply adopt, could ensure a more consistent quality and accuracy of what they do.

We can improve practice. Research shows things we can adopt to minimize bias.

We can't say you should be spending less money, and putting people into drug courts, until we can say there's a lower recidivism rate when they go through drug court than when they go through the prison system.

7. The juvenile justice system fails to integrate a developmental perspective. Experts add that the existing problems in the current system are magnified when it comes to the juvenile justice system. They explain that policymakers have failed to employ a developmental perspective in creating the juvenile justice system and its policies. Instead, aspects of the more general criminal justice system are aged down and applied to all youth. Experts cite an expanded law enforcement presence in schools as a prototypical example of this misguided approach.

It's hard to encapsulate what we know developmentally about kids but one of the sure ways to do it is that kids are not little adults so they shouldn't necessarily be treated as such. But that's hard in a broad criminal justice frame.

The same behavior that gets you a trip to the principal's office or a call home in [one] school gets you expelled and arrested in another school.

The combination of overly harsh school policies and an increased role of law enforcement in schools has created a “schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track,” in which punitive measures such as suspensions, expulsions and school-based arrests are increasingly used to deal with student misbehavior, and huge numbers of youth are pushed out of school and into prisons and jails.

An alternative approach to juvenile justice, these experts say, would consider developmentally appropriate ways of addressing behavior. Furthermore, services addressed specifically to the needs of youth and children, which are informed by a developmental perspective, are simply not available to the degree and scope that they need to be.

The brain remolds itself in adolescence so brain development opportunities that were missed in infancy re-open in adolescence, so there’s a lot more work and more opportunity in the juvenile justice system.

There are proven, effective ways of handling children who misbehave that don’t involve incarceration but can teach accountability.

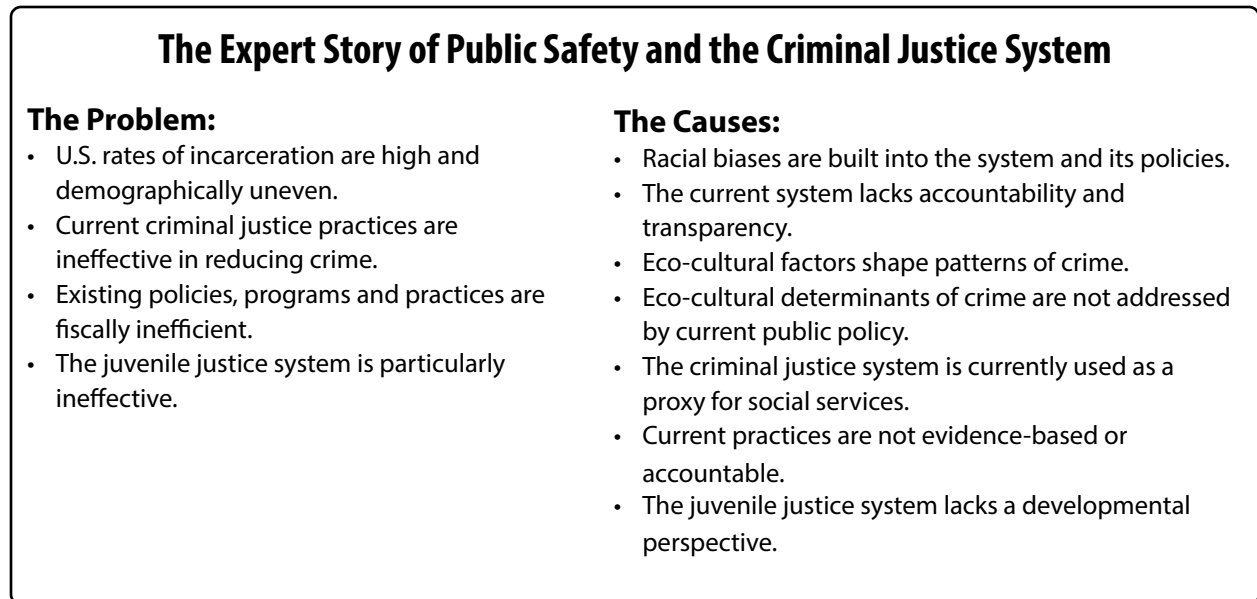
8. The criminal justice system is used as a proxy for social services. According to experts, the size of the criminal justice system has led some policymakers to view and treat it as a social service delivery system. Rather than develop the policies and resources to arm the appropriate agencies to address various social issues — from public (and mental) health, to educational reform, community development and workforce preparedness — the criminal justice system is tasked with addressing many of these needs. In short, experts emphasize a trend whereby policymakers effectively avoid dealing with our country’s pressing social problems by relying on the criminal justice system to do this work ineffectively.

It’s not that we rely on incarceration — which I think is true as the priority punishment — but that we rely entirely too much on the criminal justice system to address a whole host of issues that don’t necessarily need to be even brought in — you know, mental illness, drug addiction, drug use, the list goes on and on. And that we rely on the criminal justice as the problem solver.

Too frequently the criminal justice system is used as the delivery point for social services or intervention.

We have come to an over-reliance on the criminal justice system to address social problems — from mental health to addiction to poverty.

Figure 1: The Expert Story of Public Safety and the Criminal Justice System



Cultural Models Interviews

The following section describes the underlying assumptions that guide ordinary Americans' thinking about public safety. FrameWorks' cultural models interviews suggest that, at the explicit opinion level, Americans articulate strong views about public safety. They are passionate about their communities and about bringing up the next generation to be moral, responsible citizens. The research also shows, however, that the public have less well-developed models about how the criminal justice and legal systems work, evidenced by much less articulate answers. Americans appear to have some ideas about what goes on in prisons, but they have considerable difficulty identifying ways to improve the effectiveness of the penal system beyond simply making prisons harsher places where, "you definitely don't want to be."

At the more implicit level through which cultural models organize thinking, the research shows that these views and opinions are shaped by a set of powerful, predictable and highly shared assumptions. Our interviews suggest that Americans' thinking about the causes of crime is structured by one set of key assumptions, while their thinking about how people who break the law should be judged and punished for their crimes is mediated by another set of foundational assumptions. In short, Americans think that people commit crimes as a result of something inherently wrong within the lawbreaker, such as a lack of moral fiber, or due to ecological factors that influence or force individuals to break the law, such as a lack of money. Americans believe that sentencing should be fair, and that the punishment should fit the crime. This seemingly clear-cut thinking is driven by

contradictory models in which they conceive of criminals as either individuals without morals or the product of poor environments, resulting in a broad scope of prescriptions for punishment.

This section begins by describing the “top-of-mind” associations and explicit opinions about public safety and criminal justice that emerged from the interviews. That is, what informants said immediately and directly about what these topics are “about” and who is responsible for them. It then presents the underlying patterns of reasoning and assumptions that structured more specific responses to aspects of public safety and the criminal justice system. This section concludes with a discussion of the ways in which cultural models that shaped the understanding of the causes of crime inform the solutions people envisioned for public safety issues. This discussion is divided into five sections:

- A. Top-of-Mind Associations with the Term “Public Safety”
- B. The Ideal vs. Real Cultural Model of the Criminal Justice System
- C. Cultural Models of Causality
- D. Cultural Models of Judgment
- E. Models for Solutions

For each of these sections, the discussion of research findings is supplemented with quotes from informants. These selected quotes are typically the most direct articulations of what, from many other informants, were less compacted or distilled statements, but are offered to represent overarching patterns of talking and thinking about the topics at hand.

A. Top-of-Mind Associations with the Term “Public Safety”

1. Defining Public Safety: For our informants, the term “public safety” immediately brought to mind the police and fire operations they experienced and witnessed in their everyday lives. The term “public safety” also triggered associations with the safety of the transportation system, in terms of the efforts made to maintain the integrity and security of its infrastructure and operations.

Public safety. I would say that it means the police department, fire department, public services, hospitals, rescue squad — that kind of thing. Services that the government provides for the benefit of the public, putting out fires, protecting you ... that’s just off the top of my head.

Public safety. I think of our borders, secured borders, and our airports. Police... firemen, do we have enough, do we have enough policemen. When I hear the term “public safety,” I think of safety for the public, basically meaning, police, fire department, medical services, emergency services, and things of that nature.

2. Responsibility for Public Safety: Informants voiced opinions that public safety is simultaneously the responsibility of *government, local communities* and *individual citizens*. They stated that *individuals* are responsible for reporting and responding to crimes they witness and for ensuring overall public safety. *Communities*, meanwhile were seen as responsible for maintaining vigilance and reporting crime through neighborhood watches, assuring clean neighborhood environs and “knowing your neighbors.” Informants also emphasized the government’s responsibility, in which elected officials and the government more generally are in charge of maintaining and addressing public safety through the provision of police, and other resources. Informants alternated between these three notions of responsibility over the course of their interviews.

Interviewer: *Who are the key players in public safety?*

I would say the government, the president, police officers and the public, too. I think the public is a key element, too, because if they see a crime or something and they don't report it, then it's going to continue to happen. I mean it's just something that will keep reoccurring and reoccurring. So if you want a change, then you have to make it happen.

—

Interviewer: *Who are the key actors or players in public safety?*

Well, the key people would have to be your governor, your mayor, the people that make the decisions and then your city council who have the authority to make changes. Then there is the police chief and those kinds of people. And of course — I would like to think that what we have to say plays a factor into what happens, but ultimately it's the people who are higher up who make the decisions. —

They're [citizens] the ones that report things. They're the ones that watch out for things when things happen. If nobody sees something happen, then no one will be notified. So I think citizens play a big role.

—

Interviewer: *What is public safety to you? What comes to mind for you?*

Well, public safety ... police department ... having enough police officers to perform the duties that are needed to make sure that we, the people, that they are safe. Also the second thing that comes to mind is neighborhood watch programs.

Implications of Top-of-Mind Associations with Terminology:

- a. **Initial associations important in perceiving what the discussion “is about.”** The top-of-mind associations and immediate definitional parameters of public safety are notable for their particular, but limited, intersection with the criminal justice system. Specifically, the public understands policing as a central function of public safety, but does not initially make the link between public safety and other parts of the criminal justice system. The lack of immediate connection between public safety and aspects of the criminal justice system other than policing must be considered and explicitly addressed in communication efforts.
- b. **The potential to toggle between senses of responsibility must be acknowledged and carefully navigated.** The fact that the public has three top-of-mind opinions about who is responsible for public safety (government, communities and individuals), and the marked facility that they display in moving between these conceptions, suggests the importance of cuing and setting the government perspective at the front of communications. If the individual sense or even the community notion of responsibility are allowed to move into the perceptual foreground or are more explicitly evoked, it will be difficult to think about the importance of public policy solutions to public safety issues. This finding suggests that values will be important reframing tools in establishing a systems/government sense of responsibility essential in communications about policy solutions to public safety and criminal justice.⁹

B. The Ideal vs. Real Cultural Model of the Criminal Justice System

As already noted, informants generally did not, of their own accord, introduce either sentencing or corrections as relevant topics in addressing the issue of public safety. That said, once directly prompted about the court and correctional systems, informants had opinions to express and could describe these systems in considerable detail. Their explanations belied a fundamentally dichotomous assumption that the way things work in *reality* is expansively different from how they should *ideally* function. This assumption — which FrameWorks terms *ideal versus real* modeling — is widespread in how Americans think about issues like government, budgets and taxes.¹⁰ According to this organizing mental framework, there is a glaring separation between the way that things *should* be and the way that they *are* in real life. The presence and strength of this mental dichotomy suggests that while the public is certain to agree with advocate communications highlighting discrepancies between goals and realities, such strategies are likely to be ineffective in increasing public support for greater accountability, as this ideal/real model discourages engagement in, and consideration of, issues. Put another way, gaps between what is *ideal* and what is *real* are just “the way it is and always will be.” What follows is a brief account of the ways the public explains both the ideal and real functions of all three sections of the criminal justice system: the police, courts and prisons.

1. Police: Our informants' ideal view of the police was as the first line of defense between the public and those who would do them harm in terms of both crime prevention and response.

I think the goal of policing would be to show a presence in hopes of maybe deterring crime or minimizing it. If there is a presence of law enforcement around — it would maybe help the people feel safe, and would maybe catch something happening.

By the presence of police, prevention by means of presence. Just the fact that [the police are] there, I think does probably deter a lot of things from happening.

It's just creating a presence. Because, when there's someone there, chances are someone's not going to do anything. Or they'll give it a second thought before they do anything.

In stark contrast, our informants also presented a reality of a corrupt and prejudiced police system. While some of these observations were made using systemic terms, more often than not they were presented in individualist terms. In other words, the misconduct that characterized the reality of the policing system was largely attributed to rogue officers and was not seen as necessarily representative of policing systems as a whole.

Maybe some officers get a little lazy and, instead of patrolling, they go and they have a coffee or something.

I guess with my image I get harassed a lot. Even being a passenger in the car, I'll be the one that gets all the questions. So, my theory of public safety is a little bit different, but it's hand in hand. I mean, one; we are protected, and another, I got to deal with a little bit of profiling.

Interviewer: Do you think we have a “fair” policing system?

I'm not really sure, 'cause you always hear about, you know, like racial profiling, and things like that. And I'm not sure to what extent that really goes on. For myself, I perceive it as fair, but I'm not sure that other people do. It may not be. But I really don't know enough about it to say for sure.

Despite these examples, the public largely believes that the police fulfill their deterrent and responsive functions, and that most are well-intentioned despite lacking sufficient resources in training and numbers to effectively do their jobs. In short, the real failings of the policing system are due simply to not having enough police on the streets to address extant levels of crime.

Interviewer: *Do you think we have an effective police force in our country?*

I would like to think they're doing the best they can on the budgets they've got. I think that's an uphill battle right now.

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Interviewer: *What do you think are the best strategies for addressing crime?*

I don't know. It seems like I've heard them say more police protection, better enforcement.

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The irony is that I think they want to do the right thing. They do. But again, it just comes to, do we have the funding for that? I believe they want crime to be down, and they want police to be out there, but bottom line, is there enough funding to have that many people on patrol?

2. Courts: In their ideal function, the courts are described by informants as the distributors of justice and punishment based on the values of “upholding the law,” being “innocent until proven guilty,” and having “the punishment fit the crime.”

I mean, we're born in America, we have rights, and that's what we were founded on. And whether a crime is committed or not, “innocent until proven guilty.”

The laws were established to try to maintain order, and to apply it evenly, objectively... So yeah, I'd say [the court system] functions.

You can't treat some crimes one way when they're committed by one group of people and treat the exact same crimes completely different when they're created by another group of people.

But I still think that it should just be treated not on the person, but on the crime itself. In an ideal society, you wouldn't see the culprit, you would just hear the crime.

Informants moved, in a highly patterned way, from focusing on ideal functions in one breath, to discussions of a less-than-ideal reality in the next — moving from values of fairness and justice to the acknowledgement that, in reality, such ideals go unrealized. When speaking from the reality position, informants focused on the corruption and bias of the court system, particularly in regard to the influences of power and money.

If you can get the right attorney, you can pay the right people, you can get the right judge, you're gonna get out of it.

Your public defender and your D.A. attorney [are] not supposed to go out to lunch together. You have the person who's supposed to try to save your ass, and the person that's trying to convict your ass going to lunch together. That's not supposed to happen at all.

If you got money to pay for that lawyer, you get a good lawyer and a better trial.

Somebody with money can pay for a whole legal team and have advisors and somebody totally focused on their case and then there's somebody who just has a public defender who's probably overworked and underpaid.

3. Prisons: Informants spoke to a range of ideal functions for prisons: as locations for punishment, as segregated areas where dangerous elements could be separated from society, as sources of deterrence for would-be criminals, and as sites for rehabilitation.

We have prisons to give people the time to think about their actions. Serving time is to understand one's actions, and exclude themselves from committing other crimes.

A lot of prisons I've heard or read about or seen on television, offer education, offer substance abuse, [and] programs to give prisoners opportunities to improve themselves and make a difference.

In tandem with descriptions of ideal functions, informants shared what they saw as the reality of the penal system. The most frequent description of this reality was the notion that prisons are “too comfortable” and “too easy” and therefore do not meet their ideal functions.

I had a friend who was in prison. He spent 10 years in there, and the stories he tells me are nothing like how it's supposed to happen. These guys are playing dominoes, pinochle, shooting kites, smoking cigarettes, transporting drugs, working out. It's a big-ass sorority house.

There are punishments and prisons that are actually better than the communities these people came from. Hot meals, out of the weather, health care if you need it, TV!

All of the sudden you're in prison and you're supposed to be punished, but look you get TV, you get meals ...

Implications of the Ideal-Versus-Real Model:

- a. **Proximity of ideal and real conceptions in thinking about police poses a potential problem.** While the space between ideal and real conceptions of the police is less expansive in relation to informant thinking on other aspects of the criminal justice system, this proximity remains a cause for concern amongst communicators. As an area in which the real maps fairly well onto the ideal, this feature of the cognitive landscape suggests that Americans may not be cognitively disposed to see policing as an area that warrants significant attention, change or reform — especially when viewed in relation to the other areas of criminal justice where informants expressed views characterized by deep chasms between how the system should and does work. This creates a cognitive effect in which, since policing “is pretty darn good,” action and change in this domain “isn’t really all that necessary.”
- b. **Transitioning from the belief that problems stem from a few bad individuals to the need to reform a whole system will be a challenge.** The existence of highly individualized models of bias within policing suggests an inherent difficulty in communications about police reforms. Put simply, if Americans are predisposed to think about police problems as being restricted to a few “bad apples” in uniform, large-scale and systemic reforms of policing will be difficult to understand and support.
- c. **The ideal/real expanse carries a powerful notion of determinism.** The distance between ideal and real in thinking about the courts and prisons has the danger of being perceived as overwhelmingly expansive. In past FrameWorks research, the existence of such gaps as organizing features of informant discourse has created a powerful sense that there is little citizens can do to change their social worlds, which results in disengagement and depressed agency.¹¹ The existence of such a split in thinking about the operations of the courts and prisons is thus cause for concern and may account for the lack of public engagement and difficulty in

communicating about criminal justice reform. FrameWorks will be examining the effects of the application of the ideal/real organizational cultural model in upcoming phases of this research where we can more systematically analyze how this construct may create or reinforce antipathy and a general lack of agency among the public on the issue of criminal justice.

C. Cultural Models of Causality

Public informants relied upon four dominant cultural models to explain the causes of crime with striking consistency. Moreover, informants typically drew upon all four models to structure their explanations about why crime happens across the span of a single interview.¹²

1. Individualist Cultural Models: Informant discussion revealed a powerful and implicit assumption that crime happens due to *features and attributes of individuals*. Informants employed three specific, or nested, individualist models in thinking about why crime happens.

- a. **The rational-actor model:** When drawing upon this cultural model, informants explained that individuals commit crimes because they have weighed the costs, benefits and risks associated with an act and then made a conscious choice or decision to break the law. This was a dominant cultural model throughout our interviews in both its frequency and its power in crowding out other ways of thinking.

If you know the difference between right and wrong, and it can be proven that someone knows the difference between right and wrong, you need to be accountable for your actions.

I would think the majority of crimes done by an adult are premeditated. They've thought about it first and then said, "Yeah, I'm gonna do it."

Well, I think the difference is the state of mind. Or the intent is probably a better way to put it. A criminal intends to do harm, or intends to inflict damage upon society.

- b. **An essentialist model:** Informants also assumed that crimes are committed because there is something fundamentally wrong with the character of an individual. The prototypes for this model are violent serial killers like Ted Bundy and Charles Manson, and beyond-the-pale white-collar criminals like Bernie Madoff. Descriptions of this type of criminal evidence an essentialist assumption of causation in which, as informants frequently implicated, "some people are just born that way."

But then I also think that there are some people that intrinsically just love to do bad things. They're malicious. It just makes them feel good to steal and hurt people and harm things. They're not right in the head.

Those are the kind of people who just don't care. They can do what they want no matter who it hurts or what damage it causes.

... and there's just some people who are just basically evil.

Mental illness was also described as an explanation for crime, structured by an underlying essentialist cultural model. Informants drew upon a supposition that some individuals are just born with “mental problems” or are innately “sick in the head,” which impairs their judgment and leads to criminal acts. It is important to note that, while these explanations clearly evidenced an essentialist assumption — that mental illness is beyond cure¹³ — discussions of mental illness as a cause of criminality did elicit calls for therapeutic rather than punitive responses. This finding is consistent with FrameWorks’ extensive work on child and family mental illness.¹⁴

Well some people might just be sick in the head. And they don't realize they're doing things wrong.

And sometimes the people that are criminals are mentally ill. There's a lot of mental illness, I think, that probably contributes to a lot of things. And some of them may need mental health services; they may need financial services; they may need social services; they may need intervention.

2. Ecological Models: In contrast to the individualist assumptions described above, informants explained public safety through “ecological models” that attribute patterns of crime to exterior economic, educational, cultural and governmental factors. These explanations were structured by a general premise that the things that surround individuals and shape the contexts in which they live are key in understanding why crime happens.

- a. **Economics:** Informants displayed a strong association between economic hardship and crime. They pointed to high rates of unemployment, and the general circumstances of poverty as contributors to, and explanations for, crime.

As the economy goes down, people struggle. People are unemployed. More people turn to alternative methods for getting money ... robbing your house or whatever. So I would say that the economy is a big part of it [understanding why crime happens].

As far as it goes for crime, the places with the lowest income level are generally the places with the highest amounts of crime.

People who don't work have a higher chance of committing crimes versus people who work, because a person that works can save up enough money to buy that car, or to buy those shoes. A person who doesn't work, is not gonna have that chance to save up their money to buy this stuff, so they figure, "okay, the fast way for me to get this money is to sell drugs on the corner," or "I'm going to steal money out of the register, I'm gonna steal money from the local corner store," or "I'm gonna rob a gas station."

This last quote is an excellent example of how informants employed multiple causational models in understanding crime — in this case, both ecological and rational-actor cultural models.

- b. **Education:** A lack of quality education was frequently cited as a root cause of crime. From an ecological perspective that attributes a chain of cause and effect to a related set of external factors, a lack of education is seen to affect employment opportunities in general, which is understood to explain individuals' motives to commit crime.

They say crime is usually associated with education, low education. People fall into a financial hardship, and with financial hardships, survival means doing illegal things, such as selling drugs and whatnot.

If everybody has an education, they'll have an equal amount of opportunity in the job force, and if they have an equal opportunity in the job force, then there's no need for them to turn to selling drugs or anything like that because they could easily get a job.

- c. **Culture:** Informants also identified broader cultural factors as contributors to crime, including the degree to which crime is already a consistent feature of a community or neighborhood, and the extent to which there is a locally validated model of "success" that can be achieved via criminal activity.¹⁵

If you have more people doing it around you, you're more likely to do it. It's kind of like the role model or whatnot. If it's just something that happens and that's what you know, whereas if you don't hardly ever see it or aren't around it, you're less likely to do it.

And the people that are based here are generally — I don't want to say are the nasty criminals. You can't generalize a whole group of people like that, but it's almost as if our environment has trained us for who we are. So, we have to realize that and I think that sometimes our environments are shaping our moral standards, also.

People who are brought up in the Bronx, they have a bleak outlook on life. Because they don't feel, or they don't see the same types of advantages that other people might have, and as a result, I guess those people and social things might tend to feel that they're due.

3. A Moral Developmental Model: Informant discussion revealed a third general assumption about the causes of crime — that crime happens because of a person's upbringing. While an explicit developmental argument was rarely made, informants showed an implicit awareness that childhood is a formative period. This assertion, importantly, did not borrow from the now-established scientific view of gene-environment interaction and the early and continuous shaping of brain architecture by a child's environment of experiences, but, rather, adopted an understanding of the development and early years in which the child's *moral* development is central and is largely formed, narrowly, by imitation of his or her parents. In discussions where this model was operative, informants focused primarily on upbringing in the home. Their discourse was dominated by a focus on moral development, and how it can go awry if correct parenting is lacking. To summarize the propositional components of this model: If a child does not have good parents who help him or her develop a moral compass, he/she will grow up without the basic tools required to know whether his/her actions are right or wrong, and will therefore be more likely to commit crime.

Some people just don't have any sense of personal accountability for their own actions. I don't know that some people are taught that as they grew up.

Interviewer: *Why do you think that school-age children and youth commit crimes?*

I hate to say it, but I think some of it's their parents — either lack of parenting — or their parents may be alcoholics or drug addicts or never there.

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They're [juvenile offenders] raised by parents that didn't teach them those values that I think everyone should learn like honesty, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness — those kinds of values that I believe a parent needs to teach their child, because I don't think it's something you're born with, it has to be taught to you.

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And I think it's just from your childhood. Like, why do people commit murders and stuff like that? Why do they abuse stuff? It has to do with the way you're raised up. Were you beaten by your dad with a belt? Were you kicked around? Were you left on the streets?

Implications of Cultural Models of Causality:

- a. **Essentialism creates problematic senses of futility.** The essentialist models of causation are problematic from a communications perspective for two reasons. First, the application of such models of causation results in a powerful sense that nothing can be done, depressing agency, discouraging solutions thinking and activating disengagement from the issue. Put simply, if crime is caused by innate features within individuals, there is no easily thinkable public or policy solution to the cause of the problem. Second, when such essentialist notions of causation are activated, ideas of *prevention* become very hard to conceptualize and the only logical way to address public safety issues is through reactive measures, namely to segregate these inherently damaged individuals in order to limit the harm they can do to society.
- b. **Rational-actor model preferences a clear solution — harsher punishment.** The rational-actor model sets up a clear way of thinking about how to improve public safety — make punishment harsher. If crime results from a conscious calculation of weighted costs and benefits, increasing the costs through harsher punishments becomes the logical solution to the problem. Moreover, the application of the rational-actor model in thinking about causation renders a host of alternative solutions — things like more appropriate sentencing or alternatives to incarceration — difficult to rationalize and support. Employing this model, policies that aim to make the severity of punishment more appropriate to the crime are understood to result in more crime by lessening the cost variable in the decision calculus. The ways that the rational-actor model both preferences and occludes thinking about solutions were clearly evident in our interviews and are discussed in greater detail in the solutions section of this report.

- c. **Ecological model of causation highly promising from a communications perspective.** The underlying assumption that ecological and contextual factors are important in understanding why crime happens represents a promising lever for communications to use in crafting messages about the need to reform policies to address public safety and criminal justice issues. FrameWorks researchers expect, and will be testing, that when individuals think about issues of public safety from this perspective, they will be well positioned to see the importance of public policy as a means to address issues of crime and justice. The challenge that lies ahead is to figure out the most effective way of cueing this model while avoiding activating less productive ways of thinking about causation.
- d. **The implicit understanding that early events shape later outcomes holds communications potential.** Invoking the developmental model that childhood upbringing and later outcomes are connected has the potential to engender support for a prevention approach that focuses resources and attention on children prior to transgressions as a means of addressing public safety, criminal justice and rates of incarceration. Moreover, the natural link that informants make between crime and education may have a silver lining in expanding the temporal scope of prevention to include early childhood.
- e. **Development model of causation problematic in being trapped in the “family bubble” and narrowly concerned with morals.** Despite the promise of the development model described above, there are two aspects of this assumption that are concerning from a communications perspective. First, because the model is firmly grounded in the “family bubble,”¹⁶ it limits people’s ability to see the importance of contexts outside the home and the influence of non-family members as important in shaping developmental processes and outcomes. Second, the assumption is narrowly focused on morals as the object of development and, in so doing, a host of other important skills, abilities and processes that may be important to a prevention approach to criminal justice are seen as secondary to the development of a sound moral compass.

D. Models of Judgment

Informants applied some of the same rational-actor and ecological models that they employed in reasoning causation in their judgments of individuals who break the law. Additionally, the idea of “fairness” dominated informants’ thinking about sentencing procedures, but assumed two very different forms.

1. A Cultural Model Employed to Judge Actors: Individuals as Rational Actors: In evaluating the responsibility and culpability of an individual who has committed a crime, informants employed an underlying rational-actor assumption. Discussions showed that informants’ first operation in judging actors was to evaluate and establish their rationality.

When a crime is seen as the product of a rational decision, those who commit these acts are judged wholly responsible and accountable.

If someone told you if you committed a crime this is what's going to happen. Not this "may" happen. It puts a different perspective on it.

They're [criminals] supposed to understand that the crime that you committed is a bad crime, and that you're not supposed to do that no more.

The presence and dominance of rationality as the operative criterion in judging individuals can also be clearly seen in cases in which individuals were seen as less than responsible or culpable for their crimes. In this way, informants reasoned that if a person *lacks* rationality or cannot be expected to display rational decision-making — for example, if they suffer from mental illness, are under the influence of substances, or lack developmental maturity — they should not be held fully accountable for their actions.

If you're a drug addict — oftentimes you use all your money for the drugs, so you're desperate for more. So you seek out stealing.

People with mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia ... you hear those a lot ... shooting cops for no apparent reason, or attacking people violently ... because of their mental condition.

The dominance of the rational-actor model is particularly evident in exchanges about juvenile crime, particularly in informant reasoning about whether young people should be tried as adults. Informants asserted that once a child reaches a capacity for rational discernment, an “age of reason,” and “knows right from wrong,” they are, and should be held, fully accountable for their actions.

Interviewer: *There's also a distinction between adult crime and juvenile crime. What do you think about that distinction?*

I do think sometimes when they are under 18 they can be tried as an adult, but sometimes not. I think it's good because as a young child, you're still learning and growing and experiencing life and it's trial and error and you just don't have the maturity or the life experiences to really have a better understanding compared to someone who's 25 or 30, versus a 15-year-old.

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I do believe that up to a certain age there are certain things that a child doesn't fully understand the impact of. A 5-year-old child does not understand the things they see on TV and that guns do kill people. That cartoon characters get up and walk away. An 11-year-old child does know.

2. A Cultural Model Employed to Judge Criminal Actions: The Violence Threshold:

FrameWorks' cultural models interviews suggested that the line separating non-violent and violent crimes is particularly critical in public thinking. Informants spoke consistently to the belief that crimes involving physical violence warranted more consistent and harsher punishment than those in which there was no violence. In this way, the "violence threshold" was a readily available cognitive framework for orienting people's thinking about how to judge and respond to criminal acts.

Actually harming a person, whether it's endangering their life or any kind of harm to a person, it's much more serious than taking something that's not yours, and it's just respect for life.

For example, if folks rob, that's committing a crime. But if they robbed and they didn't hurt anybody, didn't kill anyone, they should be punished for stealing ... [They should] do time for whatever amount they stole, but if they actually committed a violent crime or they tortured and shot and killed then I think that merits a severe [punishment]. There's actual lives at stake in that.

I think a non-violent criminal might be put in a minimum security place or maybe community service or a fine. A violent offender, to protect society, you need to lock them away so that they're not harming themselves or others.

3. Cultural Models Employed to Judge Fairness in Sentencing: In addition to well-developed models for judging both the actors who commit crimes as well as the types of crimes they commit, the cultural models interviews show that the public employ two competing cultural models in thinking about the issue of fair punishment.

- a. **A consistency model of fairness:** This understanding of fair punishment is premised on the uniform application of the law. When employing this model of fairness, informants explained that everyone should face the same clear and consistent consequences for the same crime — a type of "same crime, same time" understanding of fairness. Informants reasoned that mandatory sentencing makes punishment fair by not allowing certain individuals, or groups of people, to "get off" for a crime they committed, while others who commit the same crime are punished more harshly.

You can't treat some crimes one way when they're committed by one group of people and treat the exact same crimes completely different when they're created by another group of people.

I'm thinking big, bad, scary mandatory sentences might be a good deterrent. It's just like the technicalities in the legal system now, sometimes a case goes through correctly with the system functioning the way it's supposed to, and the bad guy gets off, or a good guy gets a harsher sentence than seems appropriate.

The law needs to be applied equally. He's being treated like a white-collar criminal but meanwhile the little guy in the street is being treated like the felon street hood.

- b. **A contextual model of fairness:** The context-based model of fair punishment is premised on the idea that sentencing should be based on the unique circumstances of a crime, including the defendant's upbringing, criminal history, mental health, intent and evidence of remorse.

There's so many factors that go into every crime that every one needs to be looked at as it is, because I don't think any crime happens identical as the last one.

I would probably be a lot more lenient on somebody who was stealing to feed their family than somebody who's stealing for their own financial benefit.

Interviewer: *What factors are important in deciding what to do when a person has been convicted of a crime?*

Well, the nature of the crime, the history, the background. Not did they grow up in a nice house, or did they have a hard life, but have they done this six times? Have their crimes escalated over time. Do they get out and immediately come right back? Do they have periods of making an effort to straighten out? Are they in compliance with any of the guidelines they're being given?

Implications of Cultural Models of Judgment:

- a. **Rational-actor perspective to judge responsibility of actors presents a challenge to communicators.** The rational-actor model effectively focuses attention inward on the individual and makes the importance of contextual, cultural, social and systemic factors difficult to integrate into considerations of responsibility and culpability. In short, when an individual's rationality becomes the operative criterion in evaluations of responsibility, the factors that shape and constrain the

choices available to the individual fall out of deliberation in favor of the decision process itself.

- b. **Violence threshold model focuses attention on appropriateness of current sentencing practices.** The violence threshold perspective is promising, as it encourages an appreciation for the importance of having a sentencing system that is calibrated to focus attention and resources on the crimes that are most detrimental to public safety. When operative, this model preferences a view in which people should be able to productively consider arguments about the need to address incarceration rates through a re-examination of sentencing procedures.
- c. **Mixed implications of the consistency model of fairness.** On the one hand, this model highlights biases in the application of the law, bringing thinking about opportunities for improvement of the system at structural and policy levels to the forefront. On the other hand, this model is frequently used to justify the merits of mandatory sentencing procedures and to argue against more flexible sentencing procedures that are sensitive to context.
- d. **Assumption that contexts are important in judging actors is more promising.** Whereas the rational-actor model focuses attention inward on an individual's decision-making process, the contextual model of fairness focuses attention outward towards context and a broader consideration of the ecological and systemic factors that shape a person's life, behavior and available decisions.

E. Models for Solutions

Informant thinking about how to improve public safety, reduce levels of crime, and solve problems in the criminal justice system was structured by many of these same cultural models. As such, when informants were asked to talk directly about solutions, they relied implicitly on the structures of meaning they brought to bear in reasoning about causation and culpability.¹⁷

1. Solutions Set Up by the Ecological Model of Causation:

- a. **Address services and resources to prevent crime:** Informants drew upon ecological models of causation to argue that issues of public safety could be addressed through improving schools, employment opportunities and other public services.

Interviewer: So you're in charge of public safety....

I think I'd probably start with the school systems. Give people the knowledge

and tools necessary to understand their role in the larger society, and how they can contribute, to the overall health and safety of the society in general.

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Interviewer: *What do you think are the best strategies for addressing crime?*

Getting more resources whether it's more police, more security officers, more resources to help these people, more homeless shelters or food programs, more places for children to go who are being abused and safe places for them to go.

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If you have more services available for people in terms of, good schools, welfare services, housing. I think that would be a big one, housing ... just everything that people need to feel comfortable in life. The more you have of that, the safer your community would be.

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I think too if there were more resources — such as homeless shelters or programs — programs for those people who need help, need assistance — getting off of drugs, or getting out of a gang — just more assistance in those areas where crime is worse — trying to get help to those people so that it betters that area.

- b. **Increase rehabilitative services for individuals in the system:** Based on a similar pattern of reasoning, informants stated that problems of public safety could be addressed by focusing services on the rehabilitation of individuals already in the criminal justice system. They explained that the provision of such services would address issues of recidivism.

They don't have the proper schooling to get a decent job; they can't get a decent job. You need to make sure that these people are trained and rehabilitated so that when they re-enter society they can become a viable member of society.

They're not helping these prisoners get jobs. They're not helping them put a foundation down for them to have money in their pockets so they don't commit this same crime again. If you just locked up a guy for robbery, and he gets out and he's broke, and he doesn't have any money, what do you think he's gonna do? He's gonna rob to get money. If you're not teaching this guy that he needs to

work to get his money, then he's gonna do some of the same stuff he did before to get money.

Make sure that there's housing available for them. Make sure that they have some kind of a trade and help them get into that job. Work with various companies to help employ these people. Make sure they have a place to live. Make sure that they're going to have medical attention if they need it. Don't turn them loose with no clothing, no food, no place, no family. You can't do that, you can't take someone and lock them away for seven years and then just let them go loose.

2. Solutions Set Up by the Rational-Actor Model of Causation: The rational-actor model was powerful in organizing informant thinking of solutions. When employing this foundational cultural model, informants assumed illegal actions are the result of decisions made by individuals who carefully and consciously weigh costs and benefits. According to this rationale, the logical way to decrease illegal behavior is to increase the cost element of the decision equation. Such thinking generated the following solutions to issues of public safety.

- a. **Increase number of police on the street:** Informants reasoned that one effective way of addressing public safety issues is to increase the quantity and visibility of, as informants said, “police on the streets.” Informants reasoned that such action would lead someone thinking of committing a crime to stop “and think” before “deciding” to commit the crime. In this way, the perception of a higher chance of getting caught would tip the cost/benefit calculus toward refraining from the criminal activity.

If you see a cop while you're driving on the freeway fast, or even just normal, you kind of just slow down a little. You know, by seeing a cop, they control crime, you know? That's why I think having a large population of police officers is important.

[If] I know that there's gonna be a cop doing a patrol or whatever, that's gonna be in the back of my head, so that's gonna be a little fear tactic within myself that I'm giving myself fear. I'm not gonna screw up right now because I just saw a cop, or I'm not gonna do this because the cops are just right around the corner.

- b. **Implement neighborhood watch programs:** Informants frequently called for implementing neighborhood watch programs to address public safety. Such views also appeared to be supported by the rational-actor model in the same way as increasing police presence — the more that would-be criminals perceive their actions as observed by others, the higher the cost of committing a crime and the less likely the rational decision-maker would be to engage in illegal activities.

Interviewer: *What could be done to make our community safe?*

I think that they should make people more aware of what's going on and maybe start neighborhood watches, a lot of neighborhood watches.

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The neighborhood watch came about in our area and if [we] see something that looks suspicious we'll report it. That changed the morale of the neighborhood, but also we saw improvement of the amount of burglaries and vandalism that's going on, and graffiti and all that stuff until this day, the block is great.

- c. **Punish crimes more harshly:** Employing a similar rationale, informants explained that if the punishments for crime were made harsher, it would keep potential criminals from breaking the law and prevent ex-convicts from reoffending by altering the cost component of the decision calculus.

[Discussing way to improve public safety] I keep going back to the "cutting your hand off" thing. If you get caught stealing for the second time, you're gonna lose a hand. I would hear that. It would scare the crap out of me.

And then I think about that one boy, he was in Viet Nam or Thailand, he was doing some kind of vandalism and he got caned. And I guarantee you, he's not going to do whatever he did again! 'Cause caning is not fun.

Along similar lines, the rational-actor model was operative when informants reasoned that making prisons less "cushy" would be a way to solve public safety problems.

Criminals need to know that there is a place that's like hell ... So criminals need to know that there is a place — an institution and place that will both serve to kind of correct them, but also to punish them for what they've committed so that there is a physical consequence.

Interviewer: *In terms of preventing crime, are there specific strategies that should be directed at youth?*

You know, maybe if they knew what would happen um — even just going and seeing a jail. "Oh, I don't want to be here. This is a scary place to be." Well, this is what's going to happen if you do this.

3. Solutions Set Up by the Violence Threshold Model: Informants explained that one way to address problems in the criminal justice system is to align punishment along the violence threshold by focusing more attention and resources on violent criminals. Informants reasoned that violent offenders should be locked away, whereas those convicted of non-violent crimes should occupy less of the system's focus and resources, or perhaps even be dealt with through alternatives to incarceration.

***Interviewer:** What are the most effective ways to respond to non-violent crimes?*

I would say fines or community service — something that would help them give back to the community — rather than taking up space in jail or taking up police officers' time which could be valuable if it were spent somewhere else.

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I think it [solutions to criminal justice and public safety problems] depends on the crime. I think if it's like marijuana or maybe crack, instead of putting them in prison for a while, you put them in rehab right away. And then they have to meet their parole officer, maybe once a week. And then they would have drug tests.

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***Interviewer:** What comes to mind when you hear "criminal justice system"?*

When I hear "criminal justice system," I think of those people getting put in jail for possessing weed or whatnot, which is taking up room in the jail system for a very minor little thing. You've got more people who are murderers and violent out there who really need to be focused on. Those are bigger issues that need to be focused on, and you need more room for that as opposed to the smaller, so-called issues.

4. Solutions Set Up by the Developmental Model of Causation: Developmental thinking structured solutions to assist or rehabilitate those caught in the system with mental illness or problems with drugs. Informants discussed adding more programs to help these people become productive members of society. It is important to note, however, that views of solutions that were structured by this developmental thinking (therapy and rehabilitation) were squarely focused on *adult* offenders and did not extend to youth-based, prevention-focused solutions. Put another way, when thinking from the implicit developmental perspective, informants were apt to discuss therapy and treatment that could remediate

the effects of negative experiences incurred in childhood, but they did not describe actions that actually focused on preventing such negative experiences in the first place.

There are folks that really are not right in the head, that they have mental issues. I think this is an area that really doesn't get closely looked at. So I think investing more money in that area might help because some folks really need hospitals, they need medication and they don't get it, they don't have it, they don't get evaluated. They're just out there wandering and have problems. And maybe they get thrown in jail for a day or two and then get thrown back out there in the streets and they need more than that, you know.

There are alternatives [for offenders with mental illnesses]. There's psychiatric places where they go and get treatment. Instead of going to prison, they go and get treatment, and it seems like that's become more and more common where they're sending people to ... facilities for treatment instead of for prison.

Implications of Reasoning About Solutions:

- a. **Ecological models may prove useful for communications about solutions:** Communications that activate ecological models are highly promising. Solutions framed as ecological have the potential to set up logical connections between increased public safety and improved education, employment and other social services, and should divert attention away from less productive models discussed above.
- b. **Solutions based on rational-actor thinking render all but one change to the criminal justice system difficult to support:** Solutions messages that invoke rational-actor models are likely to engender support for a very narrow and regressive set of policy solutions. Thinking solutions through this highly operative model leads to the conclusion that the only thing wrong with the system is that it is not punishing criminals hard enough to dissuade them from committing crimes. Following this logic, changes to the system that do not directly affect the cost-reward equation (in other words, anything beyond putting more police on the streets, or making punishment harsher) will be seen as an ineffective waste of resources.
- c. **Developmental model offers mixed communications implications:** While thinking about solutions through the developmental model opens up the prospect for promoting alternatives to incarceration and rehabilitative services, it simultaneously has the potential to trigger associations with moral failure and reinforce thinking that locates primary responsibility with the individual.

Overlaps, Gaps, Holds And Traps In Understanding

The goals of this analysis are to: 1) document the way experts talk about and explain the issue of public safety; 2) establish the way that the American public understands this and related issues; and 3) compare and “map” these explanations and understandings to reveal the overlaps and gaps between these two groups. We now turn to this third task.

I. Overlaps in Understanding

Comparative analysis suggests that there are key areas of overlap between expert and public understandings of the issues germane to public safety. Some of these overlaps represent features of the cognitive landscape that communications can strategically leverage, activate and build upon to improve the accessibility of expert information in the public’s understanding of issues of public safety and criminal justice and its recommendations for effective reform.

1. Ecological Factors: Both experts and the public cite ecological factors, including access to education, employment and other social services, as contributing to public safety problems.

2. Sociological Thinking: Both groups are quick to recognize the importance of deeper, more sociological issues as determinants of public safety. The experts in our research emphasized racial biases as a primary factor behind unequal treatment within the criminal justice system. The public, however, seemed to avoid race and to focus on class in explaining the biases that they recognized in the criminal justice system.¹⁸

3. Government as Cause and Solution: The experts and the public view the government as both the cause of, and solution to, issues of public safety. On one hand, both the experts and public informants described the government as opaque and guilty of squandering public resources. On the other hand, both groups clearly feel that the government is responsible for addressing these issues.

4. Unfair Systems: Although they differed in their views of “fairness,” (see Gaps section, below) both experts and public informants agreed that the practices of the criminal justice system are unfair.

5. Unbalanced Sentencing: Experts and informants alike noted that prisons are overcrowded with white-collar criminals and drug-offenders and that such crimes could be effectively addressed through alternatives to incarceration. In this way, both experts and the public see current sentencing priorities as off kilter.

II. Gaps in Understanding

In addition to the largely productive overlaps discussed above, FrameWorks' map-the-gaps comparative analysis revealed a set of gaps between the ways that experts and Americans think about public safety issues. Below, we take each one of the gaps and discuss its communications implications with greater specificity.

1. Systems vs. Agents: While both the experts and the public recognize a lack of accountability in the criminal justice system, experts believe that problems in the system result from poor structuring (for example, police quotas, overwhelming case loads and mandatory sentencing). The public, on the other hand, tends to see failures on the part of the criminal justice system as the work of isolated individuals (for example, a lazy cop, a corrupt prosecutor or a crooked warden). This is a critical gap, as the public's focus on individuals as the source of problems will make it difficult for advocates to communicate the need for more structural systemic reform.

2. Lack of Accountability vs. Working Systems: Experts identified an overall lack of accountability in the criminal justice system, whereas public informants indicated a fair amount of trust and faith in the fact that at least the system of policing is doing its job. This gap in understanding presents a major hurdle for communications, as it represents an essential difference in the perception that a problem exists in the first place. In short, if the public sees the most visible aspect of the system as doing its job, it will be difficult to communicate about the less visible parts of the system being broken and in need of repair.

3. Quality vs. Quantity: Experts focused on the quality of criminal justice interventions, and ways to improve public safety through smarter policy. They stressed that there are different means by which to address public safety, but that these approaches vary considerably in their effectiveness. To the contrary, the public's understanding of solutions is structured by cultural models that create a logical sense that "more is better." Communications must therefore work to address and clarify the specific factors that characterize high-quality, effective solutions to criminal justice issues.

III. Holes in Public Thinking

In addition to the gaps described above, the comparative analysis revealed several areas which we refer to as cognitive holes. These are areas on which experts placed significant emphasis but where public informants had limited understandings and palpable difficulty in discussing. Therefore, rather than “gaps,” which denotes a space between two extant understandings, these features are more effectively described as “holes.”

1. The Problem of Juvenile Justice vs. What Problem? Experts saw juvenile justice as a major concern and an agenda priority. Furthermore, they emphasized the need to incorporate a developmental perspective as a key component in addressing this branch of the criminal justice system. To the contrary, informants did not recognize this as a major issue, nor did they view this aspect of the system as either important or broken. To the extent that they were able to talk about issues of juvenile justice (an issue on which they were quite inarticulate relative to other areas of the interview), informants saw this as the responsibility of parents, not society at large. Filling this fundamental hole will be a major task for upcoming prescriptive communications research.

2. Immigrants and Immigration as a Central Concern vs. What Immigrants? Experts saw the criminalization of immigrants as a structural failure of the criminal justice system. The fact that immigration issues are being dealt with in the criminal justice system, rather than through other domains regulated by policy, is largely invisible to the public. FrameWorks’ interviews with public informants were characterized by an almost total lack of discussion about immigrants and immigration, suggesting that members of the public do not implicitly see immigration as a criminal justice issue. In order to communicate this aspect of the expert story, communications will have to develop messages that show how immigration issues inappropriately fall to the current criminal justice system, and that addressing such issues in this institutional context is ineffective.

3. Trends as the Result of Bad Policy vs. an Effective Criminal Justice System: While experts attribute the dramatic rise in prison populations over the past 30 years to the war on drugs, mandatory sentencing, and repeated incarceration of vulnerable members of society for minor infractions, the public has considerable difficulty in generating even fuzzy explanations for these trends. When prompted, our informants hesitantly explained that the rise in prison populations is due to better policing, a more effective criminal justice system, or simply an overall increase in the nation’s population. This suggests a very thin public understanding of the connections between systems and policies. Communications must work to fill this hole by establishing better understandings of the relationship between policy and the institutional structures that operate the criminal justice system in order to gain widespread public support for reform.

IV. Communications Traps

On the surface, ideas that the public feels strongly about, such as justice and fairness, may appear to be an effective communications strategy. However, adopting such an approach frequently leads to unforeseen and unproductive consequences by inadvertently reinforcing dominant patterns of understanding in ways that inhibit more productive ways of thinking. The following section lists those aspects of thinking that trigger models that may be “easy to think,” but which trap public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments.

1. The Fairness Trap: Because of the dueling ways that fairness is conceptualized, invoking this concept without careful attention to framing can lead to interpretations that actually inhibit the public’s ability to see the importance of responsive systems of sentencing.

Communications Example: “The courts need to make sentencing more fair for more people.”

The Public Thinks: “Mandatory sentencing!”

2. Rational-Actor Trap: Invoking the rational-actor model leads the public towards punitive solutions that do not consider ecological or systemic factors that shape and constrain individual choice and decision-making.

Communications Example: “Individuals need to be supported in making better decisions.”

The Public Thinks: “Yes, another way of getting people to make better decisions is in making punishments more severe so that they never decide crime is worth the cost.”

3. Policing Trap: Policy advocates might find it attractive to talk about policies related to policing, but FrameWorks’ research suggests that when they do, especially at the top of communications, policing becomes the only part of the criminal justice system that people can see. By invoking police systems-based solutions, the public will be less likely to consider solutions that treat the more abstract elements of the criminal justice system.

Communications Example: “To decrease incarceration rates, we need to reform policing systems.”

The Public Thinks: “Great idea! And with fewer criminals to deal with our problems are solved.”

4. Determinism Trap: Employing rhetoric that is heavily centered on the problems and brokenness of the criminal justice system is likely to invoke the ideal/real model, and in so doing create a powerful sense of determinism that is unproductive in thinking about policy solutions to public safety issues.

Communications Example: “The current system is broken and needs to be totally overhauled.”

The Public Thinks: “The system is so flawed and far away from what it is supposed to do that it’s beyond remedy.”

5. Developmental Trap: The fact that the public recognizes a developmental component in explaining crime might encourage communicators to include developmental messages in communications. However, FrameWorks’ research shows that the public understands development in a very particular way — as acquiring morals and lying narrowly within the family domain. Communications must pay particularly careful attention to how they message about development if they are to create the public, resource-based understandings of a developmental process.

Communications Example: “Addressing child development is a key component in improving public safety.”

The Public Thinks: “Families need to work much harder on developing proper morals in their kids.”

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary goal of this report has been to define how dominant cultural models shape public thinking on public safety and criminal justice, and to locate specific overlaps and gaps between expert and public understandings about these issues. Strategic communications must address both of these challenges — redirecting public thinking away from conceptual traps posed by unproductive patterns of thinking and filling in gaps and holes where public understanding is either dissonant from that of experts or public understanding is decidedly thin and underdeveloped. Subsequent phases of FrameWorks' prescriptive framing research, including the design of frame elements including simplifying models and values, will explore precisely how experts and advocates can most successfully address the communication challenges presented here.

While this research represents the first phase of a much larger investigation, a list of preliminary recommendations have become apparent.

1. Recognize and avoid the traps in public thinking: To avoid doing unintentional harm and further entrenching perceptual stumbling blocks, communicators should avail themselves to be particularly aware of the traps discussed above. Perhaps our most important and applicable recommendation is that communications should actively avoid falling into the traps posed by particularly “resonant,” but unproductive, dominant models (fairness, rational actor, policing, determinism, development). The activation of the models that bait these traps will derail communications and lead in perceptual directions that impede the communication of the expert story.

2. Employ the promising features of public understanding: The research presented in this report documents the presence of several cultural models that structure public thinking in ways that are consistent with expert views and intended messages. These include the ecological model, the understanding of fairness as involving contextual consideration, and the violence threshold cultural model. Future research will look specifically at the most effective ways of activating these models and the actual consequences of such activation in the way that members of the public interpret information. Prior to the availability of this more targeted prescriptive work, however, we recommend that communicators be deliberate in activating these patterns of thinking in messaging.

3. Define the system and explain the problems as systemic: Both the narrowness of top-of-mind associations with public safety and criminal justice, and the difficulty in connecting systems to outcomes, point to the need for communications to establish clear definitions of what the criminal justice system *is*, how it impacts public safety, and the need for reform at a systems, rather than individual, level. In this way, communications need to build concrete causal explanations of the ways that systems-level factors connect to, and explain, outcomes.

4. Address importance of programmatic quality through the use of Effectiveness

Factors simplifying model: To understand the types of reforms that experts advocate, the public's confusion between quality and quantity in thinking about intervention must be addressed. Fortunately, this misunderstanding is not a new communications challenge and is one that FrameWorks has developed communications tools to address. Specifically, this conflation between quality and quantity can be addressed through the use of the Effectiveness Factors simplifying model that FrameWorks has developed in its work on early child development.¹⁹

5. Establish consequences of inaction — but avoid crisis: Much of the challenge related to messaging on public safety and criminal justice lies in the problems that experts see but that the public does not. This is evident both in the way that the public thinks about the criminal justice system (that it is primarily police, and that the policing system is doing its job), as well as the holes in public thinking described above. The lack of public perception that a problem exists to be addressed suggests that a primary function of communications is to simply introduce and clarify these problems and their consequences. However, such explanations should avoid crisis messages, which will play into ideal-versus-real distinctions and discourage engagement. Instead, such messages should maintain a pragmatic tone — that problems exist that require action, but that solutions are available and implementable.

6. Focus on filling holes with descriptive, explanatory communications: The existence of two cognitive holes — on issues of juvenile justice and immigration — suggest the need for communications to focus on the potential of messages to explain poorly understood phenomena — that the public *can* understand if given the translational materials. We therefore recommend that considerable attention be paid in criminal justice communications to laying out and explaining the challenges facing the juvenile justice system, and misuse of the criminal justice system as a quick fix to deeper immigration issues — but, again, we warn that such communications should avoid crisis messages and tone.

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH METHODS

Cultural models interviews require gathering what one researcher has referred to as a “big scoop of language.”²⁰ Thus, a sufficiently large amount of talk, taken from each informant, allows us to capture the broad sets of assumptions that informants use to make sense of information. These sets of common assumptions and understandings are referred to as “cultural models.” Recruiting a wide range of people allows us to ensure that the cultural models we identify represent shared, or “cultural,” patterns of thinking about a given topic.

As the goal of these interviews was to examine the cultural models Americans use to make sense of and understand these issues, a key to this methodology was giving informants the freedom to follow topics in the directions they deemed relevant and not in directions the interviewer believed most germane. Therefore, the interviewers approached each interview with a set of general areas and topics to be covered but left the order in which these topics were covered largely to the informant. In this way, researchers were able to follow the informant’s train of thought, rather than interrupting to follow a set and pre-established course of questions.

Informants were first asked to respond to a general issue (“What do you think about X?”) and were then asked follow-up questions — or “probes” — designed to elicit explanation of their responses (“You said X, why do you think X is this way?” or “You said X, tell me a little bit more about what you meant when you said X,” or “You were just talking about X, but before you were talking about Y, do you think X is connected to Y? How?”). This pattern of probing leads to long conversations that stray (as is the intention) from the original question. The purpose is to see where and what connections the informant draws from the original topic. Informants were then asked about various valences or instantiations of the issue and were probed for explanations of these differences (“You said that X is different than Y in this way, why do you think this is?”). In this way, the pattern of questioning began very generally and moved gradually to differentiations and more specific topics.

Informants were first asked a series of open-ended questions that provided them the opportunity to speak to whatever associations came to mind — about the meaning of the terms “public safety,” “crime” and “criminal justice.” The interviewer followed these general, open-ended questions with probes about any relationship between these terms. Informants were also asked to expand upon their understanding of “the criminal justice system” and were asked a series of questions about specific areas of this system. While questions of definition, organization and responsibility were distributed throughout each interview, a final series of questions addressed the topic of responsibility directly and offered each informant the chance to revisit or expand upon any of the topics already discussed.

APPENDIX B: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The following are well-accepted characteristics of cognition and features of cultural models that figure prominently into the results presented in this report and in FrameWorks' research more generally.

1. Top-down nature of cognition

Individuals rely on a relatively small set of broad, general cultural models to organize and make sense of information about an incredibly wide range of specific issues and information. Put another way, members of a cultural group share a set of common general models that form the lens through which they think and make sense of information pertaining to many different issues. This feature of cognition explains why FrameWorks' research has revealed many of the same cultural models being used to think about seemingly unconnected and unrelated issues — from education to health to child development. For example, FrameWorks' research has found that people use the “mentalist” model to think about child development and food and fitness — seemingly unrelated issue areas. For this reason, we say that cognition is a “top-down” phenomenon. Specific information gets fitted into general categories that people share and carry around with them in their heads.

2. Cultural models come in many flavors but the basic ingredients are the same

At FrameWorks, we often get asked about the extent to which the cultural models that we identify in our research, and that we use as the basis of our general approach to social messaging, apply to ALL cultures. That is, people want to know how inclusive our cultural models are and to what extent we see/look for/find differences across race, class or other cultural categories. Because our aim is to create messaging for mass media communications, we seek out messages that resonate with the public more generally and, as such, seek to identify cultural models that are most broadly shared across society. We ensure the models are sufficiently broad by recruiting diverse groups of informants in our research who help us to confirm that the models we identify operate broadly across a wide range of groups. Recruiting diverse samples in our cultural models interviews often confuses people who then think we are interested in uncovering the nuanced ways in which the models take shape and get communicated across those groups, or that we are interested in identifying different models that different groups use. To the contrary, our aim is to locate the models at the broadest possible levels (i.e., those most commonly shared across all cultural groups) and to develop reframes and simplifying models that advance those models that catalyze systems- level thinking. The latter does not negate the fact that members of different cultural groups may respond more or less enthusiastically to the reframes, and this is one of the reasons why we subject the reframes that we recommend to our clients to rigorous experimental testing using randomized controls that more fully evaluate their mass appeal.

3. The “nestedness” of cultural models

Within the broad foundational models that people use in “thinking” about a wide variety of issues lay models that, while still general, broad and shared, are relatively more issue-specific. We refer to these more issue-specific models as “nested.” For example, in our past research on executive function, when informants thought about basic skills, they employed a model for understanding where these skills come from, but research revealed that this more specific model was nested into the more general mentalist cultural model that informants implicitly applied in thinking this issue. Nested models often compete in guiding or shaping the way we think about issues. Information may have very different effects if it is “thought” through one or another nested model. Therefore, knowing about which models are nested into which broader models helps us in reframing an issue.

About The FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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- ¹ A more detailed account of this expert story and of the methods through which it was produced can be found in the following report: Gilliam, F. (2011). *How public safety experts present their story*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
 - ² However, we must note that, while both groups recognize the existence of a problem-ridden system, the expectations of, and views toward, such problems differ substantially between these groups — with experts finding systems problems “outrageous and unacceptable,” and members of the public adopting a more “par for the course” perspective on such problems. For more on the public’s views of public systems and government, see FrameWorks’ research on government: Bales, S. N. (2006). *How to talk about government*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
 - ³ It is important to note that the reverse may not be true. In other words, when thinking about immigration, Americans may very well connect this issue with the domains of public safety and criminal justice issue. What we claim here is that issues of immigration are not top-of-mind or immediately connected to discussions of criminal justice and public safety.
 - ⁴ Bales, S. N. (2006). *How to talk about government*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
 - ⁵ Gilliam, F. (2011). *Public safety: Framing a reform agenda*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
 - ⁶ The occupational screening measure rests on a fundamental relationship between personal experience and cultural models that Shore describes, “cultural models are brought to life in relation to personal experiences. My concept will be a pastiche of personal and cultural models. In many cases my personal models of marriage are likely to be more salient to me than any conventional representations. This is especially true when one understands a concept through long and deep experience.” Shore, B. (1998) *What culture means, how culture means*, p. 38. Worcester, MA: Clarke University Press.
 - ⁷ Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
 - ⁸ For description of grounded theory analysis, see: Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing, and Strauss, A.L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. For description of social discourse analysis, see Strauss, C. (2005). Analyzing discourse for cultural complexity. In Quinn, N. (Ed.). *Finding culture in talk*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, and Strauss, C. *Who belongs here and what do we all deserve? Americans’ discourses about immigration and social welfare*. Unpublished manuscript. For description of cultural models analysis, see Quinn, N. (1987). Convergent evidence of a cultural model of American marriage. In Holland, D., & Quinn, N. (Eds.). *Cultural models in language and thought*, pp. 173-194. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

- ⁹ Values are the ideals that provide the organizing principles on the basis of which people reach decisions. They can be employed to trigger cultural models; see Rokeach, M. (1973). *The nature of human values*. New York, NY: The Free Press. FrameWorks has spent 10 years studying the valence of a wide range of social problems and has conducted frame effects experiments on a diverse group of values. As a result, we have a track record of uncovering cognitive mistakes common in public thinking about social issues, and identifying values that mitigate those errors. We make use of this experience in new projects by investigating whether particular values—that we found to be successful at shifting public thinking on other social issues—may be helpful in expanding thinking in the current research. In addition to testing values that prior research on related issues suggests might be relevant, our early qualitative research in the current project also uncovered potential values frames that may move public thinking in a positive direction. For an example of the utility of values modeling and testing, see the FrameWorks research report, Simon, A. (2010) *An ounce of prevention: Experimental research in Strategic Frame Analysis™ to identify effective issue frames for public budgeting and taxation systems*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- ¹⁰ Kendall-Taylor, N. & Bales, S. (2009). *Like Mars to Venus: The separate and sketchy worlds of budgets and taxes*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- ¹¹ In this way, the ideal-versus-real assumption is nested within the much broader pattern of deterministic thinking — a fundamental American cultural model. The determinism model hinges on a general assumption about the lack of personal agency in the face of incredible complexity and inevitable conclusions. In short, determinism is the pervasive cultural assumption that the world works in mysterious ways that are complex, invisible, and ultimately beyond the scope and power of individuals to understand, control or shape.
- ¹² It is critical to keep in mind that the existence of multiple, seemingly contradictory, models that informants applied in understanding the causes of crime is by no means exceptional — conflicting and contradictory assumptions applied in understanding the same issue are relatively normal in the “swamps” of cultural models. These apparent contradictions demonstrate a basic feature of how we make sense of information; we apply existing categories and mental structures to process and make sense of incoming information (see appendices for more detailed discussion of features of cultural models and cognition). Because sets of assumptions and understandings come prepackaged and are not generated anew to best-fit new information, two different mental models may become active in thinking about and making sense of the same issue. These assumptions, because they are used to think about many other topics and issues, are not necessarily consonant and appear as illogical self-contradictions during data analysis. In short, it was not surprising to find contradictory models in the way that informants understood causation in this case. Rather, it provides evidence to the theory of cultural models.
- ¹³ Kendall-Taylor, N. (2009). *Conflicting models of mind in mind: Mapping the gaps between the expert and the public understandings of child mental health as part of Strategic Frame Analysis™*. Washington, DC: Frameworks Institute.
- ¹⁴ See: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/cmh.html> for access to the full set of research reports on child mental health.

- ¹⁵ This set of coordinated factors and beliefs is studied in the social sciences under the term “culture of poverty” and is widely cited in social science and policy circles. The “culture of poverty” was first theorized by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who attempted to explain why the disenfranchised poor seem to live in ways alternative to the life narratives of the middle and upper classes, and that reproduce poverty until it is inescapable. This highly controversial theory provides an “easy explanation” of why poor people don’t “help themselves” and has become a political scapegoat for policy-makers against providing resources for the poor. This concept leaped into the forefront of popular culture after the release of a 1965 report, written by then assistant labor secretary Patrick Moynahan. According to a *New York Times* article (October 17, 2010), his depiction of the urban black family as “caught in an inescapable ‘tangle of pathology’ of unmarried mothers and welfare dependency was seen as attributing self-perpetuating moral deficiencies to black people, blaming them for their own misfortune.”
- ¹⁶ The family bubble cultural model refers to the assumption that development happens squarely and narrowly within the confines of the home. The application of this model has been found to obscure the considerations of extra-familial influences on the process of child development. See the following report for more information: FrameWorks Institute, “Framing Early Child Development Message Brief.” (2009). Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- ¹⁷ Links between cultural models of causation and perceptions of solution appropriateness and effectiveness have been studied extensively in anthropology. For more on the connection between cultural models of causation and perceptions of treatment see the following: Kleinman, A. (1980). *Patients and healers in the context of culture: An exploration of the borderland between anthropology, medicine, and psychiatry*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Mathews, H. & Hill, C.E. (1990). Applying cognitive decision theory to the study of regional patterns of illness treatment choice. *American Anthropologist* 92(1), 155-169. Quinn, N. (1978). Do Mfantse fish sellers estimate probabilities in their heads. *American Ethnologist* 5(2), 206-226. Wilce, J.M. (2003). *Social and cultural lives of immune systems*. New York, NY: Routledge. Kendall-Taylor, N. (2009). Treatment seeking for a chronic disorder: How families in Coastal Kenya make epilepsy treatment decisions. *Human Organization* 68. The associations between these two domains in the research described here is consistent with the findings of this literature more generally — demonstrating that the ways people think about the causes of events and conditions influence how they perceive solutions.
- ¹⁸ Based on a careful examination of the transcripts, as well as pulling from previous FrameWorks research on how Americans think about race, we suspect that the class focus of our public informants is likely explained as a mix of not wanting to talk about race (for white informants, at least) and a reflection of a very real frustration with economic disparity in this country. In other words, we surmise that, in focusing on class and socio-economic issues and disparities, informants are pointing to a real bias in the system but are sidestepping another real and even more pernicious pattern in the process. From a cognitive perspective, identifying the first problem (class) allows the brain to settle in on a problem and feel good about articulating it, which allows for whatever inchoate awareness there is of the “other” problem (race) to be pushed back and away from awareness. In short, the foregrounding of the one issue allows for the backgrounding of the harder-to-think other.
- ¹⁹ FrameWorks Institute (2009). *Framing early child development Message Brief*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- ²⁰ Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 16.

