New Narratives:

Changing the Frame on Crime and Justice

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Introduction

My starting point is this: we need prisons. Some people, including, of course, rapists, murderers, child abusers, gang leaders, belong in prisons. For me, punishment – that deprivation of liberty – is not a dirty word. I never want us to forget that it is the victims of crime who should always be our principal priority. And I am not unrealistic or starry-eyed about what prisons can achieve. Not everyone shows remorse, and not everyone seeks redemption. But I also strongly believe that we must offer chances to change, that for those trying hard to turn themselves around, we should offer hope, that in a compassionate country, we should help those who've made mistakes to find their way back onto the right path.

– Former Prime Minister David Cameron, *Speech to Policy Exchange, 8 February 2016*

No punishment has ever possessed enough power of deterrence to prevent the commission of crimes. On the contrary, whatever the punishment, once a specific crime has appeared the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been.

– Political Theorist Hannah Arendt, *'Eichmann in Jerusalem', The New Yorker, 1963*

Criminal justice experts and advocates in the United Kingdom are working to advance a set of key policy reforms. These reforms are based on three interrelated critiques of the current system: (1) there is an over-reliance on punishment, (2) there is insufficient commitment to rehabilitation and (3) there is a more general failure of services outside the criminal justice system – including those related to mental health, housing, addiction and poverty reduction – that provide people with the support they need to turn their lives around. Experts and advocates agree they must address these systemic failures, but they have yet to come together around a shared communications strategy to build public support for reform.

One of the main obstacles to reform is insufficient political will to enact necessary and effective changes. The public's lack of support and demand for new solutions reflects deeply rooted cultural attitudes and beliefs about crime, human behaviour, society and the criminal justice system. For example, people tend to think about individuals as 'rational actors' who engage in a kind of cost–benefit analysis when making decisions about how to behave and whether to commit a crime. The greater the cost of an action, the thinking goes, the less likely a person will engage in criminal activity. Increasing the severity and certainty of punishment is seen as the most effective way to increase the *cost* side of the equation, which will, in turn, deter people from committing crime. This type of thinking leads to narrow-minded views about how to reduce crime and improve the criminal justice system – views that evidence shows are ineffective and even counterproductive in improving public safety.

The idea that the threat and imposition of severe punishment is a powerful deterrent has deep historical roots. More than a century ago, sociologist Émile Durkheim wrote about the central role that punishment plays in the maintenance of social solidarity. He described punishment as a key way to restore the moral boundaries breached during acts of deviance.[1] Today's political leaders and policymakers seem to channel the famous French philosopher in their arguments for an increasingly severe and punitive criminal justice system. How can criminal justice reformers effectively argue for different solutions to reducing crime when they are up against widely shared views about the efficacy of harsh punishment? How can they clearly communicate the fact that the current punitive approach is failing to prevent crime, reduce recidivism or improve communities and society?

In the quote at the beginning of this report, former Prime Minister David Cameron acknowledges that punishment is important in some cases and then pivots to a discussion about why the criminal justice system must offer opportunities for rehabilitation. Another approach is to disavow the deterrent power of punishment and explain its ineffectiveness as a policy strategy, as the late political theorist Hannah Arendt does in her famed 1963 essay in *The New Yorker*.[2] These two strategies are, however, merely hypotheses. Whether they are in fact effective is an empirical question. This MessageMemo answers this question with *data*. It provides an evidence-based communications strategy that can deepen public understanding of and build support for criminal justice reform in England and Wales.

In this report, we summarise an extensive body of research and lay out a new framing strategy for those working to reform the criminal justice system. The work described here was conducted in partnership with Transform Justice, the Standing Committee for Youth Justice, Clinks and the Criminal Justice Alliance, and was supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Porticus UK. It demonstrates that, in order to effectively engage the public and ignite a more productive conversation about criminal justice reform, communicators need to adopt a narrative strategy that dislodges the role that punishment plays in public thinking about criminal justice. Specifically, communicators need to interrupt the dominant belief that severe punishment effectively reduces crime and increases public safety and replace it with new and better ways of thinking. A fuller and richer discussion about alternatives to current practices is simply not possible until reformers are able to dislodge punishment-as-solution thinking.

In this new narrative, reformers must consistently answer the following questions with empirically based frames: *Why do crime and justice issues matter to society? How does the system work and what's wrong with it? What needs to be done to address this issue?* The new narrative must also explain why harsh punishment is an ineffective way to address crime and increase public safety.
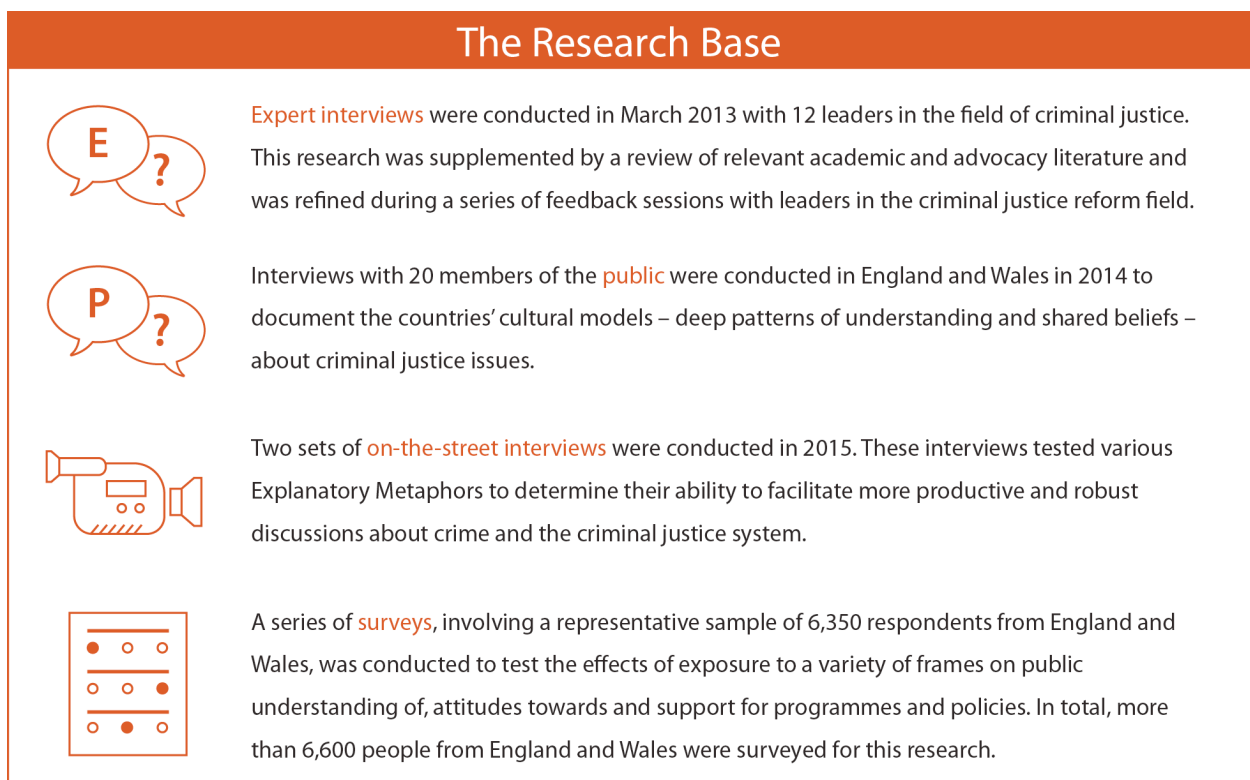
The new narrative described in this report breaks down current public thinking about punishment – and prison in particular – and then clearly explains concrete alternatives that evidence shows *will* help prevent crime and improve social outcomes. Above all else, our research demonstrates the peril of telling incomplete stories. Thin descriptions of alternatives to prison and abstruse arguments about cost savings are simply not working and may be undermining the movement.

The strategy outlined here is based on multi-method research into the deep, cultural understandings of crime and justice issues in England and Wales. FrameWorks used these findings to develop and test a new narrative that includes frame elements such as Values, Explanatory Metaphors[3] and Solutions.

The new narrative recommended here begins by activating core Values that establish why society must address issues related to crime and the criminal justice system. It then goes on to explain the core concepts of the criminal justice system with Explanatory Metaphors. And it concludes with a discussion of Solutions – the kinds of interventions and policies that enhance public safety. We first explain the overall strategy and then describe how communicators can best employ its components.

The research base that informs this new strategy – what FrameWorks refers to as a 'master narrative' – is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1:

The Research Base

Expert interviews were conducted in March 2013 with 12 leaders in the field of criminal justice. This research was supplemented by a review of relevant academic and advocacy literature and was refined during a series of feedback sessions with leaders in the criminal justice reform field.

Interviews with 20 members of the **public** were conducted in England and Wales in 2014 to document the countries' cultural models – deep patterns of understanding and shared beliefs – about criminal justice issues.

Two sets of **on-the-street interviews** were conducted in 2015. These interviews tested various Explanatory Metaphors to determine their ability to facilitate more productive and robust discussions about crime and the criminal justice system.

A series of **surveys**, involving a representative sample of 6,350 respondents from England and Wales, was conducted to test the effects of exposure to a variety of frames on public understanding of, attitudes towards and support for programmes and policies. In total, more than 6,600 people from England and Wales were surveyed for this research.

The MessageMemo is organised as follows. First, we **Chart the Landscape** by describing how dominant patterns of thinking create challenges and opportunities for those communicating about criminal justice reform. With a detailed map of what communicators are up against, we then outline a **Redirection Strategy** – an integrated set of framing recommendations that have emerged from our research. This strategy includes what experts and advocates should and should not do in their communications materials. The research shows that these strategies can shift and expand public thinking and yield new and more productive public conversations around criminal justice reform.

Charting the Landscape

The cultural models[4] that inform thinking about crime and the criminal justice system reflect a complicated cognitive terrain. Understanding these cultural models in detail, and the kinds of attitudes and opinions they support, is the first step towards a more effective communications strategy. When advocates and experts understand the cultural beliefs that shape thinking about these issues, they can anticipate what they are up against, create messages that circumvent unproductive thinking and cue and cultivate more productive ways of thinking.

FrameWorks research shows that, at a basic level, people in England and Wales define crime in the same, general way and share the same mental image of the types of people who commit crimes. They define crime as a violation of property or individuals and view the latter as the more serious type of offence. They think of petty theft as the most common type of crime, and their dominant mental image of perpetrators is of reckless and irresponsible youth.

People can appreciate the contextual causes of crime. Members of the public can employ a contextual view when thinking about the causes of crime and have accessible ways to recognise how a person's environment may shape criminal behaviour. There are three interconnected assumptions that support this perspective. First, people reason that *poverty*, or the lack of material resources, can make individuals 'desperate' and push them into situations in which they are forced to steal to provide for themselves and their families. People also recognise that the media affect behaviour and that popular culture in general creates strong desires for often unattainable material goods. These phenomena are understood to drive people to commit crime to meet those desires. Finally, people think about how social networks may influence crime. Participants in our research regularly employed a *Social Proximity* model, or the idea that individuals are strongly influenced by the behaviour of those around them.

People also have a set of models that lead them to hold individuals solely responsible for crime. Perhaps the most dominant cultural model identified throughout our research is the *Rational Actor* model. This is the widely shared but highly implicit assumption that criminal actions are the exclusive result of an individual who consciously and rationally weighs the costs and benefits of a given behaviour. According to this way of thinking, individuals commit crimes when the benefits of such behaviour outweigh the costs. People also assume that small crimes (such as shoplifting) can 'escalate' into more serious crimes (such as burglary or assault) and that, if uncorrected, people learn that they can get away with criminal activities and thus become emboldened to commit more severe offences. The public assumes that the lack of negative consequences allows people to downplay the 'cost' component of the decision calculus, which makes criminal behaviour more likely to occur. When active, the *Rational Actor* model focuses attention at the individual level and crowds out thinking about the ways in which larger community, cultural and social contexts shape decision-making.

People's most accessible ways of thinking about the purpose of the criminal justice system are not in line with expert views. When reasoning about the purpose of the criminal justice system, people tend to focus

on how the system should use punishment to deter crime, provide a source of retribution for wrongs committed and segregate people who have committed crimes. Although less dominant than these assumed functions, people can also see that the criminal justice system should rehabilitate offenders and help them successfully resettle in communities upon release. Unfortunately, this focus on rehabilitation easily gets pushed out of consideration when one of the more dominant assumptions comes to mind.

Our research also finds that people think that the criminal justice system should be fair. However, people hold two contrasting ideas about fairness. The first is the *Uniform* model of fairness, or the idea that a fair system is one that treats everyone in the same way, regardless of gender, situation, experience or any other differences. The second is the *Contextual* model of fairness, or the idea that a fair system is one that considers the unique factors, circumstances and contexts of a particular offence.

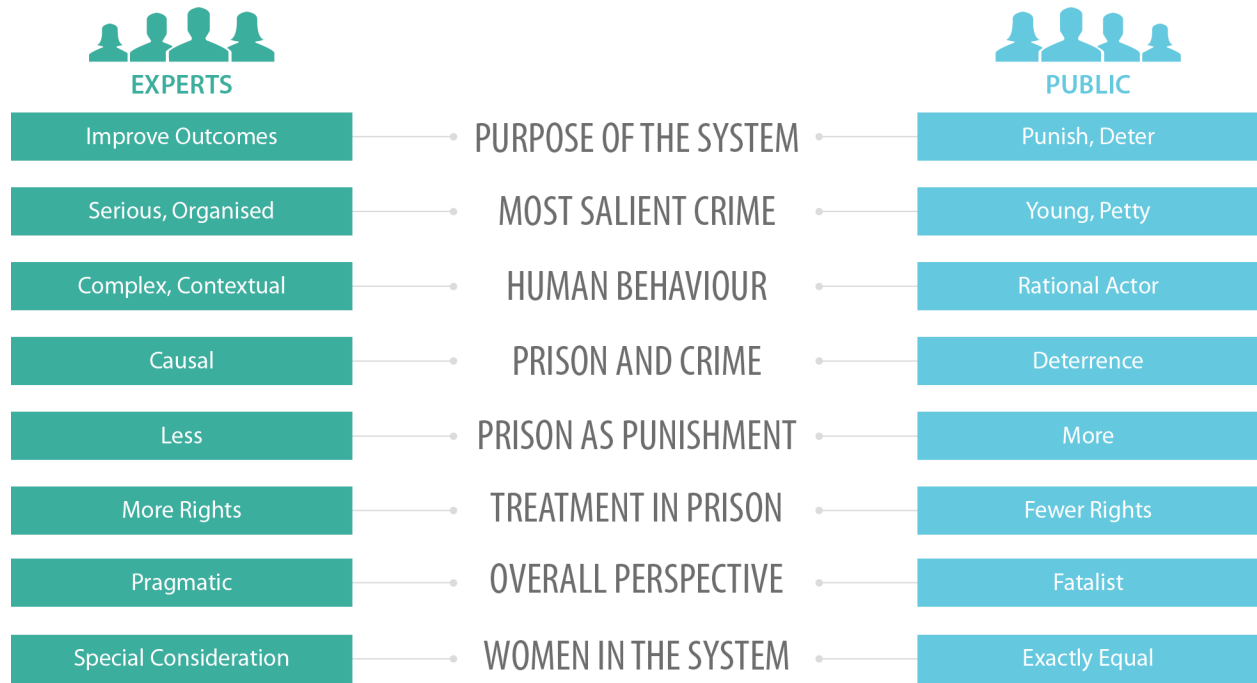*Improving the criminal justice system is 'hard to think' and dominated by a focus on punishment.* Members of the public have a heavily fatalistic view of the possibility of changing the way that the criminal justice system works. They are equally skeptical that proposed changes will actually improve social outcomes. When they *can* think about how to improve the criminal justice system, people focus narrowly on increasing the severity of punishments and comprehensiveness of surveillance measures. People reason that imposing longer and more difficult prison sentences, and reinstating the death penalty, are the only ways to reduce crime and improve public safety. Despite the public's strong emphasis on severe punishment, our research shows that people *are* willing to consider alternatives to prison for minor, non-violent crimes. This represents a significant communications opportunity, on which the strategy laid out here capitalises.

Criminal justice experts and practitioners express a different set of views about the system. They emphasise the definitions and causes of crime, see purpose in the system and advocate for solutions that are very different from those endorsed by the public. Figure 2 summarises the differences between public and expert perspectives on crime and the criminal justice system. These gaps represent the challenges that must be addressed to shift and expand the public discussion around crime and justice. In designing and testing a reframing strategy, these were the challenges to which we held potential reframes accountable.

Figure 2 clearly shows that addressing the ease and comfort with which people go to 'more punishment' and 'harsher prison' when thinking about how to address crime is a vital component of a successful framing strategy. Experts argue that many of the existing criminal justice approaches are ineffective, that policing, sentencing and imprisonment are demographically uneven and that the system is overly punitive. Furthermore, while experts focus on rehabilitation as a primary purpose of the criminal justice system, the public focuses on retribution. A critical communications task is to help members of the public understand how the criminal justice system can more effectively resettle offenders in their communities. The public also has difficulty thinking about how other types of social services might help prevent crime, whereas experts say that many problems attributed to the criminal justice system are in fact caused by failures in education, housing, mental health services and other social support systems. An effective communications strategy must, therefore, generate more robust discussions about prevention.

Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understanding of the Criminal Justice System in the U.K.

EXPERTS

PUBLIC

EXPERTS		PUBLIC
Improve Outcomes	PURPOSE OF THE SYSTEM	Punish, Deter
Serious, Organised	MOST SALIENT CRIME	Young, Petty
Complex, Contextual	HUMAN BEHAVIOUR	Rational Actor
Causal	PRISON AND CRIME	Deterrence
Less	PRISON AS PUNISHMENT	More
More Rights	TREATMENT IN PRISON	Fewer Rights
Pragmatic	OVERALL PERSPECTIVE	Fatalist
Special Consideration	WOMEN IN THE SYSTEM	Exactly Equal

To combat the accessibility of the public's current story about crime and justice, communicators need a *new* narrative that addresses these challenges in a coherent and memorable way. The strategy that follows outlines the core components of this new narrative.

Redirection Strategy

To dislodge dominant unproductive models and open up new, more productive ways of thinking, communicators need a coherent and memorable narrative that they can share easily and disseminate widely. Our research shows that many of the stories that are currently being told about criminal justice tap into unproductive patterns of thinking, impede new understandings and undermine support for reforms. Many of these current frames are common and widely used – even by those seeking reform. These framing habits have become second nature to communicators, making them difficult to identify and even harder to change.

Figure 3 summarises strategies communicators should use – and those they should avoid – to advance the public discussion on criminal justice reform. We subsequently discuss each of these strategies.

Figure 3:

DO:	DON'T:
Tell a story	Discuss Solutions in isolation or outside of a Complete Narrative
Begin the story with one of three empirically tested Values: *National Progress, Human Potential, or Problem-Solving*	Appeal to *Cost Efficiency*
Use the *Channelling Crime* Metaphor to explain *how* punishment fails to reduce crime and *why* it is ineffective in increasing public safety	Talk about individual choices or decisions
Use the *Prison Dead End* Metaphor to explain how prison limits opportunities	Trigger the *Uniform* model of fairness
Explain *why* justice approaches that rely on punishment are ineffective	Remind people that punishment is an effective response in some cases
Use the *Justice Gears* Metaphor to help people think about alternative solutions	Rely on crisis messaging

What is this issue about?

DO: Tell a story

Given the challenges posed by public understandings of crime and the criminal justice system, reframing this issue will require multiple tools that are integrated into a narrative strategy; no single frame element is able to meaningfully and durably shift thinking. A successful strategy will require persistently and consistently answering a set of fundamental questions: Why is reform necessary? What are the problems with the current system? What needs to be done to improve outcomes?

In developing and testing a new narrative, three frame elements emerged as particularly important: *Values, Explanatory Metaphors* and *Solutions*. Drawing on the functions and strengths of each of these frame elements, we have composed a narrative that addresses the communications challenges laid out above.[5]

To develop this strategy, we conducted qualitative interviews and large-scale surveys with 6,350 respondents. Each respondent read either a message with a particular frame element (a *Value, Explanatory Metaphor* or *Solution*) in isolation or in combination or was assigned to a control group that received no message. Respondents were then asked a series of questions to measure their understanding of and support for various aspects of criminal justice reform.[6] Figure 4 contains more information about these outcome measures.

Figure 4:

Scale	Sample Questions
Knowledge about Criminal Networks and Identity	When young people enter prison, they … a. Become more likely to think of themselves as 'criminals', which limits their expectations of themselves and makes them more likely to commit further crimes when they are released. b. Are likely to be very scared, which makes them less likely to commit further crimes when they are released. c. Already think of themselves as 'criminals', and it is too late to do anything to make them less likely to commit more crime.
Decreased Opportunities and Increased Stigma	In our society, after being in prison, many people … a. Are treated with suspicion by employers and others, which makes it more likely that they will end up back in prison. b. Are treated better than ordinary people, which gives them advantages that other people don't have. c. Are treated the same as everyone else, which means they should have no problem avoiding going back to prison if that is what they want.

Knowledge about Trauma	When people with mental health issues are put in prison, it … a. Is likely to make their existing mental health issues worse. b. Is likely to make their existing mental health issues better. c. Has no effect on their existing mental health issues.
Knowledge about Prevention	Strengthening services outside of the criminal justice system, such as education and housing, … a. Can prevent crime from being committed, because it helps to ensure that all people have the basic resources and support they need. b. Can't prevent crime from being committed, because the only way to prevent crime is harsher prisons and more police. c. Can't prevent crime from being committed, because crime is part of human nature and can't be prevented.
Knowledge about Rehabilitation	Which of the following is the best way to prevent an offender from committing another crime in the future? a. Give them the support they need to live productive lives, like therapy, education and drug treatment. b. Punish them harshly, so that they learn from their mistakes and choose not to reoffend. c. Keep them in prison, because people who have committed one crime almost always commit others if given the chance.
Support for General Reform	The criminal justice system should focus more on preventing crimes from being committed, and less on punishing people who have committed crimes.
Reduction in Punitive Attitudes	When people break the law, making sure they are punished for their crimes shouldn't be our only goal.
Attitudes about Prevention	We should increase funding for programmes that help prevent people from committing crime and decrease funding for punishments like prisons.
Attitudes about Rehabilitation	The effectiveness of prisons should be evaluated based on how successful they are in rehabilitating prisoners.
Support for Gender-Responsive Policies	The criminal justice system should provide special resources for women to help them deal with present and past trauma.
Support for Children and Young People	Children and young people who commit crimes should be rehabilitated in the community, not sent to prison.
Increased Efficacy	As a society, we can change and improve our criminal justice system to make society safer.
Attribution of Responsibility	Our society has a responsibility to try to rehabilitate all offenders, no matter what they have done.

In our research, we controlled for a wide range of demographic variables using multiple-regression analysis and looked at the differences in support for outcome measures that resulted from exposure to each of the messages. This procedure allowed us to measure how exposure to different frames affects people's understanding of and support for criminal justice reform issues.

Figure 5 demonstrates the power of the new narrative to increase support for a wide variety of criminal justice reform issues, which are depicted along the horizontal (*x*) axis of the graph. The graph charts the performance of three types of messages:

(1) a Values-only message (consisting of the *Problem-Solving* Value)
(2) a Solutions-only message (a description of alternative sentencing reforms)
(3) a Complete Narrative (composed of the *Problem-Solving* Value, the *Channelling Crime* Explanatory Metaphor and the alternative sentencing description).

Figure 5:
Effects of Narratives, Values and Solutions on Attitudes about Policy Support for Criminal Justice Issues
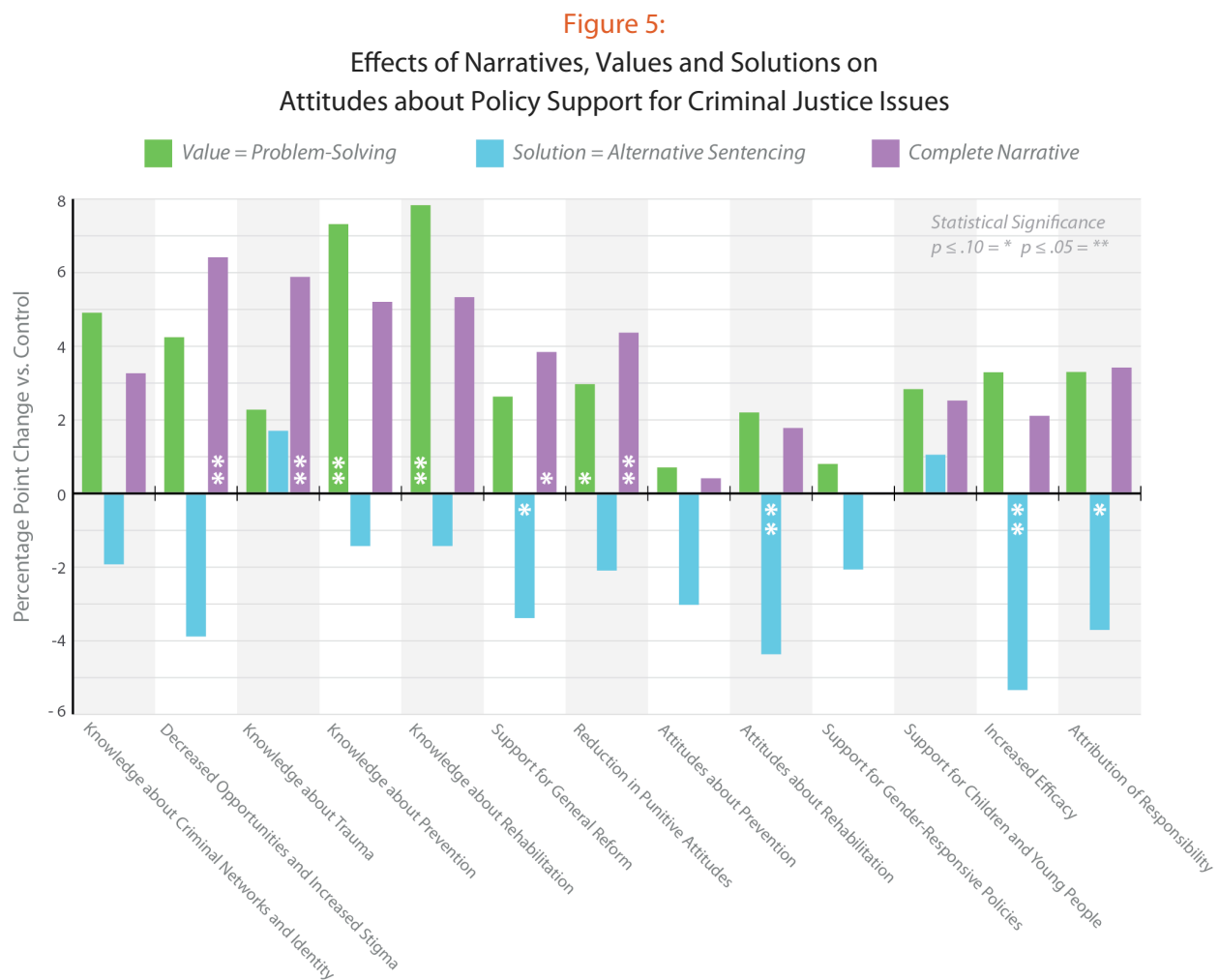
Results show that, without other narrative elements, a Solutions-only message – in this case a description of alternative sentencing practices like counselling and job training programmes – actually depressed

support for criminal justice reform on several key measures. By contrast, the *Problem-Solving* Value, even when presented in isolation, increased support in statistically significant ways in three key outcome areas (*Knowledge about Prevention*, *Knowledge about Rehabilitation* and *Reduction in Punitive Attitudes*). The Complete Narrative had the greatest effect of any of the messages tested, producing statistically significant increases in four of the 13 outcome areas (*Decreased Opportunities and Increased Stigma*, *Knowledge about Trauma*, *Support for General Reform* and *Reduction in Punitive Attitudes*) and directionally positive effects in the other nine areas. As such, we recommend using the Complete Narrative over the *Problem-Solving* Value in isolation because the former resulted in positive increases across a wider range of areas of public knowledge about and support for reform than the latter.

The Complete Narrative strategy has the power to broaden people's understanding of and support for the policies for which criminal justice reformers advocate.[7] It is important to note that the Complete Narrative was able to carry a discussion of a specific policy reform - alternative sentencing, in this case – that had insignificant or even counterproductive effects when presented on its own. In other words, these findings show that **it takes a full story** – **a Complete Narrative** – **to enable people to productively consider and engage with specific reforms.** The Complete Narrative deepens understanding of why criminal justice reforms matter and how changes can improve outcomes, giving reformers a productive frame through which to engage people in supporting new policies and programmes. Solutions, when presented in isolation, do not provide a strong enough frame to allow people to productively think about and support specific policies.

DON'T: Discuss Solutions in isolation or outside of a Complete Narrative

There is a trend in criminal justice communications in which advocates and experts rely on descriptions of alternative practices and new policies and examples of people interacting with them to make their case. Our research shows that members of the public do not understand why these programmes matter or how they work to improve outcomes. Messages that describe Solutions – but do not unpack or explain how and why they work – are generally ineffective and in some cases actually *depress* support for reforms. Figure 6 shows how descriptions of three different criminal justice reforms/programmes affect policy support and attitudes. These include alternative sentencing programmes, mental health programmes that place offenders with mental health issues into community-based mental health treatment and restorative justice programmes that bring victims, offenders and community members together to talk about the crime, its effects and possible steps to repair harm done.

Figure 6:
Effects of Solutions on Knowledge and Attitudes about Criminal Justice Reform
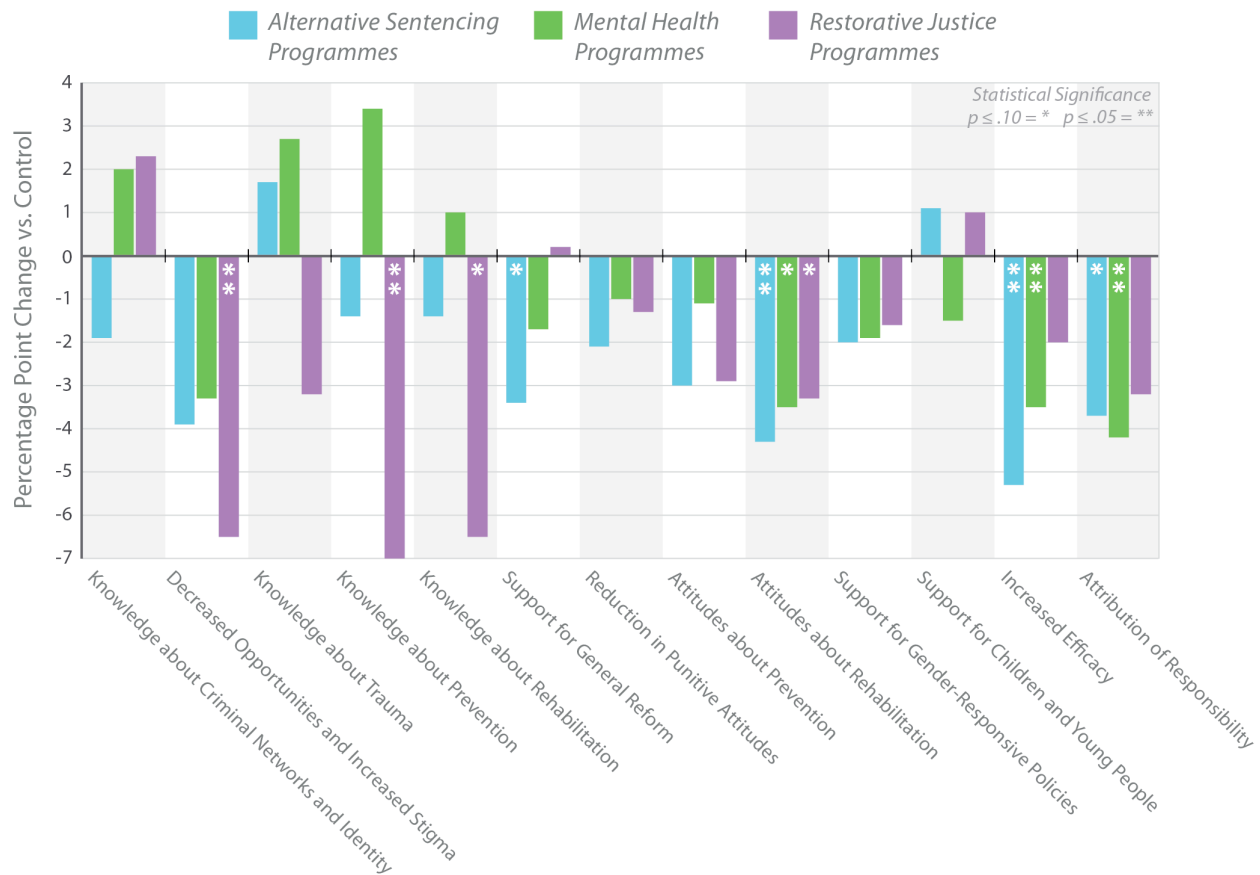
These findings show the danger of communicating about solutions in isolation and without a larger discussion of context and the importance of a Complete Narrative approach. Communicators need to carefully and comprehensively frame discussions of specific programmes rather than asking or expecting these reforms to speak for themselves.

Why does this issue matter?

DO: Begin the story with one of three empirically tested Values

Values are enduring beliefs that orientate individuals' attitudes and behaviours. In the context of framing, they are the basis of social appeals because they have the power to push audience reactions in desirable directions and motivate action. In the context of criminal justice, we found that an initial appeal to the Values of *Problem-Solving, Human Potential,* or *National Progress* cultivates public support for a wide range of criminal justice reforms.

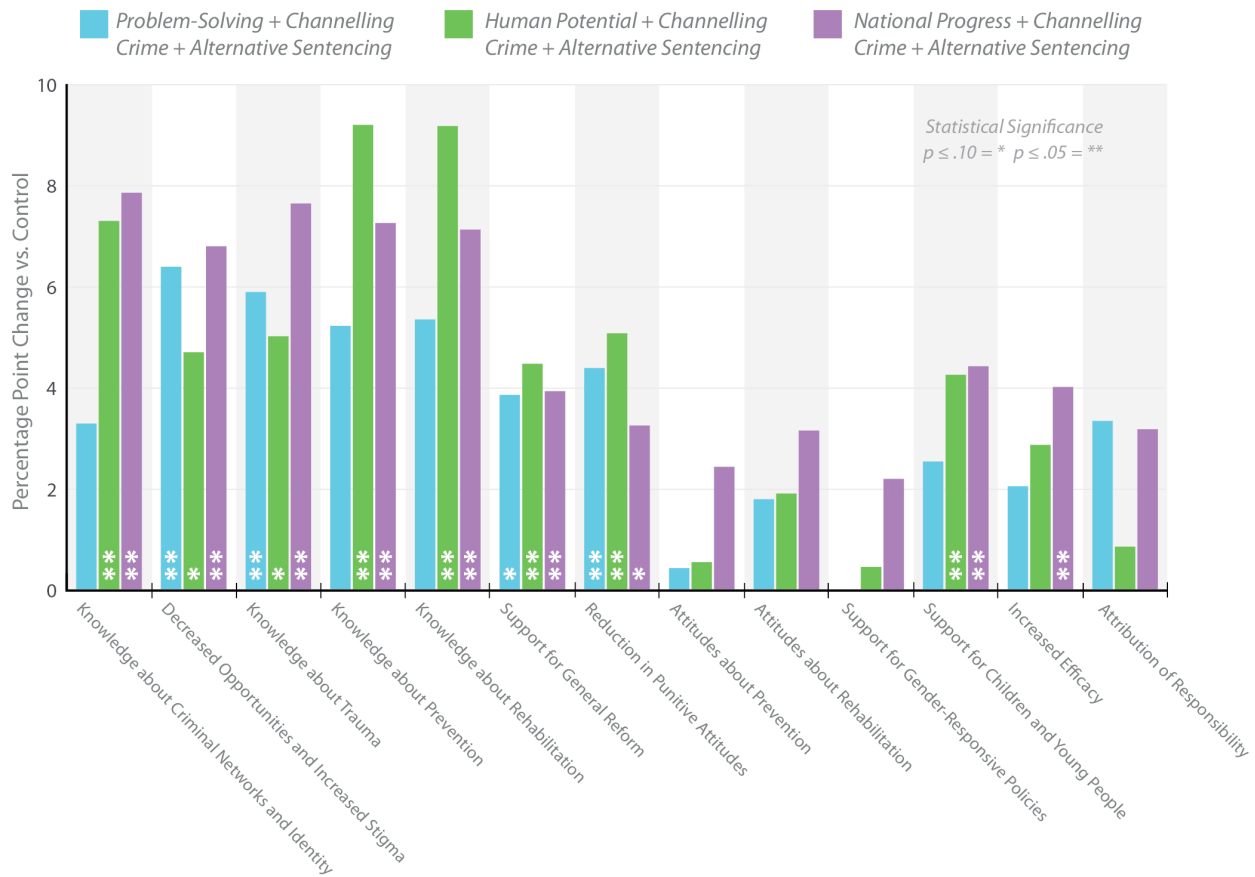**Effects of Values on Knowledge and Attitudes about Criminal Justice Reform**

Problem-Solving + Channelling Crime + Alternative Sentencing

Human Potential + Channelling Crime + Alternative Sentencing

National Progress + Channelling Crime + Alternative Sentencing

Statistical Significance
$p \leq .10 = *$ $p \leq .05 = **$

Percentage Point Change vs. Control

Knowledge about Criminal Networks and Identity

Decreased Opportunities and Increased Stigma

Knowledge about Trauma

Knowledge about Prevention

Knowledge about Rehabilitation

Support for General Reform

Reduction in Punitive Attitudes

Attitudes about Prevention

Attitudes about Rehabilitation

Support for Gender-Responsive Policies

Support for Children and Young People

Increased Efficacy

Attribution of Responsibility

Figure 7 shows three versions of the Criminal Justice Narrative, each of which uses a different Value as its lead frame. The bars in Figure 7 show that each version deepens understanding of the criminal justice system and encourages consideration of and support for key reforms.

The *National Progress* Value provides information about the ways in which the criminal justice system generates poor outcomes for society. It conveys the urgency of the problem and advances the belief that meaningful change is both possible and desirable. This combination of urgency and efficacy is critical; messages must both build support for policy change and spur engagement. Communicating urgency without building the public's sense of efficacy can result in crisis messaging, which generally depresses support for reform.[8] Our research indicates that the *National Progress* Value also helps people understand the broader societal impacts of improving the criminal justice system and thus helps suppress the *Rational Actor* model.

The following excerpt shows how advocates and experts can use this Value to frame a discussion about criminal justice reform. We encourage communicators to develop other ways of using it in ways that reflect their organisation's unique mission and voice.

Our outdated criminal justice system is holding our country back. We need to make changes to this system that will allow all of us to move forward. A criminal justice system that can improve outcomes for our communities and our country is key to making progress as a society.

The Value of *Human Potential* also performed well in our research. Using it as the lead frame in a Complete Narrative orientates people towards rehabilitation and builds support for initiatives that prevent crime from occurring. This Value also generates support for reforms to the youth justice system. Here is an example:

Changing the way our criminal justice system works is one way to make sure that all members of our society can reach their potential and contribute to our communities. This means giving people the support they need to stay out of trouble and dedicating resources to rehabilitation so those who have committed offences can add value to – rather than detract from – our society.

Our research suggests that this Value is effective because it focuses attention on the need for the criminal justice system to improve outcomes – not only for communities and society, but also for offenders. It is a way of reminding people that, with reforms, the criminal justice system should help us realise our societal goals.

Finally, the *Problem-Solving* Value orientates people to the importance of moving away from punishment as the primary function and goal of the criminal justice system. This Value helps people focus on the outcomes we want to achieve – a safer, better-functioning society – and on the need to consider these outcomes when thinking about how the system should work. Primed with this Value, people reason back from a set of desired outcomes to the ways the system should be structured.

We need to use a commonsense, step-by-step approach to solving problems and improving our criminal justice system. This means clarifying goals and establishing a set of tasks that we want the system to do, and then creating a criminal justice system that is aligned with these goals. If we focus our attention on creating a step-by-step plan for solving problems, we can decrease crime and improve public safety.

Our research suggests that this Value's positive effects stem from its ability to overcome the public's strong sense of fatalism – the belief that problems are so intractable they are not worth attempting to solve – about criminal justice issues. Emphasising the pragmatic notion that problems can be solved through careful goal setting and a step-by-step plan helps to overcome people's fatalistic attitudes and increases their willingness to think about key issues and support solutions.

DON'T: Appeal to *Cost Efficiency*

In addition to highlighting a set of Values that can engage the public and move support for key policies, our research yields cautionary information about another commonly used Value: *Cost Efficiency*. In the

survey, appealing to the Value of cost savings or financial efficiency actually *increased* people's punitive attitudes and *depressed* support for reforms. The tested language follows:

> *Every pound invested in rehabilitation saves 10 pounds down the line. Our reliance on prison and other punishments is costly and ineffective. We can make changes to the criminal justice system that will save money and improve outcomes.*

This Value's poor performance – its 'backfire effect' – is likely due to public wariness about putting a price on safety. Our research shows that people place great importance on personal and community safety and are unwilling to think about it in financial terms. This contrasts with other social issues, such as mental health, education or the environment. In these cases, people are willing to entertain and be persuaded by efficiency arguments (that we need, for example, to make decisions about health care that minimise cost and maximise benefits). But people are not willing to think about safety as something that should be governed by cost efficiency. The *Cost Efficiency* Value depresses support for reform because it is interpreted as an attempt to put a price on public safety.

Effects of the *Cost Efficiency* Value on Knowledge and Attitudes about Criminal Justice Reform
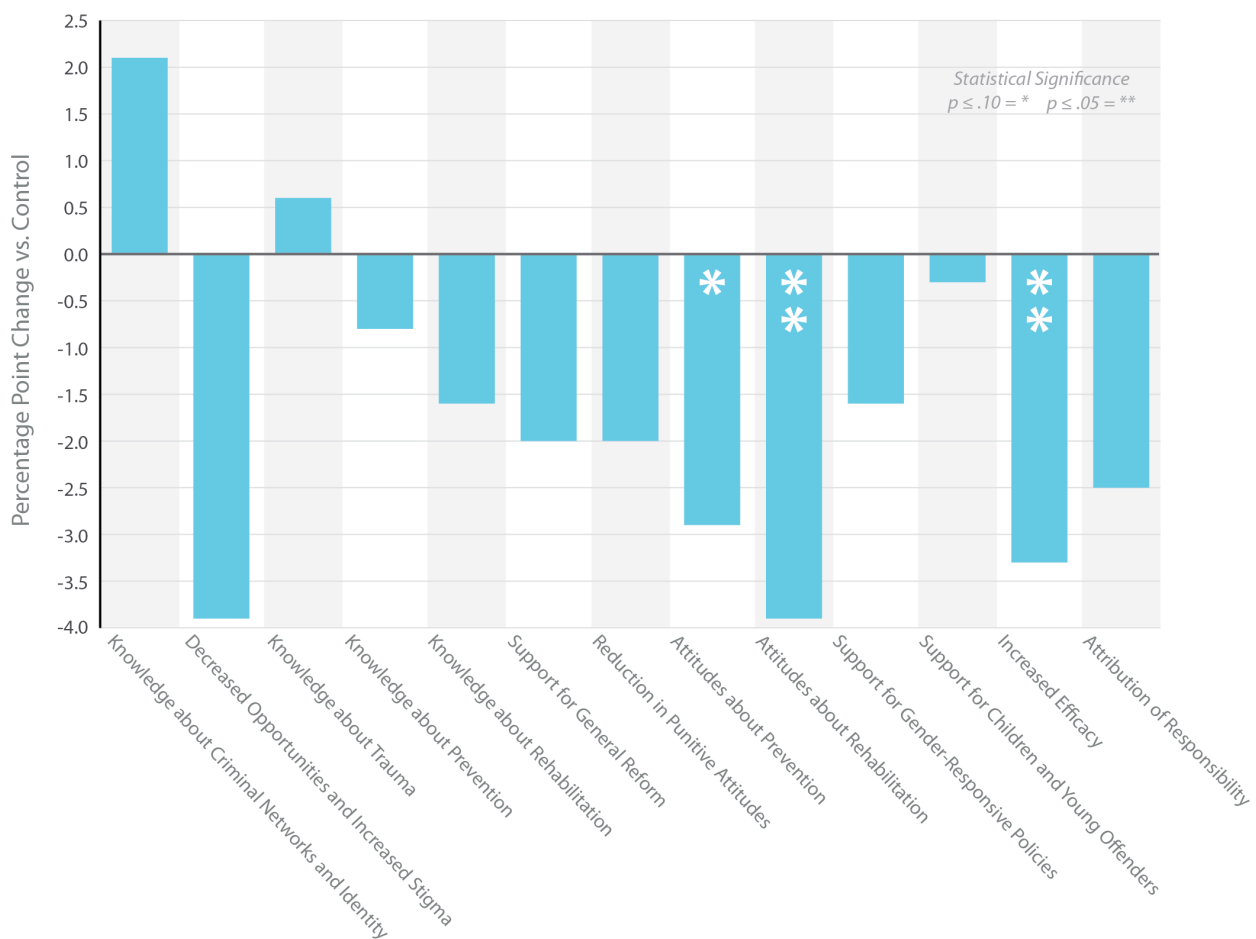
While this research shows that *Cost Efficiency* is ineffective and counterproductive, we believe that prevention-orientated cost-effectiveness data can in fact play a productive role in effective messages. These data are promising if they meet two conditions. First, they must be inserted into a narrative framed around a more effective Value (such as *Problem-Solving*, *National Progress* or *Human Potential*). Second, they must be used to argue that reforming the criminal justice system is both urgent and necessary (rather than only focusing on the latter). A sample iteration of *Cost Efficiency* follows:

> *We need to use a commonsense approach to solving problems and improving our criminal justice system. We currently have a criminal justice system that is both expensive and ineffective. By taking very practical steps, however, we can fix this. We can change the system and at the same time improve our public safety.*

Why do current approaches to criminal justice reform fail?

DO: Use the *Channelling Crime* Metaphor to explain *how* punishment fails to reduce crime and *why* it is ineffective in increasing public safety

Explanatory Metaphors are linguistic devices that help people think and talk about a complex concept in new ways. By comparing an abstract or unfamiliar idea to something concrete and familiar, Explanatory Metaphors make information easier to understand. Effective Explanatory Metaphors do not become topics of discussion; rather, they open space for more productive thinking and discussion to take place. FrameWorks researchers use multiple methods to test Explanatory Metaphors for their ability to communicate new ideas, their usability in communications materials and their likeliness to seep into the public discourse.

Our research found that people see severe punishment as a highly effective crime deterrent. We also found that people do not understand that prisons do *not* reduce crime but instead create additional problems for offenders and society. Interrupting the public habit of equating 'more severe punishments' and 'harsher prison sentences' with easy and effective solutions to crime and safety is an *essential framing manoeuvre*. This was the essential task that we designed our Explanatory Metaphors to accomplish. In particular, we sought to design Explanatory Metaphors to help people realise the following facts about punishment and prison:

- Prison creates social networks, which, in turn, create and substantiate criminal identities.
- Prison prunes outside social networks and robs offenders of strong positive social ties.
- Prison can cause trauma and exacerbate underlying problems.
- Prison limits opportunities, derailing educational achievement, disrupting employment and curtailing chances for social interaction and development.
- Prison stigmatises offenders and limits opportunities for positive social interaction and inclusion in positive social networks when offenders re-enter society.

FrameWorks developed more than 10 candidate Explanatory Metaphors to address these tasks and used qualitative research techniques to determine the three strongest candidates. Of these candidates, *Channelling Crime* successfully shifted people's thinking about punishment, prison, crime and criminal justice reform (Figure 9).

Figure 9:
Effects of Explanatory Metaphors on Knowledge and Attitudes about Criminal Justice Reform
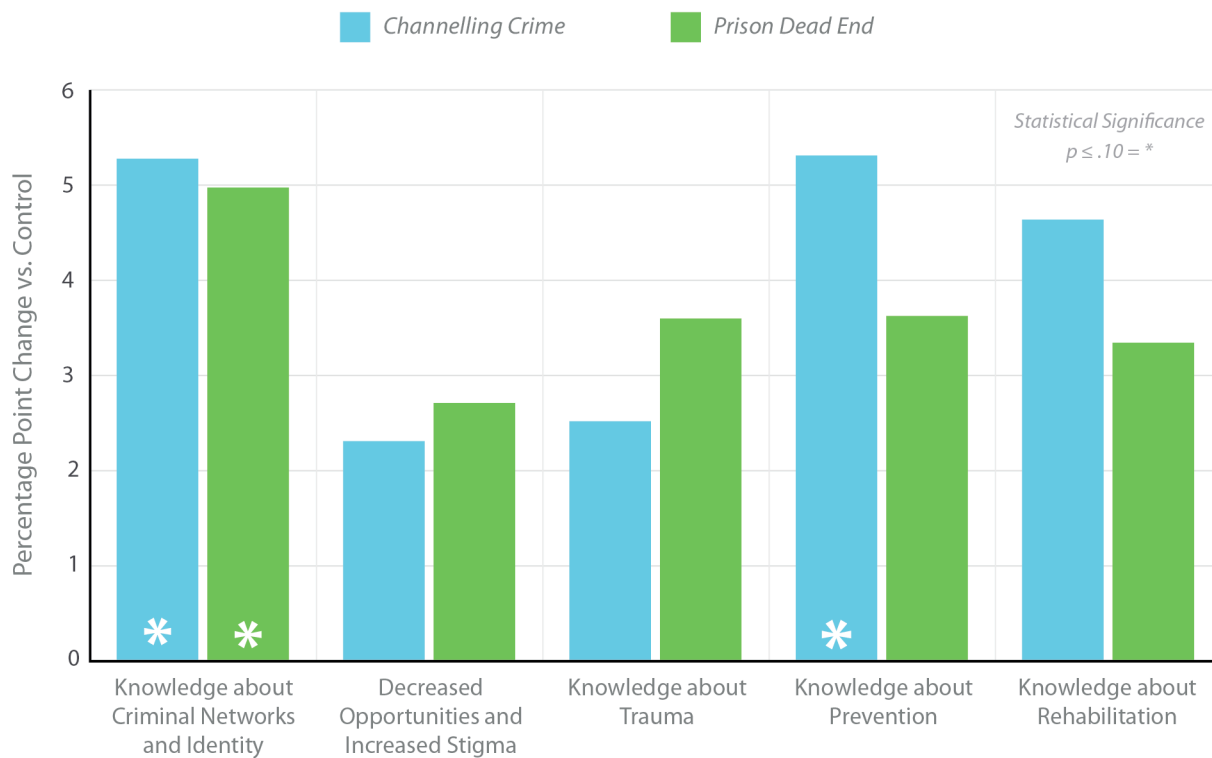
The *Channelling Crime* Explanatory Metaphor explains how imprisonment encourages recidivism. It was designed to counteract the public's beliefs that the threat of imprisonment deters crime and that serving a custodial sentence dissuades subsequent criminal activity. Within the narrative, the *Channelling Crime* Metaphor advances a new understanding of how prisons and excessive punishment exacerbate problems for offenders, their communities and society more generally. In this way, it *explains* – rather than simply *describes* – how harsh punishment is an ineffective crime reduction measure. The Metaphor is especially helpful in explaining the problems with prison sentences for minor crimes.

The following is an example of the *Channelling Crime* Metaphor:

> *Prisons sweep people into a powerful stream of crime from which it is difficult to escape. We need to keep people out of this current of criminal behaviour in the first place and guide them to safer, more stable shores.*

Research shows that people can easily use the *Channelling Crime* Metaphor to reason about what should be done to improve the criminal justice system, and that they also retain the Metaphor. Communicators can use it to make the following key points about reform:

1. ***Prison sentences frequently lead to more crime, not less***. The directionality of the Metaphor – channelling *into* or *towards* crime – helps people think about how prison generates more crime, rather than deterring it.

2. ***Alternatives to prison yield better outcomes.*** Once people recognise that prison does not deter crime or reduce recidivism, they quickly conclude that we need to reduce our reliance on prisons. Rather than channelling offenders into environments that reinforce criminal identities, strengthen negative social networks and prune positive ties to communities, offenders should be channelled into more positive relationships and supportive environments. The term 'channel' facilitates discussions about both the negative effects of prison *and* the importance of alternatives.

3. ***Prison leads to the formation of negative networks and identities.*** Channelling invokes thoughts about forcing people into increasingly narrow spaces. In this way, the Metaphor helps people think about how prisons confine offenders and establish and support negative social networks. It also primes the *Social Proximity* model in a useful way and helps people see how time in prison can foster criminal identities.

4. ***The criminal justice system can be used to create better outcomes for offenders and society.*** Thinking about channelling offenders towards better outcomes, rather than worse ones, creates a fundamental shift in people's understanding of the criminal justice system's ability to generate positive outcomes. Research shows that people use the Metaphor to think about how the criminal justice system might lead offenders to better paths; it helps them think about how it can help people find employment and successfully resettle into their communities, which is good for individuals, communities and society.

DON'T: Talk about individual choices or decisions

The *Channelling Crime* Metaphor focuses on how prison environments reinforce criminal identities and establish and support negative social networks. The Metaphor also navigates around the *Rational Actor* model. When members of the public think about decision-making or specific examples of offences (or offenders) or criminal behaviours, they tend to think of people as 'rational actors' who weigh the costs and benefits of criminal activities before engaging in them, which increases their support for punitive responses. Messages that allow or invite people to think about individual choice and decision-making should be actively avoided. One frequent way in which communicators fall into this trap is through the use of individual stories, particular examples of decision-making or discussions about individual motivation. Communicators should steer clear of these strategies. Stories and examples should be selected and presented in ways that make the role of context clear as both a causal factor (what is causing the problem) and a remedial one (what is the solution). The *Channelling Crime* Metaphor can help communicators avoid the *Rational Actor* trap because it helps people think about how social context affects individual outcomes.

DO: Use the *Prison Dead End* Metaphor to explain how prison limits opportunities

Communicators can use the *Prison Dead End* Metaphor to explain how imprisonment can fundamentally change an offender's life trajectory by cutting off opportunities for employment, education, community involvement and the development of positive social networks outside of the criminal justice system. This Metaphor is a powerful, visceral, sticky and highly effective way to make this point. The following language uses the Metaphor:

> *When people go to prison, they are put on a dead-end path and have no way to get back to a productive life. Prison is a dead end. We shouldn't use prisons as a dead end. Instead, we need to build paths that lead offenders to better outcomes; paths that will take them – and their communities – to better places.*

Research shows that this Metaphor helps people see how prisons fail to rehabilitate offenders, do not improve outcomes and instead lead to more negative results. Within the narrative, the *Prison Dead End* Metaphor serves a specific function: it explains the detrimental impact of prison – and of punishment more generally – and opens space for the public to consider alternative solutions.

More specifically, the Metaphor makes the following points:

1. ***Prisons cut people off from positive social networks, which negatively affects their ability to resettle in communities.*** This Metaphor communicates how imprisonment severs ties to positive social networks and eliminates subsequent opportunities. It also provides the public with a clear explanation of the resettlement problems that prisons create. In so doing, it generates a sense of urgency to keep offenders out of prison in the first place and to create more effective policies to assist offenders in the resettlement process.

2. ***Alternatives to prison are necessary.*** After exposure to this Metaphor, people reason that, if prison is a dead end, the criminal justice system should offer other paths that lead to more productive outcomes. In this way, it opens space for communicators to talk about alternatives to prisons and punishment.

3. ***Imprisonment for minor crimes is counterproductive.*** This Metaphor is particularly helpful in getting people to think about the problems associated with short custodial sentences for minor offences. It cues thinking about how a minor infraction should not fundamentally disrupt an offender's life trajectory; it should not amount to a dead end or keep people from contributing positively to their communities.

4. ***Children and young people who offend require developmentally appropriate interventions.*** This Metaphor can encourage thinking about how children and young people need opportunities for positive development and growth and should not be placed in environments that block development by cutting them off from opportunities. Primed with this Metaphor, people reason that children and young people should not be put in prison because they need positive influences and paths if they are to reach positive outcomes. People can see immediately that putting individuals on dead-end paths early in life is both problematic and ineffective.

DON'T: Trigger the *Uniform* model of fairness

The *Prison Dead End* Metaphor explains why a one-size-fits-all approach to sentencing is misguided and counterproductive. It also opens up space for communicators to talk about fairness and sentencing. Research participants employed two opposing models of fairness during discussions about criminal justice issues. The more dominant was the *Uniform* model of fairness, which posits that the same crimes should be punished in the same manner – regardless of the circumstances surrounding the crimes. The contrasting, and more recessive, *Contextual* model of fairness is premised on the idea that sentencing should take the unique circumstances of a crime into account, including the offender's upbringing, criminal history, mental health, intent and evidence of remorse.

However, when communicators invoke 'fairness' without carefully transmitting the version of it they seek to advance, they cannot know which model they will activate. The dominance of the *Uniform* model suggests that it is the most likely result of general appeals to fairness. In this way, fairness arguments present a communications trap for experts and advocates who want to promote policy changes. This is particularly true regarding arguments for alternative sentencing, in which *Uniform* interpretations of fairness impede support. Communicators should attempt to activate a *Contextual* view of crime, human behaviour and social outcomes. The Metaphors described above activate contextual perspectives and help people reason about effective solutions to public safety issues.

## DO: Explain *why* justice approaches that rely on punishment are ineffective

There are multiple ways to deal with the issue of punishment in a narrative strategy. Communicators can *ignore* it in an attempt to sidestep the public's preoccupation with severe punishment as a crime deterrent. They can *acknowledge* the public's dominant assumptions and nod to the need for punishment in some cases. Or they can explain *why* punishment is ineffective as a primary goal for the criminal justice system. FrameWorks tested these three strategies to understand how best to deal with the issue of punishment in a new Criminal Justice Narrative.

The results show that two messages – the message that did not mention punishment and the one that explained why it is ineffective – resulted in statistically significant changes in knowledge, attitudes and policy support for criminal justice reform. The message that acknowledged the public's dominant assumptions did not produce significant effects. Figure 10 shows these results.

In addition, nearly half (49 percent) of respondents who received the message that acknowledged the need for punishment in some cases expressed that punishment and retribution are important functions of the criminal justice system. Forty-one percent of respondents who received the message with no mention of punishment, and 40 percent of those who received the message that explained why punishment is ineffective, expressed that punishment and retribution are important. Only 23 percent of those who received the message that acknowledged the need for punishment said that rehabilitation should be the criminal justice system's primary goal. Thirty-one percent of those who received the message with no mention of punishment, and 33 percent of those who received the message that explained the problem with punishment as the primary focus of the system, said the same.

Effects of Punishment Frames on Attitudes Towards and Support for Criminal Justice Reform
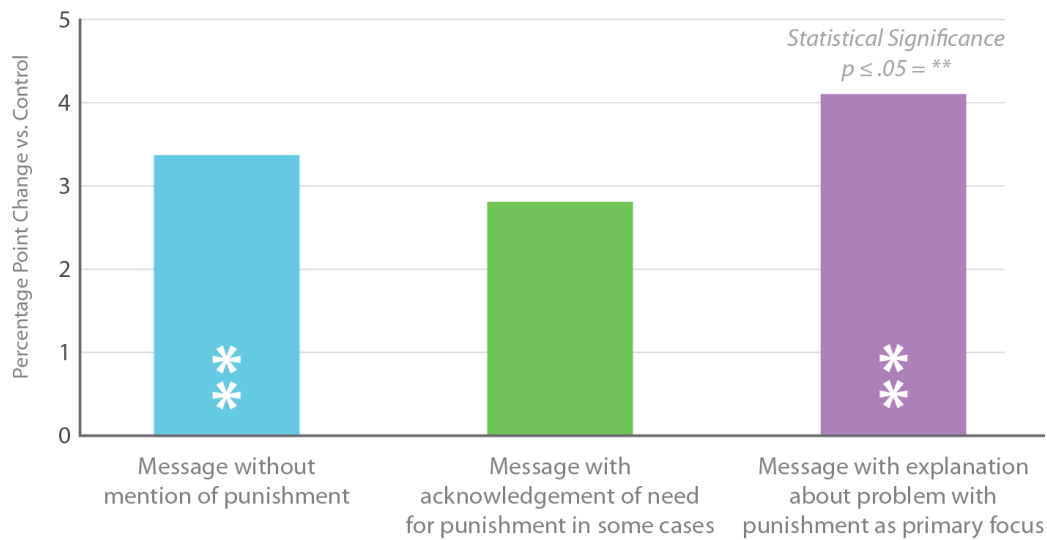
Our research suggests that when communicators acknowledge the utility of punishment in some circumstances (such as those involving violent crimes), and then pivot to discuss its ineffectiveness as a deterrent more generally, they cue unproductive understandings of the deterring power of harsh punishment and reinforce the very understandings that they are seeking to overturn.

Based on these data and other research from the field of communications, we recommend that, in telling the new narrative of criminal justice, reformers *explain why punishment is a weak cornerstone of our criminal justice system* and *avoid acknowledging the need for punishment in some cases*. The following is an example of what an explanatory strategy for dealing with the issue of punishment might look like:

Our reliance on prison as a way to respond to crime is a mistake that needs to be fixed. We know that the use of punishment, and prison in particular, does not reduce crime. Going to prison cuts offenders off from their communities, establishes criminal identities and limits people's options for life, making them more likely to commit crimes when they re-enter society. We need to stop acting out of a desire for retribution and instead focus on taking the steps that will actually make things better for all of us in society.

DON'T: Remind people that punishment is an effective response in some cases

When explaining why excessive punishment does not improve public safety, communicators are often tempted to assure the public that people who have been convicted of violent crimes will still receive prison sentences and that punishment is still important and necessary in some cases. As David Cameron does in the quote that opens this report, experts and advocates often begin their arguments with this 'in some cases' caveat. They then proceed to make the point that, in the vast majority of cases, prison sentences are not necessary and can be counterproductive. This is an unproductive strategy because it reminds people of the power of punishment. The 'in some cases' nuance is lost as people enter the familiar and comfortable terrain of thinking about punishment's ability to address crime. Instead, communicators should develop messages that explain how punishment fails to increase public safety.

What do we need to do to improve the criminal justice system?

DO: Use the *Justice Gears* Metaphor to help people think about alternative Solutions

Building public support for criminal justice reforms requires that communicators explain why alternatives are necessary and ultimately beneficial for offenders and their communities. The *Justice Gears* Metaphor highlights the need for alternatives to prison as well as the importance of strong social services outside the criminal justice system to prevent and reduce crime. The Metaphor activates a more pragmatic and contextual way of thinking and directs people's focus towards the importance of developing and implementing interventions that match experiences, circumstances and particular aspects of a situation. It helps people recognise the need for multiple types of interventions and for flexibility in responses.

The *Justice Gears* Metaphor can be stated as follows:

> *Just like we need different gears for cycling up and down hills, the criminal justice system needs different solutions for different situations. When we rely on prison as our only gear, we lose the ability to match the right solution to a specific problem. We get stuck with ineffective approaches to dealing with crime and improving public safety. We all know it's hard to get to where you need to go if you only have one gear to use. Our criminal justice system works the same way. It can't do the things that we expect of it – make our society better and safer – if it has only one approach. We need different gears if we are truly going to address, prevent and reduce crime. And we need alternatives to prison – like better mental health treatment, improved addiction services, effective therapies, flexible community sentences and other options – if we want to improve public safety.*

DON'T: Rely on crisis messaging

Using rhetoric that is heavily centred on the problems with and broken parts of the criminal justice system is likely to make the public fatalistic about the possibilities of reform. This kind of crisis messaging creates the sense that problems with the system are too great to overcome. The *Justice Gears* Metaphor primes a conversation about solutions both within the criminal justice system and beyond.

DO: Explain how Solutions work to address problems and improve outcomes

Our research shows that people need help understanding how proposed solutions achieve their intended effects. We recommend that communicators develop ways of talking about solutions that are *explanatory* in nature. Discussions about solutions need to show *how* an intervention addresses a problem to produce a desired effect. This connection should not be left unspecified. This is an important recommendation for two reasons. First, it will help people see the importance of a particular policy or reform. Second, it will help people support other solutions because they will have a better understanding of what is required to improve outcomes.

DON'T: Discuss Solutions in isolation or outside of a Complete Narrative

As discussed earlier, our research on this project (as well as on numerous other projects) has found that merely describing solutions and asserting their importance, or providing data that show their effectiveness, does not drive support for reform. Communicators must take an explanatory approach and use solutions as just one component of a larger narrative.

Putting It All Together

Effectively deploying this narrative framework will take time and practice. It will also require that communicators use their unique skills and experiences to craft versions of this narrative that resonate with and connect to particular audiences and groups. This is the challenge the field faces. The following is a short example of what the new story looks like when the elements described above come together in a short message:

'Keep Calm and Carry On'. It's one of the United Kingdom's most famous dictums, and it reflects our country's long-standing reputation for cool-headed, pragmatic, step-by-step approaches to problem solving. We need to take this approach to solve a growing problem in our criminal justice system: an over-reliance on prison in particular and on harsh punishments in general. The good news is that we can use good old-fashioned common sense to solve this problem.

A commonsense approach, of course, is grounded in evidence. Studies show that prison does not deter crime and that prisoners often leave with more severe problems than when they entered. Criminals are actually more likely to reoffend after leaving prison, not less. Why? Because prison is like a raging river that channels people into lives of crime. Fighting its muscular current requires the kind of super-human strength that most of us lack.

We don't have to throw everyone involved with the criminal justice system into this strong current, nor should we. We can, for example, enrol people convicted of minor crimes into job training, anger management and psychological counselling programmes. These types of alternative sentencing programmes are more likely to channel people to safer shores and healthier, more productive and crime-free lives. We need more alternative sentencing programmes, and fewer prison sentences, to reduce crime and improve public safety. It's just plain common sense.

Conclusion

The narrative strategy recommended here has been shown to advance public support for a wide array of reform measures. Because of its broad effectiveness, groups advocating for related but distinct policy changes to the criminal justice system can feel confident using and sharing this new story. Rather than trying to capture the public's attention with dozens of different stories, advocates can amplify their efforts by putting forward a single narrative that has the power to 'lift all boats' and advance multiple policy discussions. The research presented in this MessageMemo identifies significant challenges in communicating about criminal justice but also presents an empirically tested narrative strategy that circumvents unproductive thinking and creates space for a different kind of conversation about crime and justice.

It is important to note that, while highly effective in elevating support for a wide range of criminal justice reforms and alternatives to imprisonment, some communications challenges remain. The most effective strategy for preventing crime may well be to strengthen other social services, such as those that relate to education, housing and mental health. Building the political will to strengthen these systems is a crucial objective. Furthermore, the reframing strategy outlined here does not address specific issues around gender and women in the system. Nor does it overcome the public's strongly held belief that men and women should receive the same types of interventions no matter how they enter the criminal justice system. Our research shows that people are willing to acknowledge the unique needs of imprisoned mothers but struggle to understand that women in the system have more traumatic experiences and therefore require particular kinds of interventions. Specific research on this issue is published elsewhere,[9] but additional reframing work lies ahead for those working to change the system's treatment of women.

We encourage those in the field to develop creative, authentic and meaningful versions of the story template outlined here and to share their experiences of using the recommendations with others working to prevent crime, reduce recidivism and improve public safety. Real change will only occur if communicators unite around a common framing strategy and adopt and share a new story about criminal justice.

Endnotes

[1] Durkheim, É. (2014). *The rules of sociological method: and selected texts on sociology and its method*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

[2] Arendt, H., 'Eichmann in Jerusalem—I', *The New Yorker*, Feb. 16, 1963.

[3] Explanatory Metaphors are linguistic devices that lead people to think and talk about something they were not previously proficient in thinking or talking about. By comparing an abstract idea to something concrete and familiar, metaphors make something that is hard to understand easier to understand.

[4] Quinn, N. & Holland, D. (1987). *Culture and cognition.* In D. Holland & N. Quinn (eds.). *Cultural models in language and thought.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press (pp. 3–40).

[5] A more detailed description of frame elements and their role in constructing narratives can be found in the FrameWorks Academy 'Framing Fundamentals' module. Information about how to access the module can be found here: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/frameworks-academy.html.

[6] An effective reframe overcomes the public's unproductive, default ways of thinking about an issue. To capture the messages' ability to shift people away from unproductive cultural models, some of the questions in the survey were written in multiple-choice format. Survey respondents were given answer options that reflected unproductive default assumptions – such as the idea that harsher punishments can deter crime, that the primary function of prisons should be to segregate offenders from the rest of society and that offenders do not deserve other kinds of social services upon resettlement because they have violated the law. In addition to these options, respondents were given answer options that reflect reformers' target positions. In this way, results from the survey show the messages' ability to overcome default understandings and channel thinking in ways that make people more receptive to proposed reforms to the criminal justice system.

[7] The Complete Narrative strategy demonstrated more consistent effects on public attitudes and knowledge about criminal justice reform in the first wave of the survey. In that wave, all of the Values, including *Problem-Solving*, failed to increase public understanding and support for reform in most outcome areas. Some of the Values, in fact, resulted in negative effects. In the first wave, for example, *Problem-Solving* decreased understanding of *Decreased Opportunities and Increased Stigma* by 4 percentage points but increased support by 4 percentage points in the second wave. This indicates that Values are inconsistent and even volatile when used in isolation. Communicators can safeguard against volatility by embedding Values in a Complete Narrative.

[8] See, for example, Witte, K. & Allen, M. (2000). 'A meta-analysis of fear appeals: Implications for effective public health campaigns', *Health Education & Behavior*, 27 (5): 591–615.

[9] O'Neil, M., Kendall-Taylor, N. & Bales, S. N. (2015). *Communicating about women and criminal justice in the United Kingdom: A FrameWorks Research Brief.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.