



Advocacy Education Series: Changing the Narrative

The work of criminal justice reform goes beyond talking to elected officials about specific policies. Large-scale change requires fundamental shifts in the way that we talk and think about the criminal legal system and those directly impacted by it. These narrative shifts depend on strategic, audience-specific messaging on emotion-laden topics like violence and incarceration. The tips below are meant to facilitate more effective conversations about criminal justice issues and help build consensus around potential policy changes. Use these as a starting point, tailoring your message for your specific audience.

- **Lead with the core values** such as accountability, repair, safety, redemption, second chances, and community. Explore the ways in which an exclusive focus on punishment and incarceration work to prevent, rather than promote, the full realization of these values. Emphasize that these values are universal and should apply to everyone, including individuals involved in the criminal legal system and their families.
- **Emphasize a shared vision focused on preventing harm.** Talk about the ways in which the criminal legal system creates and perpetuates harm. Highlight alternatives and solutions that address the root causes of crime, including poverty, addiction, and mental health issues. Envision a future in which communities thrive without throwing people away.
- **Include everyone in your vision of justice.** Focus on comprehensive changes rather than emphasizing narrow reforms for only ‘non-violent’ offenses. Recognize the inherent humanity of each person. Emphasize that the criminal legal system must be fair and just for everyone. Know that eliminating mass incarceration will require moving beyond the ‘non-violent’ reforms.
- **Lift up the voices** of individuals who have been directly impacted by the criminal legal system and who have survived violence—and recognize the overlap between the two groups.
- **Use humanizing language;** resist the labels imposed by the criminal legal system. For example, use “incarcerated people” or “people in jail” instead of “inmates” or “convicts.”

Additional Resources

[Building a Narrative to Address Violence in the U.S. | The Opportunity Agenda](#)

[Criminal Justice Reform Phrase Guide | The Opportunity Agenda](#)

[Ten Lessons for Talking About Criminal Justice Issues | The Opportunity Agenda](#)

[Transforming the System | The Opportunity Agenda](#)

[People First Campaign| FWD.us](#)

[The Language Project | The Marshall Project](#)

For additional guidance or questions, contact Monica L. Reid, Senior Director of Advocacy, at mreid@nacdl.org.