



TOWARD JUSTICE



Effective Community Safety Messaging To Advance Racial And Social Justice In The Deep South



**A MESSAGING
GUIDE**



ABOUT US



The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people. Civil rights lawyers Morris Dees and Joseph Levin Jr. founded the SPLC in 1971 to ensure that the promise of the civil rights movement became a reality for all. Since then, we've won numerous landmark legal victories on behalf of the exploited, the powerless, and the forgotten. Our lawsuits have toppled institutional racism and stamped out remnants of Jim Crow segregation; destroyed some of the nation's most violent white supremacist groups; and protected the civil rights of children, women, the disabled, immigrants and migrant workers, the LGBTQ+ community, prisoners, and many others who faced discrimination, abuse, or exploitation. The SPLC Policy Research team contributed their thought leadership to the development of this messaging guide.



Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (GSSR) is a national public opinion research firm with special expertise in conducting research on emotionally and socially complex issues. GSSR's cutting-edge approach is built on decades of experience in polling, social and political marketing, and policy analysis and communications, and is rooted in the latest research on neuroscience, emotion, psychology, cognitive linguistics, and narrative theory. This unique methodology is used to unpack underlying attitudes and emotional reactions that impact behavior and decision-making. We use this *heartwired* approach to develop effective message frameworks that enable deep attitudinal change and equip advocates to accelerate positive social and policy change. Learn more about GSSR's research approach at goodwinsimon.com and heartwiredforchange.com. Amy Simon, Sara Knight, James Telesford, Daniel Gonzalez Galvan, and Justin Adams of GSSR contributed their thought leadership to the development of this messaging guide.



WELCOME

Advocates across the Deep South working to change current approaches to policing and incarceration know how difficult making progress on these issues can be. As we try to build public support for any type of alternatives, we are faced with on-the-ground realities that include politicians tapping into people’s broad and profound concerns about crime and community safety, general concerns over the scarcity of available resources to fund alternatives, and a belief that more policing and harsh punishments are the best deterrents to crime.

This work becomes even more difficult during election cycles, when candidates often cherry pick statistics and use “tough-on-crime” narratives as a way to win—by triggering existing concerns and fears among their voters. This action, in turn, causes many people to become more concerned about crime, even though many people say that they personally feel safe in their own community. It also prevents productive conversations about real potential solutions from taking place, slowing meaningful progress.

The **goal of this project** is to address these dynamics by developing evidence-based messaging interventions that can effectively counter “tough-on-crime” narratives and build more support for community-based alternatives to policing and incarceration in the Deep South. Guided by the following objectives, the research team developed a plan for research and messaging development to achieve this goal:

- 1 Understand how potential supporters in five Deep South states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi) perceive and process narratives around violence, crime, police, and community safety;
- 2 Identify existing messaging opportunities and barriers among potential supporters when it comes to building support for more community-based approaches to crime prevention and decreasing support for a reliance on law enforcement and incarceration; and
- 3 Develop messaging interventions that successfully acknowledge and calm audience concerns, introduce and validate alternative approaches, and expand support for these alternative policies and practices.

We hope you find value in this work and identify opportunities to put the insights and recommendations to work in your own message development.



What You’ll Find in This Guide

- ① A “Guide at a Glance” that includes a summary of key information and messaging recommendations.
- ② A deep understanding of the mindset of potential supporters on alternatives to policing and incarceration.
- ③ A set of overall and issue-specific, evidence-based recommendations to consider as you develop your own messaging.
- ④ A set of state-specific findings and important nuances.
- ⑤ Examples of effective messaging that have been tested in the research.

Note: Additional important background that can help you navigate this guide can be found in the appendix starting on page 99.

Brief Research Methodology



The findings and evidence-based recommendations presented in this messaging guide are developed from in-depth qualitative and quantitative research conducted from February 2023 to July 2024. The research team explored the state of the public conversation and the mindset of our audience (see page 12 for more on our audience) and tested messaging materials to determine the most effective ways to calm audience concerns about crime and community safety while creating openings to support community-based options and related policy changes.

This process proceeded in three iterative phases: landscape research, mindset research, and persuasion research.



Landscape Research

Goal: To understand the ways in which criminal legal system reforms and community safety are already being discussed in media coverage—and to digest related findings from existing research.

- A media audit to better understand the media landscape and messaging frames in news coverage of topics related to policing, crime, incarceration, and community safety, along with a social listening analysis to understand how readers metabolize and respond to news coverage.
- A survey audit to review and digest findings from available public opinion research related to policing, crime, incarceration, and community safety.



Mindset Research

Goal: To explore and understand our audience's lived experiences, beliefs, values, identities, and emotions that inform audience perspectives, messaging opportunities, and barriers.

- Two online English-language asynchronous mindset focus groups: the first from April 26 to May 4, 2023 (participants from Florida and Georgia), and the second from June 1 to June 8, 2023 (participants from Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi).
- Two online, synchronous focus groups conducted in Spanish on February 13, 2024 among participants from Georgia and Florida.



Persuasion Research

Goal: Build on mindset research to test and quantify the impact of specific messaging and messengers with our audience.

- Two online English-language asynchronous persuasion focus groups: the first from October 23 to 31, 2023 (participants from Florida and Georgia), and the second from November 13 to 17, 2023 (participants from Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi).
- An online dial-test survey among 2,127 people fielded in English and Spanish in February 2024 in Alabama (n=410); Florida (n=505); Georgia (n=506); Louisiana (n=406); and Mississippi (n=300).
- An online dial-test survey among 1,506 people fielded in English and Spanish in July 2024 in Alabama (n=306); Florida (n=300); Georgia (n=300); Louisiana (n=300); and Mississippi (n=300).

▶ For more details about our research methodology, see the appendix on page 114.



TABLE OF CONTENTS



Welcome	i
Guide At a Glance	1
Our Audience’s Mindset: Foundational Insights	1
Summary of Messaging Recommendations to Support Community-Based Alternatives to Policing and Mass Incarceration	2
Overall Messaging Recommendations	2
Issue-Specific Messaging Recommendations	6
Community-Based Approaches to Crime Reduction and Violence Prevention	6
Violence Interruption	6
Restorative Justice	7
Reducing Drug Sentencing and Marijuana Decriminalization	7
Mental Health Emergency Responders	7
Re-Entry Programs and Parole	8
Youth Incarceration	8
Connecting the Dots on Disproportionate Impacts	9
State-Specific Messaging Nuances	10
Alabama	10
Florida	10
Georgia	11
Louisiana	11
Mississippi	11
Our Audience and Their Mindset	12
Who Is Our Audience?	12
The Mindset of Our Audience	13
Many are concerned about crime—even if people feel safe where they live	14
The police are largely perceived as both a source of protection and a deterrent to crime	14
Harsh punishment and policing are perceived as the primary deterrent for crime	15
Many have deeply held values of individual responsibility, accountability, and proportional punishment	15
Most lack awareness that community-based alternatives exist—and work	15
Messaging Recommendations	16
Overall Recommendations	16
I. Foster Connection and Create Relevance	18
Elevate Shared Values	18
Include a Range of Credible Messengers	21
Make It Local	22
II. Show How Harms Impact Individuals, Families, and Communities—and How the Solutions Benefit Everyone....	23
Name That Alternative Solutions Do Exist—and They Work	23
Acknowledge Current Challenges	24
Describe Concrete Harms	26
Connect Solutions to the Harms They Address	27
Say What We’re FOR	30
III. Disrupt and Replace Our Audience’s Flawed Mental Templates	32
Show a Person’s Full Humanity	33
Tell Stories of Transformation and Redemption	34



Incorporate Facts With Impact.....	36
IV. What to Consider...and Avoid	38
Issue-Specific Messaging Recommendations.....	39
Community-Based Approaches to Crime Reduction and Violence Prevention.....	40
Violence Interruption.....	41
Restorative Justice.....	43
Reducing Drug Sentencing and Marijuana Decriminalization	46
Mental Health Emergency Responders	48
Re-Entry Programs and Parole	49
Expanding Parole Eligibility	51
Youth Incarceration	53
Connecting the Dots on Disproportionate Impacts	56
Messaging About Race in the Criminal Legal System: Opportunities and Challenges	59
Audience-Specific Nuances.....	62
Compelling Messaging by Gender.....	62
Compelling Messaging by Race and Ethnicity.....	63
Compelling Messaging by Political Party.....	66
Compelling Messaging by Age.....	70
Building Support Among Spanish-Speaking Audiences	71
States at a Glance	74
State at a Glance: Alabama	74
Message Testing by Alabama Region.....	78
State at a Glance: Florida	80
Message Testing by Florida Region.....	83
State at a Glance: Georgia	84
Message Testing by Georgia Region	88
State at a Glance: Louisiana.....	90
Message Testing by Louisiana Region	93
State at a Glance: Mississippi	94
Message Testing by Mississippi Region.....	96
Looking Forward.....	98
Appendices.....	99
Important Background to Help You Navigate This Guide	99
A Heartwired Research Approach: Developing Messaging That Meets Our Audience’s Needs and Calms Their Concerns	99
Key Concept: Upstairs Brain/Downstairs Brain.....	101
Key Concept: The Adjacent Possible.....	102
Deconstructed Messaging Examples	104
Kathryn (Louisiana)	104
Leonard (Georgia).....	106
Marche (Alabama)	108
Maria (Florida)	109
Luis (Louisiana)	111
Worksheets and Exercises	112
Worksheet: Developing Values-Based Messaging to Build and Expand Support for Criminal Legal Reform	112
Detailed Methodology	114
Landscape Research.....	114
Mindset Research	115
Persuasion Research.....	116
Acknowledgments	117



GUIDE AT A GLANCE



» Our Audience's Mindset: Foundational Insights



When it comes to the mindset of our audience, there are foundational insights and perspectives our audience already holds about crime, community safety, and criminal legal policies that are important to understand and are relevant across issues and states.

The concerns and considerations are based on our audience's emotions, lived experiences, values, beliefs, and identities—and they significantly impact how our audience receives and perceives our messaging. These foundational insights include the following:



Many are concerned about crime—even if people feel safe where they live. Our audience is very concerned about crime. Some have direct experience with being unsafe in their communities. Even if people feel generally safe where they live, many voice concern about themselves or their loved ones becoming a victim of crime (regardless of actual statistics). This perception is fueled by news coverage and by political candidates leveraging audience fears during election cycles to win votes. To be effective, our messaging needs to acknowledge and help our audience to calm these concerns.



Harsh punishment and policing are perceived as the primary deterrent for crime. Many among our audience hold a foundational belief that the criminal legal system must be harshly punitive to be an effective deterrent for crime. This often translates into wanting to see more police on the streets and harsh sentencing for those convicted of causing harm.



Deeply held values of individual responsibility, accountability, and proportional punishment are common. Our audience almost universally wants to be reassured that people who are convicted of committing a crime—particularly if they are convicted of causing violent, physical harm—will be held to account and mandated to take responsibility for their actions. Our audience also wants to ensure that the consequences of committing a crime are directly proportional to the crime itself—not too heavy or too light. Effective messaging elevates these values in ways that align with our policy goals.



Most lack awareness that community-based alternatives exist—and work. While our audience has an incomplete concept of how criminal legal policies currently work, most are very familiar with the big picture: police arrest someone who breaks the law, then that person goes to court and—if convicted—they go to prison. In fact, most cannot imagine a system that works any other way and are wary of alternatives when introduced without sufficient surrounding context or proof points. To enable our audience to be open to change, our messaging needs to paint a vivid picture for them of the alternative approaches that exist and how they are successful.






Summary of Messaging Recommendations to Support Community-Based Alternatives to Policing and Mass Incarceration

As a collective package, the following research-based messaging recommendations are highly effective. They equip our audience with what they need to begin having new emotional reactions to current approaches to policing and incarceration. This then enables them to become more supportive of possible alternative, community-based approaches.


While each recommendation is distinct, they are also interconnected—they build on one another and work together. Note that each of the messaging recommendations summarized in the following table is outlined in more detail later in this guide.

Overall Messaging Recommendations <i>(see page 16 for the full recommendations)</i>		
What Our Messaging Needs to Do	How We Can Accomplish This	Why This Is Important to Our Audience
 Foster Connection and Create Relevance	<p>Elevate Shared Values in messaging, including collective well-being, community, family, care, personal accountability, second chances and redemption, and contribution. <i>(For examples of incorporating these shared values in messaging, see the table on page 19.)</i></p>	<p>Showing these values in the context of the solutions and policies we propose is not only critical for building connection with our audience—it also helps them to see how the solutions support the values that are core to them.</p>
	<p>Include a Range of Credible Messengers speaking from their own experiences, underscoring both the harm of the current system and the possibility of positive change. <i>Note: Local messengers are most credible, although messengers from other Southern states are still relatable.</i></p>	<p>When messengers speak from their own lived experience, it not only builds emotional connection and creates an opportunity for our audience to identify with the messenger—our audience also views the information being relayed as more credible. This credibility also helps when it comes to filling knowledge gaps our audience may have.</p>
	<p>Make It Local—show messengers and use examples from local, Southern communities. For our Southern audience, do not use examples and messengers from outside of the South.</p>	<p>Our audience is deeply skeptical of messengers or examples from non-Southern states or cities, feeling like those places are too different—and what works in those communities will not work in their own.</p>




Overall Messaging Recommendations

(see page 16 for the full recommendations)

What Our Messaging Needs to Do	How We Can Accomplish This	Why This Is Important to Our Audience
 <p>Show How Harms Impact Individuals, Families, and Communities—and How the Solutions Benefit Everyone</p>	<p>Name That Alternative Solutions Do Exist—and They Work—by showing alternative approaches to policing and incarceration and how these solutions are effective.</p>	<p>Our audience is generally unable to envision effective alternatives to the current approaches of policing and incarceration. They see prison as a powerful deterrent and an effective form of punishment—and believe that violence and crime are simply intractable problems with no better way to tackle them than through policing and incarceration.</p>
	<p>Acknowledge Current Challenges that many people are facing—including many among our audience—and underscore how solutions benefit the entire community.</p>	<p>When our messaging acknowledges the challenges that people face, it enables our audience to be more open to hearing what we have to say. Acknowledging challenges can also help make the message seem more credible because it signals to our audience that the messenger or message is rooted in what’s happening on the ground, right now.</p>
	<p>Describe Concrete Harms caused by the current system, including their connection back to systemic root causes and the impact those harms have on families and communities (e.g., high rates of child poverty and youth incarceration).</p>	<p>Our audience isn’t aware of or doesn’t understand the full range of harms caused by the current system. This includes the reality of disproportionate impact, the role of root causes, and how the harms the system causes to individuals have a broader impact. Accordingly, our messaging must outline concrete harms to help our audience see the full picture.</p>
	<p>Connect Solutions to the Harm They Address—and show how they benefit the community as a whole, in addition to supporting impacted individuals.</p>	<p>When our audience recognizes the concrete harms that people are experiencing—<i>and</i> how the solutions we are proposing connect back to address those specific harms—it helps to fill knowledge gaps and disrupt flawed beliefs our audience may hold. This helps to repair their broken reasoning chains.</p>
	<p>Say What We’re FOR—create an emotional connection with our audience by providing an overarching and aspirational vision.</p>	<p>An aspirational vision gives our audience something to be <i>FOR</i> rather than only something they can be against. In addition, it helps to show our audience the ways in which their deeply held values and beliefs are in conflict with how the current criminal legal system works.</p>

Overall Messaging Recommendations

(see page 16 for the full recommendations)

What Our Messaging Needs to Do	How We Can Accomplish This	Why This Is Important to Our Audience
 <p>Disrupt and Replace Our Audience's Flawed Mental Templates <i>(the flawed images and beliefs that already exist in our audience's minds—see page 32 for more)</i></p>	<p>Show a Person's Full Humanity rather than solely a challenging moment in their life, especially when it comes to those who have been incarcerated or those who have experience with the criminal legal system in other ways.</p>	<p>Our audience holds flawed beliefs and assumptions about people who have experience with the criminal legal system. These flawed beliefs do not represent the whole of a person's story—only parts of it. By showing a person's full humanity, we disrupt these flawed beliefs and help replace them with ones that are fairer and more accurate. This helps our audience to repair their broken reasoning chains and enables them to become more supportive.</p>
	<p>Tell Stories of Transformation and Redemption, when possible, underscoring a person's renewed focus on community, family, or contribution to others (e.g., tutoring someone or providing support while in prison).</p>	<p>Stories of transformation and redemption help disrupt our audience's flawed mental template of people who have served time. Transformation and redemption stories are particularly effective at calming audience concerns about past behavior deemed criminal or violent. Including details about an individual's shift over time is important—without them our audience assumes that a person's past behavior is predictive of future behavior.</p>
	<p>Incorporate Key Facts and information that underscore the harms of our current approach and highlight the positive impact of proposed solutions.</p>	<p>Our audience is unaware of the depth of harm caused by our current approaches, or that we can do things differently in a way that supports our collective well-being. Concrete statistics and key facts showing the positive impact of alternatives to policing and incarceration help to show our audience that these alternatives can, in fact, work.</p>





Important Messaging Sequencing. Messaging sequencing directly impacts how compelling messaging is. The following is a general outline for how to build a message to effectively expand support for criminal legal system reforms.



Open with shared values, including family, safety, opportunity, and care for community. Weave in shared values throughout. (See page 18.)



Acknowledge existing concerns or realities when appropriate. This allows your audience to feel like you understand their perspective and builds message credibility.



Paint a picture of credible harms, including supporting statistics or details. Without supporting information, many among our audience will disregard the claim of harm as “emotional” rather than “factual.”



Name and normalize past or initial discomfort or lack of familiarity with criminal legal systems and processes. (See page 28.) So many among our audience do not know about these systems or are learning new details through messaging. Mirror that this is normal and completely okay.



Connect the dots between what needs to change and the solution you propose. Help our audience see how the alternative you propose could work, and how it could benefit the community broadly (See page 27.)



Disrupt our audience’s flawed mental template of people who are arrested or incarcerated. Show messengers in the context of their family and community, including details of contributions large and small. Include details about their daily life, family, and job to underscore that they are whole, rounded people—and part of a community. (See page 32.)



Attest to positive outcomes or the possibility of positive outcomes once change is enacted. Use Southern examples and statistics to underscore the possibility of positive impact. (See page 29.)



Re-affirm shared values in the closing call to action. (See page 18.)



What to Consider...and Avoid. As you develop your own messaging, there are a few additional considerations and language shifts that the research finds make communications more effective. See page 38 for more on these nuances.

CONSIDER...	CONSIDER AVOIDING...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Using Southern examples and Southern messengers 	<p>Examples and messengers that our audience perceive as outside the South or from liberal areas that they believe do not reflect their identity and values</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Discussing community programs in concrete, specific terms 	<p>Saying <i>community investments</i> as a general term</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Saying <i>child, kid, young person, youth</i> (when talking about youth incarceration) 	<p>Saying <i>young adult, young man, young woman, teenager, juvenile</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Saying <i>accountability</i> 	<p>Saying <i>punishment or consequences</i></p>



Issue-Specific Messaging Recommendations

(these are relevant across states—see page 39 for the full recommendations)

Issue Area	How to Develop Messaging That Is Effective
<p>Community-Based Approaches to Crime Reduction and Violence Prevention (see page 40 for additional details)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⦿ Show the scope of the problem, including the impact on communities and families. Include key information as proof points (e.g., the number of people incarcerated in a state or area, or the cost of funding prisons while community support programs and families are struggling to find funds). ⦿ Elevate shared values of community care and well-being, alongside the importance of someone being accountable for their actions. ⦿ Connect the dots between bigger-picture root causes of people’s criminal-legal involvement (e.g., poverty, hunger, lack of housing, and insufficient educational or employment opportunities) and how the proposed community-based solution directly addresses those causes. ⦿ Fill knowledge gaps about proposed approaches since they are often new to our audience. How do they work—in concrete terms? What are the steps and processes involved? It isn’t recommended to belabor details, but to sketch out the process so our audience can understand it. ⦿ Include concrete statistics showing evidence of positive impact (e.g., rates of recidivism or rates of crime going down). Doing so calms concerns about the efficacy of the proposed policy or change.
<p>Violence Interruption (see page 41 for additional details)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⦿ Connect the dots between the problem and the solution, underscoring the importance of proactively preventing more violence and harm to a community. ⦿ Frame violence interruption as both the direct act of mediation or halting retaliation and ensuring people’s basic needs are being met to interrupt cycles of poverty and violence in a community. ⦿ Underscore that violence interrupters come from the community where they are working; they are trusted by the people they are engaging, and their impact is rooted in relationships. ⦿ Be clear that violence interrupters work in parallel with law enforcement (not in opposition or as a replacement) and are thoroughly trained. ⦿ Clarify that violence interrupters are fully trained and not generally doing their work in the midst of violence. Instead, they are primarily talking with and helping people to de-escalate and avoid future violence. Our audience worries that violence interrupters are being put in danger; unless we calm those concerns, our audience remains skeptical. ⦿ Include concrete statistics, evidence of success, or positive impacts of violence interruption in a local community (e.g., <i>rates of homicides and violent crime are drastically reduced in communities with violence interruption programs in place—87% in one Atlanta area, where the program also focuses on helping youth and families meet their basic needs</i>).¹ ⦿ Elevate the voices of people who are themselves violence interrupters, sharing their own stories about coming to the work and why it’s important and impactful—including narratives about personal transformation or redemption when applicable.

1 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data.



Issue-Specific Messaging Recommendations
(these are relevant across states—see page 39 for the full recommendations)

Issue Area	How to Develop Messaging That Is Effective
<p>Restorative Justice <i>(see page 43 for additional details)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⦿ Lead with the importance of holding someone accountable for causing harm—and that restorative justice is a way to do that. ⦿ Be clear that this process only happens if <u>both</u> the victim and person convicted of causing harm agree to participate. It can replace a prison sentence or reduce it, depending on the agreement. ⦿ Underscore that restorative justice provides an opportunity for accountability to be directly related to the harm caused—and provides an opportunity for a victim to have a voice in the process. ⦿ Highlight a range of messengers with different experiences going through the process; this helps create an emotional connection as well as fill knowledge gaps about the process. ⦿ Model the emotional journey of a person who has been harmed being open to the process of restorative justice, and explain what they may get out of it. ⦿ Include statistics and other evidence of efficacy, including that restorative justice agreements are usually followed, and that some studies show that <i>in places where restorative justice programs have been implemented, 80% or more of victims report that they are satisfied with their experience and do not seek any further punishment.</i>² ⦿ Outline examples of what a restorative justice agreement might entail, when appropriate.
<p>Reducing Drug Sentencing and Marijuana Decriminalization <i>(see page 46 for additional details)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⦿ Highlight high rates of incarceration in specific states or communities related to non-violent drug offenses. ⦿ Detail the financial cost of incarceration to taxpayers, underscoring potential cost savings if marijuana were decriminalized. ⦿ Be clear about the impacts on individual lives, families, and the community because of disproportionately harsh sentencing (e.g., <i>unable to find work and support themselves because of a criminal conviction</i>). ⦿ Reassure our audience that, if legalized, marijuana would only be allowed for responsible use by those over the age of 21.
<p>Mental Health Emergency Responders <i>(see page 48 for additional details)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⦿ Frame messaging around the importance of more mental health support services, including for mental health emergencies. ⦿ Make the clear case that police are overburdened and not trained to handle mental health emergencies; it is not their job, and they are not trained to handle mental health crises (e.g., <i>Instead of tasking police with doing the jobs of social workers, counselors, and mediators, we should make sure our communities have mental health clinics with trained, independent social workers and mental health professionals who can answer these calls</i>). <p align="center"><i>(continued on next page)</i></p>

² Source: https://impactjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/CWW_RJreport.pdf (CA); <https://www.c4rj.org/what-is-restorative-justice/success-data> (MA)



Issue-Specific Messaging Recommendations

(these are relevant across states—see page 39 for the full recommendations)

Issue Area	How to Develop Messaging That Is Effective
<p>Mental Health Emergency Responders (see page 48 for additional details)</p>	<p><i>(continued from previous page)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Include concrete statistics underscoring the frequency that mental health-related emergencies escalate to violence as a result of untrained, ill-equipped police answering the calls (e.g., <i>At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,³ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. And in 2022 alone, 109 people in the U.S. were killed after police responded to reports of someone behaving erratically or having a mental health crisis.⁴</i>) ⊙ Introduce the solution of having trained mental health specialists answer emergency calls. ⊙ Be clear that police would be on call to provide backup as needed. While our audience predominantly supports the idea that well-trained mental health specialists should respond directly to mental health emergencies, they want reassurance that police will be available as backup should things turn violent. ⊙ Keep a neutral tone when talking about police. Highlight the benefit of mental health first responders for those in need of help/support, overburdened police, and the community as a whole.
<p>Re-Entry Programs and Parole (see page 49 for additional details)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Lean into values of second chances, accountability, redemption, cost efficiency, and contribution (implicitly or explicitly). ⊙ Include statistics to affirm prison overcrowding and its impact. ⊙ Connect the dots to how increasing parole eligibility can address overcrowding. ⊙ Clearly state that people who are eligible for parole will have completed education and job training programs. ⊙ Focus the message on the opportunity to apply and be eligible for parole, rather than the outcome of a parole hearing.
<p>Youth Incarceration (see page 53 for additional details)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Elevate shared values of second chances and care for children and youth, as well as accountability. ⊙ Center a child’s story in the context of their family, home, community, or school to remind our audience of their youth and full humanity. ⊙ Use words like <i>child, kid, youth, and young person</i> to remind our audience who we’re talking about. Avoid words like <i>young adult</i> as they imply the child has adult capacities. Also avoid <i>juvenile</i> as it is cold and distancing, and avoid <i>teens</i>, as this often evokes young people who are out of control. Talk about kids as kids. ⊙ Connect the dots between root causes and behavior when appropriate (e.g., stealing because of hunger). ⊙ Highlight the importance and positive impact of meeting children’s needs on both the child and the community as a whole. ⊙ Underscore the concrete harms of incarceration to young people, including added trauma and further destabilization. <p><i>(continued on next page)</i></p>

³ Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

⁴ Source: <https://policeviolencereport.org/2022/>



Issue-Specific Messaging Recommendations
(these are relevant across states—see page 39 for the full recommendations)

Issue Area	How to Develop Messaging That Is Effective
<p>Youth Incarceration <i>(see page 53 for additional details)</i></p>	<p><i>(continued from previous page)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⦿ Emphasize the possibility of positive interventions, including concrete examples of a young person having the opportunity to thrive as a result of positive interventions. ⦿ Include statistics about the cost of incarceration versus education to underscore imbalanced priorities (e.g., <i>In Florida, it can cost over \$130,000 per year to imprison a child, but about \$12,000 for a year of public education.</i>⁵) ⦿ Propose alternative methods of accountability to reassure our audience that action is being taken, while also supporting a child’s opportunity to grow up and thrive.
<p>Connecting the Dots on Disproportionate Impacts <i>(see page 56 for additional details)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⦿ Lean into aspirational American values of shared humanity, equality, fairness, non-discrimination, and impartiality in our legal system. We have not achieved these yet, and are a long way off, but many among our audience agree that we should—and are willing to support changes that get us closer to fairness and equality. ⦿ Connect the dots between the harm you’re outlining and the positive change you’re proposing. Be clear that damaging racial stereotypes are disproportionately harming people who are Black and Latino. ⦿ Include state-specific statistics detailing the high arrest and incarceration rates of Black and Latino people, which are compelling for many among our audience and underscore the need for change. This also underscores that the problem is systemic and needs to be addressed in a systemic way. ⦿ Include comparison details when they underscore unequal levels of arrest for the same conviction or more severe sentencing for comparable convictions. ⦿ Center shared humanity, showing people embedded in the context of their families and communities. ⦿ Be clear that addressing inequities in our criminal legal system benefits our communities as a whole.



⁵ Source: Internal SPLC data analysis available upon request

State-Specific Messaging Nuances




(see page 74 for more on these nuances)

State	How to Develop Messaging That Is Effective
 <p>Alabama <i>(see page 74 for additional details)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Elevate values of individual responsibility, accountability, fairness, and community care. Show proposed programs facilitating individuals taking accountability for their own lives while connecting the dots to how those programs also support the community broadly. This includes supporting youth so they have an opportunity to grow into contributing members of the community, as well as the economic benefits of proposed programs. ● Disrupt the flawed mental template our audience currently holds when they think of who in Alabama may be impacted by the system, including by showing a diversity of people who are directly impacted. This can help increase identification with the issue and expand the images of who comes to mind for our audience around the criminal legal system. ● Incorporate stories of redemption or transformation and contributions of those who have been impacted by the system. This can help to disrupt our audience’s flawed mental templates, as well as help connect with our audience’s shared values around responsibility and accountability. ● Back up assertions of disproportionate impacts with concrete statistics from neutral or bipartisan sources. This is most compelling for those who do not have lived experience of discrimination or racism within the criminal legal system. Quantifying these harms, within values-based messaging, builds more credibility. ● Include specific proof points—either lived experiences or statistics—that show the positive impact or possibility of alternative approaches.
 <p>Florida <i>(see page 80 for additional details)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Center the disproportionate punishment of sentencing for non-violent drug offenses, particularly if making the case for marijuana decriminalization. ● Elevate shared values of accountability and fairness while incorporating concrete statistics and first-person narratives to underscore the ways that current punishments are out of proportion with the offense. Know that there is much less support for marijuana decriminalization among Latino audiences. <i>(For additional guidance on communicating with a Spanish-speaking audience, see page 71.)</i> ● Paint a picture of the ways that alternative approaches to accountability support community well-being overall—while also helping to directly reduce crime and violence by addressing the root causes of people’s criminal-legal involvement (e.g., directing people to rehab instead of prison; providing mental health services; or increasing job and educational opportunities to allow people to support themselves). ● Include statistics showing the financial cost to taxpayers alongside the harm to communities and individuals—and connect the dots to the positive potential of shifting resources to better support community programs. ● Acknowledge the perception that police have difficult jobs and frame policies as supporting law enforcement—or at least not interfering with the police. It is particularly helpful to note that proposed policy changes can ease the load for “overburdened” officers. This helps to calm concerns about defunding or disrespecting the police, given the importance of a <i>both/and</i> approach for our audience. ● Highlight the value of safety, including examples and statistics underscoring how proposed alternatives support community safety in specific ways. This helps to calm our audience’s concerns and allows them to see that alternative approaches can support community safety without additional police on the streets. Until hearing about how proposed alternatives can facilitate community safety, many believe that more policing is the primary path to community safety.



State-Specific Messaging Nuances

(see page 74 for more on these nuances)

State	How to Develop Messaging That Is Effective
 <p>Georgia (see page 84 for additional details, including message testing by region)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Detail ways in which proposed programs and policies will be implemented whenever possible to calm skepticism about government efficacy. Include specifics about non-profits engaged in the process alongside government when relevant. ● Be direct about disproportionate impacts and harms to people who are Black and Latino, including proof points and statistics from non-partisan sources. ● Acknowledge the real impact of poverty and other root causes of people’s criminal-legal involvement on the lives of so many and connect the dots to how proposed policy changes or new programs can help both alleviate poverty and reduce people’s criminal-legal involvement. ● Frame proposed policy changes around self-sufficiency and community well-being. These two values are tied together; if people have what they need to take care of themselves and their families, the whole community benefits. ● Elevate the impact of community-based approaches to violence reduction and prevention, including violence interruption, with concrete proof points underscoring the positive possibility. ● Detail the possibility and opportunity of alternative approaches to accountability and redemption, including restorative justice. Be explicit about the ways that accountability can be directly tied to the specific harm that was caused. Include how it works and back up assertions of impact with concrete statistics.
 <p>Louisiana (see page 90 for additional details)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Begin with acknowledging the reality that many people are struggling. Starting this way builds credibility among our audience. It also signals that the proposed policy solutions that follow are rooted in lifting the community as a whole, rather than taking resources away from people who are in need; and it helps to calm concerns about increasing crime by centering reforms as addressing the root causes. ● Help our audience imagine alternative approaches, which they may be unaware of, including approaches that do not involve police. ● Connect the dots between harm and hope. Quantify the scope of the problem and lift up examples of what else is possible. ● Elevate shared values of community care, fairness, and proportionality. Include concrete statistics on disproportionate impacts and stories of police misconduct. ● Highlight the cost to taxpayers of police and incarceration and connect the dots to more effective ways to spend that money. ● Detail the ways in which parole is overly restrictive and punitive, including by re-incarcerating people due to technicalities—which also helps calm audience concerns about responsibility or not following the rules.
 <p>Mississippi (see page 94 for additional details)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledge that many people are struggling and elevate shared values of family, care, and community. ● Connect proposed changes and alternatives directly to the ways in which they will support people in the community, including addressing poverty, mental health challenges, hunger, and lack of housing. ● Underscore the outsized financial cost of prison in the state and make the case that taxpayer money could be better spent in ways that directly support the community—and alleviate root causes of people’s criminal-legal involvement. ● Show how violence interruption can work both in directly de-escalating violence and in helping to meet people’s immediate needs.



OUR AUDIENCE AND THEIR MINDSET

» Who Is *Our Audience*?

When we say *our audience* throughout this guide, we are referring to the intended receivers of our messaging and the focus of this research: people from five Southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi) who hold conflicting feelings on issues related to the criminal legal system—specifically, policing, incarceration, and how best to reduce crime. Importantly, the research focuses on this *conflicted* segment of the population. Our target audience does not include people who are very liberal and are already aligned with proposed community-based approaches, nor does it include those who identify as very conservative or are staunchly opposed to alternatives to our current system of policing and incarceration.

In addition to those already aligned with proposed community-based approaches, those who hold some internal conflict or openness on these issues—people who are not entirely fixed in their perspectives or who simply have not yet learned about proposed alternatives—are currently most available to us and potentially persuadable. To identify members of this *conflicted* audience, potential research participants were asked about their views on a range of statements, their level of concern about crime, and their own experiences—or the experiences of close loved ones—with police and the prison system.

Ultimately, our audience is made up of people who want to see their communities thrive and, at the same time, grapple with concerns about crime and violence. Our audience includes people who may be open to alternatives in how we approach policing and incarceration, yet they lack the information and context needed to understand how these alternatives work and how the alternatives would support their community as a whole.

The people who make up our audience do not necessarily fall neatly within specific demographic segments; there are nuances across party, ideology, race, and ethnicity. Also, support or potential support often varies depending on the specific alternative policy being discussed and can be deeply impacted by lived experience of encounters with law enforcement, the legal system, or crime. This makes conducting qualitative and quantitative research among a broad cross-section of our audience—investing in understanding the varying lived experiences, identities, values, beliefs, and emotions that are shaping their perceptions and behaviors—critical for developing messaging. By doing so, we can expand and strengthen a base of support, as well as persuade more people to become supportive on a broader range of alternative approaches to our current practices of policing and incarceration.



» The Mindset of Our Audience

Mindset research provides a window into the lived experiences, identities, beliefs, emotions, and values of the people we are trying to reach. It reveals the most powerful points of connection—those that begin with what is fundamentally true for our audience.

By better understanding our audience’s mindset, we can draw on the emotional power that helps change hearts and minds. It allows us to develop messages that align with core values our audience already holds, rather than requiring us to try and change these deeply held values before our messaging can be persuasive. Research shows that attempting to change someone else’s deeply held values is very difficult, and messaging that relies on this approach is often ineffective. Simply put, developing messaging that is rooted in values shared by both advocates and our audience can enable our audience to come to the change we seek on their own, rather than advocates trying to impose change upon them.

To understand our audience’s mindset and reasoning patterns as they engage on issues related to crime and criminal legal reform, we conducted two multi-day online Mindset focus groups from April to June 2023. These written discussions included 55 participants from across five Southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi) who hold conflicted views and feelings about these issues (*see page 114 for a detailed research methodology*). We intentionally included people who identify as Black, white, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American; people who identify as men and women; and people with varied lived experience, backgrounds, and educational and professional experiences to participate in this research.

The focus group discussions provided an interactive setting to hear from our audience and a crucial way to explore an initial set of values-based frames, themes, and messages. What we learned from these discussions also allowed us to refine our messaging approaches for subsequent research phases.



Our Audience’s Mindset: Foundational Insights

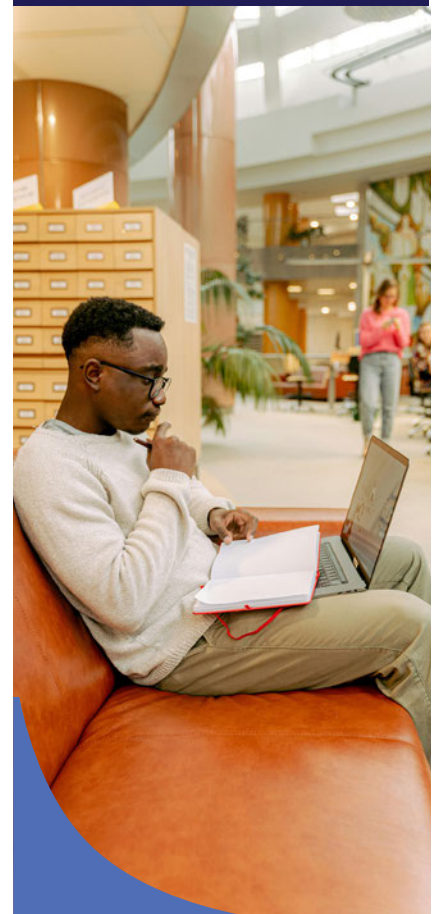
When it comes to the mindset of our audience, there are several foundational insights—perspectives our audience already has about crime, community safety, and criminal legal policies—that are important to understand and relevant across issues and states. The concerns and considerations are based on our audience’s emotions, lived experiences, values, beliefs, and identities, and significantly impact how our audience receives and perceives our messaging.

The foundational insights discussed in this section are fundamental to understanding how to develop messaging that effectively engages with the concerns and perspectives our audience already holds. We include additional audience mindset insights to outline the impact of effective messaging in the overall messaging recommendations (*pages 16-38*), issue-specific messaging recommendations (*pages 39-73*), and the States at a Glance (*pages 74-97*) sections of this guide.

Important:



The worldviews held by many among our audience do not often match the worldview that we hold as advocates who likely have a deeper understanding of the issues, a nuanced understanding of the problems we are trying to solve, and a belief that our solutions are best.



Many are concerned about crime—even if people feel safe where they live.

Our audience is very concerned about crime, full stop. Throughout the research, participants often express concern about rising crime rates in particular. Simultaneously, many say they also feel safe in the place where they live. Whether or not crime rates and violence are actually rising, many have a perception they are—in larger cities, in particular—and say their perception comes from the news coverage they watch or read. In hearing these stories, many identify with the victim of a crime as well, increasing their concern. Not only do stories about crime in the news or on social media often supersede our audience’s lived experience of safety, some even remain deeply skeptical when presented with concrete statistics showing that crime is trending down.

Gun violence, sexual assault, and home invasion robberies—all covered vividly in local news outlets or on social media—are the specific crimes that our audience says they are most worried about. In focus group discussions, many participants say they believe it is just too easy to get a gun in their state, for example. While we often see an ideological divide about gun control policies, even some conservative participants note that they want to get guns “out of the wrong hands”—and that they want to see this urgent issue addressed.

“In my specific area, there is actually not a lot of crime...I’m not scared to walk around my neighborhood at night...In areas around me, though, the crime rate is extremely high, and people are scared to leave their homes.”
— Black female, Liberal Independent, FL

For some among our audience, the rising cost of living, a lack of job opportunities, limited affordable housing, and other factors that cause economic strain are compounding existing worries about crime. They see these factors as fueling need and desperation, which have the potential to further increase crime and violence.

Given all this, our audience is eager for action to be taken to address their concerns. This makes them susceptible to “tough-on-crime” narratives that exacerbate existing fear and promise swift action to keep them safe.

The police are largely perceived as both a source of protection and a deterrent to crime.

In general, many among our audience perceive law enforcement to be key to community safety. This holds true for a majority across race, political ideology, and political party. Many think that a visible law enforcement presence is an important deterrent to crime—and that more police would make their community safer.

A majority of Black and Latino members of our audience initially express a belief that a more visible police presence improves community safety. Before reviewing any test messaging, 65 percent of Black survey respondents and 79 percent of Latino survey respondents agree with the statement that, “*Having more police on our streets is the most effective way to bring down crime rates and keep people from committing future crimes.*”

“There is a serious lack of police presence in New Orleans, it’s so bad.”
— Latino male, Moderate Democrat, LA

That said, lived experience with the police significantly impacts personal perspectives. Some participants in focus groups, especially white liberal participants and Black and Latino participants who have directly experienced racial discrimination or harassment from the police, do not share the belief that more police make a community safer. Instead, they cite the ways in which people in their community are disproportionately subject to police brutality, higher arrest rates, and harsher sentencing.

There is also a sensitivity for many among our audience around language that could be interpreted as disrespectful or blaming of police—particularly among those who are moderate or conservative, regardless of race or ethnicity. Additionally, some of those who believe that crime is on the rise place blame on the “Defund Police” movement for the rise, saying that “criminals” are only “emboldened” by a “weakened” police force.

It is important to take all of these nuances into account as we communicate with our audience and strive to build broader and deeper support for changing our criminal legal system. As we discuss in detail in the messaging recommendations



(see page 16), many can be open to alternative approaches and policies if their concerns are calmed and knowledge gaps filled. Ultimately, many among our audience support a *both/and* approach—they want police to have adequate resources while also supporting the idea of mental health first responders (see page 48) or violence interrupters (see page 41) to support community well-being, for instance.

Harsh punishment and policing are perceived as the primary deterrent for crime.

Most among our audience hold a foundational belief that the criminal legal system must be harshly punitive to be an effective deterrent for crime. Conversely, they believe the absence of harsh punishment means there is no mechanism to hold people accountable for breaking the law or causing harm—and, thus, more people will feel emboldened to commit more crime.

Our audience has such a strongly formed mental template of what “punishment” or accountability for wrongdoing looks like in our country, it leaves little room to conceptualize what alternatives could even be possible—or how our audience or their community could benefit from them. Similarly, our audience cannot yet imagine it is possible to effectively reduce criminal-legal involvement with alternative approaches to policing and law enforcement, or imagine alternatives to prison as the ultimate, appropriate punishment for causing harm. This makes it essential for our messaging to clearly and descriptively show what else is possible.

“I feel if the sentence is more severe it would be a deterrent for committing crimes.”

– White female, Moderate Independent, MS

Many have deeply held values of individual responsibility, accountability, and proportional punishment.

Our audience almost universally wants to be reassured that people who are convicted of committing a crime—particularly if they are convicted of causing violent, physical harm—will be held to account and mandated to take responsibility for their actions. They do not want anyone who has caused harm to “get off easy.” At the same time, many also want to ensure that punishment—or accountability—is proportional to the harm that was inflicted.

“People who commit crimes must pay for their crimes.”

– API female, Moderate Independent, FL

These values of individual responsibility, accountability, and proportional punishment are foundational for our audience, even if they are expressed differently by different people. You can find messaging guidance about navigating these values on page 19.

Most lack awareness that community-based alternatives exist—and work.

While many among our audience lack specific, detailed knowledge about how our criminal legal system currently works, most are very familiar with the big picture: police arrest people who break the law, then people go to court and—if convicted—they go to prison. In fact, most among our audience cannot imagine any other approach and are wary of any alternatives when introduced without sufficient surrounding context or proof points of their efficacy.

“A lot of people don’t know this program [Hope Hustlers] exists, like me. I never heard this before and I live in Atlanta. I watch local news daily. What is missing here?”

– Latina female, Moderate Democrat, GA

For our audience to be open to supporting community-based alternatives to crime prevention and reduction, we need to help them imagine what that could look like—and show them that these alternatives can work with clear-cut examples and proof points (see page 40 for more on this).





MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS

» Overall Recommendations

The following recommendations apply broadly when developing messaging to effectively counter “tough on crime” narratives and build support for community-based approaches to crime reduction and prevention. This section includes specific recommendations for how to:



Foster connection and create relevance;



Show how harms impact individuals, families, and communities—and how the solutions benefit everyone;



Disrupt and replace our audience’s flawed mental templates; and



Sequence messaging.

For messaging guidance related to specific policies tested in the research, see page 39. For additional state-specific insights and recommendations, see page 74.





A Note on Including Data and Facts in Messaging

Throughout this messaging guide, we provide examples of test messaging that includes *types* of facts that have proven helpful in building support for proposed policy changes. Of course, statistics change over time as on-the-ground realities evolve and new studies or data are released. When including data or statistics in your messaging, be sure to check your sources and include the most up to date information possible.

The research finds the following types of facts and information to be persuasive for our conflicted audience, even as some of the specific data shift:



High rates of incarceration in Southern states and nationally, signaling the broad impact of the harms our messaging highlights (e.g., *Almost one out of every 100 Americans is currently in prison or jail.*)⁶



Cost to taxpayers, including how those funds could be better used to support the community:

- **Annual budget spent on incarceration** (e.g., *Florida alone spends \$3.4 billion annually, including on incarcerating many serving time for non-violent drug offenses.*)⁷
- **Cost to incarcerate a child for a year versus a year of public education for a child** (e.g., *In Mississippi it can cost over \$155,000 per year to imprison a child, but only around \$9,000 for a year of public education.*)⁸



Disproportionate impacts on people who are Black and Latino, including higher rates of police violence, higher arrest and incarceration rates, disparate sentencing, and state populations versus incarceration rates. (e.g., *Black residents make up 32% of the population in Georgia, yet they represent 60% of those incarcerated in state prisons.*)⁹



Concrete evidence of success or positive impact when alternatives are implemented in the South (e.g., *This relationship-based approach to reducing violence is clearly working, with an Atlanta program seeing an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year.*)¹⁰

It is essential to note that while facts are critical tools for advocates, human beings are driven primarily by emotion. To generate change in our audience's attitudes, we first have to help them generate a new, different emotional reaction from the one they usually have in response to our topic. Then, we need to provide them with new information that supports new reasoning. This *emotion first, reasoning second* dynamic enables them to develop and hold onto a new belief or attitude that is more supportive. Over time, having these new attitudes leads them to be able to behave differently on the topic. For more on this, see *Key Concept: Emotions Come First, Not Information* on page 38 and also *The Power and Importance of Emotional Rebuttals* on page 22.

6 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/about/case-for-reform/>

7 Source: <https://fdc.myflorida.com/about.html>

8 Sources: <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/explore/mississippi/?section=race-interactive>; <https://www.splcenter.org/mississippi-juvenile-justice-system-reform>

9 Sources: <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-georgia.pdf> (2017). *More recent data (2023) here:* <https://gdc.georgia.gov/document/gdc-annual-fiscal-report/gdc-annual-fiscal-report-2023/download> and <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/GA,US/PST045223>.

10 Source: Hope Hustlers *internal data*

I

Foster Connection and Create Relevance



The people who make up our audience hold a range of values and beliefs connected to their differing experiences with the criminal legal system. Some have had direct encounters with law enforcement or prison, for instance, while others have perspectives that have mostly been informed by news coverage and political rhetoric.

When our messaging creates opportunities to foster emotional connection with our audience broadly, it makes that messaging more relevant—and effective. This helps to ensure the way we communicate about proposed changes to the criminal legal system resonates with our audience. The following recommendations show how we can do this effectively.

Elevate Shared Values

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Elevate shared values, including collective well-being, community, family, care, personal accountability, second chances and redemption, and contribution (*see 19 for a table of shared values with messaging examples*).

Why This Is Important for Our Audience:

When our messaging includes values that our audience shares, it resonates deeply with them. In addition, showing these values in the context of the solutions and policies we are proposing in our messaging helps our audience to see how these solutions are aligned with and support values that are core to them.

In reaction to nearly all messaging tested in the research, participants often raise the issue of personal accountability and individual responsibility. It is important to recognize that these values are deeply held by almost all participants, even if they are expressed differently by different people.

While many among our audience express the importance of holding people who break the law accountable for their mistakes or for the harm they've inflicted, they also feel that the consequences faced should be proportional to the crime. This perspective can interfere with support for some proposed policy changes, and, at the same time, it provides an opportunity to build support for others. For example, when it comes to decriminalizing marijuana, our

messaging can make the case that sentencing is too harsh for the crime committed—that the lifelong impacts of having that conviction are too severe. This is something our audience can understand and agree with.

However, when it comes to restorative justice, something our audience is much less familiar with, many are initially resistant. At first, many among our audience perceive it as a way to let people who have committed serious crimes “off the hook”—that the punishment is too weak for the severity of the crime someone has committed. For our messaging to be effective, we need to calm these concerns by showing our audience that people who have committed crimes are being held to account and that the consequences are proportional to the crime committed.

In general, most among our audience want to ensure that all crimes are sentenced fairly and appropriately.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively:

In the following table, we outline several values that our audience holds. We also provide examples of these values being expressed effectively in messaging to show how advocates share these values. It's important to remember that there are many ways to express these values effectively—and finding a way to do so that is both effective and authentic to your voice or a messenger's voice is important. It's also important to recognize that when we fail to include these core shared values in our messaging, we cede them to our opponents and cut off an important pathway for connecting with potential supporters.



SHARED VALUES WITH MESSAGING EXAMPLES

Shared Value	Ways of Expressing Value	Messaging Examples From Print Statements Tested in the Research
Safety	Include safety as a key part of the proposed policy or program change, reinforcing that we all deserve to feel and be safe in our homes and neighborhoods.	<i>“These community safety approaches help address the root causes of crime—and create a better present and future for us all.”</i>
Accountability, individual responsibility	Reassure our audience, implicitly or explicitly, that people who cause harm will be held to account with a new policy or program in place—even if accountability looks different from what our audience is accustomed to.	<i>“There is no question that when people cause harm or inflict violence on another person, they need to be held fully accountable—but a long prison sentence is not the only option.”</i>
Fiscal responsibility	When possible, underscore how funds can be reallocated and put to better use. This helps calm resource scarcity concerns as well as clarify how potential policy changes will be funded.	<i>“At a time when so many are struggling to make ends meet, we are spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars keeping people in prison every year. Florida alone spends \$3.4 billion annually, including through incarcerating many who are serving time for non-violent drug offenses. That money would be better spent improving our communities.”¹¹</i>
Community care and well-being	Lift up the ways in which potential policy or program changes can support the community as a whole, in addition to directly impacted individuals.	<i>“With restorative justice options, there is accountability that is directly connected to crime, the victim has power in the outcome because they have to sign off on the restorative justice agreement—including the consequences the person who harmed them will face—and both the victim and the person who caused harm can achieve some sense of closure, which is healing for them and for the community in general.”</i>
Rehabilitation, redemption, second chances	Concretely name the impact and importance of second chances, including programs and policies that allow for people to take responsibility for their actions, to stand on their own, and/or to contribute to others.	<i>“Not only is prison expensive to taxpayers, it doesn’t offer opportunities for genuine rehabilitation or taking real responsibility for the harm someone has caused.”</i>
Contribution	Elevate the value of contribution broadly, showing how someone is engaged in their life in ways that help others. This can be as a friend, family member, colleague, or a neighbor. Show a person’s full humanity, including participation in their community.	<i>“By reducing these penalties, we can help to prevent unnecessary incarceration, reduce the burden on our criminal justice system, and ensure more people are able to work, live, and thrive—making our whole community stronger.”</i>

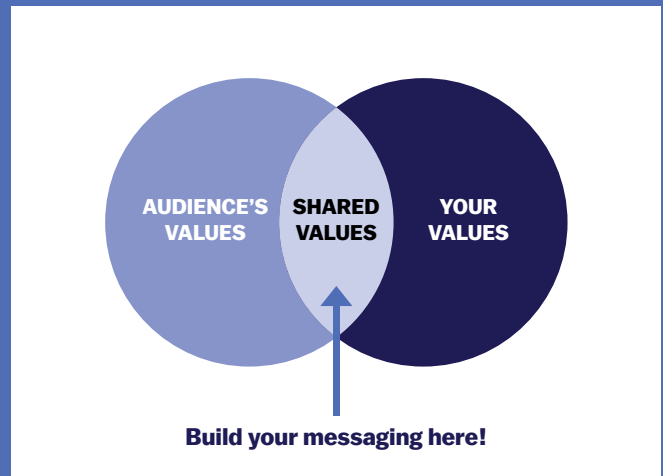
11 Source: <https://fdc.myflorida.com/about.html>

Care for family, care for children	Show the ways in which proposed policy or program changes facilitate care for families and support the well-being of children. Care for family and care for children resonate deeply for many.	<i>“When we lock up young people, we are hurting not only them, but also their families and communities. And we are taking away their chance to grow, learn, and become contributing members of our communities.”</i>
Fairness, justice	Highlight the ways current criminal legal policies are not fair, just, or impartial. This helps make the case for change in a way that resonates with our audience. There is a strong belief among our audience, and many in this country, that our laws should be fair, impartial, and just.	<i>“Studies show that Black people are seven times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of a serious offense, including murder, compared to white people.¹² The system seems to operate by a different set of rules for Black and Latino people, treating them as guilty until proven innocent. This is not fair, it’s not right, and it’s not how the system is supposed to be.”</i>
Self-sufficiency	While elevating the benefit to the community as a whole, highlight ways in which policy changes (e.g., additional re-entry programs) allow people to have the dignity and opportunity to support themselves and their families—to stand on their own two feet. Individual responsibility and self-sufficiency are core values for many among our audience.	<i>“Having a criminal record also then makes it very difficult to find work or housing after serving a sentence, so the cycle of desperation continues. But we can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize programs in our community that help people have what they need to stand on their own. This includes job training that equips people with the skills they need to support themselves and thrive.”</i>

“But what if the values and beliefs of our target audiences are troubling?”

It’s not uncommon for advocates to strongly disagree with some of the deeply held values and beliefs of their target audiences. This can lead both audiences and advocates to see themselves as having values that are fundamentally and irreconcilably at odds with one another. In some cases, that may be true. However, we cannot—at least in the short term—change our audience’s core values any more than they can change ours.

To be effective, we need to tap into the Venn diagram of shared values—the places where the values of our audience overlap with those of advocates. When we build our messaging on their pre-existing values—values that advocates also share—we can foster familiarity and help audiences to put more weight on the values and beliefs that lead them to be supportive than on those that interfere with support. This approach can also help our audience come to see the action we want them to take as being in line with who they already aspire to be and what they already believe and value, and not as out of step with their identity and values.



12 Source: <https://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race%20Report%20Preview.pdf>



Advocates Have Amygdalas, Too

As advocates, it is important to continually identify, question, and test our own assumptions about our audience. This allows us to develop more effective messaging. One way we can do this is by learning what our audience cares about and wants to know, and by centering ourselves in our audience's lived experiences, values, and beliefs. Of course, being asked to understand how potential supporters feel and think in order to persuade them to do what we see as the moral and right thing to do can trigger feelings of resentment or frustration for having to do this work in the first place. It can feel lousy and be emotionally draining.

With our amygdalas on high alert, we, like our audience, often lose access to our ability to empathize with the feelings or experiences of others or to pull back from our negative emotions. We feel defensive and want to tell our audience that their beliefs are wrong. We want to *myth bust* and expose their *flawed* ideology. However, doing so—especially initially—does little to calm the big negative emotions our audience is experiencing or prompt them to be their best selves and live their values in a positive way. In fact, it often closes the door on this conversation before it can really begin rather than cultivating opportunities for deeper and more nuanced engagement and analysis.

If we can recognize this trigger and work to calm our own amygdalas, we have an opportunity to reframe our gut reaction. To help do so, it is important for us to remember that we actually share many of these same values with our audience.

Include a Range of Credible Messengers

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Show a range of credible messengers speaking from their own experiences, underscoring both the harm of the current system and the possibility of positive change.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience:

As humans, we learn new things very effectively through stories. Therefore, when we package facts within the stories we share, it helps our audience to receive and retain the information more easily. When messengers speak from their own lived experience, it is also incredibly resonant and impactful for our audience. It not only builds emotional connection and creates an opportunity for our audience to identify with the messenger—our audience also views the information being relayed as more credible. This also helps to fill knowledge gaps our audience may have.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively:

Whenever possible, lift up the voices of people who have direct lived experience, whether they are violence interrupters, legal advocates, or someone who has themselves been incarcerated or had other encounters with the criminal legal system.

The narratives tested in the research created opportunities for our audience to connect emotionally with messengers and are very effective in helping to foster empathy within them. These narratives also fill knowledge gaps for our audience in important ways, helping to connect the dots between what's wrong with our current systems and what could be possible with proposed alternatives. Incorporating the specifics of proposed solutions within the narratives also helps our audience to understand the mechanisms, value, and impact of those alternatives (e.g., violence interruption).

See page 104 for deconstructions of several messenger videos and printed materials tested in the research.



Make It Local

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Show messengers and use examples from local, Southern communities. With our Southern audience, it is essential to not use examples and messengers from outside of the South.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience:

Our audience is deeply skeptical of messengers or examples from non-Southern states or cities. They feel those places are too different—that what works in those communities will not work in their own. The research shows that examples from non-Southern states are likely to backfire.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively:

Show local messengers and include regional examples that make the issues feel directly relevant to our audience and allow them to see the harmful impacts being experienced in their own community (or a community like theirs), such as high rates of incarceration or poverty and related taxpayer costs, mental health emergencies turning violent, or significant racial disparities. Additionally, highlighting local examples of how proposed alternatives have been successfully implemented in a community like theirs also allows them to see how these alternatives could be successful closer to home. In the absence of hyper-local examples and messengers, messaging can remain relevant to our audience if we make it local to the South.

The Power and Importance of Emotional Rebuttals



“Tough on crime” narratives that often sensationalize individual stories of violence and crime are devised to exploit, trigger, and elevate concerns that many among our audience already hold. When it comes to building support for alternatives to policing and incarceration, these concerns include fears that new or different approaches could lead to unintended consequences and impact community safety, among other fears. Those who oppose changes to the status quo effectively capitalize on these existing fears to keep our audience in a state of worry, which often prevents them from being open or able to become supportive (see *Key Concept: Upstairs Brain/Downstairs Brain on page 101 for more*).

The messaging recommendations in this guide can equip advocates to help calm our audience’s concerns, making them less susceptible to being triggered by “tough on crime” narratives and fear-based messaging. The research also shows that structuring our messages in certain ways can further limit our audience’s susceptibility to being triggered by this messaging (see *details about messaging sequencing on page 5*).

By disrupting and replacing our audience’s flawed mental template of people who serve time in prison, for instance, with more accurate and positive templates (see *page 33*), and by building connection and empathy through shared values (see *page 18*), we are effectively providing an *emotional rebuttal* to our opposition’s messaging. Emotional rebuttals are messaging interventions that focus on acknowledging and responding to the underlying fears, concerns, and emotions that our audience is

experiencing first, rather than immediately appealing to facts, reason, and logic.

Emotional rebuttals can be both reactive and proactive messaging interventions. They can be used in the moment to respond to attacks from the opposition and pivot away from their fear-based messaging frame. They can also be proactive in disrupting the flawed mental template our audience has developed of people who have been convicted of a crime, and then replacing it with a mental template that is more accurate. This helps to then undercut the power that opposition messaging has established within our audience over many years.

Importantly, we do not need to rebut opposition messaging and misinformation with a tit-for-tat approach. In fact, a tit-for-tat approach is much less effective than providing an emotional rebuttal that helps to calm core audience concerns and increase our audience’s ability to stay calm in the face of opposition messaging. Similarly, it is best to avoid *myth busting*—attempting to expose the opposition’s *flawed* ideology by naming a myth and refuting it—which ultimately repeats the myth and can unintentionally reinforce the framing and messaging opponents are using.

As advocates trying to expand support for alternatives to policing and incarceration, our job is to provide our audience what they need that will enable them to become supportive. This means helping them to put less emphasis on the things they fear and more emphasis on the positive—on who they aspire to be and the things they can help improve.



Show How Harms Impact Individuals, Families, and Communities—and How the Solutions Benefit Everyone



Effective messaging paints a picture for our audience—one that draws a direct link between the harms people face, the impact these harms have on families and communities, and how the solutions we propose can benefit everyone. This is important because many among our audience are not aware of or do not fully understand the harms that the current criminal legal system causes, and how these harms connect back to them personally or to their community more broadly.

The following recommendations show how our messaging can effectively highlight these harms and connect them back to solutions.

Name That Alternative Solutions Do Exist—and They Work

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Let people know that alternative approaches to policing and incarceration do exist—and show how these solutions are effective.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience: Our audience is not currently equipped to imagine that there could be effective alternatives to policing and incarceration as a response to crime. They see prison as a powerful deterrent and an effective form of punishment—the most appropriate consequence for crime, especially violent crime. In their eyes, violence and crime are simply intractable problems with no better way to tackle them than police and prison.

In the research, when participants receive effective messaging that names alternative solutions and shows why and how the alternatives are effective, many note having “a-ha” moments. In general, many become more supportive—this includes those who initially hold a more conservative, hardline attitude on crime and punishment. Overall, most participants agree with the need for change, and agree that our current approach isn’t working. At the end of focus group discussions, many say they are hopeful that the alternatives we describe—particularly violence interruption—will be adopted in their own communities.



How Messaging Can Do This Effectively: When our messaging names and describes alternative approaches to policing and incarceration, our audience is often initially skeptical but interested to learn more. Messaging that shows our audience how these alternatives work and, importantly, that they are successful at addressing crime and violence in the community, is highly effective. The following is an example tested in the research that effectively underscores the positive impact of violence interrupters:



Relationship-based approaches to reducing violence are working in cities like Atlanta, Montgomery, and New Orleans, where members of the community who are known and trusted train to be “violence interrupters.” They work in parallel with the police to successfully mediate conflicts before they turn violent. A violence interruption program in part of Atlanta resulted in an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year.¹³

You can find more guidance and more examples on various alternative solutions in the issue-specific recommendations that begin on page 39-73.

Acknowledge Current Challenges

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Effective messaging acknowledges the current challenges that many people are facing—including many among our audience—and underscores how solutions benefit the entire community.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience: Many among our audience are having a hard time. They are struggling to make ends meet or are feeling financially stressed. Inflation feels pervasive and is exacerbating their anxiety and sense of economic insecurity. Those who feel financially stable often have family members struggling, particularly with high costs for housing, gas, food, and medical bills. All of this economic insecurity contributes to people feeling anxious about how limited public funds are being spent. At the same time, many among our audience have growing concerns about crime and safety in their communities. When our messaging acknowledges these challenges—particularly the heightened concerns about community safety and perceived resource scarcity—it connects with our audience’s own lived experience and enables them to be more open to hearing what we have to say.

In essence, our audience needs to know that we understand what they are grappling with, including worries about how public funds are being spent. When we include acknowledgment messaging, then pivot to how proposed programs will benefit individuals and communities broadly, it helps calm those concerns.

Acknowledging current challenges also helps make our messaging seem more credible because it signals to our audience that the messenger or message is rooted in our audience’s reality of what’s happening on the ground, right now.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively: Effective messaging includes important acknowledgments but doesn’t dwell on them. It quickly pivots to messaging that describes concrete harms and connects the solutions we propose back to how they are going to benefit the community as a collective whole—our audience included. In addition, pointing out how taxpayer money is being unwisely used—and how it could be better spent on things like education, job training, and re-entry programs to support the whole community—is important for our audience. This helps to calm concerns they have about resource scarcity, and that we don’t have enough funding for housing, education, or other community programs to go around. The acknowledgment and pivot is an effective way to demonstrate to our audience that the messenger is grounded in reality and is also centering the well-being of the whole community, not just the individual, in solutions.



13 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data



The following is an effective message tested in the research. It leads by acknowledging that people want to feel safe and have opportunity, while also naming that we have failed to invest in the things that would help ensure that safety and opportunity. The message then quickly pivots to talk about solutions and how they help to alleviate harm for everyone in the community. Next to the example are quotes from research participants highlighting the message’s impact.

We all deserve to feel safe and have the opportunity to thrive. Yet for too long, we have failed to invest enough in resources that help create safe, stable communities like job training, affordable housing, education, and mental health services. It’s time to make some changes, to be smarter about our investments while addressing the very real challenges so many of us are facing.

First, instead of overburdening police, we need to ensure that our loved ones with mental health challenges have access to counseling and treatment—and that mental health specialists are on call to answer behavioral emergencies so these crisis situations don’t escalate to violent confrontations. Additionally, we should expand community-based violence prevention programs so highly-trained and trusted community members—violence interrupters—can engage meaningfully to help de-escalate conflicts before more violence erupts.

Not only are these programs cost-effective, but they really work. Rates of homicides and violent crime are drastically reduced in communities with violence interruption programs in place—87% in one Atlanta area,¹⁴ where the program also focuses on helping youth and families meet their basic needs. These community safety approaches help address the root causes of crime—and create a better present and future for us all.

“ I feel like the key is preventing it from happening in the first place. If I know this, I know local officials know this as well. Why not invest what’s needed to fund and launch these programs into our communities in the first place?”

– Latina female, Moderate Independent, FL

“ I believe that the most effective solution is for the community to participate in their own rescue. To get more involved in improving the living conditions, the overall mentality of their neighbors as well as other challenges.”

– Black male, Moderate Democrat, GA

“ The 87% in one Atlanta area stands out. The ‘we all deserve to feel safe’ bit is a part which is absolutely true but there are people who do not feel this way.”

– White male, Conservative Republican, FL

Most participants in the research find this statement to be extremely compelling. Acknowledging that everyone deserves to feel safe aligns with many participants’ concerns about keeping their communities safe and reflects their own desires to feel safe.

Some of the participants also explicitly note that they appreciate the call to collective action because they value people who care for their neighbors. They feel this collective action also helps their communities be independent and “not depend on police officers to work things out for us.”

The statistic on effectiveness (87% in one Atlanta area) stands out to many participants as evidence of the impact, with many expressing hope this program is implemented where they live. It is important to many that this statistic is from Atlanta—it helps those in Georgia feel a connection to the impact of the policy. At the same time, those in the region—and in other states—feel like it can work there, too.

14 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data

Describe Concrete Harms

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Describe the concrete harms caused by current policies and approaches, including their connection to systemic root causes and their impact on families and communities.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience: Our audience isn't aware of or doesn't understand the full range of harms caused by the current system. This includes the reality of disproportionate impact, the role of root causes, and how the harms the system causes to individuals have a broader impact.

In the research, many participants initially see illegal activity as solely an issue of personal responsibility—of individuals who should know better than to do something wrong. Additionally, some (often white and/or more conservative participants) will define root causes of people's criminal-legal involvement in terms of the individual, noting, for example, things like childhood trauma or bad parenting as the root of problems, rather than broader systemic challenges like under-resourced schools or high unemployment rates.

The good news is that after receiving effective messaging, many participants agree that community support programs that help to meet people's basic needs (e.g., providing food, clothing, housing, and access to education and job opportunities) serve to lift up the whole community—and that this helps to bring crime rates down. The messaging equips our audience to connect the dots in helpful ways to see that when people have what they need to work, live, and provide for their families, the community benefits collectively, and crime decreases.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively: Tell stories that help to paint a picture of the current realities for people and the emotional, real-life impact that existing policies are having on them. Rather than characterizing or summarizing what happened to a person, it is most powerful to bring our audience into the moment by describing what happened, what was said, what the person felt, and how others reacted. This kind of approach helps our audience to emotionally connect with messengers, to make the harms or potential harms of our carceral system more real and concrete.

As you describe concrete harms, be sure to provide just enough details. Providing details that are too graphic

for our audience can be triggering and cause what psychologists refer to as emotional flooding. When people get overwhelmed and emotionally flooded, they can't be reflective or process information as they normally or rationally would.

Important to Show a Person's Full Humanity.

To disrupt our audience's flawed beliefs about who encounters law enforcement and is caught up in our carceral system, it is also important to show a person's full humanity. This means showing them in the context of their family and community, not just in a moment of harm or need. Disrupting their flawed beliefs in this way helps repair their broken reasoning chains and allows them to come to new conclusions.

For more on this, see the messaging recommendation on page 33.

The following is an example, tested in the research, that is effective at describing concrete harms caused by the current system:



It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.¹⁵ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.

Importantly, our messaging should be careful about connecting poverty and criminal-legal involvement. Some among our audience have direct lived experience with growing up in poverty or are struggling with poverty today. In focus groups, some participants would share their personal experiences with poverty and note that it did not lead them to become lawbreakers—rightly asserting that being poor doesn't mean you have to steal or engage in other illegal behavior.

¹⁵ Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>



These participants are also somewhat offended at any implication of such in messaging. When our messaging is perceived by our audience to directly connect poverty to criminal-legal involvement, they may feel implicitly judged and can become defensive or resentful.

The following is an example, tested in the research, that is effective in lifting up concrete harms and talking about the potential connection between economic inequity and criminal-legal involvement without triggering feelings of judgment in our audience:



In Florida, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects 2.9 million Floridians,¹⁶ including nearly 20% of our children¹⁷ living below the poverty line. When people are hungry and desperate, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize community programs that help people stand on their own, including access to affordable housing and healthcare.

Connect Solutions to the Harms They Address

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Connect proposed solutions back to the harms they address—and show how they benefit the community as a whole, in addition to impacted individuals.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience:

For messaging to be effective, we need our audience to both recognize the concrete harms people are experiencing **and** recognize how the solutions we are proposing connect back to address those specific harms. Connecting the dots in this way for our audience is critical in filling knowledge gaps, disrupting flawed beliefs they may hold, and helping them to repair their broken reasoning chains (see page 33 for more on broken reasoning chains). This equips our audience with what they need to become more supportive.

¹⁶ Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/FL/IPE120222>

¹⁷ Source: <https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/region-hillsborough/child-poverty-rates-more-than-double-in-2022#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Annie%20E,%20children%20in%20the%20state>



How Messaging Can Do This Effectively: It is important that our messaging describes the concrete harms or problem—what is wrong—and also how the problem is directly addressed by the solutions we are proposing. As our messaging does this, it should keep the community centered, discussing the solutions in terms of how they benefit us all, in addition to individuals impacted by the criminal legal system.

Community programs should also be discussed in concrete, specific terms. For instance, instead of saying “community investments”—which can trigger concerns about insufficient financing to go around—be clear on what the program does. For example, that a program may connect people coming out of prison with potential employers.

When talking about crime prevention and reduction, make the case that it's time for a new approach.



If our current approach to preventing and addressing crime were working, we wouldn't have our current problems. So, it's time to do something different and here's what we can do.

Journey stories (see *The Power of Modeling a Journey* on page 28) are a particularly impactful way to show alternative solutions and how they connect back to addressing harms, including systemic root causes. They allow messengers to share and model their own “a-ha” moments in learning about these new approaches, which helps to mirror and normalize our audience's own experiences.

The Power of Modeling a Journey

Research shows that people respond positively to journey stories—stories in which a main character changes over the course of a story. Showing how someone has changed over time because of their experiences makes a story more believable, relatable, and accessible. These stories foster audience identification and serve as a model for how a person who, like our audience, was once unaware of, unfamiliar with, uncomfortable with, or on the other side of an issue, came to feel differently. It is particularly important for our audience to hear from messengers who share their values, identities, or lived experiences—people who may have also had inner conflict or been unfamiliar with community-based alternatives to policing and incarceration at one time, but who have come to feel differently after learning more about these alternatives.

Journey stories also help take the debate out of the national political fray and make it about real people in their communities, which can be transformative for our audience. The most effective journey stories are carefully sequenced and constructed. Below, we outline the key sequencing and components that are especially important.



Establish credibility and foster identification. For our audience to connect with a messenger, they must first identify with the messenger. Sharing key details about the person’s background—that they are a mother or father, where they live, how long their family has been in their community, that they are a Christian, or a Republican (for example)—can be important in helping our audience situate what the messenger is saying and can provide opportunities for identification.



Affirm messengers’ good intentions. Many among our audience have a strong impulse to judge and also to feel judged, even implicitly, by our messaging. By establishing upfront that the messenger has always tried to treat people fairly, tried to be welcoming and accepting, or tried to understand others’ experiences, we are not only mirroring the emotional experience of our audience, but also minimizing chances that our audience will feel judged or too harshly judge the messenger—both of which can interfere with persuasion. Similarly, by framing the discomfort or anxiety as initial or *at first*, we can prevent our audience from seeing the messenger as too rigid or biased. As an example, the following message shows initial concern and indicates the beginning of a journey or shift in perspective after learning more: “When I first heard about violence interrupters, I thought it was silly. Why would we put someone in harm’s way during violence? But then I learned that violence interrupters are trained—and very trusted by the people in their community. Their work is about talking with people and de-escalating violence before it erupts.”



Elevate shared values. As with other messengers and storytelling, expressing core shared values that have guided them and ultimately led them to feel differently or see an issue differently helps to foster identification. It also models for our audience how they can put more weight on the values and beliefs that lead them to be supportive rather than those that interfere with support.





Mirror or name inner conflict or lack of familiarity or comfort. It is crucial that messengers reflect back the thoughts, conflicts, and emotions of our audience. Being asked to understand an opposing point of view can sometimes feel like you are validating it. However, when we do not acknowledge the inner conflict and emotional experience of our audience, they can interpret that conflict as a reason not to change or a reason to be unsupportive. By naming it, we show empathy for our audience and help them to let go of the need to completely resolve their inner conflict in order to be supportive.



Model reflection and a journey. Starting from a place of discomfort, lack of familiarity or inner conflict, we can help guide our audience through conflicting emotions or feelings of anxiety toward support by using social modeling. This includes:

- ① Showing how the messenger was initially unfamiliar or opposed, and then learned from friends, neighbors, or colleagues, and/or educated themselves about the topic, to become more aware and informed. To do this effectively, we need cues that suggest an appropriate passage of time to convey an emotionally congruent struggle, and we need to include a precipitating event that led to a change of heart.
- ② Rooting our messenger and our audience in their lived experiences with the criminal legal system and their desire to live their values and do right by others. We can do this most effectively in stories and messaging by showing people who have been harmed by the criminal legal system together with their friends, neighbors, and coworkers, or by referring to their relationships when doing so is not possible.

We should include cues and message frames that indirectly encourage our audience to step back and reflect, return to their *thinking* brain, and reaffirm their core values. The way in which the messenger describes their journey should recognize that higher levels of discomfort, intense inner conflict, or a complete lack of familiarity requires their story to reflect a longer period of time and more steps to process and manage their internal conflict. The story also needs to clearly lay out the experiences, thinking, and values that led the messenger to feel differently from how they felt initially. If the journey is too easy, it is not perceived as genuine by our audience.




Affirm positive outcomes. Finally, helping our audience to see the positive impact of the journey provides important reassurance that, despite lingering doubt, discomfort, or internal conflict, the action we want them to take or position we want them to support ultimately has no serious long-term negative consequence. Even more, we can model how change can bring unexpected and positive outcomes—including stronger relationships and communities, living more in line with one's values, setting an example for one's children, and protecting others from harm.

The following is an excerpt from a messenger video that was tested in the research and effectively shares a journey story. Kathryn, who is a legal advocate in Louisiana, shares the story of her “a-ha” moment of coming to understand how being subject to poverty and not having food to eat was driving the behavior of a young man who was repeatedly caught stealing. Connecting the dots in this journey story was very helpful for our audience.

Along the transcript, you will find a deconstruction of the content that provides insights and shows the recommendations in action (see page 104 in the appendix for the full transcript and deconstruction).

Kathryn (Louisiana)



My name is Kathryn.
I live in New Orleans, Louisiana.

There were a number of moments—I would say “a-ha” moments—that led me to shifting my perspective.

One that I really remember—one that just made me so sad—I had worked for a while with juveniles. I remember a child

coming in—and I remember the police had been talking about him—and they were saying, “This kid is just bad news. He’s a bad kid. He’s always in here, and he got picked up for stealing.”

And I was talking to him. You’re basically doing a needs assessment and trying to figure out, you know, why is this kid constantly in here—constantly shoplifting? At some point he just kind of stopped and he’s like, “Do you have anything to eat?” And I was like, “Sure.” I said, “Is this what you were doing in that store?” He goes, “Well, I was just really hungry.”

Growing up, that was just not something that would have happened in my house. It just made me incredibly sad. And I just remember thinking, you know, I’ve been sitting here listening to these cops talk about this kid and how he’s a bad kid, and he’s always in trouble. He’s a bad kid. And what I see is a 13-year-old child, who looks considerably older than 13. He cannot read or write, and he was also hungry. And that’s when I looked at the things that he was shoplifting. He was stealing food. I’ll never forget that.

Here the messenger uses language that indicates she has experienced a personal **journey**.

Sharing these details helps to tap into **shared values around care and concern for children**, who our audience feels should not be labeled and judged so quickly.

The messenger also helps to **connect the dots** between root causes and the child’s behavior.

The messenger provides more details that help our audience understand her personal **journey** on this issue.

Details about the child’s life also help to again **tap into shared values** around care and concern for children.

Say What We’re FOR

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Create an emotional connection with our audience by providing an overarching and aspirational vision of what we are working towards.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience: When the messages our audience hears only include what advocates are against—rather than also including what they are for—it creates significant anxiety for our audience. Without an understanding of what changes are needed or possible, our audience imagines that changing the current system could create chaos, have unintended consequences, or create a greater risk to community safety. Growing anxiety and concern can create a sense of helplessness and resignation—and these emotions, unfortunately, lead our audience to disengage or be opposed to our approach.



An aspirational vision gives our audience something to be *FOR* rather than only something they can be against. In addition, it helps to show our audience the ways in which their deeply held values and beliefs are actually in conflict with how the current criminal legal system works. The research shows that letting people know why they should care—in a way that connects with their own

values—is compelling for our audience. They are better equipped to become more supportive when they can clearly understand what we are for, not just what we are against. It also helps to remind them of the good people they want to be—or of the good people they imagine they are.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively: The following is a message that effectively puts many of the recommendations found in this guide to work, including saying what we’re for with an aspirational vision.



*We need to make our criminal legal system more just and more efficient. One step in the right direction would be to reduce the number of people in prisons for nonviolent crimes, especially those serving harsh sentences on drug charges. Decriminalizing marijuana alone would save about \$47,000 per incarcerated person annually¹⁸—money that could instead go to education or job training. We also need fair, orderly, and clear processes for releasing people on parole and supporting their re-entry into society. **When someone gets out of prison, we should have programs in place to better support their transition so they can find work, reconnect with family, and become a contributing member of the community. These past few years have been particularly challenging for many. If we invest in our communities differently, more people will be able to live and thrive—making our communities safer for all.***

By focusing on what we’re for—“investing in our community differently”; having “programs in place” to help people released from prison “find work, reconnect with family, and become a contributing member of the community”; and making “our criminal legal system more just and more efficient”—this message effectively taps into values we share with our audience and equips them to be open to learning more and to become more supportive.

For most participants in the research, what resonates most about the above message is the need to decriminalize marijuana. Some think it is a long overdue change because marijuana serves medicinal purposes, many states have done it, and they don’t believe nonviolent crimes like marijuana possession should be punished with jail time.

Additionally, some participants say they would like to see fewer people in jail—not only for marijuana-related crimes, but also for other drug-related and nonviolent crimes. For these participants, jail time doesn’t necessarily mean rehabilitation—the focus on people being punished doesn’t help those people or benefit the community.

The amount of money spent per incarcerated person annually is a fact with impact for our audience. When learning about this amount, some participants say that profit may be a motive behind putting more people in jail. Others think it is just too much money—resources that could be better spent to serve the community. Ultimately, they think decriminalizing marijuana would lead to fewer people in jail, and the money saved could be invested in other things like education, job training, and rehabilitation programs.



“Decriminalizing marijuana - this is a long overdue approach with marijuana having long been utilized for medicinal purposes. This drug should be treated in the same manner as alcohol and the sentences that have been associated to use are beyond unreasonable.”

– White male, Moderate Democrat, FL

18 Source: <https://www.vera.org/publications/the-price-of-jails-measuring-the-taxpayer-cost-of-local-incarceration>. Note: This data is from 2015 and would need to be updated in future messaging.

III

Disrupt and Replace Our Audience’s Flawed Mental Templates



When developing messaging, it is essential to remember that many among our audience know very little about the criminal legal system beyond the headlines they see in the media. This causes our audience to develop flawed mental templates of the system and many components related to it, including about people who are arrested or incarcerated. Many also have major gaps in their knowledge regarding how our current legal system works—gaps that interfere with our audience forming accurate reasoning chains (see *Key Concept: Flawed Mental Templates and Broken Reasoning Chains on page 33 for more*). Those who lack close personal relationships or lived experiences with being arrested, incarcerated, or having a criminal conviction need our messaging to help disrupt their flawed mental templates—which also helps repair their broken reasoning chains.

Meanwhile, most “tough on crime” narratives are purposefully rooted in our audience’s flawed mental templates—namely, that harsh punishments are the most effective approach to increasing community safety. For our messaging to be effective in countering these narratives, it is critical that we understand, disrupt, and replace our audience’s flawed associations and beliefs with more accurate and positive ones. If we do not, our audience remains easily exploited by the opposition.

There are many ways we can disrupt and replace these flawed mental templates, which we describe in detail in the following recommendations.





Key Concept: Flawed Mental Templates and Broken Reasoning Chains

A *mental template* is the name given to the combined web of associations and images a person’s mind constructs about something—or someone—they encounter in the world. The concept was developed by Dr. Phyllis Watts, a social and clinical psychologist who advises changemakers on the psychological dynamics that prevent progress on tough social issues.

When we read, listen, watch, or experience things throughout our lives, our mind develops these mental templates as a way to take in and synthesize all this information into shortcuts that help bring order and make sense of things for us. This is why, for example, when we read a story about a police officer facing excessive force charges, our mind is automatically primed with images and associations of police officers and of how we think our legal system works. We tap into these to help us understand the context in the story we are reading.

We also tap into these mental templates to form *reasoning chains*—a way for our mind to link things together and bring some sort of logical order to the things we feel, know, and believe. Ultimately, these reasoning chains help us to reach conclusions or make decisions. For example, if our mental template of police officers is full of generally positive associations, we may read a story about an officer accused of using excessive force on a person having a mental health crisis and assume there was justification for that force.

Of course, the associations and images held in our minds are not always fair or accurate. According to Dr. Watts, people will develop a *flawed mental template* when they are not deeply familiar with something or

someone—when they lack either the information or the lived experiences needed to form an accurate template in their mind. Without the necessary information at hand, their minds work to make sense of things—to connect the dots—with whatever information they do have, often making flawed leaps of logic to complete a reasoning chain and reach a conclusion. This forms what is known as a *broken reasoning chain*.

When our audience holds a flawed mental template of a police officer being the best enforcer of safety, for instance, it understandably results in them forming broken reasoning chains that police officers are best positioned to respond to a mental health emergency. They do not know, for example, that police officers receive very little training in navigating mental health crises—and that these situations all too often lead to police instigating violence. Understanding our audience’s knowledge gaps gives us the opportunity to be much more effective with our messaging—to provide them with specific narratives, personal experiences, and information that can help them correct their flawed beliefs and accurately connect the dots.

Fortunately, we do not have to correct every flawed idea or inaccuracy for our audience to be able to become more supportive. We simply need to disrupt these flawed mental templates enough that it allows our audience to begin questioning what they think they know—and to replace those flawed associations with ones that are more positive or neutral. Doing so can enable them to be open to hearing more, thinking about issues in new ways, and creating new emotional reactions.

Show a Person’s Full Humanity

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Show the full humanity of people who have been incarcerated or have experience facing the criminal legal system.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience: There is a tendency for many among our audience to automatically think of a person who is incarcerated, who has been arrested, or who has been charged with a crime as being “guilty” or “bad.” When it comes to people who are being released from prison, the picture that comes to our audience’s mind is typically focused on this single facet of a person’s experience—their conviction and sentence are in the forefront, and their full humanity is absent.

This incomplete snapshot and the flawed beliefs that exist within our audience’s mind do not represent the whole of a person—only parts of their story. It can also lead many among our audience to form broken reasoning chains (see page 33) that compel them to worry that being convicted of breaking the law once means a person will do it again—or that things may escalate, leading them to commit even more dangerous crimes. By showing a person’s full humanity, we disrupt these flawed beliefs and help replace them with ones that are more fair and more accurate. This then helps our audience to repair their broken reasoning chains, enabling them to become more supportive.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively:

A powerful way to disrupt these snapshots and help our audience establish a more robust and accurate picture is by sharing stories and developing messaging that show the full breadth of a person’s life and humanity. This includes showing or describing people who have been incarcerated in the context of their family, with their community, and living their everyday lives—doing things everyone, including our audience, does. It is also very helpful to share additional details about who they are as a person—a student, a father, a soccer coach, a daughter, or a business owner. Who are they in their everyday life?

It is not effective to only show or describe messengers solely in a moment of crisis, wrongdoing, being stopped by the police, or at the moment of their conviction. This paints a one-dimensional image for our audience rather than a humanized multi-dimensional picture of their lives.

Providing details that show a person’s full humanity helps our audience to situate the messenger in a larger—and more familiar—context. These details also serve to humanize, foster audience identification, and highlight the values that our audience shares. The research shows this is helpful in building connection and empathy overall, while also calming fears of future criminal-legal involvement—all things that help our audience become more supportive of positive change.

See Key Concept: **Upstairs Brain/Downstairs Brain on page 101 for more on the importance of calming our audience’s fears.**

Tell Stories of Transformation and Redemption

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: Tell stories of transformation and redemption when possible, underscoring a person’s renewed focus on community, family, or contribution to others (e.g., tutoring someone or providing support while in prison).

Why This Is Important for Our Audience:

Stories of transformation and redemption help disrupt our audience’s flawed mental template of people who have been arrested or have served time in prison. These stories are also particularly effective at calming concerns our audience may have about past behavior being predictive of a person’s future behavior. Details showing how someone has recognized their past missteps and is now taking a new path are powerful and signal to our audience that this person has no intention of causing harm in the future. The research shows that without details about an individual’s shift over time, our audience assumes that the past behavior is not only predictive of future behavior—that it may escalate.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively:

The most effective stories show the full arc of a person’s life to date, show connections with family or community, and show the ways someone has transformed over time, helping to foster audience connection.

Including specifics about the ways in which someone has contributed to others since the time of their conviction is a powerful component of redemption stories. This includes, for example, showing someone focused on helping others learn about their legal rights while in prison, or someone who has, since being released, become an advocate for others. Importantly, stories about transformation or redemption do not have to include graphic details or be retraumatizing for the person sharing their story to be compelling for our audience.

The following is an example of effective messaging—a print piece that was tested in the research. Alongside the piece, you will find a deconstruction of the content, noting various insights and messaging recommendations in action.



Luis (Louisiana)



I was 16 when I went to a friend's party where I knew there might be trouble. I went anyway—and I took the gun I had bought off someone in the neighborhood to use for protection. I didn't plan to use it, but figured I could flash it if I needed to.

Highlighting a person directly impacted by the system as a **messenger is credible** and effective with our audience.

I was young and made a bad decision that still haunts me. When a fight broke out that night, some guy pushed me down and started hitting me. I grabbed my gun and shot to scare him off, but then I heard someone scream. My stray bullet had hit and killed an innocent guy nearby. The consequences were immediate and life-changing: I was tried and convicted as an adult for both the murder of the bystander and the attempted murder of the guy I fought with.

Accountability is very important to our audience. By talking about "consequences" and being haunted by "a bad decision," the messenger helps to **elevate accountability**.

At 17, I was sentenced to life in prison without parole, and they sent me off to one of the worst prison facilities in the state—a place with a terrible track record for prisoner abuse. I was younger than all the guys there, still a kid and terrified.

Here the messenger simultaneously is **describing concrete harms** while tapping into **shared values** our audience holds around care and concern for children. These details also help to paint a **fuller picture of his humanity**.

Though I expected to spend my entire life behind bars, the state changed the rules for people incarcerated as minors, and I was released at the age of 46. It's been two years now since my release, and I've started working at a non-profit organization focused on mentoring kids to help prevent situations of violence from occurring in the first place—and on creating a dialogue between our community and our elected officials about alternatives to putting people behind bars.

Stories of transformation and redemption are powerful and persuasive for our audience.

One pilot project we are working on with law enforcement and the District Attorney's office involves having victims and offenders meet in supervised discussions—what we call "restorative justice conferences"—before sentencing happens.

Here the messenger provides details that **describe what we are FOR** while **naming that alternative solutions do exist**—and are effective.

Together, with a trained mediator, they discuss what it would take and what it could look like to repair the harm caused to the victim. The agreement is rigorously supervised, and if the person being held accountable doesn't comply, they are returned to court for further sentencing. I know firsthand that prison stigmatizes and isolates prisoners, rather than providing opportunities to take direct responsibility for their actions. That's why I believe in restorative justice as an option and a better path forward.

Again, the messenger **discusses accountability** and **connects the solution to the harms** that it helps to address.



Incorporate Facts With Impact

What Our Messaging Needs to Do: After connecting to our audience with shared values, include key statistics and information that underscore the harms of our current approach (e.g., severe sentencing for nonviolent drug convictions or disproportionate impacts on Black and Latino people), and highlight the positive impact of proposed solutions, including community improvements (e.g., decreased crime rates) and cost savings for taxpayers.

Why This Is Important for Our Audience: Our audience is unaware of the depth of harm caused by our current approaches, or that we can do things differently, in a way that supports our collective well-being. Concrete statistics and key facts showing the positive impact of alternatives to policing and incarceration help to show our audience that these alternatives can, in fact, work.

How Messaging Can Do This Effectively:

It is important for messaging to incorporate basic information and compelling facts and phrases—not just anecdotal stories about the criminal legal system being unfair or causing harm. This is another effective way to disrupt our audience’s flawed mental templates of the criminal legal system and the people who face it. It also helps our audience come to realize they do not know the system as well as they believe they do, which creates opportunities for them to reconsider their current beliefs and be open to change.

The following specifics, tested in the messaging, are effective and surprising to many among our audience. These details directly calm commonly held concerns among our audience, creating an opportunity to generate a new emotional reaction and provide the information our audience needs to support new thinking:

See page 22 for more on the importance of generating new emotional reactions.


FACTS WITH IMPACT	
Key Information	Why It Is Impactful
<p>High rates of incarceration in Southern states (and overall) that signal the broad impact of the harms we’re lifting up</p> <p>(e.g., <i>Almost one out of every 100 Americans is currently in prison or jail.¹⁹ OR Southern states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, with Mississippi topping the list.²⁰</i>)</p>	<p>This information helps show the scope of the problem, including how many individuals, families, and communities are directly impacted. When coupled with taxpayer spending, it may also speak to our audience’s distaste for inefficient spending.</p>
<p>Costs and savings to taxpayers, including how those funds could be better used to support the community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual budget spent on incarceration (e.g., <i>Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated over \$80 billion every year.²¹</i>) • Cost to incarcerate child for a year versus a year of public education for a child (e.g., <i>In Georgia it can cost \$113,000 per year to imprison a child, but only \$10,000 for a year of public education.²²</i>) 	<p>Many among our audience, particularly those who are moderate or more conservative, are concerned about the inefficient use of public resources. This is especially true in the context of post-COVID economic recovery when so many are struggling to make ends meet. Statistics highlighting disproportionate spending underscore the problem that our proposed alternatives are focused on alleviating.</p>

19 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/about/case-for-reform/>
 20 Source: <https://www.wjtv.com/news/state/doj-mississippi-has-highest-incarceration-rate-in-us/>
 21 Source: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>
 22 Source: <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/explore/georgia/?section=race-interactive>



<p>Disproportionate impacts on Black and Latino people, including higher rates of police violence, higher arrest and incarceration rates, disparate sentencing, and state population versus incarceration rates. (e.g., <i>Black residents make up 32% of the population in Georgia, yet they represent 60% of those incarcerated in state prisons.</i>²³ <u>OR</u> <i>Twenty-four percent (24%) of people killed by police in 2023 were Black—about twice the percentage of Black people in the U.S.</i>²⁴ <i>We need to rethink our approach to public safety and crime reduction so that everyone in our community is safe.</i>)</p>	<p>While some among our audience who are Black or Latino have their own lived experience of being harassed by law enforcement or discriminated against in the legal system, others are not clearly aware of these realities. Concrete statistics underscore the impact in ways that cannot be dismissed as individual circumstances or emotional messaging, making it very clear racial disparities are real and systemic, and need to be directly addressed.</p>
<p>Concrete evidence of success or positive impact when alternatives are implemented in the South (e.g., <i>This relationship-based approach to reducing violence is clearly working, with an Atlanta program seeing an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year.</i>²⁵)</p>	<p>Because we are introducing proposed alternatives that our audience has never heard of and struggles to imagine, we need to provide factual evidence that these proposals can have a positive impact in ways that align with what our audience is concerned about.</p>

The following is an example of a message tested in the research that incorporates some basic information and key facts that calm our audience’s concerns and create openness. This message resonates strongly with our audience.

 *Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated \$80 billion every year.²⁶ There is growing bipartisan support to make a change. In 2007, for instance, Texas passed a \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and other prison diversion programs. The crime rate fell 26% after seven years,²⁷ and Texas has been closing prisons. We can save money, reduce crime rates, and strengthen our communities with a different approach.*



One important note: Before introducing facts, it is important to foster an emotional connection with our audience through our shared values (see page 18). Ultimately, human beings are motivated to act and make decisions not based on policy or logic but rooted in what we believe is right or wrong, in how we believe a good person should or should not act, or what we believe should or should not be acted on based on the values that we hold dear. When we begin our messaging with the problems we see—or we cut right to the actions we want people to take—we miss critical steps that are necessary to create connection with and engage our audience. It puts our audience in their head—removed from the heart, one of the most potent tools we have as change makers. While some among our audience may have a hard time identifying with specific experiences of people who have been incarcerated or who have experienced harm within the criminal legal system, they can easily identify with values of accountability, individual responsibility, wanting to contribute, and community care and well-being, for example.

23 Sources: <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-georgia.pdf> (32%, 2017). More recent data (2023) here: <https://gdc.georgia.gov/document/gdc-annual-fiscal-report/gdc-annual-fiscal-report-2023/download> and <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/GA,US/PST04523>.
24 Source: <https://policeviolencereport.org/>
25 Source: *Hope Hustlers* internal data.
26 Sources <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>
27 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/ten-years-of-criminal-justice-reform-in-texas/#>.





Key Concept: Emotions Come First, Not Information

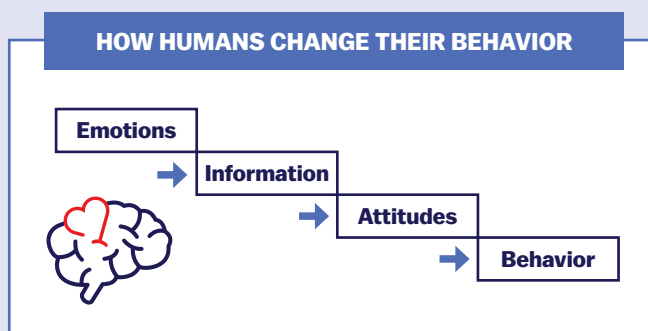
For decades, the work of many social change makers centered around the idea that if you wanted to create positive behavior change, you should first provide your audience with information. The belief was that getting the right information in front of your audience would lead them to consider an issue differently, which would generate changes in their attitude. Ultimately, this attitude change would then lead to changes in behavior.

Over time, we have learned that this model is not how human beings change. While many of us pride ourselves on being rational thinkers, human beings are driven primarily by emotion. Our emotional reactions happen first, instinctively, and then our brains quickly provide us with a rationale, with reasoning, for feeling how we feel.

To generate change in our audience’s attitudes, we first have to help them generate a new, different emotional reaction from the one they usually have in response to our topic. Then, we need to provide them with new information that supports new reasoning. This emotion first, reasoning second dynamic enables them to develop and hold onto a new belief or attitude that is more

supportive. Over time, having these new attitudes leads them to be able to behave differently on the topic.

Emotions are therefore vital entry points in creating change. When we connect with our audience using messaging that matches the feelings that they have—messaging that is emotionally congruent—it can open pathways that enable emotional change within them. This emotional change enables attitude change, which then enables behavior change to occur. Conversely, when we try to communicate with people in a way that is not congruent with their emotions, they simply shut down.



IV

What to Consider...and Avoid



As you develop your own messaging, there are a few additional considerations and language shifts that the research finds make communications more effective:

- ⦿ Use Southern examples and Southern messengers—avoid examples and messengers that our audience perceive as outside the South or from liberal areas that they believe do not reflect their identity and values.
- ⦿ Discuss community programs in concrete, specific terms rather than saying *community investments* generally. This can trigger concerns about the scarcity of available financial resources.
- ⦿ When talking about youth incarceration, say *child*, *kid*, *young person*, or *youth*. Avoid *young adult*, *young man*, or *young woman*, as these words imply that they should be treated like adults. Also, when possible, avoid *teenager*, as that also can bring to mind people who are rowdy or intentionally breaking rules or testing limits. It is also recommended to avoid *juvenile*.
- ⦿ Use the word *accountability* instead of *punishment* or *consequences* whenever possible. This reinforces the broader way proposed changes support accountability and still align with deeply held audience values about ensuring proportional responses to illegal action or violence.





» Issue-Specific Messaging Recommendations

In this section you will find research-based messaging recommendations related to specific issue areas and policies identified as priorities by SPLC staff, working in collaboration with the research team. Note that some of the overall messaging recommendations may reappear within an issue area—and some issue-specific recommendations may also overlap. This is intentional, as these recommendations are often interconnected, and some are listed within issue areas because they are key to developing effective messaging around that specific issue.

A key insight relevant across these areas is that our messaging needs to include credible statistics that show systemic, broad harm. This is critical for building a case for change at the community rather than individual level. This can include statistics that show the high percentage of traffic stops or mental health emergencies that turn violent; how significant racial disparities are; the high rates of incarceration; high rates of poverty; and costs to taxpayers that a proposed solution could address. The research also finds that statistics showing harm or hope must be current to be perceived as credible by our audience. Data and statistics from more than five years ago (pre-COVID) can create skepticism that the solution is relevant in today's context.

Across all issues, the research finds that our audience needs details that calm the concerns they already hold, along with evidence showing that the proposed approaches are effective. Since many of the policy ideas presented to our audience are new to them, they are eager to know more—and to know the proposed programs and policy changes work. Noting specific successes, such as reductions in the rates of homicide or the closure of prisons due to prison rates dropping, help to ensure our proposed solutions are perceived as credible. Using local, state, and regional examples also helps to facilitate connection and relevance for our audience (whereas using examples from non-Southern states or liberal-leaning cities can create backlash or undermine support). Only after we meet our audience's needs in this way are they equipped to become more supportive.

See Key Concept: Emotions Come First, Not Information on page 38 and The Power and Importance of Emotional Rebuttals on page 22 for more on the importance of meeting our audience's needs.

Community-Based Approaches to Crime Reduction and Violence Prevention

There is widespread agreement that things need to change to help prevent crime and reduce violence—and when messaging clearly states that we need a new approach, many agree. While our audience is eager for change, they are not aware of possible alternatives to more policing, more incarceration, or more rigid and punitive measures. They can't imagine on their own how else these issues could be approached—and are initially skeptical that community-based approaches could make a positive difference, since the scope of the problem feels so big.

Our messaging needs to help our audience to envision possible alternatives—including specifics about how they operate and the concrete, positive impact they can have. It is also important to frame community-based approaches to crime reduction as options that will support the entire

community, including those who are directly impacted. These longer-term solutions disrupt the root causes of criminal-legal involvement and violence. These solutions also support people so that they have what they need—food, housing, education, or job opportunities. The research shows that our audience is willing and able to see the connections between cycles of criminal-legal involvement and violence and root causes.

Additionally, our audience largely sees proposed reforms and alternatives as *part* of the solution, not the whole solution—something that exists alongside approaches they're very familiar with, like hiring more police. For our audience, it's often a *both/and*, rather than *either/or*.

Messaging that addresses the root causes of people's criminal-legal involvement, including providing treatment alternatives rather than prison sentences and better re-entry programs to prevent recidivism, is highly effective with our audience. Ensuring that people are able to get jobs and contribute—and that this helps to prevent people from future criminal-legal involvement—resonates.

The following is an example of an effective message.

Our jail and prison system is often inhumane, ineffective, and wildly costly for taxpayers—with one out of every 100 Americans currently in prison or jail.²⁸ This rate is much higher than in other Western countries. Mass incarceration is an expensive way to try to keep people safe, compared to other proven approaches. Estimates show that the prison system now costs U.S. taxpayers more than \$80 billion every year,²⁹ which is up from \$11 billion in the mid-1980s.³⁰ And there is growing bipartisan support for prison reform, including for sentencing reform and alternatives to jailing people.

States such as Texas, Georgia, and Oklahoma have shown that investing in prison alternatives like drug, mental health, and other specialized courts which are designed to help people avoid prison and receive treatment instead, can reduce the rate at which people return to prison, reduce crime, and save taxpayer dollars. For example, in 2007, Texas passed a historic \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and diversion programs and since then, for the first time in its history, Texas is closing prisons. At the same time, the crime rate fell 26% just seven years after enacting these investments.³¹

We can save money, and allow people convicted of certain crimes to return to being productive members of society, while also reducing the crime rate.

“ I do feel those who are arrested for drug crimes (addicts themselves) should be referred to a drug treatment facility or program that can get to the root of the problem. Putting these people in jail does nothing to rehabilitate them.”

— White female, Moderate Democrat, AL

28 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/about/case-for-reform/>.
29 Sources: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>.
30 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/about/case-for-reform/>
31 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/ten-years-of-criminal-justice-reform-in-texas/#>.

Participants in the research agree with this statement for several reasons. They express how it is important to tackle the root causes of people’s criminal-legal involvement, instead of just sending people to jail. Some note that the system should be focused on rehabilitation and re-entry—and that putting people in prison doesn’t do that but instead just financially benefits the system itself. Some participants also express agreement with the idea that people with non-violent drug offenses should not be going to jail.

For messaging that advocates for alternative approaches to crime prevention and violence reduction to be effective, we recommend the following:

- ③ **Show the scope of the problem**, including the impact on communities and families. Include key information as proof points (e.g., the number of people incarcerated in a state or area, or the cost of funding prisons while community support programs and families are struggling to find funds).
- ③ **Elevate shared values** of community care and well-being, alongside the importance of someone being accountable for their actions.
- ③ **Connect the dots** between bigger-picture causes of people’s criminal-legal involvement (e.g., poverty, hunger, lack of housing, and inadequate educational or employment opportunities) and how the proposed community-based solution directly addresses those causes.
- ③ **Fill knowledge gaps about proposed approaches since they are often new to our audience.** How do they work, in concrete terms? What are the steps and processes involved? It isn’t recommended to belabor details, but to sketch out the process so our audience can understand it.
- ③ **Include concrete statistics showing evidence of positive impact** (e.g., rates of recidivism or rates of crime going down). Doing so calms concerns about the efficacy of the proposed policy or change.

Violence Interruption

Violence interruption is a concept and policy idea tested in the research to great success. The concept of violence interrupters—people who are trusted in their own communities and trained to deescalate and help prevent violent retaliation—was unfamiliar to most participants in the research, and very welcome once the idea was explained clearly.

The idea of proactively preventing violence before it occurs, including a holistic approach to helping individuals and families get their basic needs met, is a powerful one. Hearing from people’s direct, lived experience with violence interruption, along with statistics showing the positive impact or success rates of these programs, is also deeply compelling.



“It’s like the old saying, an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. Most definitely let someone diffuse the situation before someone else is hurt and another person thrown into prison.”

—White female, Conservative Independent, AL



The research shows that effective messaging, which preempts our audience’s concerns and answers key questions, not only allows our audience to see the value of the violence interruption approach—it also prompts many to then express a desire to have these programs in their own community and beyond. The following is an effective message on violence interruption that was tested in the research:

While there was an increase in violent crime at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, those numbers are coming down now. Still, there’s much more work to do to ensure we are all safe in our communities. More cities across the country—including Atlanta, Montgomery, and New Orleans—are focusing on community-based violence reduction efforts.

“Violence interruption” programs, for instance, focus on halting violent retaliation before it starts; people who live in the community, who are trusted and known by their neighbors, train to be “violence interrupters” who can mediate conflicts as they arise—and before they turn violent.

The work of violence interrupters is often done in parallel with law enforcement, as well, with police letting them know if there has been a shooting or if someone arrived at the hospital with a gunshot wound and has angry loved ones seeking revenge. Then the violence interrupter can go to the hospital, or go to their neighbor’s house, to help mediate the conflict without bloodshed. This relationship-based approach to reducing violence is clearly working, with an Atlanta program seeing an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year.³²

“ Again, a program with proven results. How come we don’t hear of this being standard procedure all over the country? 87% is an impressive reduction.”

– White male, Conservative Republican, LA

For messaging on violence interruption to be most effective, we recommend:

- ③ Connect the dots between the problem and the solution, **underscoring the importance of proactively preventing more violence and harm to a community.**
- ③ **Frame violence interruption as both the direct act of mediation or halting retaliation and ensuring people’s basic needs are being met** to interrupt cycles of violence in a community.
- ③ **Underscore that violence interrupters come from the community where they are working;** they are trusted by the people they are engaging, and their impact is rooted in relationships.
- ③ **Be clear that violence interrupters work in parallel with law enforcement** (not in opposition or as a replacement) and are thoroughly trained.
- ③ **Clarify that violence interrupters are fully trained and generally not doing their work in the midst of violence.** Instead, they are primarily talking with and helping people to de-escalate and avoid future violence. Our audience worries that violence interrupters are being put in danger; unless we calm those concerns, our audience remains skeptical.
- ③ **Include concrete statistics, evidence of success, or positive impacts of violence interruption in a local community** (e.g., *Rates of homicides and violent crime are drastically reduced in communities with violence interruption programs in place—87% in one Atlanta area, where the program also focuses on helping youth and families meet their basic needs*).
- ③ **Elevate the voices of people who are themselves violence interrupters,** sharing their own stories about coming to the work and why it’s important and impactful—including narratives about personal transformation or redemption when applicable.

32 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data



Restorative Justice

There are clear opportunities where effective messaging can build support for restorative justice among our audience. In focus groups, most participants say they have never heard of restorative justice. While many are initially skeptical about its efficacy and impact, by the end of the discussions they end up expressing a belief that it should be an available option—except for those who are repeatedly arrested or charged with causing violent harm.

Personal narratives help to paint a picture for our audience of how restorative justice works and how it can provide an opportunity for both accountability and healing. They also help to model the emotional journey of someone who has either been directly harmed or whose loved one was harmed—and can help calm initial audience concerns about people who have been harmed (or their loved ones) being “taken for a ride.”

It is very important to note in messaging that restorative justice is only an option if both the person who caused harm *AND* the victim (or victim’s family) agree to it. Our audience is compelled by the idea that restorative justice provides an opportunity for victims to have a voice in the



process—and that accountability for causing harm can be or should be directly connected to the specific harm that was caused.

Statistics detailing the frequency of this approach being followed through to final resolution are important to help calm our audience’s concerns about efficacy and concerns about those causing harm “getting off the hook.” Our audience wants to ensure people who inflict harm are held accountable and that no one is “getting away with” violence. For them, the consequences must match the crime.

The following is an example of effective messaging—a print piece that was tested in the research. Alongside the piece you will find a deconstruction of the content, noting various insights and messaging recommendations in action.

Maria (Florida)



Maria, Florida resident

When my 26-year-old son, Ray, was killed in a robbery gone wrong six months ago, there were no words for my grief and rage.

After the trial, I was surprised when the prosecutor’s office reached out to me, asking if my husband and I were interested in participating in something called “restorative justice.”

I had never heard of it and was reluctant, but I learned that with restorative justice, a victim or a victim’s family has an opportunity to participate in the justice process.

Rather than standing on the sidelines feeling powerless, we could be directly involved in shaping what comes next for the person who killed our son.

The messenger fosters connection and creates relevance by **elevating shared values** of family.

This messenger, a mother whose son was killed, is also an **unexpected—and credible—messenger** for our audience.

Including “after the trial” is a cue there has been **accountability**—something very important for our audience.

The messenger helps to **model the emotional journey** of someone who has been harmed being open to the restorative justice process.

These details help to show how restorative justice provides an opportunity for accountability to be **directly related to the harm** caused—and provides an opportunity for a victim to have a voice in the process.

In order to participate, we would have to agree to meet face-to-face with the man and his family—and he would have to agree to meet with us. I was reluctant, but after careful consideration and discussion, my family decided to give it a try so we could have a say in what justice looks like.

To be effective, it is important to be clear that process **only happens if both the victim and person convicted of harm agree to participate**. Elevating that the process gives victims a voice resonates strongly with our audience.

Meeting face-to-face was very difficult. We sat with George, the man who killed my son, along with George's wife, 1-year-old son, and a mediator who guided us through the two-hour discussion. There were tears, and at times raised voices, but I also felt a shift.

The messenger again **models an emotional journey** for our audience. She is also **elevating shared values** around family and providing details that help to **show George's full humanity**.

Looking into George's eyes and telling him how he had stolen so much from my family felt so important. It also felt important to hear George own up to what happened, and how sorry he was for taking my Ray.

Leading with the importance of holding someone **accountable** for causing harm is important for our audience—and it shows restorative justice is a way to do that.

We are still figuring out what the restorative justice agreement will look like with the mediator. We want George to serve some time, but we also want him to use his experience to help stop violence like this from happening to others. If he can work to put some good out into the world and help prevent others from doing wrong through a local youth outreach program, we might agree with a plan that includes a reduced sentence. This process may not work for everyone, but it has been important for my family.

The concept of restorative justice is new to most among our audience. **Outlining examples** of what a restorative justice agreement might entail is very helpful for them.



The following is another example of effective messaging on accountability and restorative justice:

Not only is prison costly to taxpayers, it is often inhumane. While it is important to hold people accountable for harm they may have caused, including physical violence, prison is not the only option. A restorative justice approach—when both the person who caused harm and the person who has been harmed agree to participate—can be quite effective.

Together, with a trained moderator, the two parties and their families discuss what repairing the harm caused might look like. The person who has been harmed names what they need and want to help repair the harm. Agreeing to these terms can be an alternative to prison time—or a severe reduction in the time they are required to serve, depending on the situation. The agreement is rigorously supervised, and if the person who caused harm doesn't comply with the terms, they are returned to court for further sentencing.

In places where similar programs have successfully launched, 80% or more of victims report that they are satisfied with their experience and do not seek any further punishment.³³ There is also a high level of compliance with restorative agreements as compared to other court sanctions that generally have no connection to the specific harm caused. With restorative justice options, there is accountability that is directly connected to crime, the victim has power in the outcome, and both the victim and the person who caused harm can achieve some sense of closure, which is healing for them and for the community in general.

“The idea that the victim can take back the power in a sense is a true revelation. Instead of holding grudges, this gives all parties involved a chance to openly communicate and express their feelings. Closure and the healing process are so directly linked; I think the idea and option of restorative justice opens windows to how making amends is truly freeing.”

— White male,
Moderate Democrat,
AL

The high satisfaction rate of victims from restorative justice programs is very compelling for our audience—even for those who have doubts about how the programs work or who do not necessarily support the concept. It is very important for our audience that the restorative justice approach puts the victim in the center of the resolution and gives them power and a voice in the outcome.

“The 85 - 90% success rate is the most compelling thing to me. If this only just started and has this high rate then it means that society has always begged for something like this.”

— Latino male, Liberal Independent, LA

For messaging on accountability and restorative justice to be most effective, we recommend the following:

- ① **Lead with the importance of holding someone accountable for causing harm**—and that restorative justice is a way to do that.
- ① **Be clear that this process only happens if both the victim and person convicted of causing harm agree to participate.** It can replace a prison sentence or reduce it, depending on the agreement.
- ① **Underscore that restorative justice provides an opportunity for accountability to be directly related to the harm caused**—and provides an opportunity for a victim to have a voice in the process.
- ① **Highlight a range of messengers with different experiences going through the process**; this helps create an emotional connection as well as fill knowledge gaps about the process.
- ① **Model the emotional journey** of a person who has been harmed becoming open to the process of restorative justice and what they may get out of it.
- ① **Include statistics and other evidence of efficacy**, including that restorative justice agreements are usually followed and that *85 - 90% of victims report that they are satisfied with their experience and do not seek any further punishment.*
- ① **Outline examples of what a restorative justice agreement might entail, when appropriate.**

33 Sources: https://impactjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/CWW_RJreport.pdf (CA); <https://www.c4rj.org/what-is-restorative-justice/success-data> (MA)



Importantly, when it comes to effectively messaging on restorative justice, the research finds that all components of these recommendations are critical and necessary in order to calm our audience’s concerns and to meet them where they are emotionally. When attempting to skip some of these details in shorter format tested pieces, the messaging is much less resonant and persuasive—it doesn’t bring our audience along with us in the same way.

Reducing Drug Sentencing and Marijuana Decriminalization

There are many among our audience who express strong support for medical marijuana and marijuana decriminalization, with some also supporting legalization. In addition, there is strong support for reducing marijuana-related sentencing, along with reducing mandatory minimums for non-violent drug offenses.

Many liken using marijuana to drinking alcohol and believe it should be regulated similarly, including having legal guardrails (e.g., you must be 21 or older to purchase it and are not allowed to drive under the influence). While there are some among our audience who express concern that marijuana is a “gateway” drug that could lead to more substance use or crime, most do not share that perspective.

Our audience also thinks of this as a state issue, rather than a federal one. In the research, the phrase “legalize marijuana in all 50 states” leads some moderates and conservatives to voice concerns about states’ rights. While they may support legalizing marijuana in their own states, they want states to be allowed to determine their own policy. That said, as more states legalize recreational or medical marijuana, others say they see no point in making it illegal in their states—or having such harsh penalties for possession convictions.

Heightened Concern Over Marijuana Among People Who Are Latino

It is notable that people among our audience who are Latino—both English- and Spanish-speaking—are more opposed to marijuana legalization. In addition, the research finds that concern about marijuana being a gateway drug is particularly strong among Spanish-speaking members of our audience. These opinions are also reflected in a March 2024 report from Pew, which finds that 41 percent of Latino adults are “more likely to say marijuana’s legalization makes communities less safe,” and 39 percent say that “legal marijuana increases the use of . . . other drugs.”³⁴

If you are developing messaging on this issue, we recommend calming concerns about marijuana as a “gateway drug” with concrete information showing this to be false and showing the benefits of marijuana decriminalization or legalization to the community, including by highlighting savings to taxpayers and increased tax revenue. For more on this, see *Building Support Among Spanish-Speaking Audiences* on page 71.

Messaging that underscores the harms of harsh sentencing for drug offenses—including the impact this sentencing has on individuals, their families, and the community—helps to bolster support for decriminalization. **This remains true whether or not it is explicitly stated as a “non-violent” drug offense.** Financial arguments about the cost of incarceration and how taxpayer funds would be better spent on programs for the community further strengthen support among our audience for decriminalization.

³⁴ Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/03/26/most-americans-favor-legalizing-marijuana-for-medical-recreational-use/>



The following is an effective message on marijuana decriminalization and sentence reduction:



Southern states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, with Mississippi topping the list. At a time when so many are struggling to make ends meet, we are spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars incarcerating people every year. Florida alone spends \$3.4 billion annually,³⁵ including many who are serving time for non-violent drug offenses. That money would be better spent improving our communities.

For example, Miami-Dade County has implemented a successful pre-trial diversion program that provides non-violent offenders with the opportunity to avoid jail time and receive treatment instead.³⁶ We can also reduce the number of people in prison by reducing criminal penalties for low-level drug possession offenses, including marijuana.

Currently, in states where it's still illegal, possession of even small amounts of marijuana can result in prison time, steep fines, and a criminal record that makes it very difficult to find employment. By reducing these penalties, we can help to prevent unnecessary incarceration, reduce the burden on our criminal justice system, and ensure more people are able to work, live, and thrive—making our whole community stronger.

In general, our audience agrees that people should not be incarcerated for possession of marijuana. The message leads some participants in the research to comment that they believe marijuana remains illegal just to put people in jail—for the financial benefit of the prison system—and that they see how governments and private entities are profiting from the prison system.

There is also general support for reducing mandatory minimums for non-violent drug offenses. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of survey respondents say the following messaging is compelling, with 52 percent saying it is *extremely* or *very* compelling.



Our prisons are overcrowded and costly to taxpayers—and many of those currently in prison are there because of harsh sentencing rules for non-violent drug charges. One step in the right direction would be to remove “mandatory minimum” sentencing for non-violent drug charges, making sure that sentencing is fair and matches the situation. This would free up taxpayer money that could be used on community programs for housing, healthcare, or education.

For messaging on marijuana decriminalization and removing mandatory minimums to be most effective, we recommend:

- ⑤ **Highlight high rates of incarceration in specific states or communities** related to non-violent drug offenses.
- ⑤ **Detail the financial cost of incarceration to taxpayers**, underscoring the cost savings if marijuana were decriminalized based on state incarceration data.
- ⑤ **Be clear about the impacts on individual lives, families, and the community because of disproportionately harsh sentencing** (e.g., unable to find work and support themselves because of a criminal conviction).
- ⑤ **Reassure our audience** that, if legalized, marijuana would only be allowed for responsible use by those over the age of 21.



³⁵ Source: <https://fdc.myflorida.com/about.html>

³⁶ Source: <https://miamisao.com/our-work/signature-programs/diversion-programs/> ; https://miamisao.com/about/year_in_review/#flipbook-year-in-review-2023/29/ (pg. 27)



Mental Health Emergency Responders

To our audience, the idea of mental health specialists responding to mental health crises makes good sense. There is broad recognition and agreement that more mental health supports and services are needed. There is also strong support for increasing mental health services across the board.

While our audience predominantly supports the idea that well-trained mental health specialists should respond directly to mental health emergencies—and that police are both insufficiently trained and too overburdened to do that well—they do want reassurance that police will be available as backup should things turn violent. In fact, most want a *both/and* approach with police being available or accompanying mental health specialists dispatched to emergency situations in case a situation turns violent. Importantly, our audience wants to know that neither the first responder nor the person having a mental health crisis will be physically harmed.

“Police officers are not trained to be doctors for the city or the people. We need real doctors to help the mental health issues that we have here in America.”

— Black male, Democrat, liberal, FL

The following is an effective message on mental health first responders that was tested in the research:



At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,³⁷ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.

37 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>



Notably, we tested different messaging proposing mental health first responders operating autonomously, without any police involvement or back up. This idea was not well received. By contrast, the idea of having police on hand as back up if needed calmed audience concerns about potential violence and yielded much more broad support.

For messaging on mental health first responders to be most effective, we recommend the following:

- ③ **Frame messaging around the importance of more mental health support services**, including for mental health emergencies.
- ③ **Make the clear case that police are overburdened and not trained to handle mental health emergencies**; it is not their job and they are not trained to handle mental health crises (e.g., *Instead of tasking police with doing the jobs of social workers, counselors, and mediators, we should make sure our communities have mental health clinics with trained, independent social workers and mental health professionals who can answer these calls*).
- ③ **Include concrete statistics underscoring the frequency that mental health-related emergencies escalate to violence as a result of untrained, ill-equipped police answering the calls** (e.g., *At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,³⁸ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. And in 2022 alone, 109 people in the U.S. were killed after police responded to reports of someone behaving erratically or having a mental health crisis³⁹*).
- ③ **Introduce the solution of having trained mental health specialists answer emergency calls.**
- ③ **Be clear that police would be on call to provide back up as needed.** While our audience predominantly supports the idea that well-trained mental health specialists should respond directly to mental health emergencies, they want reassurance that police will be available as back up should things turn violent.
- ③ **Use a neutral tone when talking about police.** Highlight the benefit of mental health first responders for those in need of help/support, overburdened police, and the community as a whole.



Re-Entry Programs and Parole

Many among our audience have not previously heard of—or given much thought to—programs that support re-entry after release from prison. The good news is that after receiving effective messaging, many participants in the research find these programs to make good sense. They express support for the idea of instituting re-entry programs that help people find employment, housing, and educational opportunities, and allow people to begin planning for re-entry before their prison release date.

Many see the value of helping people stand on their own—for their own well-being and the well-being of the whole community. They also see that re-entry programs increase employment opportunities and reduce recidivism.

Effective messaging centers the values of second chances, access and opportunities for education and employment, self-sufficiency, and contributing to society as a whole. While some among our audience agree that parole rules need to change to better support successful re-entry, others continue to have questions about how the current system works. This is an area for continued exploration in future research.

38 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

39 Source: <https://policeviolencereport.org/2022/>

The following is an example of an effective message on re-entry programs and parole that was tested in the research. It frames the importance of re-entry programs around providing opportunities for independence and creating stability for family, while also contributing to the well-being of the whole community. This message resonates across gender, race, political party, and education level—and is one of the most compelling test messages overall with 90 percent finding it compelling in total and 64 percent saying it is *extremely* or *very* compelling:



It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.⁴⁰ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job and stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.

Additionally, making the case that people who are released on parole—with re-entry supports in place—are more likely to stay out of prison in the future is compelling for 85 percent of survey respondents:



When people are released on parole, part of the process is helping them find a job and a place to live. People who serve their entire sentence are released on their own without any supervision or support. That is why research shows that people released on parole are less likely to be arrested or incarcerated again. In Louisiana, for instance, people released from prison after serving their full sentence are more than twice as likely to land back in prison as those released early on parole. Releasing more people on parole reduces prison crowding—while also providing the opportunity for people to get back on their feet so they can rejoin their families and communities.⁴¹

For messaging on re-entry programs and parole to be most effective, we recommend the following:

- ③ **Lean into values of second chances, redemption, and contribution** (implicitly or explicitly).
- ③ **Connect the dots between the harm and the solution** and include statistics that underscore the connection between employment and low recidivism.
- ③ **Attest to positive outcomes.** Include supporting statistics that show successful re-entry, including for people who are paroled.
- ③ **Elevate people sharing their own stories** or stories of loved ones struggling to find fair opportunities upon release from prison.
- ③ **Be clear that individual, family, and community well-being are connected**—that everyone benefits when people have what they need to live and thrive.



40 Source: <https://www.prisongpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>

41 Source: https://www.nola.com/opinions/guest-column-abolishing-parole-doesnt-work/article_52c2b424-d506-11ee-b6dd-2308e408fd8a.html



Expanding Parole Eligibility

In addition to testing messaging related to shifting parole rules to be more supportive of re-entering society after serving a sentence as outlined above, we also tested messaging in support of expanding parole eligibility. Leaning into values of accountability, redemption, and the importance of a second chance—including in instances of mistakes made in youth—is moving for our audience.

The following test message does this effectively. In an online survey conducted across all five states, 82 percent of respondents say it is compelling overall, with 51 percent saying it is *extremely* or *very* compelling. Note that the message ends with the value of opportunity, rather than something being owed or deserved—or framing the message around rights. This is important for the persuadable segments of our audience, as they also value agency and self-determination. In other words, a person must take action to fulfill the available opportunity.



In addition to allowing compassionate parole for those who are incarcerated and facing terminal illness, we should provide parole opportunities for those who were sentenced to decades in prison in their teens. If someone who was incarcerated as a young person has served at least ten years of their sentence, and has completed education or job training programs, they should be eligible for parole. Many people make mistakes when they are young. We should all have the opportunity to take accountability, learn from our mistakes, and have a second chance.

Among our Alabama audience, focusing on prison overcrowding and inefficient government spending helps build support for expanding parole. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of survey respondents say they are likely to support changing criminal legal policies after reading the message below, which frames the issue around financial responsibility, self-determination, and opportunity for those who are “truly rehabilitated.”



Alabama's prison system is currently at 169% of designed capacity,⁴² and the state is considering spending billions in new prisons—even though prisons would still be over capacity. Expanding parole eligibility for those who are truly rehabilitated would be a more cost-effective way to address the situation.

Another message tested in the research highlights the impact of poor governance on low parole rates—and the resulting prison overcrowding. This message is compelling for 80 percent of survey respondents. In addition to compelling statistics, the message also underscores deeply held shared values with our audience, including redemption, second chances, opportunity, and contribution:



Alabama's prisons are overcrowded, in part because of a drastic reduction in the number of eligible people being granted parole. Since appointing a new chair to the Board of Pardons and Paroles in 2019, the parole rate dropped to 8% in 2023—compared to 53% in 2018.⁴³ Without meaningful changes, our state prison population will continue to skyrocket, leaving people who have completed education and job training programs in prison without any opportunities to rejoin and help strengthen their communities.



42 Source: <https://alabamareflector.com/2024/04/29/alabama-cant-build-its-way-out-of-the-prison-crisis/>

43 Source: <https://paroles.alabama.gov/monthly-statistical-reports/>



One parole-related message we tested in Louisiana focuses on the injustice of sentencing youth to decades of incarceration for mistakes they made early in life—when they were not yet “emotionally or mentally mature” enough to understand the gravity of their mistakes or the legal repercussions. This message is also framed around justice, accountability, and redemption—allowing people who have “shown true accountability” the opportunity to apply for parole. Note that there were no promises of being granted parole, just a promise that a person who had served two decades of their sentence could be eligible for consideration. This is compelling to 73 percent of respondents.



Thousands of people in Louisiana are sentenced to serve 30 or more years or life in prison. These sentences are often given to young people before they have fully emotionally and mentally matured to understand what they are accused of or what is happening to them. When someone has served at least 20 years of a 30+ year sentence, and they show true rehabilitation and accountability, they should be allowed to apply for parole.

A message tested among our audience in Florida—where parole has largely been abolished—effectively makes the case for reinstating parole. This statement also leans into the importance and power of redemption, personal responsibility, independence, and contribution. By noting the strain on government supports, it also makes an implicit case that parole is more cost effective than prison—which taxpayers appreciate, especially in this era of zero-sum thinking and scarcity mindset. Eighty-one percent (81%) of survey respondents find this statement compelling overall.



Since Florida abolished parole, the state is incarcerating a growing and aging prison population, which adds unnecessary strain on the Department of Corrections and increases the number of people completely dependent on the state. For people in prison, the possibility of parole is a powerful incentive to reform their lives, recognize their own personal responsibility, and reenter society. Lawmakers should consider allowing some incarcerated people to receive a reduction in their sentence for completing certain rehabilitative programming, such as education or job training programs.

For messaging on expanding parole eligibility to be most effective, we recommend:

- ① **Lean into values of second chances, accountability, redemption, cost efficiency, and contribution** (implicitly or explicitly).
- ① **Include statistics to affirm that prison overcrowding is a clear problem.** Include the financial burden to taxpayers, including the cost-benefit of reducing (unnecessarily harsh) sentencing for drug charges.
- ① **Connect the dots to how increasing parole eligibility can address overcrowding** while also providing opportunities for those on parole to get back to their families and communities.
- ① Where possible, emphasize that most eligible for parole have **completed education and job training programs.** They are showing their interest in providing for themselves, their families, and their communities—which is implicit proof of wanting to walk a crime-free path.
- ① **Focus the message on the opportunity to apply and be eligible for parole,** rather than the outcome of a parole hearing.





Youth Incarceration

There is broad agreement among our audience that young people should not be held in adult prisons, and there is strong support for halting the practice. Many also have empathy for the idea that young people should be provided second chances and opportunities to change, given our audience’s own experiences of making mistakes when they were young. Additionally, after exposure to test messaging, many agree that we should be investing more in supporting kids to have access to resources that meet their needs, including food, housing, education, and job training.

Test messaging about youth incarceration is particularly persuasive for members of our audience 35 or older, as their agreement with the following statement increases by ten to 14 points. Those who are 18-34 years old start with strong agreement and end with even stronger agreement:



When a young person under the age of 18 is charged with a crime, they should not be automatically put in jail or prison. Instead, we need to take a closer look at their circumstances and determine the best rehabilitation approach. (68% overall agreement)

Still, there is strong belief in holding people of all ages accountable for wrongdoing or causing harm. While most believe that juvenile detention is an appropriate measure when someone has broken the law—and that it can provide an opportunity for rehabilitation—there are some who express a belief that incarceration of any kind is destabilizing and traumatizing. They believe that young people should stay in their homes and communities whenever possible.

One video messenger tested in focus groups, Kathryn, shared what she described as an “a-ha” moment: how she came to learn that a teenager stealing food wasn’t doing it because he was a “bad kid” but rather because he was hungry (see page 104 for a transcript of Kathryn’s messenger video). This is powerful and emotionally resonant for many participants in the research because it taps into their existing values and beliefs that children should be cared for. It also helps to build a compelling case for community support and interventions as solutions rather than incarceration.

“ We as adults may not know or understand how the events in a child’s life... what leads to the actions that they take.”

– White male, Conservative Republican, AL

Another video messenger, Leonard, makes the case for helping to make children and families “whole” by ensuring they have food, shelter, and the other resources they need to function; he says this increases safety and stability for kids, families, and communities (see page 106 for a transcript of Leonard’s video).

Below is a message on youth incarceration we tested with state-specific statistics for survey respondents in each state. It was compelling for 83 to 87 percent of survey respondents in each state, effectively outlining the disproportionate spending on prison versus education—and making the argument for more supports instead of more incarceration.



The kids in our state need more support. Too many young people under 18 are being incarcerated—including in adult prisons. In Georgia, it can cost almost \$113,000 per year to imprison a child, but only \$10,000 for a year of public education.⁴⁴ Instead of putting children in prison, and taking away their chance to grow and learn, we should take a close look at the circumstances that led to their behavior and provide rehabilitation opportunities whenever possible.

After being exposed to this messaging about youth incarceration, as well as messengers sharing their personal stories about the importance of providing support for young people and opportunities for transformation, the percentage of those who *strongly* agree with the following statement increased nine points (39% to 48%), with agreement overall increasing from 58 to 68 percent.



When a young person under the age of 18 is charged with a crime, they should not be automatically put in jail or prison. Instead, we need to take a closer look at their circumstances and determine the best rehabilitation approach.



44 Source: <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/explore/georgia/?section=race-interactive>





For messaging on youth incarceration to be most effective, we recommend the following:

- ③ **Elevate shared values of second chances and care for children and youth, as well as accountability.** Many among our audience personally identify with the experience of making youthful mistakes—and the importance of being given a second chance to learn and grow. They also agree that mistakes made in youth should not follow someone their entire life.
- ③ **Center a child’s story in the context of their family, home, community, or school** to remind our audience of their youth and full humanity.
- ③ **Use words like *child, kid, youth, and young person* to remind our audience who we’re talking about.** Avoid words like *young adult*, as they imply the child has adult capacities. Also avoid *juvenile*, as it is cold and distancing, and *teenager*, as it evokes young people who are out of control. Talk about kids as kids.
- ③ **Connect the dots between root causes and behavior when appropriate** (e.g., stealing because of hunger).
- ③ **Highlight the importance and positive impact of meeting children’s needs on both the child and the community as a whole.**
- ③ **Underscore the concrete harms of incarceration to young people**, including added trauma and further destabilization.
- ③ **Emphasize the possibility of positive interventions**, including concrete examples of a young person having the opportunity to thrive as a result of positive interventions.
- ③ **Include statistics about the cost of incarceration versus education to underscore imbalanced priorities** (e.g., *In Florida, it can cost over \$130,000 per year to imprison a child, but about \$12,000 for a year of public education*⁴⁵).
- ③ **Propose alternative methods of accountability** to reassure our audience that action is being taken, while also supporting a child’s opportunity to grow up and thrive.

.....
45 Source: Internal SPLC data analysis available upon request

Connecting the Dots on Disproportionate Impacts

Our audience does not uniformly understand it to be true—or agree—that the criminal legal system disproportionately harms Black and Latino people. Perspectives on this are deeply informed by our audience’s own lived experiences, worldview, and political ideology. Even among some conservative Black and Latino individuals, there is skepticism about what advocates may see as undeniably true and accurate. This variation in perspective highlights the complexity of addressing racial disparities within the criminal legal system. Segments of our audience with distinct perspectives are outlined below (see page 103 in the appendix for additional details about these two audience segments).

Conflicted Empathizers

These tend to be people who are liberal and those who have experienced racial discrimination. In the context of disproportionate impacts, they have personally experienced or witnessed the harms of the criminal legal system and immediately recognize and validate the importance of discussing race. For them, race is seen as an obvious and critical factor that must be addressed in any conversation about criminal justice. They not only acknowledge the systemic harms that disproportionately affect Black and Latino communities, but also appreciate and advocate for a multicultural approach that recognizes and values the diverse experiences of different racial and ethnic groups and eschews racial bias. Participants who have witnessed or experienced racial discrimination often express concern about disproportionate impacts before the issue is even introduced. In one focus group, a participant expressed the belief that calling on the police “*makes [situations] even worse because they are ready to shoot on site...*”—a sentiment that many other Black participants agreed with. Conflicted empathizers view the acknowledgment of racial disparities as essential to understanding and addressing the root causes of injustice within the system. For them, messaging that ignores this will be missing an important piece. It is therefore important for messaging to call out disproportionate impacts to boost messaging credibility and impact with this audience.

“ I personally witnessed this happening. There was a white young man that went before the judge, and he received probation. The Black young man went before the same judge and received a prison sentence for almost the identical crime.”

– Black male, Liberal Democrat, AL

Concerned Skeptics

This portion of our audience tends to include moderates, some conservatives, and those who have not experienced racial discrimination. Regardless of race or ethnicity, concerned skeptics have fewer experiences with the criminal legal system and are less receptive to messages underscoring racial disparities in the criminal legal system. This audience often prefers a colorblind approach, where race is not seen as a factor when thinking about social issues because they truly believe and value that “race does not matter” and that “justice is blind and treats everyone equally.” Instead, they are more likely to focus on individual actions and choices, saying that “Black, brown, white...we all know right from wrong.” They are more likely to believe that each person is solely responsible for their own outcomes, regardless of racial background. As a result, they may argue that the higher presence of Black and Latino individuals in the criminal legal system is due to higher crime rates within these communities, rather than viewing it as a reflection of systemic racism. This audience often disputes messaging that emphasizes the disproportionate harm to Black and Latino people.

It is important to note that sharing concrete examples of disproportionate harms, especially from non-partisan sources, can help to paint a fuller picture of the problems we need to address—especially for *Concerned Skeptics*. These examples also help to create openings among those who see state violence against Black and Latino people as isolated incidents rather than a broader, systemic problem.



The following are examples of messaging tested in the research that effectively elevates disproportionate harms, with strongest resonance amongst those who are liberal and/or Black:



Non-partisan studies show that incidents of police misconduct and violence fall disproportionately on Black Americans—resulting in deeply upsetting situations like the murder of Tyre Nichols in 2023. According to one study, Black people are more likely to be killed by police, more likely to be unarmed when killed by police, and less likely to be threatening someone when killed than anyone else.⁴⁶ We need to rethink our approach to policing so everyone in our community is safe and has the opportunity to live and thrive.

Extremely or Very Compelling by Ideology + Race		
Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
→ Black: 86%	→ Black: 65%	→ Black: 64%
→ Latino: 71%	→ Latino: 48%	→ Latino: 32%
→ White: 80%	→ White: 48%	→ White: 31%



The criminal justice system is supposed to treat everyone equally, but it often fails to do that. Because of deeply-rooted and harmful stereotypes, statistics show law enforcement singles out Black and Latino people for stops, searches, and arrests. For instance, a Black person is five times more likely to be stopped by police without just cause than a white person.⁴⁷ Black and Latino people also often face tougher sentencing than others for the same conviction. This is not just, not right, and not how the system should be.

Extremely or Very Compelling by Ideology + Race		
Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
→ Black: 79%	→ Black: 77%	→ Black: 67%
→ Latino: 76%	→ Latino: 68%	→ Latino: 28%
→ White: 77%	→ White: 46%	→ White: 32%



Harsh sentencing for non-violent drug offenses impacts our entire community, but not equally. Black people are arrested at much higher rates for possession even though studies show Black and white people use marijuana at the same rates.⁴⁸ In Alabama, for instance, one study found that Black people are approximately four times as likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than white people.⁴⁹ We need to legalize marijuana in our state for those over 21 so that we can level the playing field and work toward a criminal justice system that works to help our communities be safer for everyone.

Extremely or Very Compelling by Ideology + Race		
Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
→ Black: 74%	→ Black: 66%	→ Black: 63%
→ Latino: 71%	→ Latino: 47%	→ Latino: 30%
→ White: 78%	→ White: 53%	→ White: 33%

46 Source: <https://policeviolencereport.org/>

47 Source: <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

48 Source: <https://norml.org/marijuana/fact-sheets/racial-disparity-in-marijuana-arrests/>

49 Source: <https://www.alreporter.com/2021/02/17/black-alabamians-are-four-times-more-likely-to-be-jailed-for-marijuana/>

This messaging prompts a significant majority of participants in the research to agree that the police treat Black people differently, that it is wrong, and that it needs to change. While effective for many, the impact of these messages varies depending on our audience’s lived experiences, beliefs, and political ideologies.

For messaging to most effectively connect the dots on disproportionate impact, we recommend the following:

- ③ **Lean into aspirational American values of shared humanity, equality, fairness, non-discrimination, and impartiality in our legal system.** We have not yet achieved these, and are a long way off, but many among our audience agree that we should—and are willing to support changes that get us closer to fairness and equality.
- ③ **Connect the dots between the harm you’re outlining and the positive change you’re proposing.** Be clear that damaging racial stereotypes are disproportionately harming people who are Black and Latino.
- ③ **Include state-specific statistics detailing the high arrest and incarceration rates of Black and Latino people,** which are compelling for many among our audience and underscore the need for change. This also makes clear that the problem is systemic—not the result of a few “bad apples” or the result of individual choices—and makes clear that the problem needs to be addressed in a systemic way.
- ③ **Include comparison details when they underscore unequal levels of arrest for the same conviction or more severe sentencing for comparable convictions.**
- ③ **Center shared humanity,** showing people embedded in the context of their families and communities.
- ③ **Be clear that addressing inequities in our criminal legal system benefits our communities as a whole.**

Realities of U.S. History vs. Living Up to Aspirational American Values and Ideals

Many among our audience genuinely believe in values that they feel represent the aspirations of what it means to be American, including opportunity, justice, and freedom. They see these aspirational values as motivations and justifications for why the United States is a nation that believes in transformation, redemption, and second chances.

When our messaging avoids tapping into these deeply held values, it is a missed opportunity to make an emotional connection with our audience. At the same time, given the United States’ history of racism, violence, and colonialism, some advocates feel uncomfortable using language that they feel erases that history or glorifies or promotes the idea of American exceptionalism.

We can navigate this tension when we work to make our nation’s espoused aspirational values—fairness, equity, justice, safety, and freedom—a lived reality for everyone. Our messaging can honor this tension by incorporating language that affirms the shared values we and our audience collectively hold—while also acknowledging that the United States has so far fallen grievously short of living up to this aspiration.





Messaging About Race in the Criminal Legal System: Opportunities and Challenges

Many among our conflicted audience think of *racism* as individual acts done by a racist person or a set of individual beliefs that a racist person holds. They think that this type of individual-level racism is wrong, and someone engaging in racist behavior should stop doing so. At the same time, many people in our persuasion audience *only* see racism as these individual acts. They do not understand the ways in which racism is also a systemic problem. While there is more messaging research to do around how to help people understand the systemic nature of racism within the context of our criminal legal system, our research suggests that messaging showing the disproportionate harms on Black and brown people is an effective entry point. It helps many among our audience understand the widespread nature and harmful impacts of discriminatory policies and practices.

In general, most among our audience do not want to see themselves as racist or to be perceived as being racist by others—including those who identify as liberal, moderate, and conservative. This provides us with an opportunity to develop messaging that can engage with this part of their identity—messaging that connects to shared values while describing facts and circumstances demonstrating disproportionate harms. That said, if messaging directly states that the system is racist or that people who align themselves with a “tough on crime” approach are racist, it runs the risk of alienating some among our audience—people who would otherwise be available to us and could become supportive of our proposed policy changes.

This is in part because many believe that leaders or politicians who promote or adopt a “tough on crime” mindset have genuine concerns about public safety and are, from the perspective of our audience, offering concrete, serious solutions to decreasing crime in their communities. Our audience is also averse to perceiving people they know as being racist, including loved ones who are members of law enforcement. These dynamics combine to make some among our audience more likely to dismiss messaging that explicitly cites systemic racism, rather than making an implicit case through data and descriptions of disparate harms.

Another core element to consider in delivering effective messaging related to the systemic nature of racism is the heavy importance many, including members of our audience who are Black and Latino, place on individual responsibility, personal agency, and accountability for personal decisions and actions. That is, many among our audience—across race and ethnicity—believe that people are impacted by their background, environment, and circumstances. And, at the same time, many feel that individuals are also responsible for their decisions and actions. Many among our audience who are Black and Latino emphasize the importance of individual choices within an unjust system, alongside their view that racism is a systemic issue.

All in all, most among our persuasion audience support a fair, equal, non-discriminatory criminal legal system that also ensures those who have caused harm are held to account. This is true across race, gender, region, and political ideology, though perceptions of what counts as fair, equal, and non-discriminatory vary to some degree. There are variations on how our audience may articulate this—informed deeply by lived experience and political ideology—as outlined in the following audience segments:



⊙ **Liberals and Black members of our audience:** Disproportionate impact messaging resonates most with liberal segments of our audience across race, including liberals who are Black, white, and Latino. Additionally, segments of our audience who are Black and moderate, or who are Black and conservative, also respond positively to disproportionate impact messaging. As such, there is an opportunity to solidify and expand support among the liberal and Black segments of our audience—and to engage them more directly, as they already see the discrimination embedded in our criminal legal system and are eager to support significant change.

“ As an African American, this deeply resonates with me seeing my fellow brothers and sisters being unjustly arrested. I strongly agree that something has to give.”

—Black female, Liberal Democrat, FL

“ A Black person is almost always seen guilty of a crime even before given the chance to speak.”

—Latino male, Liberal Independent, LA

⊙ **White and Latino Moderates and Conservatives:** For the moderate and conservative white and Latino segments of our audience, there is a particularly strong emphasis on individual responsibility. As one white conservative focus group participant from Georgia said, “I don’t think skin color should matter; you do a crime, you do the time.”⁵⁰ Additionally, some white conservatives think the criminal legal system is already “color blind,” and they dismiss statistics detailing disproportionate percentages of arrests or incarceration of Black and brown people as simply representative of the people who are breaking the law. Some Latino conservatives among our audience think that higher arrest or incarceration rates are related to individuals making bad choices rather than the result of a discriminatory system, with one Florida Latino conservative participant saying, “The percentage of people in prison has nothing to do with race, it is based on people who commit crime.”⁵¹ At the same time, moderates and conservatives across race generally believe that people found guilty of a crime deserve due process and should be treated as “innocent until proven guilty” (as the quote on the right illustrates). More research is needed to determine if and how messaging focused on disproportionate harms to Latinos in the criminal legal system might resonate with Latino moderates and conservatives and help build the case that systemic change is needed.

“ Justice is supposed to be blind and see no color!!! Whenever a crime is committed, regardless of race or color, that person should be innocent until proven guilty.”

—Latino male, Conservative Republican, FL

To develop effective messaging about racial discrimination in the criminal legal system, the messaging research supports incorporating the following recommendations:

- ⊙ **Include journey stories from unexpected messengers** who became aware of racial discrimination in the legal system through someone in their lives or specific experiences;
- ⊙ **Include statistics showing disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates from non-partisan or conservative sources;**
- ⊙ **Describe the ways in which discrimination is embedded in policies and practices,** and not just a matter of individual behaviors or beliefs (rather than simply asserting systemic racism exists, for example); and
- ⊙ **Elevate shared values of non-discrimination, justice, accountability, and impartiality.**

50 White female, conservative Republican, GA

51 Latino male, conservative Republican, FL

While more research is needed to further develop comprehensive strategies to strengthen messaging about systemic racism, there are clear opportunities to message effectively about the disproportionate impact our criminal legal system has on people who are Black and brown—and to begin drawing connections to the systemic racism ingrained in our current structures.

In the July 2024 online survey, after reviewing messaging about disproportionate harm and messengers sharing their own experiences, there is a 3-point increase in agreement with the following statement (from 69% to 72%). There is even more movement among key subgroups, showing the potential for increasing awareness and support more broadly: Republicans overall moved six points (56% to 62% overall agree), with Republican men showing the most change at nine points (49% to 58%). Tested messaging also solidifies and expands liberal agreement by six percentage points, increasing from 80 percent total agree to 86 percent.



Addressing structural racism—including racially discriminatory policies and practices that lead to unemployment, lack of sufficient education or stable housing, or economic challenges—is vitally important to reducing crime rates and ensuring all of our communities are safer.

The following message makes it clear that racial discrimination continues to be embedded in our policies and practices—that it is *systemic* and is therefore contributing to disproportionate impacts that exist in our criminal legal system. It tested well (80% compelling overall). While this message is helpful for those who are unaware of current realities, it is particularly compelling for people who are Black (73% *extremely* or *very* compelling), as it likely aligns with their own observations or experiences.



As a nation, we have overturned many laws that discriminated by race. At the same time, it may be surprising to learn how many federal, state, and local governments still have discriminatory policies and practices in place that result in disproportionate poverty rates, arrests, and policing of Black Americans. We need to fix these inequities, level the playing field for all communities, and ensure that our friends and neighbors have equal access to stable housing, good-paying jobs, and educational opportunities.

Messaging incorporating shared values with facts about disproportionate impact, combined with powerful personal stories, are effective with a significant portion of research participants. It helps to build a case for some among the harder-to-move segments of our audience that systemic racism is in fact operating and causing deep harm. One conservative focus group participant, a white Republican woman from Mississippi, shows what is possible even with conservative audiences. She was moved by the tested messaging, reporting that her perspective was significantly changed over the course of that conversation. She said, “This is a clear injustice, and we need to work to change it. My perspective on this issue has shifted since I first joined this group. I have learned more about the history of racial injustice in the criminal justice system, and I have seen the personal stories of people who have been harmed by this system. This has made me even more committed to working for change.”

» Audience-Specific Nuances

The messaging recommendations featured in the previous section outline guidance relevant across our *conflicted* audience as a whole. Nuances included in this section can help refine messaging for specific segments of our audience.

Compelling Messaging by Gender

While men find messaging about proposed policy changes compelling, survey results show that, overall, women find them even more compelling than men. As the following table shows, for both men and women, the strongest test message focused on the importance of having mental health professionals answering mental health emergency calls—with 70 percent of women finding this compelling overall (nine more points than men).

Women are particularly compelled by messaging about increased mental health support, increased employment opportunities, and proposed solutions having a clear and positive community-wide impact.

Men are particularly compelled by economic impact messaging and statements calling for changing our approach to harsh sentencing, including mandatory minimums for drug offenses.

Top Tested Messages by Gender: Extremely + Very Compelling			
	ALL	Women	Men
<i>[Mental Health] At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use, but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations.⁵² As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.</i>	66%	70%	61%
<i>[Re-Entry/Employment] It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.⁵³ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job and stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.</i>	64%	67%	60%
<i>[Justice Reinvestment] Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated \$80 billion every year.⁵⁴ There is growing bipartisan support to make a change. In 2007, for instance, Texas passed a \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and other prison diversion programs. The crime rate fell 26% after seven years, and Texas has been closing prisons.⁵⁵ We can save money, reduce crime rates, and create safer communities with a different approach.</i>	61%	61%	60%
<i>[Harsh Sentencing] Our prisons are overcrowded and costly to taxpayers—and many people in prison are there because of harsh sentencing rules for non-violent drug charges. One step in the right direction would be to remove “mandatory minimum” sentencing for non-violent drug charges, making sure that sentencing is fair and matches the circumstances. This would free up taxpayer money that could be used on community programs for housing, healthcare, or education.</i>	57%	57%	57%

52 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

53 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>

54 Source: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>

55 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/ten-years-of-criminal-justice-reform-in-texas/#>



It is notable that women are consistently more moved by messaging about racial discrimination and disproportionate impacts than men. Fifty-two percent (52%) of men find the following statement compelling, while 62% of women find it compelling overall.



The criminal justice system is supposed to treat everyone equally, but it often fails to do that. Because of deeply-rooted and harmful stereotypes, statistics show law enforcement singles out Black and Latino people for stops, searches, and arrests. For instance, a Black person is five times more likely to be stopped by police without just cause than a white person.⁵⁶ Black and Latino people also often face tougher sentencing than others for the same conviction. This is not just, not right, and not how the system should be.

Messaging related to financial costs of incarceration and restorative justice is least compelling to women overall. Men find messaging about parole expansion and restorative justice least compelling.

Compelling Messaging by Race and Ethnicity

In all of our research, we tested language that opponents to criminal justice reform may use to simulate a real-world situation where our audience is exposed to a variety of perspectives. The opposition messaging we tested in the online surveys resonates strongly across the board, particularly with people who are white or Latino. However, we also see strong resonance with supporter messaging making the case for positive change—underscoring the fact that many among our audience have a *both/and* perspective. They want to see more police on the streets AND more violence interruption programs, for instance. This is a sincere messaging opportunity for us to continue building support for a new approach to community safety and collective care.

It is also notable that people who are Black are much less swayed by arguments for more policing and more incarceration—and are also more compelled across the board by messaging to build support for changing our legal system.

Additionally, as outlined in the following table, people among our audience who are Black or Latino are significantly more compelled by messaging that details the disproportionate, racially motivated harms of our current legal system than white members of our audience. Messaging on disproportionate impact also resonates more strongly with people among our audience who are white and liberal than with those who are white and conservative. Conservative audiences overall are more moved by messaging underscoring cost efficiency and potential savings to taxpayers, as well as accountability and self-sufficiency (see page 68 for additional details about effective messaging for conservative audiences).

For messaging to be particularly compelling for people among our audience who are Black, it is important to include details that acknowledge and quantify the disproportionate impacts experienced within their communities—including police violence, arrest, and incarceration rates, and harsh sentencing for drug charges—while also lifting proposed solutions that can alleviate those harmful impacts and benefit whole communities. This builds messaging credibility and affirms the need for change. Highlighting disproportionate impacts in messaging is also important for Latino audiences. Ensuring that the sources included in this messaging are bipartisan makes them more credible and persuasive for a broader range of white members of our audience, as well.

In future research, it may be worth testing additional messaging approaches that more clearly connect the dots between historical abuse and discrimination and abuse and discrimination in our current legal system. This could be helpful in building support for policy changes among white moderate and conservative audiences, providing them an opportunity to more clearly see the throughlines and connections between the systemic harms they know or learn about from U.S. history and contemporary race-based systemic discrimination.

The most compelling messaging for white audiences, including those who are moderate or conservative, begins with an acknowledgment that people are struggling and quantifies that reality with statistics before calling for change. We tested state-specific versions of the same statement in all five states; the following version, tested

⁵⁶ Source: <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

in Georgia, is the highest tested messaging among white survey respondents overall. It also tests very well across political ideology.



In Georgia, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects the lives of 1.4 million Georgians, including around one in six children living below the poverty line. When people are hungry and desperate, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize programs in our community that help people stand on their own, like job training and affordable housing.

Other messaging that is particularly compelling for white members of our audience calls for mental health emergency responders and supporting kids who are struggling instead of incarcerating them. Emphasizing the importance of re-entry support programs also resonates with white members of our audience across ideology.

In the following table, you will see that our audience is strongly compelled across race and ethnicity by the possibility of mental health professionals answering mental health emergencies. There is also aligned support for effective parole and re-entry policies.

Top Tested Messages by Race and Ethnicity: Extremely + Very Compelling

	ALL	Black	Latino	White
[Opposition/Remove Criminal*] <i>When someone commits a crime—particularly a violent crime like assault or murder—they need to be held accountable. The best way to prevent future crime is to remove the criminal from the picture. We cannot turn a blind eye to the harm they have inflicted and the wrong they have done.</i>	69%	65%	67%	72%
[Mental Health] <i>At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,⁵⁷ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.</i>	66%	71%	65%	63%
[Re-Entry/Employment] <i>It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.⁵⁸ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.</i>	64%	69%	64%	60%
[Opposition/More Police*] <i>Crime rates are too high, and people in our communities are not safe enough. There have been more robberies, more carjackings, more assaults—yet so many police departments are underfunded and understaffed. We need to make smart investments in the police, which research shows can significantly lower violent crime.</i>	61%	54%	62%	65%
[Incarceration Cost] <i>Southern states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, with Mississippi topping the list. At a time when so many are struggling to make ends meet, we are spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars keeping people in prison every year. Florida alone spends \$3.4 billion annually,⁵⁹ including many serving time for non-violent drug offenses. That money would be better spent improving our communities so more people are able to work, live, and thrive.</i>	60%	71%	51%	53%

57 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

58 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>

59 Source: <https://fdc.myflorida.com/about.html>



[Violence Interruption] Relationship-based approaches to reducing violence are working in cities like Atlanta, Montgomery, and New Orleans, where people in the community who are known and trusted are trained to be effective as “violence interrupters.” They work in parallel with the police to successfully mediate conflicts before they turn violent. A violence interruption program in parts of Atlanta resulted in an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year. ⁶⁰ Violence interruption is a proven and effective approach to reducing violence and making our communities safer for all.	60%	65%	62%	57%
[Racial Discrimination] The criminal justice system is supposed to treat everyone equally, but it often fails to do that. Because of deeply-rooted and harmful stereotypes, statistics show law enforcement singles out Black and Latino people for stops, searches, and arrests. For instance, a Black person is five times more likely to be stopped by police without just cause than a white person. Black and Latino people also often face tougher sentencing than others for the same conviction. This is not just, not right, and not how the system should be. ⁶¹	57%	76%	59%	46%
[Fix Inequities] As a nation, we have overturned many laws that discriminated by race. At the same time, it may be surprising to learn how many federal, state, and local governments still have discriminatory policies and practices in place that result in disproportionate poverty rates, arrests, and policing of Black Americans. We need to fix these inequities, level the playing field for all communities, and ensure that our friends and neighbors have equal access to stable housing, good-paying jobs, and educational opportunities.	56%	73%	56%	46%
[Disproportionate Impact] Non-partisan studies show that incidents of police misconduct and violence fall disproportionately on Black Americans—resulting in deeply upsetting situations like the murder of Tyre Nichols in 2023. According to one study, Black people are more likely to be killed by police, more likely to be unarmed when killed by police, and less likely to be threatening someone when killed than anyone else. ⁶² We need to rethink our approach to policing so everyone in our community is safe and has the opportunity to live and thrive.	55%	71%	56%	46%
*In online surveys, we tested opposition messaging statements (in blue) alongside supporter messaging statements to mirror what our audience would hear in the real world.				

Test messaging that is *least* compelling by race and ethnicity includes the following:

- ⦿ **Black:** Opposition messaging about high crime rates is some of the least compelling for survey respondents who are Black (54% total compelling). Supportive messaging advocating for expanding parole eligibility is least compelling overall for Black respondents, but that is 60 percent. **It is notable that half or more of Black respondents are compelled by each of our messaging calling for change.**
- ⦿ **Latino:** In alignment with concerns about legalizing marijuana, respondents who are Latino find messaging about the need to reduce harsh sentencing for non-violent drug charges least compelling. Latino respondents are also less moved by messaging advocating for expanding parole programs.
- ⦿ **White:** Overall, disproportionate impact and racial discrimination messaging are least compelling for respondents who are white. However, as noted elsewhere in this guide, these statements are compelling for people among our audience who are white and liberal—and less resonant for those who are conservative.



60 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data

61 Sources: <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>; <https://norml.org/marijuana/fact-sheets/racial-disparity-in-marijuana-arrests/>

62 Source: <https://policeviolencereport.org/>

Compelling Messaging by Political Party

A majority of Democrats find each supporter message tested in the research to be compelling, with messaging about disproportionate racial discrimination being the most compelling. Messaging about the importance of mental health first responders is the second most compelling message among Democrats. Initial messaging about restorative justice is least compelling for this group, but that increases significantly once there is more explanation about the process of restorative justice—and what it is.

While Democrats are compelled by supportive statistics, they are also motivated by values of fairness and equality, opportunity, and collective well-being. State-specific messages about poverty rates, and the impact on children, also resonate deeply for Democrats.

Those who are independent are most compelled by test messaging about mental health first responders, employment support for those who have been incarcerated, and our “wildly costly” prison system. Financial statistics, along with values of self-sufficiency and independence, are compelling for independents as well as Republicans.

A majority of Republicans are also compelled by the idea of mental health first responders and the fiscal impact of our prison system. They are least compelled by messaging detailing racial discrimination or disproportionate impact. Details about costs to taxpayers, along with policy changes framed as alleviating the burden on police, are most compelling.

Top Tested Messages by Political Party: Extremely + Very Compelling
(Ranked by compelling to Democrats)

	ALL	Democrat	Independent	Republican
[Mental Health] <i>At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use, but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations.⁶³ As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.</i>	66%	77%	59%	61%
[Disproportionate Impact] <i>Non-partisan studies show that incidents of police misconduct and violence fall disproportionately on Black Americans—resulting in deeply upsetting situations like the murder of Tyre Nichols in 2023. According to one study, Black people are more likely to be killed by police, more likely to be unarmed when killed by police, and less likely to be threatening someone when killed than anyone else.⁶⁴ We need to rethink our approach to policing so everyone in our community is safe and has the opportunity to live and thrive.</i>	55%	77%	45%	43%
[Re-Entry/Employment] <i>It’s difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.⁶⁵ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.</i>	64%	75%	57%	58%

63 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

64 Source: <https://policeviolencereport.org/>

65 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>



<p>[Justice Reinvestment] Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated \$80 billion every year.⁶⁶ There is growing bipartisan support to make a change. In 2007, for instance, Texas passed a \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and other prison diversion programs. The crime rate fell 26% after seven years, and Texas has been closing prisons.⁶⁷ We can save money, reduce crime rates, and create safer communities with a different approach.</p>	61%	72%	53%	56%
<p>[Racial Discrimination] The criminal justice system is supposed to treat everyone equally, but it often fails to do that. Because of deeply-rooted and harmful stereotypes, statistics show law enforcement singles out Black and Latino people for stops, searches, and arrests. For instance, a Black person is five times more likely to be stopped by police without just cause than a white person.⁶⁸ Black and Latino people also often face tougher sentencing than others for the same conviction. This is not just, not right, and not how the system should be.</p>	57%	74%	53%	45%
<p>[Mandatory Minimums] Our prisons are overcrowded and costly to taxpayers—and many people in prison are there because of harsh sentencing rules for non-violent drug charges. One step in the right direction would be to remove “mandatory minimum” sentencing for non-violent drug charges, making sure that sentencing is fair and matches the circumstances. This would free up taxpayer money that could be used on community programs for housing, healthcare, or education.</p>	57%	74%	52%	46%

Test messaging that is *least* compelling by political party includes:

- ⊗ **Democrat:** All the supportive messages tested are compelling for more than half of survey respondents (64-77% total compelling). The least compelling message is a statement about restorative justice, although subsequent messaging that outlined the process and successes of restorative justice is much more impactful.
- ⊗ **Independent:** Supportive test messaging that is compelling for fewer than half of independent respondents across states ranged between 42 to 49% compelling overall, with the statement about restorative justice coming in last at 42%. Messaging about disproportionate impacts is also least compelling for independents.
- ⊗ **Republican:** Opposition messaging resonates most with Republican respondents overall. Advocacy messaging outlining racial discrimination or disproportionate impacts on Black or Latino people in the criminal legal system is least compelling overall (41-46% total compelling), but still resonates with four in ten people.



66 Source: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>
67 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/ten-years-of-criminal-justice-reform-in-texas/#>
68 Source: <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>



Building Support Among Conservatives

Conservatives are most influenced by messaging framed around financial efficiency and opportunities to reduce costs. This can include the direct (and high) cost of incarceration, for instance, or the benefit of increasing employment opportunities that allow people to support themselves and their families.

Values of accountability, proportionality, and self-sufficiency also tend to resonate strongly with conservatives, which creates messaging opportunities—in particular, when messaging focuses on outlining the ways in which punishment or accountability is too harsh. After connecting through values, there is then an opportunity to make the case for change by elevating the benefit and positive impact of non-carceral or non-policing approaches to accountability—or providing opportunities for self-sufficiency.

The following tested message underscores the high financial cost of our current system and includes an example of a red state successfully taking a different approach. It is compelling for 54 percent of conservatives:



Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated \$80 billion every year. There is growing bipartisan support to make a change. In 2007, for instance, Texas passed a \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and other prison diversion programs. The crime rate fell 26% after seven years, and Texas has been closing prisons. We can save money, reduce crime rates, and create safer communities with a different approach.

The following tested message is also compelling for 54 percent of conservatives. It is framed around individual responsibility and self-sufficiency—values that also resonate:



It’s difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison. We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.

Fifty-four percent (54%) also find the following message about mental health first responders compelling, interpreting the proposed change as providing support for an overburdened police force rather than criticizing police or taking something away from police:



At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use, but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.



Other tested messages that resonate for about half of conservative survey respondents emphasize financial impact and the importance of caring for and supporting children. These messages resonate for about half of conservative survey respondents.

After exposure to these and other messages, conservative respondents also shift their perspectives on the following statements by five to 12 percentage points:

- ⊙ *When a young person under the age of 18 is charged with a crime, they should not be automatically put in jail or prison. Instead, we need to take a closer look at their circumstances and determine the best rehabilitation approach. (+12 agree)*
- ⊙ *There are effective, community-based approaches to prevent and reduce violent crime to make our communities safer. We should be putting those to work in my state. (+5 agree)*
- ⊙ *Many prison sentences for non-violent drug charges are too harsh. We should remove “mandatory minimums” and make sure that sentencing is fair and matches the circumstances. (+6 agree)*

When messaging to a conservative audience, we suggest following these guidelines:

- ⊙ **Elevate values of accountability, responsibility, and proportionality, as well as care for children and family.**
- ⊙ **Acknowledge mistakes and lean into the values of redemption and second chances.**
- ⊙ **Include statistics that outline financial impacts**, including high costs to taxpayers, inefficient spending, and the possibility of more efficient spending.
- ⊙ **Outline the benefits of proposed policy changes with concrete evidence and statistics**, including opportunities for effective rehabilitation.
- ⊙ **Emphasize the ways in which proposed changes will allow for additional employment or job training opportunities**, allowing people to care for themselves and their families.
- ⊙ **Avoid criticizing police departments, but instead outline ways in which proposed changes can alleviate their current burden.**
- ⊙ **Avoid including racial comparison data on disparities.**
- ⊙ **Avoid framing messaging around race-specific disproportionate impacts that are explicitly attributed to systemic racism.**



Compelling Messaging by Age

With regards to age, those among our audience ages 35 to 49 are most compelled by messaging in support of policy changes overall. This age range is most compelled by messaging focused on:

- ⊙ Introducing the idea of mental health emergency responders (70% compelling overall);
- ⊙ Re-entry employment supports (69%);
- ⊙ Prison overcrowding due to harsh drug sentencing (67%); and
- ⊙ Disproportionate impact of police violence on people who are Black (66%).

Those who are younger, ages 18-34, are most compelled by messaging focused on:

- ⊙ Introducing the idea of mental health emergency first responders (64% compelling overall);
- ⊙ Disproportionate and harmful impacts on Black and Latino people in the criminal legal system, including harsh sentencing for drug offenses (63%);
- ⊙ Re-entry employment supports (62%); and
- ⊙ High incarceration rates and cost in the South (62%).

Those 18-34 are least compelled by messaging advocating for expanding parole eligibility.

Those who are 50-64 are most compelled by messaging focused on:

- ⊙ Introducing the idea of mental health emergency responders (68% compelling overall);
- ⊙ Re-entry employment supports (66%);
- ⊙ Disproportionate and harmful impacts on Black and Latino people in the criminal legal system, including disproportionate arrest rates (64%);
- ⊙ Prison overcrowding (64%).

Survey respondents in this age range are least compelled by messaging about parole eligibility expansion and disproportionate impacts of police violence on Black people.

Older members of our audience, 65 and older, are most compelled by fear-based opposition messaging compared to all other age groups. In regards to messaging advocating for change, the messaging that most resonates with members of our audience in this age range includes:

- ⊙ Introducing the idea of mental health emergency first responders (60% compelling overall);
- ⊙ “Wildly costly” incarceration system (60%);
- ⊙ Re-entry employment supports (57%); and
- ⊙ Violence interruption programs (53%).

They are least compelled by messaging focused on high incarceration rates in the South, parole eligibility expansion, discrimination in our criminal legal system, and restorative justice.





» Building Support Among Spanish-Speaking Audiences

There is significant overlap in how to craft effective messaging for Spanish-speaking and English-speaking members of our audience. At the same time, there are insights from research that inform nuances to make messaging more effective.

For instance, we find that our Spanish-speaking audience—primarily Latino residents of Florida and Georgia—are more likely than English speakers to embrace approaches to crime prevention that address root causes and are grounded in community from the outset. Even before exposure to test messaging, 83 percent of Spanish-speaking survey respondents agree with the following statement: *“There are effective, community-based approaches to preventing and reducing violent crime—and keeping our communities safe. We should be putting those to work in my state.”* Relatedly, 82 percent agree even before exposure to test messaging that *“Addressing root causes*

of crime—like unemployment, lack of sufficient education or stable housing, or economic challenges—is vitally important to reducing crime rates and ensuring all of our communities are safer.”

This segment of our audience also supports providing programs and services for people struggling with mental health challenges—and responds positively to messaging calling for mental health services. This is also true of English-speaking members of our audience, but Spanish-speaking survey respondents are even more strongly supportive. More than eight in ten (83%) agree with the statement that, *“When people are struggling with mental health challenges and drug addiction, we should provide programs and services to help them rather than putting them in prison.”* In alignment with that perspective, 70 percent are compelled by the test messaging statement advocating for mental health emergency responders:



At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use, but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations.⁶⁹ As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.

69 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

Spanish-speaking members of our audience are notably less supportive of legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana. This is also true of English-speaking Latino members of our audience, but it is more pronounced among those who speak Spanish. Messaging focused on reducing harsh sentencing for non-violent drug offenses is also notably less compelling for Spanish- and English-speaking Latino audiences.

While the research shows that the overall and issue-specific messaging recommendations shared in other sections of this guide are also generally recommended for our Spanish-speaking audience, the following nuances will help messaging be more persuasive with this segment of our audience:

-
- ① **Ground alternative approaches and root causes within community connection and relationships**, showing how individuals affect communities and vice versa. Many among our Spanish-speaking audience deeply value relationships with others and view community connection and strong interpersonal relationships as effective ways to prevent crime from occurring in the first place.
-
- ① **Connect the dots between the harms of the criminal legal system and the impacts on individuals, their families, and communities**. For example, detailing how the system leads to a lack of employment opportunities that negatively affects a person, their children, and the economy can help our audience better understand the relevance of the changes we are seeking.
-
- ① **Highlight individual stories of inequality in the criminal legal system as well as concrete statistics on race-based disparities** between Latino, Black, and white people in the criminal legal system. This serves as a reminder of how the system often goes against deeply held values around fairness. For our Spanish-speaking audience, it is particularly effective to contrast statistics on Latino and white people in the criminal legal system.
-
- ① **Elevate key shared values**, including care for and protection of family and children, community connection, collective well-being, fairness, and education.
-
- ① **Reinforce that alternatives hold people accountable**, and paint a vivid picture of how they do so. This can help our Spanish-speaking audience to envision an effective approach to accountability outside of a tough-on-crime approach.
-
- ① **Contextualize alternatives as the most effective way to keep communities safe or increase community safety**. Provide regional examples with statistics that demonstrate effectiveness, which can help calm concerns many among our Spanish-speaking audience may have around alternatives increasing crime or being ineffective in their area.
-
- ① **Compare statistics between states that have implemented alternative approaches and those that have not**. Negative comparisons between their state and other states are particularly effective at leading those who took the survey in Spanish to express support for alternatives as compared to those who took the survey in English. Our audience—the Spanish-speaking segment of our audience in particular—takes pride in the state where they live, and negative comparisons to other states motivate some participants to support change.
-
- ① **Concretely describe the harms of the current system on young people**, which evokes a deep desire to protect children from harm and motivates our audience to want to change the system for young people.
-
- ① **Calm audience concerns about marijuana as a “gateway drug”** with concrete information showing this to be false. Include first-person stories from individuals who have experienced disproportionate impacts of criminalizing marijuana, particularly those who are Latino.
-
- ① **Show the benefits of decriminalizing or legalizing marijuana to communities broadly**, including by highlighting savings to taxpayers and increased tax revenue. Connect the dots to how those funds can be spent to help communities be safer.
-



Message Testing by Spanish-Speaking Subgroup

While sample sizes for each subgroup are very small and not statistically significant, the following table shows the top messaging among Spanish-speaking survey respondents by nationality. These data are shared as insights and trends to build upon with additional research. Please note, only those subgroups with 20 or more respondents are included here.

Top Messages Among Spanish-Speaking Audiences: Extremely + Very Compelling					
	ALL	Mexican n=22	Puerto Rican n=23	Cuban n=28	South American n=20
[Opposition/Remove Criminal*] <i>When someone commits a crime—particularly a violent crime like assault or murder—they need to be held accountable. The best way to prevent future crime is to remove the criminal from the picture. We cannot turn a blind eye to the harm they have inflicted and the wrong they have done.</i>	76%	56%	41%	72%	87%
[Mental Health] <i>At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,⁷⁰ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.</i>	70%	59%	60%	73%	71%
[Opposition/More Police*] <i>Crime rates are too high, and people in our communities are not safe enough. There have been more robberies, more car jackings, more assaults—yet so many police departments are underfunded and understaffed. We need to make smart investments in the police, which research shows can significantly lower violent crime.</i>	69%	58%	50%	63%	83%
[Re-Entry/Employment] <i>It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.⁷¹ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job and stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.</i>	62%	60%	56%	64%	73%
[Violence Interruption] <i>Relationship-based approaches to reducing violence are working in cities like Atlanta, Montgomery, and New Orleans, where people in the community who are known and trusted are trained to be effective as “violence interrupters.” They work in parallel with the police to successfully mediate conflicts before they turn violent. A violence interruption program in parts of Atlanta resulted in an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year.⁷² Violence interruption is a proven and effective approach to reducing violence and making our communities safer for all.</i>	60%	50%	67%	61%	67%
*In online surveys, we tested opposition messaging statements (in blue) alongside supporter messaging statements to mirror what our audience would hear in the real world.					

70 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

71 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>

72 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data

STATES AT A GLANCE

While the overall and issue-specific messaging recommendations detailed earlier in this document resonate across all five states included in this research (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi), there are important distinctions to note for each of these states. This section outlines specific mindset and messaging nuances to help build support for shifting our approach to community safety and the criminal legal system in each state.

For overall recommendations, see pages 16-38. For issue-specific recommendations, see pages 39-73. These recommendations apply across states.

Alabama

In Alabama, many among our audience—across demographics—hold particularly strong values connected to independence, accountability, and communities taking care of their own. Messaging elevating these values resonates and builds support to expand parole eligibility, expand community programs, and develop alternative approaches to accountability and youth justice.

In this state, we also see more explicit discussion and belief in harmful racial stereotypes. In our initial focus groups, several focus group participants who are white point to seeing mugshots of people who are Black in crime-related news reports as justification for their belief that “these are the populations committing the majority of the crime.” We know from our media audit analysis of crime-related news coverage in each of the states that Alabama crime reporting is often deeply skewed, with many outlets including mugshots only when the person arrested is Black and rarely when the person arrested is white.

Disproportionate Impacts

Despite more explicit belief in harmful racial stereotypes, many among our Alabama audience are receptive to test messaging that both disrupts their flawed mental template of people who are arrested or serve time and elevates the ways our criminal legal system disproportionately impacts and harms Black people. The following is an example of an effective test message that helps clarify

disproportionate impacts, with 66 percent saying it makes them more likely to support changing criminal legal policies:



Twenty-four percent (24%) of people killed by police in 2022 were Black—more than twice the percentage of Black people in the U.S.⁷³ We need to reform our approach to public safety and crime reduction so that everyone in our community is safe.

While disproportionate impact messaging resonates much more strongly with members of our audience who are Black—as this messaging may align with their own experiences or observations—it also resonates with our audience more broadly. After reviewing test messaging that disrupts our audience’s flawed mental template of people who are arrested or incarcerated, as well as messaging underscoring racially disproportionate rates of arrest and incarceration, we see a ten-point increase (from 46% to 56%) in agreement among white survey respondents with the statement, “*Black and brown people are arrested and incarcerated at much higher rates than others. This is not right or fair, and we should work to change this.*” The following fact-based messaging statement helps to drive this ten-point increase among white respondents:

⁷³ Source: <https://policeviolencereport.org/>



The criminal justice system is supposed to treat everyone fairly and equally, but it often fails to do so. In Alabama, Black residents make up 28% of the population, yet they represent 54% of those incarcerated in state prisons.⁷⁴

Community Programs to Address Root Causes

The value of taking care of your own also provides additional messaging opportunities to build support for addressing root causes of criminal-legal involvement. Specifically, test messaging leaning into community and family care expands initial strong agreement with the importance of addressing root causes from 74 percent to 81 percent after test messaging. Additionally, our audience in Alabama strongly agrees that we should be providing community programs for people struggling with mental health challenges and drug addiction (80% agree).

The following is a test message that effectively taps into Alabamians’ value of community care and taking care of their own, with 62 percent saying it is *extremely* or *very* compelling, and with 87 percent saying it is compelling overall:



In Alabama, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects almost 830,000 Alabamians, including nearly one in every four children living below the poverty line.⁷⁵ When people are hungry and desperate, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize community programs that help people stand on their own, including access to affordable housing and healthcare.

Parole Eligibility Expansion

Messaging that embodies shared values of independence and care for our own, along with the importance of second chances and fairness, drives strong agreement (81% total agree) with the following statement: “*When applying for parole, each person’s situation should be evaluated fairly and transparently so that those who have completed education or job training programs have an opportunity for release and re-entry.*”

Aligned messaging that also leans into accountability, fairness, second chances, and community care helps drive support for changing parole rules. Eighty percent (80%) of Alabama respondents find the following test message compelling overall (52% *extremely* or *very* compelling):



Alabama’s prisons are overcrowded, in part because of a drastic reduction in the number of eligible people being granted parole. Since appointing a new chair to the Board of Pardons and Paroles in 2019, the parole rate dropped to 8% in 2023—compared to 53% in 2018.⁷⁶ Without meaningful changes, our state prison population will continue to skyrocket, leaving people who have completed education and job training programs in prison without any opportunities to rejoin and help strengthen their communities.



74 Source: <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-alabama.pdf> (2017); AL Dept of Corrections Feb 2024 data has Black prison population at 53.7% <https://doc.alabama.gov/docs/MonthlyRpts/February%202024.pdf>; Census (2023) has Black state population at 26.6% of AL <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AL,US/PST045223>

75 Sources: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AL,US/PST045223>; <https://eji.org/news/alabama-ranks-among-nations-lowest-in-child-well-being-life-expectancy/>

76 Source: <https://paroles.alabama.gov/monthly-statistical-reports/>

The statement above also helps build support for expanding parole eligibility by quantifying the scope of the problem and then leaning into values of economic efficiency, government accountability, and community care.

After reading the following statement, 67% say they are likely to support changing our criminal legal system:



Alabama's prison system is currently at 169% of designed capacity,⁷⁷ and the state is considering spending billions in new prisons—even though the newly constructed prisons would still be over capacity. Expanding parole eligibility for those who are truly rehabilitated would be a more cost-effective way to address the situation.

Accountability and Restorative Justice

Test messaging that builds a case for alternative, community-based approaches to holding people accountable also resonates deeply with our audience in Alabama. We see a 12-percent decrease in agreement (from 70% total agree to 58%) with the statement that: “The best way to hold people accountable for committing violent crimes, and to prevent them from committing future crimes, is to put them in prison.” This is a significant movement, given that most among our audience were previously unaware of—and unable to imagine—any alternatives to prison.

In addition to painting the picture of what an alternative might be, like restorative justice, it’s important for messaging to quantify its impact. The following is an example illustrating positive results, from the perspective of the person who was harmed. After reviewing this short statement, 60 percent of Alabama survey respondents say it makes them more likely to support changing our criminal legal system:



In places where restorative justice programs have been implemented, more than 80% of victims report that they are satisfied with their experience and do not seek any further punishment.⁷⁸

Youth Justice

We also see test messaging around the harmful impacts of youth incarceration resonating overall with our Alabama audience. After reviewing test messaging, we see a 14-point increase in agreement (from 53% to 67% agree) with the statement that “when a young person under the age of 18 is charged with a crime, they should not be automatically put in jail or prison. Instead, we need to take a closer look at their circumstances and determine the best rehabilitation approach.”

The following is another compelling state-specific message, focused on youth incarceration and incorporating concrete financial data. Fifty-seven percent (57%) find it *extremely* or *very* compelling, and 85 percent find it compelling overall:



The kids in our state need more support. Too many young people under 18 are being incarcerated—some in adult prisons. In Alabama, it costs about \$162,000 per year to imprison a child in a public facility, but only \$12,000 for a year of public education. Instead of putting children in prison—taking away their chance to grow, learn, and become contributing members of our communities—we should provide rehabilitation opportunities whenever possible.⁷⁹

77 Source: <https://alabamareflector.com/2024/04/29/alabama-cant-build-its-way-out-of-the-prison-crisis/>

78 Source: https://impactjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/CWW_RJreport.pdf (CA); <https://www.c4rj.org/what-is-restorative-justice/success-data> (MA)

79 Source: <https://www.splcenter.org/presscenter/splc-report-exposes-rampant-racial-disparities-alabamas-juvenile-justice-system>





Alabama-Specific Recommendations

For messaging to be particularly resonant with our audience in Alabama, we recommend the following:

- ④ **Elevate values of individual responsibility, accountability, fairness, and community care.** Show proposed programs facilitating individuals taking accountability for their own lives while connecting the dots to how those programs also support the community broadly. This includes supporting youth, so they have an opportunity to grow into contributing members of the community, as well as the economic benefits of proposed programs.
- ④ **Disrupt the flawed mental template our audience currently holds when they think of who in Alabama may be impacted by the system,** including by showing a diversity of people who are directly impacted. This can help increase identification with the issue and expand the images of who comes to mind for our audience around the criminal legal system.
 - Share stories and visual images that embed those who have been incarcerated or arrested within the contexts of their families and communities to disrupt our audience’s flawed mental templates, build shared humanity, and foster empathy.
- ④ **Incorporate stories of redemption or transformation and contributions of those who have been impacted by the system.** This can disrupt our audience’s flawed mental templates, as well as help connect with our audience’s shared values around responsibility and accountability.
- ④ **Back up assertions of disproportionate impacts with concrete statistics from neutral or bipartisan sources.** This is most compelling for those who do not have lived experience of discrimination or racism within the criminal legal system. Quantifying these harms, within values-based messaging, builds more credibility.
 - For example, 66 percent of survey respondents say they are more likely to support changing our criminal legal policies in response to this statement: *“Twenty-four percent (24%) of people killed by police in 2023 were Black—about twice the percentage of Black people in the U.S. We need to reform our approach to public safety and crime reduction so that everyone in our community is safe.”*
- ④ **Include specific proof points—either lived experiences or statistics—that show the positive impact or possibility of alternative approaches.**



Message Testing by Alabama Region

Many of the messages previously noted resonate broadly across the state. Still, there are some that resonate more strongly in certain parts of Alabama. The following table summarizes tested messaging by region.

Due to the small sample size in some regions, these findings are not statistically significant. However, findings across regions point to trends in those areas and could be further quantified with additional research.

Tested Messages by Alabama Region: Extremely + Very Compelling (Ranked by ALL)						
	ALL n=306	East Central=89	North n=77	Southeast n=70	Southwest n=40	West Central n=31
<p>[Mental Health Emergency Responders] At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,⁸⁰ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.</p>	62%	70%	59%	61%	62%	50%
<p>[Poverty] In Alabama, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects almost 830,000 Alabamians,⁸¹ including nearly one in every four children living below the poverty line.⁸² When people are hungry and desperate, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize community programs that help people stand on their own, including access to affordable housing and healthcare.</p>	62%	72%	60%	59%	52%	57%
<p>[Re-Entry] It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.⁸³ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job and stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.</p>	58%	55%	58%	61%	51%	64%

80 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

81 Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AL,US/PST045225>

82 Source: <https://eji.org/news/alabama-ranks-among-nations-lowest-in-child-well-being-life-expectancy/>

83 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>



<p>[Incarceration Cost] Our jails and prisons are often inhumane, ineffective, and wildly costly for taxpayers—the U.S. locks up more people per capita than any other nation.⁸⁴ But we can have a justice system that better serves us all and locks fewer people up. For example, we can reduce the number of people in prison by decreasing criminal penalties for low-level drug offenses, including marijuana possession. Currently, in states where that is still illegal, being caught with even small amounts of marijuana can result in prison time, steep fines, and a criminal record that makes it very difficult to find jobs or housing. By reducing these penalties, we can help to prevent unnecessary incarceration, reduce the cost of our criminal justice system, and ensure more people are able to support themselves and their families.</p>	57%	62%	53%	61%	46%	55%
<p>[Youth Incarceration] The kids in our state need more support. Too many young people under 18 are being incarcerated—some in adult prisons. In Alabama, it costs about \$162,000 per year to imprison a child in a public facility, but only \$12,000 for a year of public education.⁸⁵ Instead of putting children in prison—taking away their chance to grow, learn, and become contributing members of our communities—we should provide rehabilitation opportunities whenever possible.</p>	57%	60%	55%	60%	52%	54%
<p>[Justice Reinvestment] Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated \$80 billion every year. There is growing bipartisan support to make a change. In 2007, for instance, Texas passed a \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and other prison diversion programs. The crime rate fell 26% after seven years, and Texas has been closing prisons. We can save money, reduce crime rates, and create safer communities with a different approach.</p>	57%	63%	56%	52%	61%	48%



84 Source: <https://www.prisonspolicy.org/reports/pje2024.html>
85 Source: <https://www.splcenter.org/presscenter/splc-report-exposes-rampant-racial-disparities-alabamas-juvenile-justice-system>



STATES AT A GLANCE

» Florida

Overall, our audience in Florida is most receptive to both opposition messaging that asserts the importance of more police and harsher prison sentences AND supporter messaging making the case for community-based approaches to crime prevention. Our Florida audience embodies the *both/and* approach—wanting to see increased police presence while also supporting the introduction of programs that address root causes of criminal-legal involvement and facilitate improved mental health services, violence prevention/interruption, and more efficient taxpayer spending for community benefit.

Marijuana + Drug Sentencing

There is strong concern about marijuana being a “gateway” drug in Florida, and less support for marijuana legalization overall than we see in other Southern states included in this research. Opposition to marijuana legalization is largely driven by the larger Latino and Spanish-speaking audience in this state (*see page 71 for additional messaging recommendations for a Spanish-speaking audience*).

At the same time, there is notable support for reducing mandatory minimums and harsh sentencing for drug offenses—including when tested as “non-violent drug offenses” and simply “drug offenses.” Before test messaging, 70 percent agree with the statement that, “many prison sentences for **drug charges** are too harsh. We should remove ‘mandatory minimums’ and make sure that sentencing is fair and matches the circumstances.” In comparison, 67 percent agree that “many prison sentences for **non-violent drug charges** are too harsh. We should remove ‘mandatory minimums’ and make sure that sentencing is fair and matches the circumstances.”

The percentage of Florida respondents who agree that “drug charges” are too harsh stays steady when respondents are asked again at the end of the survey, while exposure to test messaging leads to an eight-point increase among those who agree that “non-violent drug charges” are too harsh. Both have very high agreement.

A tested message that helps build support for reducing non-violent drug sentencing specifically frames the issue around inefficient spending, fairness, and proportionality—making sure the sentencing matches the severity of the crime. The following message is compelling to 83 percent of Florida survey respondents:



Our prisons are overcrowded and costly to taxpayers—and many people in prison are there because of harsh sentencing rules for non-violent drug charges. One step in the right direction would be to remove “mandatory minimum” sentencing for non-violent drug charges, making sure that sentencing is fair and matches the circumstances. This would free up taxpayer money that could be used on community programs for housing, healthcare, or education.

In Florida, we also tested a message underscoring harsh prison sentences for fentanyl—and the importance of addressing the fentanyl crisis through treatment rather than incarceration. In response to this message, 83 percent say it is compelling:



Fentanyl abuse is devastating families and overwhelming communities and emergency responders. Harsh prison sentences and aggressive law enforcement have proven to be ineffective. To really address this crisis, and help get people clean and back on their feet, we need more drug counseling and rehabilitation services in our communities.



There is clearly a messaging opportunity here that can be further uncovered through additional research.

Community Programs to Address Root Causes

Messaging statements that make the case for the value and importance of addressing root causes of criminal-legal involvement and helping ensure people have jobs, access to education, and stable housing so they can care for themselves, their families, and their communities resonate strongly with our audience in Florida. The following statement is compelling overall for 89 percent of Florida respondents:



It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.⁸⁶ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.

A tested message that further builds support for addressing root causes of people's criminal-legal involvement by meeting community needs is compelling overall for 85 percent of respondents in the state:



In Florida, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects almost 2.9 million Floridians,⁸⁷ including nearly 20% of our children living below the poverty line.⁸⁸ When people are hungry and desperate, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize community programs that help people stand on their own, including access to affordable housing and healthcare.

86 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>

87 Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/FL/IPE120222>

88 Source: <https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/region-hillsborough/child-poverty-rates-more-than-double-in-2022#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Annie%20E,%20all%20children%20in%20the%20state>

89 Source: <https://www.moneygeek.com/living/state-policing-corrections-spending/#detailed-findings>. *Policing and corrections percentage of total budget.*

Costs of Incarceration + Support for Alternatives

In addition to the messenger narratives and videos we tested (see *deconstructed transcripts on page 104*), the following message helps to show the harm of current incarceration rates and build support for alternative approaches. It also elevates shared values of redemption, second chances, and efficient/effective use of resources for community benefit. After reading it, 68 percent say they are likely to support changing criminal legal policies:



Florida spends more than any other state on police and prisons,⁸⁹ but it is not addressing the real problems our communities face like hunger and housing shortages.



We also see focus group participants express worry about the impact of prisons on increased taxpayer spending and a high incarceration rate. This concern provides an opening to make the case for alternative approaches, and we see a 13-point decrease in agreement with the statement: “*The best way to hold people accountable for committing violent crimes is to put them in prison.*” Slightly more than seven in ten (71%) of Florida survey respondents agree with this statement before seeing test messaging, and 58% agree after exposure to test messaging.

A narrative about someone engaging in a restorative justice process after their son was killed was also particularly effective (83 percent compelling).

Additionally, the following statement makes an effective comparison between Florida and other states, with 68 percent saying they are more likely to support changing criminal legal policies after reading it:



Florida is one of the few states left that forces everyone in prison to serve 85% of their sentence.⁹⁰ People who have shown rehabilitation and good behavior should be able to shorten their sentences.

Florida-Specific Recommendations

For messaging to be particularly resonant with our audience in Florida, we recommend the following:

- ① **Center the disproportionate punishment of sentencing for drug offenses**, particularly if making the case for marijuana legalization.
- ① **Elevate shared values of accountability and fairness** while incorporating concrete statistics and first-person narratives to underscore the ways that current punishments are out of proportion with the offense. Know that there is much less support for marijuana legalization among Latino audiences. (*For additional guidance on communicating with a Spanish-speaking audience, see page 71.*)
- ① **Paint a picture of the ways that alternative approaches to accountability support community well-being overall**—while also helping to directly reduce crime and violence by addressing the root causes of people’s criminal-legal involvement (e.g., directing people to rehab instead of prison; providing mental health services; increasing job and educational opportunities to allow people to support themselves).
- ① **Include statistics showing the financial cost to taxpayers alongside the harm to communities and individuals**—and connect the dots to the positive potential of shifting resources to better support community programs.
- ① **Acknowledge the perception that police have difficult jobs** and frame policies as supporting law enforcement—or at least not interfering with them. It is particularly helpful to note that proposed policy changes can ease the load for “overburdened” officers. This helps to calm concerns about defunding or disrespecting the police, given the importance of a *both/and* approach for our audience.
- ① **Highlight the value of safety**, including examples and statistics underscoring how proposed alternatives support community safety in specific ways. This helps to calm our audience’s concerns and allows them to see that alternative approaches can support community safety without additional police on the streets. Until hearing about how proposed alternatives can facilitate community safety, many believe that more policing is the primary path to community safety.

90 Source: [https://supremecourt.flcourts.gov/content/download/242696/file/Johnson%2013-711\(1\).pdf](https://supremecourt.flcourts.gov/content/download/242696/file/Johnson%2013-711(1).pdf)



Message Testing by Florida Region

Many of the messages previously noted resonate broadly across the state. Still, there are some that resonate more strongly in certain parts of Florida. The following table summarizes tested messaging by region. Please note that, due to small sample sizes by region, the percentages included in the table are not statistically significant. However, findings across regions point to trends in those areas and could be further quantified with additional research.

Tested Messages by Florida Region: Extremely + Very Compelling (Ranked by ALL)						
	ALL n=300	Panhandle n=18	Crown n=39	East Central n=60	West Central n=75	South n=108
[Mental Health Emergency Responders] <i>At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,⁹¹ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.</i>	65%	61%	70%	66%	58%	68%
[Poverty] <i>In Florida, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects almost 2.9 million Floridians,⁹² including nearly 20% of our children living below the poverty line.⁹³ When people are hungry and desperate, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize community programs that help people stand on their own, including access to affordable housing and healthcare.</i>	62%	60%	62%	60%	63%	64%
[Re-Entry] <i>It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.⁹⁴ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.</i>	61%	53%	59%	57%	67%	62%
[Violence Interruption] <i>Relationship-based approaches to reducing violence are working in cities like Atlanta, Montgomery, and New Orleans, where people in the community who are known and trusted are trained to be effective as “violence interrupters.” They work in parallel with the police to successfully mediate conflicts before they turn violent. A violence interruption program in parts of Atlanta resulted in an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year.⁹⁵ Violence interruption is a proven and effective approach to reducing violence and making our communities safer for all.</i>	60%	50%	58%	58%	61%	63%
[Incarceration Cost] <i>Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated \$80 billion every year.⁹⁶ There is growing bipartisan support to make a change. In 2007, for instance, Texas passed a \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and other prison diversion programs. The crime rate fell 26% after seven years,⁹⁷ and Texas has been closing prisons. We can save money, reduce crime rates, and strengthen our communities with a different approach.</i>	60%	56%	69%	47%	69%	57%

91 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

92 Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/FL/IPE120222>

93 Source: <https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/region-hillsborough/child-poverty-rates-more-than-double-in-2022#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Annie%20E,all%20children%20in%20the%20state>

94 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>

95 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data.

96 Sources <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>

97 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/ten-years-of-criminal-justice-reform-in-texas/#>



STATES AT A GLANCE

» Georgia

In Georgia, we see less trust in local governments than we see in other Southern states included in this research, which leads some to be more skeptical that proposed program or policy changes would have the desired or promised positive impact. As such, incorporating proof points underscoring the efficacy and efficiency of new programs is even more important in this state.

We also see less trust in police overall, with a higher proportion of focus group participants elevating the issues of police violence and disproportionate impacts on Black and Latino communities before being exposed to test messaging. Related, test messaging builds on this initial perspective and is compelling, with one focus group participant, who is white, citing it as a reason for becoming more supportive of criminal legal reform: “I would definitely say the number of people killed (by police). I had no idea it was that high, and a record high at that.”



Disproportionate Impacts

A message framed around disproportionate impacts that Georgia respondents find particularly compelling (85%) lifts up the harmful impacts of stereotypes with concrete statistics to back up the assertion of harm. It also leans into strongly held shared values that the legal system should be impartial and not prejudicial:



The criminal justice system is supposed to treat everyone equally, but it often fails to do that. Because of deeply-rooted and harmful stereotypes, statistics show law enforcement singles out Black and Latino people for stops, searches, and arrests. For instance, a Black person is five times more likely to be stopped by police without just cause than a white person.⁹⁸ Black and Latino people also often face tougher sentencing than others for the same conviction. This is not just, not right, and not how the system should be.

Community Programs to Address Root Causes

Our audience in Georgia is also acutely concerned about poverty and readily sees the connection between alleviating poverty and reducing crime. More than nine in ten survey respondents (92%) say that the following statement is compelling, with more than seven in ten (74%) saying it is *extremely* or *very* compelling:

98 Source: <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>





In Georgia, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects the lives of 1.4 million Georgians,⁹⁹ including around one in six children living below the poverty line.¹⁰⁰ When people are hungry and desperate, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize programs in our community that help people stand on their own, like job training and affordable housing.



When someone is arrested and cannot afford to pay cash bail, they are detained until their trial—which can be weeks or months away. Some plead guilty, even if they are innocent, just to move the process along and get back to their jobs and families. Having criminal charges on your record follows you for the rest of your life, making it harder to get a new job, apply for school, or get a mortgage.

Cash Bail

Messaging connecting the dots between pre-trial detention and cash bail impeding someone’s ability to earn a living aligns with our audience’s concern about poverty. There is strong support for people in Georgia to be self-reliant and have access to opportunities that allow for self-sufficiency. Eighty-one percent (81%) of survey respondents say the following statement is compelling (58% saying *extremely* or *very* compelling):

Costs of Incarceration and Youth Justice

Along these same lines, messaging that lifts up the financial and human cost of incarceration is compelling. The following message, which emphasizes the cost of the prison system in the South explicitly, is compelling for 87 percent of Georgia survey respondents:

99 Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/GA,US,PST045223>

100 Source: <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/694-children-living-in-poverty#detailed/2/any/false/1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,56/any/8890,8891>



Southern states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, with Mississippi topping the list.¹⁰¹ At a time when so many are struggling to make ends meet, we are spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars keeping people in prison every year. Florida alone spends \$3.4 billion annually, including many serving time for non-violent drug offenses.¹⁰² That money would be better spent improving our communities so more people are able to work, live, and thrive.

This is also true when it comes to youth incarceration. The following message—compelling for 86 percent—underscores the importance of addressing the root causes that lead a child to have encounters with the criminal legal system:



The kids in our state need more support. Too many young people under 18 are being incarcerated—including in adult prisons. In Georgia, it can cost almost \$113,000 per year to imprison a child, but only \$10,000 for a year of public education. Instead of putting children in prison,¹⁰³ and taking away their chance to grow and learn, we should take a close look at the circumstances that led to their behavior and provide rehabilitation opportunities whenever possible.

Restorative Justice

Our audience in Georgia is also more compelled by the possibility of restorative justice, from a values perspective and because of the financial cost of incarceration. This includes people from large and small cities, suburban areas, and small or rural towns. The following test message elevates values of efficiency, rehabilitation, and accountability. It is compelling to 78 percent of survey respondents. While the sample sizes are small, those in the Northeast region of the state find the following

statement most compelling (88% total compelling) while those in the Southwest are least compelled (64% total compelling). Between 76 and 82% of respondents in the other regions of the state say it is compelling overall:



Not only is prison expensive to taxpayers, but it does not offer opportunities for genuine rehabilitation—which is why some communities are testing a restorative justice approach. Restorative justice requires both parties being willing to participate, to sit down and determine with a mediator what accountability should look like. This gives the person who has been harmed a voice in the process—and ensures accountability is directly tied to the harm that has been caused.

Additionally, a tested personal narrative about a woman participating in a restorative justice process with the person who killed her son is most compelling (85% total compelling) and believable (84% believable) among Georgia survey respondents (see the full deconstructed narrative on page 109). Sixty-nine percent (69%) also say that reading the narrative “has me thinking about the criminal legal system in a new way.”

Violence Interruption

The idea of violence interruption also resonates with many in Georgia. Seventy-two percent (72%) say they are more likely to support changing our criminal legal policies after reading the following fact-based statement:



Violence interruption, a relationship-based approach to reducing violence, is clearly working. A program in part of Atlanta led to an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year.¹⁰⁴

A related, longer-format test message is also compelling to 88 percent of Georgia survey respondents:

101 Source: <https://www.wjtv.com/news/state/doj-mississippi-has-highest-incarceration-rate-in-us/>
 102 Source: <https://fdc.myflorida.com/about.html>
 103 Source: <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/explore/georgia/?section=race-interactive>
 104 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data





Relationship-based approaches to reducing violence are working in cities like Atlanta, Montgomery, and New Orleans, where people in the community who are known and trusted are trained to be effective as “violence interrupters.” They work in parallel with the police to successfully mediate conflicts before they turn violent. A violence interruption program in parts of Atlanta resulted in an 87% reduction in homicides over the last year. Violence interruption is a proven and effective approach to reducing violence and making our communities safer for all.¹⁰⁵

Georgia-Specific Recommendations

For messaging to be particularly resonant with our audience in Georgia, we recommend the following:

- ① **Detail ways in which proposed programs and policies will be implemented** whenever possible to calm skepticism about government efficacy. Include specifics about non-profits engaged in the process alongside government when relevant.
- ① **Be direct about disproportionate impacts and harms to people who are Black and Latino**, including proof points and statistics from non-partisan sources.
- ① **Acknowledge the real impact of poverty and other root causes on the lives of so many** and connect the dots to how proposed policy changes or new programs can help both alleviate poverty and reduce crime and violence.
- ① **Frame proposed policy changes around self-sufficiency and community well-being.** These two values are tied together; if people have what they need to take care of themselves and their families, the whole community benefits.
- ① **Elevate the impact of community-based approaches to violence reduction and prevention**, including violence interruption, with concrete proof points underscoring the positive possibility.
- ① **Detail the possibility and opportunity of alternative approaches to accountability and redemption, including restorative justice.** Be explicit about the ways that accountability can be directly tied to the specific harm that was caused. Include how alternatives work and back up assertions of impact with concrete statistics.



105 Source: Hope Hustlers internal data

Message Testing by Georgia Region

Many of the messages previously noted in the section above resonate broadly across the state. Still, there are some that resonate more strongly in certain parts of Georgia. The following table summarizes tested messaging by region.

Due to the small sample size in some regions, only the total and Metro region findings are statistically significant. However, findings across regions point to trends in those areas and could be further quantified with additional research.

Tested Messages by Georgia Region: Extremely + Very Compelling (Ranked by ALL)								
	ALL n=300	North- west n=22	North- east n=34	Metro n=151	Central West n=33	Central East n=10	South- west n=27	South- east n=24
[Poverty] <i>In Georgia, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects the lives of 1.4 million Georgians,¹⁰⁶ including around one in six children living below the poverty line.¹⁰⁷ When people are hungry and desperate, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize programs in our community that help people stand on their own, like job training and affordable housing.</i>	74%	79%	79%	74%	66%	74%	74%	71%
[Mental Health Emergency Responders] <i>At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,¹⁰⁸ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.</i>	71%	54%	69%	74%	66%	56%	73%	76%
[Incarceration Cost] <i>Southern states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, with Mississippi topping the list.¹⁰⁹ At a time when so many are struggling to make ends meet, we are spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars keeping people in prison every year. Florida alone spends \$3.4 billion annually, including many serving time for non-violent drug offenses.¹¹⁰ That money would be better spent improving our communities so more people are able to work, live, and thrive.</i>	70%	41%	67%	72%	71%	17%	75%	88%

106 Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/GA,US/PST045223>

107 Source: <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/694-children-living-in-poverty#detailed/2/any/false/1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36/any/8890,8891>

108 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

109 Source: <https://www.wjtv.com/news/state/doj-mississippi-has-highest-incarceration-rate-in-us/>

110 Source: <https://fdc.myflorida.com/about.html>



<p>[Re-Entry] It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.¹¹¹ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.</p>	68%	63%	61%	73%	62%	38%	68%	77%
<p>[Youth Incarceration] The kids in our state need more support. Too many young people under 18 are being incarcerated—including in adult prisons. In Georgia, it can cost almost \$113,000 per year to imprison a child, but only \$10,000 for a year of public education.¹¹² Instead of putting children in prison, and taking away their chance to grow and learn, we should take a close look at the circumstances that led to their behavior and provide rehabilitation opportunities whenever possible.</p>	68%	58%	72%	67%	64%	67%	70%	81%



111 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>
 112 Source: <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/explore/georgia/?section=race-interactive>



STATES AT A GLANCE

» Louisiana

There is strong support in Louisiana for addressing the root causes of people’s criminal-legal involvement, including poverty, and supporting broader community programs. Test messages that lean into the realities many are facing—as well as fiscal prudence, care for family and community, self-determination, and impartiality in the legal system—are strong in this state.

Community Programs to Address Root Causes

The following test message, which acknowledges the struggle of many, quantifies the scope of the problem, and underscores the possibility of community programs to allow people to get the ground under their feet, is compelling for 91 percent of survey respondents:



In Louisiana, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. We have the second highest poverty rate in the nation, with poverty affecting the lives of 830,000 people here—including nearly one in four children.¹¹³ When people are desperate and hungry, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize programs in our community that help people stand on their own, like job training and access to affordable housing.

Our audience in Louisiana is also persuaded by economic arguments when framed with shared values about how those resources could better support the community. Ninety percent (90%) find the following test message

compelling. It connects the dots between surprisingly high taxpayer spending and alternative approaches that would ensure accountability while providing opportunities for rehabilitation opportunities—and support for the community as a whole:



Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated \$80 billion every year.¹¹⁴ There is growing bipartisan support to make a change. In 2007, for instance, Texas passed a \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and other prison diversion programs. The crime rate fell 26% after seven years,¹¹⁵ and Texas has been closing prisons. We can save money, reduce crime rates, and strengthen our communities with a different approach.

Youth Justice

The value of care for children—also included in the message above—as well as agreement that we should re-evaluate our approach to youth incarceration is evident in responses to test messaging throughout the online survey. Total agreement with the following statement increases thirteen points (55% to 68%) from the beginning of the online survey to the end:



When a young person under the age of 18 is charged with a crime, they should not be automatically put in jail or prison. Instead, we need to take a closer look at their circumstances and determine the best rehabilitation approach.

113 Source: <https://www.labudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Census-2022-2023.pdf>

114 Sources <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>

115 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/ten-years-of-criminal-justice-reform-in-texas/#>.



Notably, agreement with the statement that “we should not make a young person under the age of 18 serve time in an adult prison” also increases by 8 points.

Disproportionate Impacts

Disproportionate impact messaging also resonates in this state. Several of the tested statements naming racial discrimination within the legal system resonate strongly with Louisiana survey respondents, with the following statement topping the list. It is compelling for 84 percent. The statement opens with values around community care and equality, then follows with concrete details to back up the assertion of harm—and ends with a call for a policy change that would benefit individuals and the community broadly.



Harsh sentencing for non-violent drug offenses impacts our entire community, but not equally. Black people are arrested at much higher rates for possession even though studies show Black and white people use marijuana at the same rates.¹¹⁶ In Alabama, for instance, one study found that Black people are approximately four times as likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than white people.¹¹⁷ We need to legalize marijuana in our state for those over 21 so that we can level the playing field and work toward a criminal justice system that works to help our communities be safer for everyone.



Costs of Incarceration

Additionally, almost nine in ten (89%) say they are compelled by the following statement that highlights the fiscal impact of overly punitive drug sentences—calling for that money to be better spent on supporting the community:



Southern states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, with Mississippi topping the list. At a time when so many are struggling to make ends meet, we are spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars keeping people in prison every year. Florida alone spends \$3.4 billion annually,¹¹⁸ including many serving time for non-violent drug offenses. That money would be better spent improving our communities so more people are able to work, live, and thrive.

Parole and Re-Entry Support

Making the case for expanding parole and re-entry supports also resonates with our audience in Louisiana, including arguments to alleviate the financial strain on the prison system and allow people to get to work and support themselves, their families, and their community.

Eighty-eight percent (88%) find the following statement compelling:



It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.¹¹⁹ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.

116 Source: <https://norml.org/marijuana/fact-sheets/racial-disparity-in-marijuana-arrests/>

117 Source: <https://www.alreporter.com/2021/02/17/black-alabamians-are-four-times-more-likely-to-be-jailed-for-marijuana/>

118 Source: <https://fdc.myflorida.com/about.html>

119 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>



Louisiana-Specific Recommendations

For messaging to be particularly resonant with our audience in Louisiana, we recommend the following:

- ⊙ **Begin with acknowledging the reality that many people are struggling.** Starting this way builds credibility among our audience. It also signals that the proposed policy solutions that follow are rooted in lifting the community as a whole, rather than taking resources away from people who are in need. It also helps to calm concerns about increasing crime by centering reforms as addressing the root causes.
- ⊙ **Help our audience imagine alternative approaches,** which they may be unaware of, including approaches that do not involve police or incarceration.
- ⊙ **Connect the dots between harm and hope.** Quantify the scope of the problem and lift up examples of what else is possible.
- ⊙ **Elevate shared values of community care, fairness, and proportionality.** Include concrete statistics on disproportionate impacts and stories of police misconduct.
- ⊙ **Highlight the cost to taxpayers of police and incarceration** and connect the dots to more effective ways to spend that money.
- ⊙ **Detail the ways in which parole is overly restrictive and punitive,** including by re-incarcerating people due to technicalities—which also helps calm audience concerns about responsibility or not following the rules.

Message Testing by Louisiana Region

Many of the messages previously noted in the section above resonate broadly across the state. Still, there are some that resonate more strongly in certain parts of Louisiana. The following table summarizes the top tested messaging by region. Please note that these findings are not statistically significant due to small sample sizes in each region. However, findings across regions point to trends in those areas and could be further quantified with additional research.



**Tested Messages by Louisiana Region: Extremely + Very Compelling
(Ranked by ALL)**

	ALL n=300	Shreve- port n=42	Monroe n=24	Alex- andria n=12	Lake Charles n=12	Lafayette n=39	Baton Rouge n=45	Hou- ma n=21	North Shore n=42	New Orleans n=63
[Poverty] In Louisiana, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. We have the second highest poverty rate in the nation, with poverty affecting the lives of 830,000 people here—including nearly one in four children. ¹²⁰ When people are desperate and hungry, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize programs in our community that help people stand on their own, like job training and access to affordable housing.	70%	74%	62%	64%	78%	58%	63%	68%	74%	79%
[Drug Charges] Harsh sentencing for non-violent drug offenses impacts our entire community, but not equally. Black people are arrested at much higher rates for possession even though studies show Black and white people use marijuana at the same rates. ¹²¹ In Alabama, for instance, one study found that Black people are approximately four times as likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than white people. ¹²² We need to legalize marijuana in our state for those over 21 so that we can level the playing field and work toward a criminal justice system that works to help our communities be safer for everyone.	67%	68%	76%	78%	74%	78%	64%	77%	40%	71%
[Mental Health Emergency Responders] At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use, ¹²³ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.	67%	67%	61%	64%	77%	60%	72%	65%	57%	74%
[Re-Entry] It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison. ¹²⁴ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.	66%	59%	64%	81%	84%	59%	59%	74%	65%	71%
[Incarceration Cost] Southern states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, with Mississippi topping the list. ¹²⁵ At a time when so many are struggling to make ends meet, we are spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars keeping people in prison every year. Florida alone spends \$3.4 billion annually, including many serving time for non-violent drug offenses. ¹²⁶ That money would be better spent improving our communities so more people are able to work, live, and thrive.	64%	81%	100%	62%	74%	56%	54%	65%	34%	68%

120 Source: <https://www.labudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Census-2022-2023.pdf>
 121 Source: <https://norml.org/marijuana/fact-sheets/racial-disparity-in-marijuana-arrests/>
 122 Source: <https://www.alreporter.com/2021/02/17/black-alabamians-are-four-times-more-likely-to-be-jailed-for-marijuana/>
 123 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>
 124 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>
 125 Source: <https://www.wjtv.com/news/state/doj-mississippi-has-highest-incarceration-rate-in-us/>
 126 Source: <https://fdc.myflorida.com/about.html>

STATES AT A GLANCE

» Mississippi

Our audience in Mississippi says that poverty and crime are particularly serious problems in the state and express a belief that many state residents are “just surviving.” These perspectives undergird audience support for policies designed to address root causes and meet community needs, including almost eight in ten (75%) survey respondents who agree with the following statement before exposure to test messaging: *“When people are struggling with mental health challenges and drug addiction, we should provide programs and services to help them rather than putting them in prison.”*

Mental Health Support

Aligned with this, 88 percent find the following statement calling for mental health first responders to be compelling:



At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,¹²⁷ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.

Community Programs and Addressing Root Causes

Our Mississippi audience is also concerned about the many who are struggling and want to see their community supported in more effective ways. The following is compelling for 90 percent of survey respondents. It underscores the need to support community well-being in Mississippi, acknowledges that many people are struggling, and connects the dots between economic inequity and criminal-legal involvement—without being perceived as judgmental:



In Mississippi, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects the lives of over half a million people here and we have the highest child poverty rate in the nation.¹²⁸ When people are desperate and hungry, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize programs in our community that help people stand on their own, like job training and access to affordable housing.

Costs of Incarceration

Aligned with the perception that communities need more help, messaging highlighting the high cost of incarceration—money that could better be spent

127 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>

128 Sources: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MS/IPE120222> and <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/12/poverty-rate-varies-by-age-groups.html>



supporting people—is also particularly compelling in Mississippi. Sixty-four percent (64%) of survey respondents say the following statement makes them more likely to support changing our criminal legal policies:



Estimates show that Mississippi spends more than \$780 million every year on police and prisons,¹²⁹ and the total population in jails and prisons in our state has increased 721% since 1970¹³⁰—but it's not addressing the real problems our communities face like hunger and housing shortages.

Youth Justice

Messaging that makes a case for changing our approach to youth incarceration is also impactful. After reviewing test messaging, there was a ten-point increase in agreement among survey respondents with this statement: “We should not make a young person under the age of 18 serve time in an adult prison.”

A related test message statement (compelling for 85 percent of Mississippi survey respondents) includes compelling financial data to underscore values-based messaging making the case that alternative approaches to supporting youth are needed:



The kids in our state need more support. Too many young people under 18 are being incarcerated—including in adult prisons. In Mississippi it can cost over \$155,000 per year to imprison a child, but only around \$9,000 for a year of public education.¹³¹ Instead of putting children in prison, and taking away their chance to grow and learn, we should take a close look at the circumstances that led to their behavior and provide rehabilitation opportunities whenever possible.

Violence Interruption

Messaging about the impact of violence interrupters is also particularly compelling for our audience in Mississippi. More than nine in ten (93%) find our test messenger Leonard’s video compelling, and 84 percent say they feel “hopeful” after watching his video (see page 106 for a full deconstruction of Leonard’s video transcript). The positive impact of this is also likely tied to the close connection between how violence interruption is explained as meeting the needs of youth and families in the local community.



129 Source: <https://www.moneygeek.com/living/state-policing-corrections-spending/#detailed-findings>. Combined spending for policing and incarceration is over \$1.3 billion; spending on policing alone is \$791 million (2024). Higher budget numbers will be even more compelling than the originally tested dollar amount.

130 Source: <https://trends.vera.org/state/MS>

131 Source: <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/explore/mississippi/?section=race-interactive>



Mississippi-Specific Recommendations

For messaging to be particularly resonant with our audience in Mississippi, we recommend the following:

- › **Acknowledge that many people are struggling** and elevate shared values of family, care, and community.
- › **Connect proposed changes and alternatives directly to the ways in which they will support people in the community**, including addressing poverty, mental health challenges, hunger, and lack of housing.
- › **Underscore the outsized financial cost of prison in the state for adults and youth**, and make the case that taxpayer money could be better spent in ways that directly support the community—and alleviate root causes of criminal-legal involvement.
- › **Show how violence interruption can work** both in directly de-escalating violence and in helping to meet people’s immediate needs.

Message Testing by Mississippi Region

Many of the messages previously noted in the section above resonate broadly across the state. Still, there are some that resonate more strongly in certain parts of Mississippi. The following table summarizes the top tested messaging by region. Please note that these findings are not statistically significant due to small sample sizes in each region. However, findings across regions point to trends in those areas and could be further quantified with additional research.



Tested Messages by Mississippi Region: Extremely + Very Compelling
(Ranked by ALL)

	ALL n=300	Northwest n=76	Northeast n=100	Southwest n=60	Southeast n=63
[Poverty] <i>In Mississippi, too many of our neighbors are hungry, out of work, and struggling. Poverty affects the lives of over half a million people here and we have the highest child poverty rate in the nation.¹³² When people are desperate and hungry, and there is a lack of supportive resources in place, they may resort to stealing or trying to earn money in illegal ways. We can interrupt this cycle if we prioritize programs in our community that help people stand on their own, like job training and access to affordable housing.</i>	66%	65%	56%	74%	74%
[Mental Health Emergency Responders] <i>At least one in five emergency calls are about mental health crises or substance use,¹³³ but police are not provided enough training on how to navigate these situations. As a result, things can escalate quickly, ending in police severely wounding or even killing someone having a mental health breakdown. Instead of expecting police to do the jobs of social workers and counselors on top of everything else, we should have trained mental health professionals on call for mental health emergencies—with police as back up if needed.</i>	65%	65%	58%	76%	66%
[Re-Entry] <i>It's difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. Almost two-thirds (63%) of individuals have not been able to find a steady job one year after being released from prison.¹³⁴ We need more effective and supportive parole and re-entry policies so people can find a steady job, stable housing, and be able to support themselves and their families. When more people are thriving, our communities are safer and stronger.</i>	65%	65%	59%	80%	60%
[Harsh Sentencing] <i>Our prisons are overcrowded and costly to taxpayers—and many people in prison are there because of harsh sentencing rules for non-violent drug charges. One step in the right direction would be to remove “mandatory minimum” sentencing for non-violent drug charges, making sure that sentencing is fair and matches the circumstances. This would free up taxpayer money that could be used on community programs for housing, healthcare, or education.</i>	64%	65%	64%	55%	71%
[Incarceration Cost] <i>Our prison system is wildly costly, with taxpayers spending an estimated \$80 billion every year.¹³⁵ There is growing bipartisan support to make a change. In 2007, for instance, Texas passed a \$241 million “justice reinvestment” package for drug treatment and other prison diversion programs. The crime rate fell 26% after seven years, and Texas has been closing prisons.¹³⁶ We can save money, reduce crime rates, and create safer communities with a different approach.</i>	60%	64%	61%	58%	55%

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132 Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MS/IPE120222> and <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/12/poverty-rate-varies-by-age-groups.html>
133 Source: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/emergency-responses>
134 Source: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>
135 Source: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/mass-incarceration>
136 Source: <https://rightoncrime.com/ten-years-of-criminal-justice-reform-in-texas/#>

LOOKING FORWARD

We hope this messaging guide provides valuable insights that can assist in our collective work to build support for community-based alternatives to policing and incarceration.

We are greatly encouraged by the openings and opportunities for change that this research helps to show are possible among our audience. Of course, there is still so much to learn, and additional research questions emerged through the course of this project, including:

- ④ In what ways can messaging continue to build support in the South, among more conservative audiences, for autonomous mental health first responders? How can we calm audience concerns about potential violence without involving police in the process?
- ④ What is the best messaging approach to build support for removing mandatory minimums? How do audiences respond to messaging about giving judges discretion to respond to each case as appropriate? Is making the case that mandatory minimums tie the hands of judges effective? How do we best tap into our audience's desire for punishment that is proportionate?
- ④ Given that tested messaging naming disproportionate racial impact and racial discrimination fell flat with conservative and Republican audiences, is there an opportunity to more effectively make the case that we need to address racial discrimination in our criminal legal system among conservative and Republican audiences? Is there a way to develop more effective messaging on disproportionate impacts among ideologically mixed audiences? How would drawing a throughline from slavery to contemporary systemic, legalized racism and discrimination impact the efficacy of messaging among different audience segments? Are there ways to better inform our audience about the myriad forms of government discrimination against Black people?
- ④ What could we learn by further exploring our audience's reaction to messaging focused on reducing drug sentencing for violent offenses as well as a broader drug class?

As noted earlier, big victories most often come after years of building grassroots support, sharing personal stories, educating leaders and community members about harms and benefits, and creating small, meaningful changes that generate the momentum necessary to make larger changes, with the social buy-in it takes to become lasting change. Every step forward is important, because it is another step toward justice.





APPENDICES

» Important Background to Help You Navigate This Guide

A *Heartwired* Research Approach: Developing Messaging That Meets Our Audience's Needs and Calms Their Concerns

Advances in neurological and social sciences have created a paradigm shift in our understanding of how the human brain processes emotion, logic, and primal or gut reactions, and how these elements impact people's decision-making. Researchers have come to realize that human decision-making is largely influenced by how people are *heartwired*—the mind circuits and connections that tie together five important factors: their emotions, identity, values, beliefs, and lived experiences.

In 2017, with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research and Wonder: Strategies for Good released a strategy guide called *Heartwired* that outlines an integrated approach to audience research, storytelling, and persuasion

communication. The heartwired research approach centers this new understanding of how people make decisions and why people change, and investigates how the five heartwired factors combine, and often collide, to shape people's attitudes and behaviors.

Understanding how a person is heartwired allows advocates to develop messaging that can meet their emotional and informational needs. When these needs are met, that person has a greater capacity to sit with and sort through their feelings (including contradictory or ambivalent feelings), take in new and different information, and begin to change. Importantly, when these needs are not met, change is very difficult and unlikely to happen.

The Five Heartwired Factors	Why This Is Important for Messaging
 <p>EMOTIONS: The feelings that human beings have in response to the stimuli within and around us are complex. Our emotions typically drive our behavior and lead us to prioritize certain concerns. Given how we are neurobiologically wired, we tend to make decisions based on emotions and back them up with logic, especially when we feel urgency and need to make a split-second decision, and this all happens on a largely unconscious level.</p>	<p>Emotions provide opportunities to connect with people. When messengers connect with an audience using messaging that matches the feelings that they have—messaging that is emotionally congruent—it can open pathways that enable emotional change within them. At the same time, emotions can also be a barrier. When messengers try to communicate with people in a way that is not congruent with their emotions, or they become emotionally flooded by an issue, they simply shut down and will not be capable of hearing and processing new information.</p>
 <p>IDENTITY: Self-identity is how people see themselves in relation to the world around them. We are all driven to make decisions that align with our sense of self, and when we don't, we experience uncomfortable cognitive dissonance. Every individual's identity incorporates many facets (e.g., gender, race, faith) and traits (e.g., being hard-working, fair-minded, educated). Internal conflict related to behavior change on certain topics is often the result of a tug-of-war between different facets of a person's identity.</p>	<p>Nearly all humans have a deep psychological need to see themselves as good, and very few want to see themselves as harming others. It is important for messaging to convey that the messenger understands their audience's good intentions, and to show how it is possible to support an issue that generates internal conflict within them while also retaining their identity and the sense of themselves as a good person.</p>
 <p>LIVED EXPERIENCES: The events and relationships people experience in their lives combine with the meaning they assign to those experiences to shape their response. The way we interpret and remember events—the narrative we construct around them—is just as important as what actually happened. Exploring and understanding those lived experiences is key to effective messaging strategies that drive behavior change.</p>	<p>As people sit with their internal conflict, sorting through their beliefs and feelings about an issue, they bring their own lived experiences to that internal process. That makes the role of people's lived experiences important to understand and to consider in order to develop messaging that is effective.</p>
 <p>VALUES: Values are ideals that individuals hold about what is good or bad, right or wrong, important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate. Values influence emotional reactions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and are often shared broadly within a culture or community. A person's values help them make meaning in their lives. If those values are contradicted, people experience a sense of dissonance and incongruence, which interferes with their capacity to change attitudes and behaviors.</p>	<p>When conducting audience research, it is important to identify the Venn diagram of shared values—the places where our audience's values overlap with those of advocates. By listening deeply—and with empathy—it is possible to identify these shared values, even while there are many others that advocates would disagree with. It is in this space that building effective communications and persuasive messaging—ones that are rooted in shared values—is achievable.</p>
 <p>BELIEFS: Beliefs are ideas that people hold to be true. When we have significant experience with something, our beliefs are deeper and more nuanced. When we have little to no experience, we tend to fill in the knowledge gaps. Whether we have deep or scant knowledge, our beliefs are further shaped by our identity, our lived experiences, and our values. In other words, facts alone do not shape beliefs.</p>	<p>Whether an advocate agrees or not, their audience's beliefs will remain true for them. To effectively engage them, it is critical to understand how our audience's beliefs interfere with their ability to be supportive and build messaging to implicitly disrupt those beliefs—or else those beliefs remain roadblocks to change.</p>



🔑 Key Concept: Upstairs Brain/Downstairs Brain

Psychologically, when human beings feel relaxed and comfortable, we tend to rely on our **Upstairs Brain**—the part of the brain that is responsible for our higher order thinking, reflection, and empathy. Yet, when something is unfamiliar or uncomfortable for us, the amygdala— sometimes called the **Downstairs Brain**—kicks into high gear. This is the part of our brain that regulates big negative emotions like fear, anxiety, and anger. Those big negative emotions are like noise that can shut down our higher-order, thinking brain.

As long as the amygdala is triggered, the brain is unable to process the messages we want our audience to consider, which interferes with their ability to become supportive of people who have been arrested or incarcerated and to act altruistically on their behalf. Our audience remains emotionally stuck and conflicted. Familiarity, however, acts to calm the amygdala and open the door to empathy. Empathy—the capacity to understand and be sensitive to another’s experience—is critical to our efforts to equip our audience with what they need to become more supportive. Empathy is critical because it is a precursor to altruistic behavior.

Your Brain on Messaging

UPSTAIRS BRAIN

Responsible for decision making and planning, control over emotions and body, self-understanding, empathy and Morality.

Allows for empathy, which is a precursor to altruistic behavior.



DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN

This primitive brain is responsible for basic functions, innate reactions and impulses, and strong emotions.

Shuts down the *upstairs* brain to respond to fear and focus on survival.



Key Concept: The Adjacent Possible

In popular science author Steven Johnson’s book, *Where Good Ideas Come From*, he notes that while “we have a natural tendency to romanticize breakthrough innovations... [ideas] are, almost inevitably, networks of other ideas” that must evolve gradually, with each new innovation or insight opening up new possibilities that did not exist before. One breakthrough leads us to see possibilities that did not exist before, which in turn leads to new breakthroughs. Throughout the process, each of these individual breakthroughs creates a cascade of other innovations that may have been previously inconceivable. This step-by-step process is a concept Johnson calls *the adjacent possible*, adapted from evolutionary biologist Stuart Kauffman.

The adjacent possible represents a helpful way for us to think about how change happens when it comes to emotionally complex social issues and how we can explore pathways forward for change. As with innovations, we can sometimes romanticize that a big victory on an important social change issue was the result of a certain court case, a key piece of legislation, or a set of policies. In reality, big victories most often come after years of building grassroots support, sharing personal stories, educating leaders and community members about harms and benefits, and creating small, meaningful changes that generate the momentum necessary to make larger changes, with the social buy-in it takes to become lasting change.

When it comes to our audience and their potential support for community-based alternatives to policing and incarceration, most are not simply *with us or against us*. Instead, they fall somewhere along a continuum of support and opposition, and the behaviors and emotions that are associated with each stage. On the more oppositional end, they hold heavily “tough on crime” and harshly punitive attitudes. On the most supportive end, people are eager to support positive change and are open to rethinking the way our criminal legal system works. As we move along the continuum from either side towards the middle, we find people who feel discomfort about change or engage in avoidance because of the internal conflict they may feel around the issue. It is here where people may support some policies and improvements to the current criminal legal system, even while they have concerns and hesitations. While this conflict may be uncomfortable for our audience, it provides an opportunity for our messaging to foster support for change.

It is essential for us to recognize that the amount of change needed to get someone who is at the more oppositional

end of the spectrum to jump all the way to the supportive end is massive—and highly improbable in the near-term. To put it in perspective, imagine if someone came to you and asked you to oppose any changes to our current system under any circumstances—or to trust that law enforcement is “colorblind” and has everyone’s best interest in mind. You may feel a mixture of anger and frustration and feel compelled to immediately challenge that person. Someone on the most opposed end of the spectrum may feel the same way when advocates approach them suggesting we need to “defund the police” or remake our entire criminal legal system.

That said, the research finds that people in the middle of this continuum—those holding a set of mixed beliefs—can and do move to become more supportive when they are given messaging that meets their emotional and informational needs. Of course, reaching and moving people along this spectrum takes deliberate and purposeful work. It also takes time.

Understanding our audience’s current attitudes, and the circle of adjacent possibilities they may be open to believe in and ready to support, gives us an opportunity to help them take one step, of many, towards the supportive end of the spectrum. It does not mean we accept that intermediate step as an end unto itself. Nor does it mean that we are coddling our audience. Rather, it means we use each step as an opportunity to expand an ever-greater set of new possibilities.

Just one example of adjacent possibilities at work is when advocates first develop a strategy for mental health emergency responders to have law enforcement nearby if back up is needed. This is something that helps to calm our audience’s concern that mental health specialists will be endangered or in harm’s way. Then, as this strategy is successful and shows a positive impact, advocates can more easily grow support for mental health first responders being fully independent from law enforcement.

Because our audience is not yet ready for a non-policing option, and at the same time is open to a joint approach like this, this strategy helps provide a pathway for progress. Helping to calm their concerns, and showing them that an alternative approach like this can work, equips them with what they need to be open to the next adjacent possible. Step-by-step, progress can be made toward justice.



Key Concept: Conflicted Empathizers and Concerned Skeptics

The research finds that, within our available, persuasion audience, there are two audience segments: Conflicted Empathizers and Concerned Skeptics. The following contains insights on these audience segments.

Conflicted Empathizers are open to being supportive, yet they have their own concerns that need to be acknowledged. While they are doing okay financially, they have anxiety about resource scarcity and worry about limited public funding to provide all the support that is needed in their community—including for crime reduction and public safety measures. *Conflicted Empathizers* often know someone (in some cases themselves) who has come in contact with the criminal legal system, and they understand that sometimes circumstances beyond one's control can have a profound impact on one's life. They do not blame others for needing help, and also want their own struggles and concerns recognized and acknowledged. They want everyone to have their basic needs met.

For messaging to be particularly resonant with *Conflicted Empathizers*, it should:

- ⊗ Acknowledge *Conflicted Empathizers*' own real economic considerations and anxieties.
- ⊗ Use relatable messengers who can reference their own feelings about having to work so hard just to make it.
- ⊗ Express empathy for others who are struggling and may need some extra help to get back on their feet.

Concerned Skeptics are more likely to prioritize self-sufficiency and independence as core values, along with other important values like family, hard work, personal responsibility, community, and self-sufficiency. They understand that circumstances beyond one's control can affect life circumstances. At the same time, they are still more likely to ascribe someone's situation to the choices that person has made, including their choices about how to respond to things outside their control. *Concerned Skeptics* are less satisfied with state government, which leads to skepticism about government as a lever for change and concerns about tax increases due to inefficient or misdirected use of government funds. They are open to policies they believe will support self-sufficiency and help someone get back on their feet, as long as they perceive that person as wanting to take responsibility for their own life. They have a strong emotional need for policy guardrails.

For messaging to be particularly resonant with *Concerned Skeptics*, it should:

- ⊗ Acknowledge their concerns directly, including language that addresses their skepticism.
- ⊗ Use trusted and potentially unexpected messengers who share and express the values and concerns of *Concerned Skeptics*, including small business owners who can speak to the ways proposed policy changes facilitate accountability and self-sufficiency.
- ⊗ Include non-profits and/or the private sector as mechanisms of policy implementation—not relying solely on state government. This can calm concerns about government being ineffective, as well as calm concerns about cost to taxpayers.

Deconstructed Messaging Examples

The following are transcripts of effective messenger videos that were tested in the research. Along the side of each transcript, you will find a deconstruction of the content, noting various insights and messaging recommendations in action.



My name is Kathryn. I live in New Orleans, Louisiana. I'm a criminal justice advocate. I've been working with people that are involved in the criminal justice system for over 30 years.

The messenger identifies herself as being from New Orleans, helping to **make it local**. She then provides details that help to **establish her credibility as a messenger** on this issue.

There were a number of moments—I would say “a-ha” moments—that led me to shifting my perspective.

Here the messenger uses language that indicates she has experienced a personal **journey**.

One that I really remember—one that just made me so sad—I had worked for a while with juveniles. I remember a child coming in—and I remember the police had been talking about him—and they were saying, “This kid is just bad news. He’s a bad kid. He’s always in here, and he got picked up for stealing.”

Sharing these details helps to tap into **shared values around care and concern for children**, who our audience feels should not be labeled and judged so quickly.

And I was talking to him. You’re basically doing a needs assessment and trying to figure out, you know, why is this kid constantly in here—constantly shoplifting? At some point he just kind of stopped and he’s like, “Do you have anything to eat?” And I was like, “Sure.” I said, “Is this what you were doing in that store?” He goes, “Well, I was just really hungry.”

The messenger also helps to **connect the dots** between root causes and the child’s behavior.

Growing up, that was just not something that would have happened in my house. It just made me incredibly sad. And I just remember thinking, you know, I’ve been sitting here listening to these cops talk about this kid and how he’s a bad kid, and he’s always in trouble. He’s a bad kid. And what I see is a 13-year-old child, who looks considerably older than 13. He cannot read or write, and he was also hungry. And that’s when I looked at the things that he was shoplifting. He was stealing food. I’ll never forget that.

The messenger provides more details that help our audience understand her personal **journey** on this issue.

Details about the child’s life also help to again **tap into shared values** around care and concern for children.



And I just don't really, you know, believe necessarily in bad kids. If you can't find the common humanity, if you can't see them as a person, if you can't see them as— especially with juveniles—if you can't see them as a child, it's very difficult to help them.

I am very saddened by the fact that we are so ready at younger and younger ages to give up on these kids and try them as adults. How can that possibly make any sense? You're not an adult. You don't have the brain of an adult. Even when people are accused of really serious crimes, they're still children accused of really serious crimes.

I think poverty is the biggest, biggest driver of criminal behavior. A lot of people in this town are walking a very, very tight rope—just to survive every day. People get desperate and start doing things that are against the law to survive.

You know, you're being punished for breaking the rules, but you're still part of society, and you will be reentering society. So, it is in society's best interest to help these people. Help them in the beginning so that maybe they don't end up there. And if they do, you know, help them so that when they come out, they can be contributing valuable members of society.

Using words like child and children helps to remind our audience of who we are talking about.

Reminding our audience that we are talking about children and including details about their life (in the previous paragraphs) also helps to paint a **fuller picture of their humanity.**

Here the messenger again helps to **connect the dots** between root causes and behavior.

Here the messenger again helps to **connect the dots** between root causes and behavior.





Leonard (Georgia)

My name is Leonard. I'm executive director of Hope Hustlers, a violence prevention organization located in Atlanta, Georgia.

A regional example helps to foster connection and create relevance by **making it local**. If this solution works in an area our audience perceives to be similar to their own, they are more likely to be able to better envision, and even enthusiastically support, violence prevention programs in their own area.

On-Screen Text: In 2002, Leonard was arrested and convicted of drug trafficking.

This **establishes credibility**—a messenger who is directly impacted by the criminal legal system and can directly speak to the harms of the system and the need for reform.

Now, that part of my story is when God sat me down to show me what my purpose actually was on this planet.

The messenger helps to **foster connection and relevance by elevating faith-based values**.

And during that seven years of incarceration, I actually helped over 400 inmates get their GED, solved several gang disputes and violent disputes that were happening on the prison yard.

In sharing details that show transformation and redemption, the messenger helps to disrupt our audience's flawed mental template of people who have previously been incarcerated and replace it with a mental template that is more positive.

And so that's kind of what led me into this work. And I got out of prison and hit the ground running. Hope Hustlers is a community violence intervention program and prevention program. We focus initially on the highest risk individuals—those who are at the highest risk for committing violence or being a victim of violence.

By sharing the story of his life beyond his time in prison, the messenger helps to **show his full humanity**.

We treat violence like a disease. The way we do that is interrupting the transmission—by reaching out to those high-risk individuals and embracing not just them, but their entire families.

In the research, this is a very effective metaphor for our audience.

We prevent the spread because we provide them with their immediate needs—which every human on the planet needs—food, water, clothing, shelter, and sleep. So, we make sure that their immediate needs are taken care of.

Here, the messenger **elevates shared values** of caring for community members and making sure people have their needs met.

He **describes concrete harms**—root causes of criminal-legal involvement such as lack of food and shelter—and **connects the dots** to a holistic solution that addresses those root causes.

Maybe getting some mental health counseling, mentorship, college prep, whatever it is that they need to move on. We do an individual success plan, with each individual and their families, and we help them stick to that plan.



Violence interruption starts with the relationships that we have with members of the community. Violence interrupters are individuals who are from a specific community, who are known in that community for helping people.

Maybe they were in the life of crime, but no longer. So, because we have those relationships, we get phone calls before violence happens. We've resolved disputes before they happen.

Right now, we're serving roughly 12 communities, 5,000 high risk individuals. We don't turn anyone down.

We get calls from all over Atlanta. We'll show up wherever we need to. We meet them in the school. We meet them in the community as well as the hospital court system. Wherever they come from.

We work along—parallel to—law enforcement. We don't want to get in their way. We are just trying to stop violence before it happens.

We understand that they are an important part of public safety.

We collect and maintain our data to know what we're doing is working. We just did a survey in eight communities in Atlanta that we're working in, and data shows we've reduced homicides by over 87% in the last year.

These are potentially violent individuals. Not one has committed another crime. Not one has committed another act of violence in the year they've been in the program. So, we brag on a 99% success rate.

If you make one household whole, if we make that family whole, especially to start with the youth, then you have a higher chance to be successful. We call ourselves the vaccine against negativity and violence. If we can spread more positivity and conflict resolution and people are whole, they actually can see a light at the end of the tunnel.

What we need to do is reach out to those families that not only directly are affected by gun violence, but indirectly affected by gun violence, and make sure that their traumas are being addressed. That changes the community as a whole.

It is important for our audience to hear that **violence interrupters come from the community they work in and are trusted.**

Also, that they are **not entering violent situations** and **not in immediate danger.**

Our audience generally isn't aware that alternatives like violence interrupters exist.

Naming that solutions like this exist—and that they work—gives them hope.

It is effective for our audience to hear that this program **works in parallel with law enforcement.**

Acknowledging the role of law enforcement can also **foster connection** among those who view law enforcement as an important part of community safety.

Not only do these details help to **make it local, incorporating key facts and statistics that show an alternative approach works** helps our audience to see it as credible.

The messenger helps to **show how harms impact individuals and families and connects solutions to harms.**

The messenger closes by **describing what we are FOR** and by **elevating shared values around care and concern for family.**

Marche (Alabama)



I am Marche, born and raised here in Montgomery, Alabama, and I currently serve as a city councilor in the district and the area I grew up in.

The messenger fosters connection and creates relevance by **making it local**. These details also help our audience to view her as a **credible messenger** who cares about community.

Sometimes we get in a place in life where we think everybody does the same thing and has got the same resources and same access. Think “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” was a good term, right? What if they don’t have any bootstraps?

The messenger helps to **disrupt and replace our audience’s flawed mental templates** around fairness and responsibility, reminding our audience that not everyone has the same resources.

On-Screen Text: Marche has helped create community support programs, including job opportunities for people recently released from prison.

In a community, re-entry looks like resources to get a job, resources to use those skills—so, what jobs are available for you? They should have that same type of list so they can call. And as a matter of fact, if I’m three months from being released from prison, why not let me go ahead and start doing that stuff now?

This helps to **show concretely what we are FOR** and what re-entry can look like. It also shows the harms of the current system, which many among our audience have not previously considered.

Give them what they need to be productive adults. Even with the kids that are teenagers coming from the detention facility, right? Give them what they need in case college is on their mind. So, you have a plan for these kids when they get out, and they don’t become repeat offenders and go to adult prison. That’s what I call giving them the tools that they need. Now, we’ve got a good community. The community still flowing. It’s still going.

The messenger is also **elevating shared values** around contributing to society, self-sufficiency, employment, care and concern for young people, the importance of education, community, and second chances.

On-Screen Text: Marche has seen the positive impact of community support in her neighborhood.

My neighbor around the block, when he got out of prison—this was two years ago—he’s a working man now because of what we did. We didn’t only just go fuss at him and tell him what he wasn’t going to do. But we said, “Hey, what do you need?” And he said, “I need a job. Y’all going to help me?” We were like, “Yeah, okay.” He did get his GED and he works at a construction yard. And I think for me, that’s perfect re-entry.

The messenger again **makes it local, describes what we are FOR**, and **elevates shared values** around care and concern for the community.

I think that a successful reentry program will benefit the community. Because the more productive people we have in society and in our communities, the better off we are.

By **elevating the well-being of the whole community, along with the impacted individual**, the messenger helps to foster connection and relevance.



We got three mega prisons being built. Why? If it wasn't a corporation, we wouldn't be building three mega prisons. We wouldn't have used dollars that need to flow through our communities that have been torn up from the same government to fund a prison, if it wasn't big business in Alabama.

Here the messenger is **describing concrete harms**.

On-Screen Text: Re-entry and other community support programs are helping make Marche's district safer for all.

I know that these programs are working because we've seen the violent crimes decrease by 22% in my area. We're now one of the safest places in the area because of all the things that we've implemented.

The messenger **incorporates key facts** that help to show evidence of positive impact.

I care about the people that live here because I know that it's more to life and you can be better if you have the opportunity, and you know that it's there.

She also closes by saying what **we are FOR** and **elevating shared values** around concern for those in the community.

The following are examples of effective print materials that were tested in the research. Along the side of each print piece, you will find a deconstruction of the content, noting various insights and messaging recommendations in action.



When my 26-year-old son, Ray, was killed in a robbery gone wrong six months ago, there were no words for my grief and rage.

The messenger fosters connection and creates relevance by **elevating shared values** of family.

This messenger, a mother whose son was killed, is also an **unexpected—and credible—messenger** for our audience.

After the trial, I was surprised when the prosecutor's office reached out to me, asking if my husband and I were interested in participating in something called "restorative justice."

Including "after the trial" is a cue there has been **accountability**—something very important for our audience.

I had never heard of it and was reluctant, but I learned that with restorative justice, a victim or a victim's family has an opportunity to participate in the justice process.

The messenger helps to **model the emotional journey** of someone who has been harmed being open to the restorative justice process.

Rather than standing on the sidelines feeling powerless, we could be directly involved in shaping what comes next for the person who killed our son.

These details help to show how restorative justice provides an opportunity for accountability to be **directly related to the harm** caused—and provides an opportunity for a victim to have a voice in the process.

In order to participate, we would have to agree to meet face-to-face with the man and his family—and he would have to agree to meet with us. I was reluctant, but after careful consideration and discussion, my family decided to give it a try so we could have a say in what justice looks like.

To be effective, it is important to be clear that process **only happens if both the victim and person convicted of harm agree to participate**. Elevating that the process gives victims a voice resonates strongly with our audience.

Meeting face-to-face was very difficult. We sat with George, the man who killed my son, along with George's wife, 1-year-old son, and a mediator who guided us through the two-hour discussion. There were tears, and at times raised voices, but I also felt a shift.

The messenger again **models an emotional journey** for our audience. She is also **elevating shared values** around family and providing details that help to **show George's full humanity**.

Looking into George's eyes and telling him how he had stolen so much from my family felt so important. It also felt important to hear George own up to what happened, and how sorry he was for taking my Ray.

Leading with the importance of holding someone **accountable** for causing harm is important for our audience—and it shows restorative justice is a way to do that.

We are still figuring out what the restorative justice agreement will look like with the mediator. We want George to serve some time, but we also want him to use his experience to help stop violence like this from happening to others. If he can work to put some good out into the world and help prevent others from doing wrong through a local youth outreach program, we might agree with a plan that includes a reduced sentence. This process may not work for everyone, but it has been important for my family.

The concept of restorative justice is new to most among our audience. **Outlining examples** of what a restorative justice agreement might entail is very helpful for them.



Luis (Louisiana)



Luis, Louisiana resident

I was 16 when I went to a friend’s party where I knew there might be trouble. I went anyway—and I took the gun I had bought off someone in the neighborhood to use for protection. I didn’t plan to use it, but figured I could flash it if I needed to.

I was young and made a bad decision that still haunts me. When a fight broke out that night, some guy pushed me down and started hitting me. I grabbed my gun and shot to scare him off, but then I heard someone scream. My stray bullet had hit and killed an innocent guy nearby.

The consequences were immediate and life-changing: I was tried and convicted as an adult for both the murder of the bystander and the attempted murder of the guy I fought with.

At 17, I was sentenced to life in prison without parole, and they sent me off to one of the worst prison facilities in the state—a place with a terrible track record for prisoner abuse. I was younger than all the guys there, still a kid and terrified.

Though I expected to spend my entire life behind bars, the state changed the rules for people incarcerated as minors, and I was released at the age of 46. It’s been two years now since my release, and I’ve started working at a non-profit organization focused on mentoring kids to help prevent situations of violence from occurring in the first place—and on creating a dialogue between our community and our elected officials about alternatives to putting people behind bars.

One pilot project we are working on with law enforcement and the District Attorney’s office involves having victims and offenders meet in supervised discussions—what we call “restorative justice conferences”—before sentencing happens.

Together, with a trained mediator, they discuss what it would take and what it could look like to repair the harm caused to the victim. The agreement is rigorously supervised and, if the person being held accountable doesn’t comply, they are returned to court for further sentencing. I know firsthand that prison stigmatizes and isolates prisoners, rather than providing opportunities to take direct responsibility for their actions. That’s why I believe in restorative justice as an option and a better path forward.

Highlighting a person directly impacted by the system as a **messenger is credible** and effective with our audience.

Accountability is very important to our audience. By talking about “consequences” and being haunted by “a bad decision,” the messenger helps to **elevate accountability**.

Here the messenger simultaneously is **describing concrete harms** while tapping into **shared values** our audience holds around care and concern for children. These details also help to paint a **fuller picture of his humanity**.

Stories of transformation and redemption are powerful and persuasive for our audience.

Here the messenger provides details that **describe what we are FOR** while **naming that alternative solutions do exist**—and are effective.

Again, the messenger **discusses accountability** and **connects the solution to the harms** that it helps to address.

» Worksheets and Exercises

Worksheet: Developing Values-Based Messaging to Build and Expand Support for Criminal Legal Reform

Use this worksheet to help organize your own messaging for future content. Keep in mind the needs of your specific audience. For example, consider the values our audience holds about safety, care for family and children, and the importance of individual accountability. As you develop your messaging, ask yourself: which specific audience values and beliefs am I engaging with, and how can I best connect to them? How am I connecting the dots between the harms of our current system and the proposed solutions in ways that are congruent with audience values and beliefs? What else does my audience need to hear to help them manage their complex and conflicting feelings?

Instructions: *Develop a few sentences for each of the message categories below.*

1. **As you develop this messaging, who is your target audience? What is the purpose of this communication? What change are you asking your audience to support? What is your call to action?**

Audience: _____

Purpose: _____

Change: _____

Call to Action: _____

2. **Elevate Shared Values + Foster Audience Identification:** *How would you describe yourself, your experience, or your values in ways that build connection with your audience? What values can you share that would provide an opportunity for your audience to feel connected with this issue? (Examples: safety, family, fairness, accountability, contribution, second chances, shared humanity)*

3. **Show Credible Harm; Tell Stories That Indict the System + Fill Knowledge Gaps:** *What are some things you think your audience doesn't know—or misunderstands—about the criminal legal system that might lead them to reconsider their perspective? What brief details or experiences can you include that show the harmful impacts of how the system is currently set up? What facts can you share that back up assertions of harm?*



4. **Disrupt Our Audience’s Flawed Mental Templates + Show the Full Humanity of People Who Are Entangled in the Criminal Legal System:** *What details or brief stories can you include that help disrupt our audience’s flawed mental template of people who are arrested or incarcerated to remind our audience of our shared humanity?*

5. **Paint a Picture of Proposed Solutions/Alternatives:** *What is the program or policy change you are seeking to build support around? How does it work? Who does it serve? How does it support community well-being broadly? What statistics or information can you include to help affirm that it will have a positive impact on directly affected individuals as well as the community as a whole? Be as concrete as possible—and center shared humanity, efficiency, and accountability.*

6. **Include a Call to Action:** *What can your audience do to help make proposed changes a reality? Is there any helpful action for them to take now? (This can be a personal action, like speaking up or posting on social media. It can also be actions like voting, volunteering, or reaching out to an elected official.)*



» Detailed Methodology

The findings and evidence-based recommendations presented in this messaging guide are developed from in-depth qualitative and quantitative research conducted from February 2023 to July 2024. The research team explored the state of the public conversation, the mindset of our audience, and tested messaging materials to determine the most effective ways to calm audience concerns about crime and community safety while creating openings to support community-based options and related policy changes.

Landscape Research

Media Audit & Social Listening (Conducted February 2023)

Goal:

- ▶ To understand how the media in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi, along with organizations and individuals featured in the media, report on and frame concepts related to crime and criminal legal reform.
- ▶ To equip us to enter the Mindset phase of audience research with a concrete understanding of the ways in which culture is both being shaped by, and reflecting, the conversation about crime and criminal legal reform that is taking place in public discussions.
- ▶ This messaging analysis will also provide us with insights that inform our next phase of Mindset research, including how we shape the research discussions we will have with participants in the upcoming focus groups—and what language we use in initial messaging interventions we develop and test.

Methodology:

- ▶ **Print media audit:** In-depth review of 2,908 articles published between November 1, 2021 and November 30, 2022 across 21 outlets in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi.
 - Alabama outlets include (3): *The Birmingham News/Mobile Press-Register, Alabama Daily News, Montgomery Advertiser*
 - Florida outlets include (5): *Tampa Bay Times, Orlando Sentinel, Tallahassee Democrat, El Nuevo Herald, Jacksonville Free Press*
 - Georgia outlets include (5): *Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Atlanta Business Chronicle, Gwinnett Daily Post, GPB News, Macon Telegraph*
 - Louisiana outlets include (3): *Louisiana Illuminator, LA Politics Weekly, The Drum*
 - Mississippi outlets include (5): *Clarion Ledger, Sun Herald, Mississippi Today, Daily Journal, Jackson Advocate*
- ▶ **Social listening analysis:** Detailed review and analysis of reader comments and social media responses on select articles from each of the 21 audited outlets.
- ▶ **Search Terms:** Articles were identified using a robust list of criminal legal-related search terms identified by SPLC staff.

Initial Term(s)	Paired With
crime [and criminal]	arrest, carjacking, community safety, decrease, defund police, drugs, gun(s), homeless, houseless, increase, justice, juvenile, prevention, public safety, rising, robbery, violent, violence, predator, mental illness, mentally ill, marijuana, youth
police [and policing]	accountable, accountability, danger, Black, budget, Blue Lives Matter, Black Lives Matter, communities of color, community, safety, data [collection], defund, discrimination, fatally shot, “for profit,” funding, justice, mental health, mental illness, mentally ill, misconduct, public safety, reform(s), shooting(s), spending, transparency, unarmed, violence, marijuana, youth, juvenile
violence	community safety, decrease, defund police, drug, gun, increase, public safety, prevention, reduction, mental illness, youth, juvenile, perception, program, study



Initial Term(s)	Paired With
juvenile	arrest, detention, diversion, drugs, incarceration, jail, justice, transfers, prevention, harm, police, predator, dangerous, rehabilitat[e,ion], sentencing
jail and prison	abuse, bail, bond, death/died/dying, fines/fees, “getting out of,” incarceration, [mandatory] minimum, mental illness, overcrowding, overcrowded, parole, rehabilitation, release, sentence, school-to-prison pipeline, violence, abolition, reform
drug(s)	abuse, addiction services, addiction treatment, arrest, community-based, counseling, courts, decriminalization, [mandatory] minimum, marijuana, mental health, opioid, opioid settlements, parole, prevention, rehabilitation, scheduling, program, alternative

Survey Audit (Conducted February 2023)

Goals

- ▶ To review and digest findings from available public opinion research related to policing, crime, incarceration, and public safety.
- ▶ This analysis will inform upcoming research, including the change hypotheses we develop together and language we craft to test in audience Mindset research.

Methodology

- ▶ This polling audit analyzes findings and methodologies of 17 surveys and reports from 2020-2022 related to public attitudes about the criminal justice system, policing, violence, incarceration, substance abuse, mental health, and community safety in the U.S. and in key Southern states.
- ▶ There are a select few surveys that track comparative data over a broader time period up until 2022.
- ▶ While most of the surveys are publicly available, some are confidential and are included in this analysis with permission.
- ▶ The 17 surveys included in this analysis were selected in collaboration with the SPLC research team.

Mindset Research

Two online Asynchronous Mindset Focus Groups (Conducted April–June 2023)

The purpose of these Mindset Focus Groups is to:

- ▶ Explore the mindsets of target audiences in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi — including the beliefs, emotions, lived experiences, values, and identities they bring to conversations related to crime, safety, policing, accountability, and the related reforms to the criminal legal system.
- ▶ Test initial messaging and messengers with target audiences in all five states, including specific language and framing.
- ▶ Identify knowledge gaps among our target audience and begin determining the most impactful information to include in messaging.

We conducted two four-day, asynchronous English-language focus groups among 55 adults, the first one from April 26 to May 4, 2023 with participants from Florida and Georgia, and the second one from June 1 to June 8, 2023 with participants from Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Participants included:

- ▶ 28 women, 27 men.
- ▶ 16 Black, nine Latino, four API, four Native American, two mixed race, and 20 white participants.
- ▶ Nine residents from Alabama, 15 from Florida, 14 from Georgia, 10 from Louisiana, and seven from Mississippi
- ▶ A range of education, ideology, political party, and professional experience.

Findings for this focus group are based on in-depth qualitative, not quantitative, research; as such, any numeric data presented here is suggestive only, and it is not statistically generalizable to larger populations.

- ▶ Research was iterative, and some test materials were revised for the second group.

Persuasion Research

Two online Asynchronous Persuasion Focus Groups (Conducted October–November 2023)

- ⦿ **The purpose of these Persuasion Focus Groups is to:**
 - ▶ Test messaging and messengers with target persuasion audiences in all five states, including specific language and framing that helps build support for proposed reforms related to violence prevention and reduction, community safety, policing, accountability, and incarceration.
 - ▶ To continue identifying knowledge gaps among our target audience and determine the most impactful information to include in messaging.
- ⦿ We conducted two four-day, asynchronous English-language focus groups among 55 adults, the first one from October 23-31, 2023 with participants from Florida and Georgia, and the second one from November 13-17, 2023 with participants from Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Participants included:
 - ▶ 32 women, 23 men.
 - ▶ 17 Black, 10 Latino, three API, two Native American, and 23 white participants.
 - ▶ 12 residents from Alabama, 14 from Florida, 14 from Georgia, nine from Louisiana, and six from Mississippi.
 - ▶ A range of education, ideology, political party, and professional experience.
- ⦿ Findings for this focus group are based on in-depth qualitative, not quantitative, research; as such, any numeric data presented here is suggestive only, and it is not statistically generalizable to larger populations.
- ⦿ The purpose of these discussions was to test the efficacy of specific messaging and messengers with the persuasion audiences.

Online Live, Synchronous Focus Groups (February 2024)

- ⦿ We conducted two, two-hour online focus groups among Spanish speaking participants.
 - ▶ One group was conducted among men (eight participants) and one among women (eight participants).
- ⦿ Participants were residents of Georgia and Florida.
- ⦿ The purpose of these focus groups was to explore audience mindset and test the impact of persuasion messaging among Spanish-speaking members of our target audience.

Online Dial Test Survey (Conducted January–February 2024)

- ⦿ Online message testing survey (n=2,025) fielded between January 30 and February 11, 2024 in English and Spanish.
 - ▶ This was conducted among residents in five Southern states (n=2,127), including:
 - Alabama (n=410); Florida (n=505); Georgia (n=506); Louisiana (n=406); Mississippi (n=300).
 - Spanish-speaking (n=102).
 - ▶ Data have been weighted to reflect population proportions in each state.
 - ▶ The full sample has a margin of error of +/- 2%. Subgroups have a larger margin of error.
 - ▶ Due to rounding, a sum of percentages may appear to be one point more or less than its parts.

Online Dial Test Survey (Conducted June–July 2024)

- ⦿ Online message testing survey (n=1,506) fielded between June 24 and July 16, 2024 in English and Spanish.
 - ▶ This was conducted among residents in five Southern states (n=1,506), including:
 - Alabama (n=306); Florida (n=300); Georgia (n=300); Louisiana (n=300); and Mississippi (n=300).
 - Spanish-speaking (n=118).
 - ▶ The full sample has a margin of error of +/- 3%. Subgroups have a larger margin of error.
 - ▶ Data have been weighted to reflect population proportions in each state.
 - ▶ Due to rounding, a sum of percentages may appear to be one point more or less than its parts.



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TOWARD JUSTICE

**Effective Community Safety Messaging To
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