



CORE PRACTICES TO
**CHANGE THE NARRATIVE
ON VIOLENCE**

CORE PRACTICES TO CHANGE THE NARRATIVE ON VIOLENCE

For the last fifteen years, Common Justice has been talking about violence. We have done this in political contexts ranging from emotionally charged to downright hostile. In these conversations, which we have had with survivors and elected officials, movement leaders and people staunchly opposed to change, community leaders and skeptics, people in dense urban areas and in small towns, we have learned that a few core practices have proven essential to shifting the narrative about violence. We offer those here.

WHAT WE MEAN BY NARRATIVE CHANGE

At Common Justice, we know narrative is bigger than content or messaging. It is about the filter through which people take in information, stories, and experiences. That filter is about culture, power, relationships, belonging, values, and the scope of what is possible. Our aim in changing the narrative is not just to tell new stories, but to fundamentally transform that filter.

Pop Culture Collaborative talks about narrative as: “a story people already know; a story template recurring in a culture over time that people widely recognize and understand, and to which they have a predictable response.” The Narrative Initiative describes narrative this way: “A narrative reflects a shared interpretation of how the world works. Who holds power and how they use it is both embedded in and supported by dominant narratives... An ambitious scale is inherent in the strategy of narrative change.”

We know our ability to change the narrative is not just about narrative activity, but narrative power. As Color of Change defines it, narrative power is “the ability to create leverage over those who set the incentives, rules, and norms that shape society and human behavior.” Narrative power is about whose stories shape our culture and how. It is not just about visibility or wide dissemination, though it includes those things, but about broad societal influence and the ability to render certain things possible and others impossible.

We have been fed too many stories that demonize people who commit violence, conflate Blackness and dangerousness, center certain survivors at the expense of others, and foreclose options and imagination. Narrative power is not just about the telling of those stories, but the centering of them in our culture as determinants of what we collectively will do. Changing the narrative means intervening at the point of assumptions and transforming what is possible from there. What follows are some of the most effective core practices we have deployed to that end.

“A NARRATIVE REFLECTS A SHARED INTERPRETATION OF HOW THE WORLD WORKS. WHO HOLDS POWER AND HOW THEY USE IT IS BOTH EMBEDDED IN AND SUPPORTED BY DOMINANT NARRATIVES... AN AMBITIOUS SCALE IS INHERENT IN THE STRATEGY OF NARRATIVE CHANGE.”

The Narrative Initiative



1

DO NOT MINIMIZE THE FREQUENCY OR IMPACT OF VIOLENCE

Our opposition leads with fear. Too often people who support criminal justice reform seek to combat that fear-mongering by making data-driven arguments that there is less violence than our opposition claims or that the violence is not somehow as bad as it's depicted to be. This is a steadily losing strategy.

First, data is not a match for fear. For people who are unlikely to experience violence and fear it anyway, their views are already contradicted by the data, so more data is not what will shift them. But even more so, people who feel unsafe in neighborhoods where violence is more common have often survived violence themselves and/or have a legitimate fear that they or their loved ones will be hurt. Marginal increases or decreases in overall crime rates does not change that fundamental reality of their lived experience, and downplaying violence or treating them as though their fear is somehow uninformed or baseless disrespects their valid experience, which has in it the seeds of real solutions, and only alienates them from our messages and our movement. Reformers' insistence that current crime rates, whatever they are, are somehow acceptable lands as at best naïve and out of touch or at worst quite brutally callous—as though they are saying the level of pain people have gone through is acceptable and does not merit further attention or care. In so doing, these minimizing approaches alienate the people with the greatest stake in advancing real solutions to violence from the very movements that aim to do so.

Common messages in 2021 and 2022 that make the mistake of minimization have included arguing that while crime was higher than the immediately previous year, it was lower than 5 years earlier. This kind of messaging is unambitious with regard to safety and normalizes current levels of loss. An even worse messaging pattern from a narrative perspective that emerged from many sectors of our movement in these years was a version of: "only homicides are up—all other categories of violent crime have declined in X year."

This framing could not be more tone deaf and can cause real harm. At Common Justice, we always think about how a mother who had lost her child to gun violence would experience our messaging, or how it would resonate with a father who fears that his son might be hurt or killed during his daily walk to school. In this case, it is impossible to imagine they would believe for a moment that their child's life mattered to us. If we adopt messaging that makes little of these lived experiences, we cannot then blame our opposition if they and countless others go on to support them instead of us.

We have better options. Instead of minimizing, we can insist that current levels of violence are unacceptable. We can recognize that disenfranchised Black and brown communities across the country not only do not experience, but have never experienced the level of safety they deserve. We can insist that one murdered child, one domestic violence homicide, one gunpoint robbery is too many, and allow our movement and our messages to include space for loss and grief. From that loss and grief, we can lift up with unequivocal moral authority the irrefutable conclusion that the strategies we have used so far—most of them policing and prisons—have gotten us to where we are, and that we will no longer stand for more of the same, because we deserve better. We deserve survival, safety, and healing for all communities, and we will not fall for the lie that more of the same will get us there. We can shine a light on the indifference, laziness, and dishonesty of any political actors who would dare tell us that the status quo strategies are working. We have seen too much, know too much, and care too much about one another to stand for anything less than real, lasting solutions.

In so doing, we align our movements with the people who have the greatest stakes in the outcome of our work and place the rightful blame and responsibility on the status quo for a set of painful conditions that we together can transform.



2

OFFER AN AFFIRMATIVE VISION

Our movement's work to reduce the use of police and prisons to address violence is often compromised by our failure to put forward an affirmative vision of what could take their place. Even people who have a strong, grounded critique of law enforcement responses often prefer these responses to nothing at all, so arguments for less that do not include what we would do instead fall flat for people who need to feel as safe as possible now. Talking about eliminating current approaches without replacing them also runs the risk, as with minimizing, of making our movements appear naïve or indifferent to violence. Instead, we know we will move people not primarily by exposing the pain and wrongs of things as they are, but rather by offering a compelling, values-based, pragmatic and visionary affirmative vision of things as they could be and giving people an opportunity to contribute to making that world real.

The work we at Common Justice do engaging survivors provides a microcosm of this lesson. At Common Justice, we only take responsible parties into the program if the people who they harmed consent. In our experience, a full 90 percent of survivors who have been given the choice of seeing the person who harmed them incarcerated or seeing them take part in our work have chosen Common Justice. All of these survivors are people who participated in the criminal justice process. They are among the survivors who called the police (as fewer than half of survivors do) and are part of the even smaller subgroup of those people who continued their engagement through the grand jury process (another half of survivors drop out before this process). They are people who initially chose a pathway likely to lead to incarceration. Even among these survivors, when another option is present, 90 percent choose something other than that very incarceration they were pursuing. Although some certainly choose Common Justice out of compassion, most choose out of simple, pragmatic self-interest: they choose to participate in this process because they believe it represents a better chance of meeting their short- and long-term needs for safety and justice and ensuring that others won't experience the kind of suffering they did.

One core lesson this teaches us is that what people choose in the absence of options is never a prediction of what they will choose in the presence of options. It is important to recognize that they did not move away from incarceration—they moved toward something that met their needs. Their choices were affirmations.

This kind of pragmatism is not just available where a program like Common Justice exists. Across the board, community-based programs and investments stand a better chance of producing safety than approaches rooted in enforcement and punishment. And more and more people know this: a recent FWD.US study found that one in two Americans identified as having had a loved one incarcerated. This means an enormous amount of people have come to appreciate the failings of the current system from their own proximity to it. It is therefore not evidence of the system's limitations that will move people most, though they are primed for that shift; rather, it is the presence of something else that might work better.

People have all seen police cars and precincts and jails and countless TV shows about criminal legal solutions. Our movement has to make visible what else is possible, including alternatives to incarceration, restorative and transformative justice approaches, violence interrupters, hospital-based programs, culturally rooted healing interventions, and more. We need to tell clear, compelling, pragmatic, relatable stories in which people can see themselves and the world they want to live in. When we do that, we can invite people not simply to step away from what isn't working but to step toward what is.



3

UPLIFT SAFETY, SURVIVORS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

For too long, our movement has behaved as though ‘public safety’ was our opponents’ priority while justice was ours.

Safety. The truth is that safety and justice are not just compatible, they are interdependent. Too often, we talk about prisons as failing to solve violence when in fact they are criminogenic—they produce violence. When we understand them that way, their reduction becomes a necessary element of any plan to increase safety. We have to portray prisons as dangerous to us all—and as especially unacceptable choices in the presence of alternatives that actually work. Over and over again, alternatives to incarceration, community investments, and other non-punitive approaches out-perform prisons in every meaningful respect in generating near-term and lasting safety for individuals and communities.

Survivors. While we are seeing some shift in this respect, for too long, our movement has allowed our opposition to act as though they were the only and rightful spokespeople for survivors. Legislators have enacted draconian criminal justice laws in the names of survivors. Others have drawn on crime victims’ stories to motivate sympathy, horror, and outrage. But the one thing rarely done is to ask the full range of survivors what they want.

What happens when we ask survivors what they want is we find they are with us, they are us. Survivors want solutions that work, and they have paid the price for the current systems’ failures with their enduring pain.⁶ Their voices, uplifted in support of transformative change, can have an outsized effect in moving the public and legislators toward ending mass incarceration and building infrastructures that prevent harm and heal it when it occurs.

Accountability. Our movements have long and rightfully opposed punishment. Punishment is brutal, passive on the part of those punished, and wildly ineffective. In the United States, its application is rife with vast racial inequities at every turn in every jurisdiction. But punishment is not accountability. Punishment is suffering inflicted on someone who has (allegedly or actually) done wrong. Accountability is a process in which the person who has caused harm takes responsibility for their actions and works to make things as right as possible. Accountability is active, dignifying for the person making right, and often transformative for the people harmed. It is a necessary element of strong and safe relationships and communities.

When we work from the value of accountability rather than punishment, we can offer into insight into why violence occurs without excusing it. We can unapologetically uphold the inviolable dignity of those who have caused harm and always hold the possibility of transformation—without ever understating the consequences of violence to those harmed or the responsibility of those who cause harm. We can uplift the possibility of transformation and repair even in the face of the gravest harm. That is a vision people will move toward.

CHANGING THE STORY

We are and always have been on the side of safety. When we can root our narrative work in our unrelenting regard for the humanity of everyone touched by violence and our unquenchable determination to fight until everyone is as safe as they deserve to be, we can intervene at the level of values and assumptions and build unstoppable movement up and out from there.

GET INVOLVED: To learn more about Common Justice and how you can help grow our work, please visit our website at www.commonjustice.org. We look forward to sharing our vision with you.