PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

How do advocates for genuine justice and liberation put forth a compelling case about what incarceration does especially to people of color? How do we establish a popular agenda for dismantling the carceral state and the barriers erected to bar those with records from prosperity?

To answer these and related questions, **Center for Community Change** partnered with ASO Communications. The language recommendations that follow emerge from analysis of over 1000 data points from current language. The data included consist of (1) advocacy (2) media coverage (3) opposition and prison industry (4) popular culture and (5) 50 one-on-one interviews with advocates.

Beyond views of incarceration, we explored beliefs and assumptions about barriers to employment post release.

METHODOLOGY

Using a variety of techniques from *cognitive linguistics*, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, we set forth to examine how people reason, formulate judgements and come to conclusions about environmental concerns.

Principally, these conclusions emerge from *metaphor analysis*. This involves cataloging the commonplace non-literal phrases in all speech. Noting patterns in these expressions reveals how people automatically and unconsciously make sense of complexity. Each metaphor brings with it *entailments*, or a set of notions it highlights as "true"

about a concept. Priming people with varying metaphors has been shown to alter not just how they speak but the ways they decide, unconsciously, what "ought" to be done about a given topic. We judge a metaphor's efficacy on how well it advances and amplifies what advocates wish the public got about an issue.

For example, researchers at Stanford showed that groups primed with a metaphor of CRIME AS DISEASE (*plaguing* our communities, *spreading* around) more often came up with preventative solutions for crime such as after school programs and preschool for all. Conversely, subjects exposed to the metaphor of CRIME AS OPPONENT (*fight* crime, *beat back* homicide) generally thought harsher punishments were the answer. If you're working for prevention, it's clear you should liken crime to DISEASE and avoid OPPONENT evocations. A 3-strikes advocate would want to do the opposite.

You know wording matters: the very label for the people you address — prisoners, criminals, formerly incarcerated — is up for debate. Individual words, especially labels for people, matter immensely as researchers on voting behavior discovered.

In another study, investigators asked respondents whether they'd *vote* in an upcoming election and others whether they'd *be a voter*.

The difference is stunning. Where just over half of those asked about voting intended to do so, 87.5% of those asked about being a voter desired to get to the polls. Post-election, voting records

showed 96% of those surveyed about being a voter actually pulled the lever.

A simple word difference, from "will you vote" to "will you be a voter" is also a conceptual shift from action to identity, from what you do to who you are. The words we use shape what's true for our audiences. This is as true in ideas about handling crime as it is for voting behavior. If theory holds, it should prove effective to unpack and then alter perceptions of criminal justice broadly, including barriers to employment.

WHAT THIS WORK **ISN'T**

Applying the findings of this method of analysis to assess and, hopefully, shape advocacy discourse can ensure you're saying what you actually think. It helps you say today what you'll still believe and mean tomorrow.

However, this assumes a focus on the long-term: an attempt to shape how the public understands and comes to judgements about environmental justice over time. This is <u>not</u> traditional political research designed to win the next election.

As such the analysis and recommendations here may challenge conventional wisdom about what the public is ready to hear. The premise here is to find the range of ways people *can*, if supported by our messaging, come to support environmental efforts -- in other words where they are capable of going and how to lead them there.

Finally, as with all such approaches, things like messenger, timing, context and repetition matter immensely.

profiling the problem

Carefully select your frame

In describing a complex problem and creating empathy for a deliberately maligned population, you're trying on various argument frames - some of which may harm you in the long-run.

1. Focusing solely or even principally on economic benefits makes "saving money" the highest good. This lays ground for push to privatize prison as cost saving measure. It also undermines push for greater outlay of money for people's well being.

No: "reduce costs"   Yes: improve health/wellbeing/lives
No: "taxpayers foot the bill"   Yes: citizens bear the moral burden
No: "good for the economy"   Yes: good for the nation

2. Prominent use of the water metaphor hides the real people making decisions to create, grow and sustain prison. Further, it reduces currently and formerly incarcerated to drops of liquid.

No: "school to prison pipeline" Yes: cradle to prison gauntlet
No: "prisons overflowing"   Yes: we cram more people in

3. The revolving door analogy for recidivism fails to convey it's the system, not the individual, at fault. People enter and exit revolving doors without any problem — they're designed for this. Further, common expressions (e.g. "she went to prison") imply a person acted of his or her own volition.

No: "prison is like a revolving door"
Yes: prison as quicksand, maze, labyrinth, vacuum, bottomless pit
No: "end up back in prison" "go back to prison"
Yes: "sent back to prison" "forced back to prison"

What is incarceration?

Descriptions of prison focus in on the physical — cage, bars, cell. This paints privation but fails to show we're talking about <u>people</u> with rights and relationships.

• Profile humanity as well as how harms extend beyond person inside.

No: "putting behind bars" "incarcerating"
Yes: separating people from family

• Induce emotion
No: "juvenile detention"
Yes: children's prison

• Don't imply time is rightly owed.
No: "served my/his/her time"
Yes: completed a sentence

• Don't put prison outside community.
No: back to community
Yes: back to family, emerge from enforced separation

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

1. Insist that people's rights are <u>inherent</u> and not granted externally.

No: lose license, lose voting rights   Yes: have license taken, have voting rights denied

2. Your barrier metaphor works powerfully. However, it's confusing to mix inability to access jobs with claim there aren't jobs to access. Leave open possibility to argue for <u>more</u> jobs — not just ending discrimination to existing ones.

No: "find a job" "finding employment"   Yes: land/secure/obtain/get hired at rare job
No: "dismantle barriers to employment"   Yes: dismantle first/a barrier to **a** job

profiling the people

Avoid passive constructions

Reliance on passive constructions weakens point that choices people in power make create and sustain our carceral state. This diminishes potency of our proposed solutions.

1. Signal that people created current conditions and could alter them; things don't just come to be.

No: "prison system is growing"
Yes: leaders/officials decide to separate more people from their families

No: "public dollars go toward incarceration"
Yes: we choose to spend money on prison; we choose not to fund health, education and welfare

No: "prison expansion" "prison reduction"
Yes: our choice to put more people in prison

2. Always return to <u>people</u> as the heart of the issue

No: "mass incarceration"

Yes: targeting and controlling people

No: "prison-industrial complex"

Yes: destroying people for profit, sequestering people for profit

No: "prison populations" "correctional populations"

Yes: people we elect to imprison, people we separate from their families

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Naming your constituencies

You tend to call people "prisoners" or "formerly incarcerated." While efficacy of these labels is an empirical question, they profile the negative situation and distance from audiences who have not experienced prison.

• Emphasize humanity, not just fact of prison
No: "prisoner"
Yes: person we imprisoned

• Highlight strength and resilience, not merely time served
Less often: formerly incarcerated
More often: prison survivor, person/ mother/father/cook/artist/etc. who completed a sentence,

• Use singular plus the indefinite article — e.g. *a mother, an African American man* — helps mitigate noxious stereotyping. Making people focus in on one example enhances empathy and interest.

HOW TO HANDLE "NAMING NAMES"

At times, of course, it's hard to pinpoint who is behind some nefarious deed. There are ways you can *convey* a problem is person made and therefore not unavoidable, without necessarily spelling out who did what to whom. And, with government, take caution before pointing the finger too directly.

✦ Words like "manufacture" "create" "place" and "bring", as in "law enforcement places more people of color behind bars", tell audiences bad things didn't come from nowhere.

✦ Be especially careful about characterizing government writ large as the source of the problem. Judicial, police, prosecutorial and correctional complicity is all bad government — and it must be stopped. However, because we often need people to see government as the solution, it's problematic to fan the very present anti-government sentiment in our society. Emphasize *lost opportunities, erroneous beliefs, discredited approaches*, rather than blanket condemnations. Another approach is to name particular politicians.