



**Women
in Prison**

Talking about women in contact with the criminal justice system: a messaging guide

March 2023

Women in Prison (WIP) is a national charity which provides independent, holistic, gender-specialist support to women facing multiple disadvantage, including women involved in (or at risk of being involved in) the criminal justice system. We work in prisons, the community and 'through the gate', supporting women leaving prison and in the community to address the root causes of offending. We run Women's Centres and 'hubs' for services in Manchester and London and in partnership in Surrey.

Our combined services provide women with support and advocacy, relating to domestic and sexual abuse, mental health, harmful substance misuse, debt, education, training, employment, and parenting. Our campaigning is informed by our frontline support services for women, delivered at every stage of a woman's journey through the criminal justice system. The experience and knowledge of staff working directly with women affected by the criminal justice system enable us to see first-hand the effects of policy in practice and strengthen our recommendations for change.

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 @wiplive

 womeninprisonuk

[womeninprison.org.uk](https://www.womeninprison.org.uk)

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Introduction

Our society tends to view women who have contact with the criminal justice system harshly. This is especially true when they are mothers. A 'tough on crime' climate has led to an over-reliance on prison, despite overwhelming evidence showing time and time again that this doesn't address why people commit crime in the first place or often, prevent reoffending. This can and must change. We know that when people understand the root causes of offending and the full picture of a person's life, then they favour solutions that work.

Honing the way we communicate is an essential step to making sensible changes a reality. We must be clear, consistent and compelling.

This guide is designed to make communicating effectively with the public easy by doing two things. Firstly, it will give you an insight into what people are already thinking about women who have contact with the criminal justice system. Secondly, it will guide you step by step through communications tips and specific messages to use or customise. It is designed to help you to shape your content, both written and verbal. Importantly, this guide will also give you tips on things to leave un-said. If we get it right, we will help people to understand, connect with and support our work. Essentially, it's not about what you say but how you say it!

Throughout this guide we'll bring this to life with examples from Women in Prison and other organisations working in this field that have already seen success using this approach. We've found that since adopting these tips we've been heard and understood better - so we wanted to share this information to help others experience the same thing.

The findings are based primarily on research done by the [Frameworks Institute on behalf of Transform Justice](#), the Criminal Justice Alliance, Clinks and the Standing Committee for Youth Justice. It also builds upon further findings by [Transform Justice](#).

Step one: Be heard and avoid hurdles

Our first step to improved communications requires us to understand what people think and feel because this influences how they react to messages.

No one is hearing our messages with an empty brain. We all have beliefs, values and assumptions that we draw on when interpreting the world around us - including when we see a campaign slogan or tweet. These are deep rooted and cultural. We build them over our life and absorb them from many areas like family influences, education and the media.

Unless you have personal contact with the criminal justice system, through family or friends, the narrow definitions of the people who commit crime are created young (even evident in pre-school TV) and repeated as we grow. That is why it is key that we work together to raise our voices, to build a different, fairer, picture of women in contact with the criminal justice system.

In this guide, we are drawing out some of the biggest and deepest-rooted beliefs the UK public have; the ones that can easily derail support for our work - our hurdles. Once you trigger people's brains towards one of these it is hard to get them back to the story you want to tell. Therefore, we always try to dodge them, and instead lean into other areas where we can connect with people.

Hurdle one: Committing crime is a rational choice

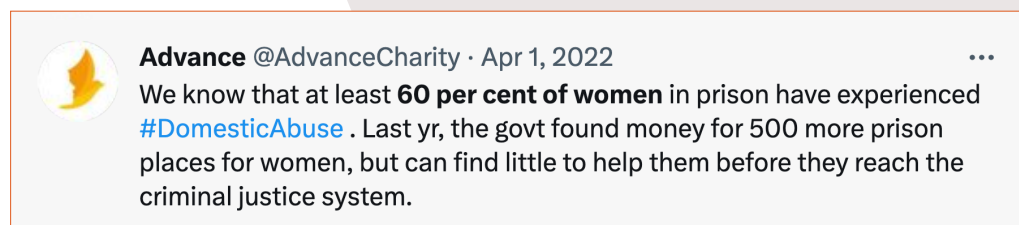
The idea of choice and personal responsibility is ingrained in our society. It is one of the biggest concepts to shape the way people think about crime and justice. People believe that crime is a rational choice. This can work against women, especially those who have children, as people can think "As a mother she should have put her children first and never have committed a crime". However, in reality we know this does not happen, and women are often faced with impossible choices.

How this plays out:

A focus on individual decision-making, void of context, reinforces the idea that harsh punishments will stop crime and that longer sentences will deter future crimes. It also makes people more likely to think that the system is there just to punish people.

Solution

Context, context, context. Always weave context into any story you tell. For example, people recognise that poverty is a driver of crime. One example of this is convictions for TV licence fees. When talking about the subject draw out the connection between women convicted and poverty. Another example of using context is below from Advance:



Hurdle Two: Fatalism

A major barrier to support is the strong belief that crime can't be fixed.

How this plays out:

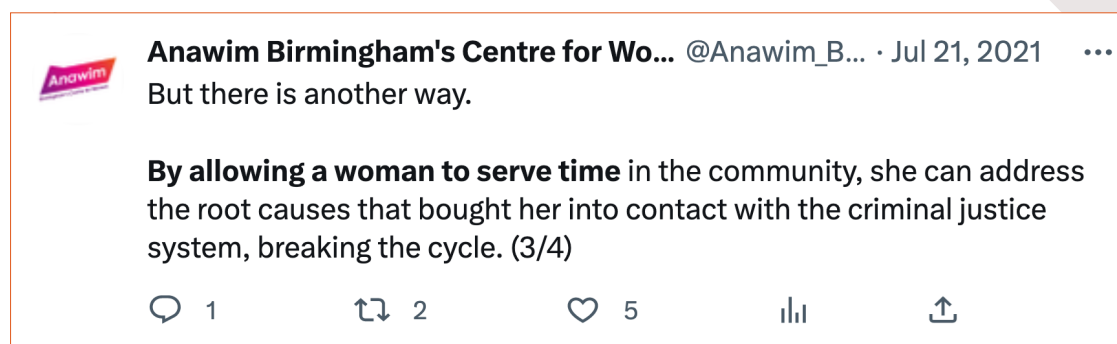
Organisations inadvertently reinforce the idea that there is nothing we can do to stop crime by only talking about the problem issues, without a clear solution.

Solution:

Always show the way we can resolve systemic problems and place solutions up front and clear. We must place more emphasis on the solution. For example, talk more about women's centres than prison terms. This doesn't mean hiding problems, just shifting our focus.

It is also useful to avoid terms that will trigger fatalism, like talking about a 'broken system' or a 'revolving door' because once this strong visual idea is triggered in someone's brain they are less likely to absorb your alternatives. Instead tell your story, of your successful alternatives.

Explain why Women Centre's and specialist services are best placed to tackle the issues that sweep women into the criminal justice system. Join the dots for the audience and be overt about why these options work. When we are clear public support is often there, but it may not be at the front of their mind.



Hurdle three: 'They' are different to 'me'

When we talk about women in the criminal justice system by using any labels such as "those women" or "offenders" we are mentally separating 'them' from 'us'. This fuels the idea that arrest or prison happens to 'other people', who are not like 'us'.

How this plays out:

Separating people in our minds can stop people caring. This also connects with our first hurdle, as if we believe people who commit crime are different to us, it's easier to envision that they choose to commit crime, a choice that we wouldn't make. The result is that it becomes harder to recognise a person who needs support and instead see them as someone that should be separated from us.

Solution

Use language that emphasizes women's humanity and the things that encourage the general public to be able to relate to women who have been swept up into crime. This can be things such as shared experiences of parenthood, the importance for everyone to have access to health care (something hard for pregnant women in prison) or that everyone needs and deserves accommodation.



Women in Prison @WIP_Live · Jan 24, 2022

...

Everyone needs safe and stable housing. But last year half of women left prison without settled accommodation.

It doesn't have to be like this which is why we're supporting [#SafeHomesForWomenLeavingPrison](#) to call on [@MoJGovUK](#) to take action

Hurdle four: You can't put a price on safety

It can feel natural to focus on how Women's Centres are cheaper than prison stays BUT when it comes to people's views about the criminal justice system this can backfire, badly.

How this plays out:

Organisations highlight how Women's Centres are a cheaper alternative to prison places. However, despite people consciously wanting things to be cheaper, if you place your focus on money as the key benefit of alternatives to custody, their brain will jump to thinking that spending money on responding to crime is a necessity. They are also then more focused on the money than the actual benefits of Women's centres.

Highlighting cost savings might be useful in discussions with politicians behind the scenes, or with civil servants but making the case for a reduction in spending on justice will not work as your main argument' after 'will not

work. when talking publicly. Politicians are also unlikely to talk publicly about saving money when it comes to spending on the criminal justice system.

Solution

Instead, focus on the other benefits Women's Centres provide. Show that they have a lasting impact of reducing crime, because they address mental ill health, maintaining a woman's relationships with her children or being able to address the fact they may turned to drugs or alcohol to cope with trauma or abuse. The money can in some circumstances support other arguments, but should never be your focal point. The key focus is that Women's Centres work for communities, families, and the economy.



Working Chance @WorkingChance · Apr 6, 2022



Prison is all too often a dead end.

We must prioritise education and skills while people are in prison: increasing their chances of finding a job on release, building a future for their families, and escaping the cycle of poverty and crime.

Step two: Help your audience to understand

We've drawn out a few different ways to build understanding. For example, the public recognise the court system is flawed and a blunt instrument that can do more harm than good. But that doesn't mean people will naturally join the dots to back solutions that could support women instead of criminalise them, like support for drug or alcohol misuse.

We've drawn out a few different ways to build understanding.

Dial up helpful beliefs

1. We should resolve crime before it reaches court

The majority of the public think it's sensible to resolve crime early and before it reaches court. They think it is a good use of resources. Highlight the benefits of this, how it can reduce future crime and support women and families at the same time. This includes using 'upstream' analogies about pulling people out of the rapids before they get in too deep.



Women in Prison @WIP_Live · Sep 17, 2021



"There are women you see in prison who've never even had a caution before, but they're in the wrong place at the wrong time or got caught up with a partner."

This can change. **We must invest in local services** that stop women from being swept up into crime

2. We need to use context to be fair

People connect with people, we must paint that human picture using context. And show how important this context is as a factor to be considered to make decisions fair. This could be a woman's background of domestic abuse or experiencing the care system and how this has impacted her journey into the criminal justice system.

It is important to know that discussing fairness is a double edged sword. When talking about women we must avoid making people think about uniform fairness, the idea of an "eye-for-an-eye" and everything must be equal to be fair. This idea is also strong, so if we trigger that idea of uniform fairness it backfires. Always connect fairness with context.

“The new report by Agenda and the Alliance for youth justice reveals that up to 90% of girls in contact with the youth justice system have been previously abused by trusted person. And the system is just re-traumatising them. We must consider this context before sentencing and look at alternatives that support them. It’s the only fair thing to do.”

Indy Cross, Chief Executive, Agenda

3. Alternatives to prison

The idea of alternatives to prison won't be the first thing people think of, however, it is something people believe in, so we should be talking about it more. That also means talking just about the alternatives, without even mentioning prison. Even mentioning prison will inadvertently help people to think about that as a solution to crime.



Tomorrow's Women @TomorrowsWomen · Nov 6, 2019

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Happy [#WomensCentreWednesday!](#) **Women’s centres work because in supporting** women, we are building resilient communities. Empowering a community of women to get support, make positive changes & access services [#womensupportingwomen](#) [#empoweredwomen](#) [#womenscentreswork](#)

Use accessible language

We all quickly become accustomed to using jargon as we become experts in our field. That means we forget that most people don't understand it. Audiences won't be familiar with terms that are everyday to us. This includes Women's Centres and what they do.

Explain upfront what a women's centre is using your own language.

If in doubt, a good rule of thumb is think 'how would I explain this to my friend or family?'. Picture someone in your life who knows nothing about this topic. Would they understand you? If not, try different language.

To get you started, here is a series of terms and alternative ways to describe them.

AVOID	TRY
Vulnerable women	<p>Simply say: women.</p> <p>If you need more information use clear context, for example:</p> <p><i>Many women in contact with the criminal justice system have experienced domestic violence and trauma</i></p>
Offenders, prisoners, criminal	<p>Simply say: people, women</p> <p>If you need more information:</p> <p><i>Women caught up in the criminal justice system, women in prison, women who have been swept up into crime.</i></p>
Holistic	<p>Explain the term, for example:</p> <p><i>From housing, mental health and finances to courses dealing with issues like escaping domestic abuse or anger management techniques, we take an approach that encompasses all aspects of a woman's life.</i></p>
Trauma-informed	<p>Explain the term, for example:</p> <p><i>We treat everyone as an individual and tailor our support to them ensuring that it takes into account their specific experiences and trauma</i></p>
Substance misuse	<p>Be specific and clear. For example:</p> <p><i>Often women may turn to drugs or alcohol to cope with trauma and abuse</i></p>

Repeat, repeat, repeat

There is power in repetition. That is why politicians continually repeat terms they want to be effective, like ‘personal responsibility’ or ‘tough on crime’.

We can use the power of repetition and if we are consistent we can **boost our collective power**. This does not mean all using the same words. Think singing from the same hymn book instead of the same hymn sheet. For example a series of organisations below have talked, in their own way, about supporting the potential of women.

Step three: Make it easy for people to care

As well as understanding us, we need people to care about the women we work with. We do that by drawing out why our work matters. By placing the focus of our story on why it matters we can help more people to care. There are a few different routes that work well with the stories we tell.

Only use one at a time to help your audience connect with the topic.

1. Show how suggested changes will have a positive impact for us all

The way the criminal justice system operates has wide-reaching consequences for us all. It is helpful if you can highlight how investing in community alternatives, including Women's Centres, can benefit us all and help move society forward. If women are not sent to prison but stay in their community they can address the root causes of their offending and make permanent changes in their own and their children's lives, that way they can contribute to their community.



Working Chance @WorkingChance · Jul 8, 2021

The @MoJGovUK has identified sites for the planned 500 new prison places for women. The evidence says this is not the most effective solution for women, who are better supported in the community. insidetime.org/sites-for-500-...

Read our statement #StopThe500:

2. Highlight the importance of supporting women's potential


If people are to reach their potential they need the tools to help them do this. In a criminal justice context this means giving someone the support they need to stop them being swept up into the criminal justice system or help to pull them out.

“We believe that all women and girls have the right to reach their potential and to live their lives free from poverty and violence.”

New Dawn, New Day

3. Highlight the ways suggested changes are sensible and work Focusing on a practical and pragmatic solution to a problem can be really effective. If people can visualise and understand how something can easily be addressed it can help bring them with you. Paint the picture for them.

A screenshot of a tweet from The Howard League. The tweet text is: "Women's centres can achieve what prisons cannot – working with other organisations in the community to turn lives around and reduce crime. It is essential that they are properly funded to continue this success." - @francescrook. The tweet is enclosed in a thin orange border. The background of the page features a large, light grey abstract shape on the right side.

 **The Howard League**  @TheHowardLeague · Jun 27, 2018 

“**Women’s centres can achieve what prisons cannot** – working with other organisations in the community to turn lives around and reduce crime. It is essential that they are properly funded to continue this success.” - [@francescrook](#)

Step four: remove the space to be sceptical

Whenever we are working to win people over on a topic, we have to ensure we show the full story. So far we've helped people to understand and care about our work. Now we need to ensure there are no gaps that may cause them to doubt us. That means ensuring our stories paint a clear picture for our audience. We can do that in a few ways.

Powerful Facts

Numbers or facts alone will not change minds. Their role is to help you to prove your point. One or two clear facts can clarify your position. Use them sparingly. One powerful fact, will resonate far more than five or six stats.



19 in 20 children have to leave their home when their mother goes to prison

Personal Stories

A human story, can deepen empathy and understanding. This can be about one person or a composite of different people's experiences. The key is to ensure you are telling the story (whether your own or someone else's) to highlight the bigger picture of what the issues are, instead of honing in on the experience in isolation. This will help people to understand how wider systemic or societal issues can impact what happens in an individual's life and help audiences to recognise that this experience is not just a one-off or the result of the individual's personal choices.

Sandwich the personal story around a reason why your audience should care and a solution to the systemic issues to ensure other women don't face the same experience.

It helps to use language that reminds your audience this isn't an isolated case and that there is a problem with the system that needs resolving too. For example:

- Janelle, like many other women...
- So many people are affected by this...
- The system restricted Kate's options...

If it is not your own story and the people you work with want their story out there, supporting them to tell their story in a way that feels comfortable and safe is vital. You could work with them to write something or transcribe what they tell you and use their direct quotes. Short video or audio clips can also be very effective.

It is really important that you gain informed consent before sharing anyone's story.

Don't forget context. It's easy to zoom in on activity with personal stories, but context is key.



Anawim Birmingham's Centre for W... @Anawim_... · May 24, 2022 ...
"My world had fallen apart and now I was in prison"

Mental ill-health contributes to and is exacerbated by women's experience of the criminal justice system. It's a vicious cycle.

Supporting women in the community is fairer and more effective.

Metaphors

Metaphors work. They help people to visualize the topic you are discussing, they also make it easier to dodge some of our big hurdles. There are two we've found land well when we talk about our work. They can feel a bit awkward at first, so our tip is to practice with colleagues and test on family or friends. Once you crack them they are one of the strongest tools you can reach for when trying to win people over.

Metaphor one: a current

Encourage people to think of the criminal justice system as a body of water with a current that people are swept into with little control, and are sometimes unable to escape. This makes it easier to think about the context that leads to crime being committed.



Women in Prison @WIP_live · Nov 20, 2021



“**Prison is a dead-end** that will never be able to meet people’s mental health needs. Women who are severely unwell are being locked away simply because there aren’t enough beds in mental health facilities.”

Metaphor two: a dead end

This is the easiest metaphor to use. We know that prisons cause harm to women and families- serving a prison sentence can tear you away from your children and family and remove you from the support you have in your community. We can help people to see prison as a dead end and something that will be no benefit to the woman serving the sentence, her family and children or the wider community.



Women in Prison @WIP_live · Jan 27, 2022



It doesn't have to be like this, **when women are supported in the community** they can tackle the issues that sweep them into crime like domestic abuse & ill mental health.

This is why the Govt can & must [#StopThe500](#) planned women prison places & invest in local services instead.



Step five: Put the pieces together to build a story

Telling a story is vital. Whether it's the six o'clock news or round the dinner table we all know that it's not just what we say but how we say it can change the way a story is listened to.

This is the same with shaping our stories at work. We need to place our focus on helping people to care whilst explaining the situation and showing sensible solutions to issues. Think of it as your story sandwich. You need all three pieces for it to work well, which we've explored in our earlier steps.



We can see the story sandwich in action here:



Roma Hooper OBE @RomaHooper · May 4, 2022

...

Prison is a dead end. There is no doubt that community solutions are the answer. Surely the government should be focusing on what works - not what doesn't work.

Our top tips

The techniques outlined in this guide need practice to perfect - so give it a go and don't worry if it is hard at first! The checklist below should help guide you through the process.

1. Dodge the hurdles that can hurt progress:
 - Calculated decision making
 - Fatalism
 - 'They' are different to 'me'
 - You can't put a price on safety
2. Be accessible and clear to help your audience to understand
3. Make it easy for people to care
4. Remove the space to be sceptical by showing them:
 - a. Why it matters
 - b. How it works
 - c. How it can improve
5. Use visual and clear language like:
 - a. "Prison is a dead end, one that tears families apart"
 - b. "Women are swept up into the criminal justice system"
 - c. "This can change. Women's Centres and specialist services provide the support for women to address the issues that sweep her into crime."

Other guides to explore

- Transform Justice- 'Reframing crime and justice: a guide to improving communications'
[TJ_Framing_Toolkit_WEB4.pdf \(transformjustice.org.uk\)](#)
- Crisis- 'Talking about homelessness' [crisis-framing-toolkit-july-2020-update.pdf](#)
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation- 'Talking about poverty' [Framing toolkit: Talking about poverty | JRF](#)