

Talking about Immigrants and the Criminal Justice System

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Tips

- ▶ **Talk about the values that should guide our criminal justice system.** We want to make sure that people receive equal treatment, that policies keep our communities safe, and that our laws follow common sense while also upholding our values.
- ▶ **Outline how current policies are failing us.** Be specific in pointing out which policies need to change and who needs to change them. Vague criticisms of the “system” can make the problems with it seem insurmountable.
- ▶ **Avoid myth busting.** Repeating untruths, even in order to refute them, only serves to bolster their staying power in audiences’ minds. Instead, focus on the truth.
- ▶ **Put forward an affirmative solution.** Don’t just say what we shouldn’t be doing, give audiences ideas about what will prevent future tragedies.
- ▶ **Acknowledge the need for people to be held accountable when they have made mistakes.** While many people are caught up unfairly in the criminal justice system, we need to acknowledge that there still has to be a fair and reasonable plan for those who have made mistakes, or even committed serious crimes, to move forward.

Sample Language

Value

We all make mistakes. But most Americans believe that people deserve a second chance, and that most mistakes shouldn’t be allowed to ruin our lives, and the lives of everyone around us.

Problem

But our criminal justice system *does* ruin the lives of many immigrants who come into contact it. Even if you’ve lived here for years, you can be deported if you’ve been accused of a low-level offense like shoplifting. Many immigrants in the system don’t get access to lawyers, and thousands are detained for indefinite amounts of time with no hearing. There’s no question that we all should be held accountable for our actions, but removal from the country or indefinite detention is a clear example of the punishment simply not fitting the crime.

Solution

We need to re-examine how our justice system treats everyone here, and align that with the values we hold dear. We need a fair system that makes sure we don't punish people without a hearing or access to lawyers. Those rights are central to our values.

Action

We need to fix our flawed criminal justice system.

Talking about Immigrants Convicted of Serious Offenses**Value**

Our policies should reflect our core values: equality, fairness, and accountability. Aligning our policies to those values is crucial if they are to survive and prosper.

Problem

But our criminal justice policies currently don't reflect those values. Our laws treat immigrants who have been convicted of any crime very differently than others here, with an entirely different set of laws and a wholly different level of respect for rights. That distorts our notions of fairness and equal treatment. People certainly need to be held accountable for their actions, there's no question about that. But having two sets of laws creates confusion, breeds unfairness, and isn't in line with our values.

Solution

We need to re-examine our laws and how we treat immigrants in our justice system, and align them with the values we hold dear.

Action

We need to fix our flawed justice system.

For more ideas on talking immigration issues, visit www.opportunityagenda.org.