

Shifting narratives about gangs and gang harm

Changing how we talk about gangs and gang harm can deepen people's understanding and build support for policies, practices and structures that will reduce gang harm and improve wellbeing for all communities. Using the science of narrative and mindset shift, we can contribute to a future where gangs are just part of our communities in which people can live their lives, care for whānau and fulfil their aspirations.

This memo offers insights we as experts, advocates, and communicators, can use to amplify certain narratives, or patterns of meaning in our communication. By using specific frames, values, metaphors, simple explanations and stories we can divert people away from unhelpful shared mindsets, or ways of rationalising about the issue, while pointing them towards more helpful ones.

This helps create an information environment in which people are able to understand and think about gangs and gang harm in accurate and rational ways. In turn, this creates the conditions in which good evidence and solutions based on that evidence have a better chance of being understood and supported.

Shared mindsets

Shared mindsets are cultural ways of reasoning about, and understanding how and why issues come about and what should be done about them. They shape people's responses to information and the policies and practices they are willing to support.



Shared narratives

Narratives are a pattern of meaning present in our communications — like a golden thread weaving through them. The pattern of meaning reflects shared deep mindsets. Narratives have core values — our core human motivations — nested within them.



Stories

Stories are different tales about particular events and people that appear in different forms across our information environment. At the heart of many stories are shared narratives. Many stories together contribute to building and amplifying specific narratives.



What experts want people to understand about gang communities and harm

To develop this memo we interviewed experts on gang communities and gang harm at the Gang Harm Insights Centre¹ to uncover what experts want people to understand.

That people get important needs met in gang communities, including belonging

Experts want people to understand that gang communities offer people a sense of belonging, which is a core human need. Gang communities support their members and whānau in many ways and offer wide networks of peers, and connections around the country. Gang communities are whānau to their members — they are people's brothers, sisters, uncles. People in gangs have dreams and aspirations like everyone: they want self-determination, they want their whānau to thrive.

The origin of gangs and the reasons people join gang communities

Experts want people to understand that gangs came about in response to cultural loss, and they offered and continue to offer reconnection. Gangs are communities formed to support one another where society and the State failed people. The 'system' and the State have contributed to the establishment of gangs and gang members and their ancestors and whānau have experienced significant harm. Gang members are experiencing harm — 50% are victims of family violence. Experts want people to understand that people in gang communities are united by shared experiences of poverty, deprivation, violence, neglect and discrimination, including by the State. People in gang communities share history and experiences.

How stigma towards gangs causes more exclusion and harm

Experts want people to understand that stigma leads to exclusion and exclusion leads to social harms (housing, education, employment, health care), which leads to a lack of opportunities and understanding, in turn leading to more stigma.

That gang communities are the experts on reducing gang harm

Experts want people to understand that the solutions to reduce harm in gang communities lie in recognising the expertise that people in gang communities have about the needs of their communities and in trusting gang whānau. They want people to understand the need for more trusting relationships between government agencies and gang communities. They want people to understand the need for the Government to support and fund gang communities to solve the problems in their own communities. Experts want people to support gang communities to achieve their aspirations for thriving whānau.

1. The Gang Harm Insights Centre (GHIC) is a multi-agency team focused on delivering holistic, actionable, and timely insights, enabling agencies to empower communities in making a difference to gang-related harm. Highlighting the voices and experiences of our gang communities strengthens our understanding of the harm occurring by, to, and within the community and ensures agencies can support and enable gang communities to implement and create lasting positive outcomes for whānau.

Amplify these helpful narrative ideas across your stories and message.

✓ **A strength-based narrative:**

This narrative draws out the positive by emphasising people's strengths, especially the strengths they have because of their culture, their lived experiences, and their community. This narrative is most helpful when it focuses on the specific insights and expertise that people in gang communities have about how to reduce harm in their communities.

✓ **(Unfair) Systems narrative — the whakapapa of gangs:**

This narrative draws attention to how systems shape people's experiences and mindsets. It is helpful for explaining how systemic discrimination and violence — such as the history of abuse in state care — has dislocated people from their community and causes harm.

✓ **People are the reason:**

This narrative is about how we all share intrinsic values and motivations — like the desire to care and love for people, and the desire to belong. It highlights that for many people, gangs are whānau — that people join gangs for a sense of community and a place to belong.

✓ **Better together narrative:**

This is a narrative about collectivism and the shared benefit of working together. This narrative shows us that we can work together with gangs and gang members to achieve things that are good for everyone.

Avoid these unhelpful narratives

✗ **Us-vs-Them:**

This is the idea that we exist in zero-sum competition: that more for you means less for me. It positions gangs as 'against' the broader community and people who aren't in gangs. This is the most common unhelpful narrative in the conversation about gang harm. This sometimes presents as a 'culture of crime' narrative, the idea that some families and communities are inherently criminal.

✗ **Individualism:**

This is the idea that through individual effort and choice we make our own destiny. Solutions to most problems are presented as individual choice. This feeds into the narrative that people in gangs are 'inherently bad' or have made bad choices.

✗ **Fatalism:**

This is the idea that most of the problems we face aren't addressable, or changeable in a meaningful way given their scope and depth. Fatalism is present in the narrative that gangs are 'inherently bad' or corrupt.

✗ **Money is the reason:**

This is the idea that making money is what motivates people — that people join gangs because they want to make money and get rich through crime. It also shows up in the narrative that money is the reason we need to address gang harm because gang harm is costly to our economy.

✗ **One way of knowing:**

This is the idea that there is one way of knowing. The type of knowing emphasised in this narrative will be the way of knowing valued in dominant power structures. This will often show up as the assumption that only certain kinds of technical expertise and official knowledge can be used to minimise gang harm.

How to amplify a strengths-based narrative

- Lead with a vision that emphasises people’s strengths, especially the strengths people have because of their culture, community, or lived experience
- Highlight how people can be leaders by drawing on their knowledge and experiences, especially those experiences and forms of knowledge that they share with their communities
- Celebrate the unique contributions people can make to solving problems
- Engage the intrinsic values that we know are widely shared, such as love for family, enabling people to fulfil their potential, and pragmatism
- Amplify existing strength-based narratives by Māori and other indigenous peoples. We see strengths-based narratives a lot in te ao Māori and in the context of other indigenous peoples’ communication and storytelling. Indigenous communities are leaders in using these kinds of strengths-based narratives, and in encouraging others to use them too

This can sound like:

- » “NZ ‘P’ Pull” is not a service. It’s a community-initiated movement run by people with direct experience who have amassed practical expertise in how to support people dealing with the impacts of P. This approach means that many people feel safer and more open to come along.’ – David Hanna - Wesley Community Action.²

Avoid deficit and problem-led narratives

Avoid leading with ‘deficits’ and problems. These narratives suggest that certain kinds of people lack the ability to succeed or make change. This can lead to a sense of fatalism — a feeling that the barriers are too high and our problems can’t be solved

- Sometimes deficit narratives can look like they are sympathetic to underprivileged or marginalised groups because they acknowledge a group’s lack of privilege. But these deficit narratives rob people of their agency and ignore the value of their knowledge and experiences
- Avoid fatalistic narratives. These tell us that the circumstances are hopeless, that inequity is too entrenched and pervasive to allow for change, or that other people will never find a way to support the necessary change

². David Hannah, ‘Q&A: David Hanna’. Drug Foundation. September 2020, <https://www.drugfoundation.org.nz/matters-of-substance/archive/august-2020/q-and-a-david-hanna/>.

How to amplify a systems narrative – the whakapapa of gangs

- Draw attention to how systems shape people’s experiences and mindsets. Explain the system drivers that dislocate people from their community and cause harm
- Include stories about the role of the State and systemic harm in the origins of gangs — for example, the history of abuse in state care, dislocation from family, community, and land, poverty, etc.
- Direct our gaze towards the systems that need to change, and move us away from thinking we can address social problems with individual behaviour change
- Lead with a vision of a fairer system
- Use simple explanations — about systemic racism, or the history of State harm, for instance — to explain how system drivers have caused harm
- Use helpful metaphors. Good metaphors for systems narratives might include weighted scales, the idea of certain groups being ‘locked out’ of opportunity, ‘locked in’ to inequitable conditions, or ‘constrained’ by current systems

This can sound like:

- » Talking about ‘systemic racism’
- » Describing entrenched economic and social inequality
- » Using helpful metaphors, such as ‘too many young people are being swept into our criminal justice system’, and ‘people in gang communities are locked out of opportunities for housing and work’.
- » ‘People found support and belonging in gangs, which they never did in other places...Certainly they didn’t find it in the so-called care settings by those who were supposed to be caring for them.’
– Commissioner Paul Gibson, from the Royal Commission.³
- » ‘Gangs and poverty are entwined. Gangs and colonisation are entwined. Gangs and abuse in state care are entwined. Gangs and sky-high incarceration rates are entwined.’ – Joel Maxwell.⁴

Avoid individualistic narratives

- Avoid talking about people’s lives and conditions improving because individuals chose to change their behaviour. This is an individualistic narrative that tells us people’s lives are entirely determined by their own efforts — by their hard work, for instance
- Individualistic narratives hide the role that systems play in shaping people’s lives. They suggest that circumstances don’t play a role in determining opportunity, and that communities that are struggling must be lazy or inadequate, or simply not taking advantage of the opportunities they’re presented with

3. Commissioner Paul Gibson in article by Olivia Shivas. ‘Disabled gang members, abused by state, found welcoming whānau in life of crime. Stuff. February 2023, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/pou-tiaki/131282484/disabled-gang-members-abused-by-state-found-welcoming-whnau-in-life-of-crime>.

4. Joel Maxwell. ‘Gangs are the result of many problems. Being Māori is not one of them. Stuff. June 2023, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/opinion/300908738/gangs-are-the-result-of-many-problems--being-mori-is-not-one-of-them?cid=app-iphone>.

How to amplify a ‘people are the reason’ narrative

- Show how we all share intrinsic values and motivations — like the desire to care and love for people and the desire to belong
- Highlight that for many people, gangs are whānau — that people join gangs for a sense of community and a place to belong
- Explain there are people on all sides of harm: victims are people and more than political fodder and gang members are people, too
- Engage with intrinsic values of care and belonging. In Aotearoa, most people say they value benevolence, universalism, and self-direction. Our job is to remind people that most of us share these collective wellbeing values, and we can use them to bring about change

This can sound like:

- » Stories of people finding community and whānau in gangs
- » ‘Some disabled Kiwis, desperate to belong, found community with gangs after being failed by the state care system.’ – Olivia Shivas⁵
- » ‘Respect and aroha brings down any wall... There’s more people coming together to help, to contribute to this kaupapa. And again, aroha and respect has been at the forefront and at the centre of this kaupapa. Since the beginning. Simply to give back to the community. To our community.’ - T.K.⁶

Avoid ‘money’ is the reason narratives

- ‘Money is the reason’ narratives suggest that people join gangs because they want to make money and be a part of a criminal enterprise. They frame gangs as only criminal enterprises.
- Avoid using ‘cost to our economy’ as the reason people should care about or take action to reduce gang harm.

5. Olivia Shivas. ‘Disabled gang members, abused by state, found welcoming whānau in life of crime. Stuff. February 2023.

6. T.K. Mana Atua – Black Power Community Outreach. Fantail Studios. Youtube. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmUZLICKQmk>.

Values

Values are our deepest human motivations — our ‘why’ of life. Values are distinct from attributed value (a term often used in relation to people’s preference). We all hold a broad range of values. At a subconscious level, values act as a filter for the information that we receive. They provide a frame to ask ‘how do I interpret this information in the context of what I am deeply motivated by (my values)?’

Intrinsic values

Benevolence values: The group of values that relate to being motivated by the preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in close or frequent personal contact. It includes values like mature love, forgiveness, helpfulness and responsibility.

Universalism values: The group of values that relate to being motivated by understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature. It includes values like broadmindedness, social justice, peace, equity/equality and harmony with nature.

Self-Direction values: The group of values that related to being motivated by independent thought and action — choosing, creating, and exploring - collectively as well as individually. It includes values like curiosity, creativity, freedom, independence and the ability to choose and pursue one’s own goals.

How to amplify a better together narrative

- Show collectivism and the shared benefit of working together — together we achieve things that are good for everyone
- Highlight that gangs are part of the community, and the community — including all of us — wants to do better and thrive
- Lead with a vision of the community working together to achieve good things for everyone
- Highlight the responsibilities we have to people in our communities who have been harmed — for instance, our community responsibility towards people who have come into gangs as a consequence of systematic injustice
- Emphasise our shared intrinsic values of pragmatism, care, belonging, and solidarity
- Use better together narratives with strength-based narratives, highlighting how the unique strengths of a group can be used to benefit everyone in the community
- Amplify the voices of people already working for better in their communities

This can sound like:

- » ‘There are benefits that constructive partnerships and collaboration bring to any challenge. We can always achieve more when we work together and respect and value diverse experiences, knowledge and ways of doing things. Te Tiriti provides a framework for doing just that.’ – Dr. Carwyn Jones.⁷
- » Discussing a Mongrel Mob initiative that provides classes on the road code for people wanting their driver’s licence: ‘It means a lot because it helps all of us, really... it’s not just the brothers, you know it’s the sisters and anybody, anybody that’s in the community that needs help to go for their licences.’ – Te Karere, TVNZ⁸

Avoid ‘Us vs Them’ narratives

- Better together narratives counter the ‘us vs them’ narrative that tries to divide people by whether or not they are a member of a gang
- Avoid engaging fear as a reason to take action on crime
- Avoid the ‘culture of crime’ narrative — the racist and classist narrative that some communities are more disposed to violence and crime. This can sound like:
 - » “10% of families take 50% of the resources”
 - » “90% of crimes are committed by people from X families”
 - » “Some families are just broken”

7. Carwyn Jones. ‘Climate change? Recession? Pollution? There’s a Treaty solution for that.’ Stuff. February 2023, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/opinion/131131462/climate-change-recession-pollution-theres-a-treaty-solution-for-that?cid=app-iphone>.

8. ‘Mongrel Mob members open new chapter within the road code.’ Te Karere TVNZ. Youtube. June 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOgm7rkEayU>.

- Avoid the ‘us vs them’ narrative that gangs are ‘against’ and outside of communities, rather than part of them
 - Avoid narratives that say we need to ‘get tough’ on gangs
 - Avoid rise-in-crime narratives that frame gangs as ‘against’ police
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A note about messengers

Choosing the right messengers is core to whether people will connect with your stories or not.

Trust and credibility are important factors in a messenger. Appealing to formal experts as trustworthy will only work for some people. It is important to use messengers with shared values to your target audience. It’s also important that your messengers are equipped with a helpful narrative — they can’t just say anything.

Unexpected messengers can be powerful. So can intergenerational messengers.

When talking about reducing gang harm and crime and justice more broadly, there are many people who have helpful narratives to share, and are already sharing them. Some examples are:

- Survivors of crime who advocate for criminal justice system reform.⁹
 - Merepeka Rauwaka-Tait talking about Sir Robert Muldoon’s collaboration with gangs.¹⁰
 - A victims advocate for solutions that work for everyone (pragmatism value).¹¹
 - Social worker and Black Power member Eugene Ryder on preventing domestic violence.¹²
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About this memo

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9. Alliance for Safety and Justice. ‘Crime Survivors Speak. The First-Ever National Survey of Victims’ Views on Safety and Justice.’ Alliance for Safety and Justice. <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/crimesurvivorsspeak/>.

10. Merepeka Rauwaka-Tait. ‘Merepeka Rauwaka-Tait: Sir Robert Muldoon had the right idea when it came to gangs. NZ Herald. June 2023, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/rotorua-daily-post/news/merepeka-raukawa-tait-muldoon-had-the-right-idea-when-it-came-to-gangs/OESI0D4BWRA2TFBSR7W7UVV5LI/>.

11. Ruth Money in article by Michael Neilson and Chris Knox. NZ Herald. June 2023, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/politics/crime-in-nz-the-facts-from-ram-raids-to-prosecutions-and-convictions/DZUEOSV24FAMHLZ4HHBSNSE6YM/?ref=readmore>.

12. Eugene Ryder in article by Donna-Lee Biddle. ‘Social worker and Black Power member Eugene Ryder talks about the impact of domestic violence.’ Stuff. July 2018, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/105626663/social-worker-and-black-power-member-eugene-ryder-talks-about-the-impact-of-domestic-violence>.

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