

# BEYOND THE EASIEST CASES

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Greisa Martinez Rosas and Matt Desmond



REIMAGINE JUSTICE

When you turn on the news, “easiest case” narratives abound about those involved in the criminal legal or immigration systems: simplistic stories of a “villain” or a “hero,” intended to make an uncomplicated point. Often times, these narratives are used to make generalizations about a certain group of people—for example, a crime committed by an undocumented immigrant will typify the “criminality” of undocumented immigrants. It may be tempting to try to reverse this by painting undocumented immigrants in a singularly positive light—like many have done with Dreamers—but more oversimplification misses the point. Stories like this not only risk dehumanizing people by failing to recognize their full personhood, with all the good and bad involved; they are also ripe for critique when the capricious winds of politics or public opinion blow in a new direction.

Instead, stories must be reoriented to prioritize a full telling of personhood, complicating easiest cases.

The authors posit the following framework for shaping new, transformational justice stories that can contribute to foundational, sustainable change:

### 1. Question the terms of the debate.

If we offer the mirror images of negative stereotypes, we bind ourselves within a narrative frame that was employed to motivate repressive policies. New narratives for criminal-legal and immigration reform should avoid supplying new answers to the same questions.

### 2. Tell personal accounts.

People closest to the problem are closest to the solution. Those who have direct experience with justice and immigration systems should play key leadership roles in developing and deploying new narrative strategies.

### 3. Target norms not beliefs.

Leveraging empathy is often unsustainable—fury at inhumanity often dissipates when the news stops its around-the-clock coverage. Instead of provoking people to change personal beliefs, alter perceptions of social norms.

### 4. Collaborate on reform movements and reform narratives.

The criminal legal and immigration systems are only becoming more intertwined with increasing militarization of the border and police. Use new narratives to increase collaboration among advocacy movements and build collective political power.

### 5. Base civil inclusion on shared values.

Telling stories about individual moralism shifts focus away from systems committing harm en masse. Base justice narratives on a set of shared values to push forward aspirational justice policy.

### 6. Ask more of each other.

Typical justice narratives respond to fear, moral panic, and violence. Demand that the public has a higher tolerance for moral lapses, and extend grace to those who have done harm. □