

Improving Policy Narratives for Young Black Workers



This collection of 13 messaging principles was developed from insights from a task force of 11 young Black workers, focus groups, and a thorough media analysis. These recommendations shed light on how educational systems, labor market institutions, and policy frameworks have failed young Black workers' transitions into the labor force. These messaging principles will help stakeholders including journalists, advocates, funders, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers better address issues facing young Black workers in today's economy.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

1

Address the connections between racial divisions and economic hardship.

Young Black people and Black communities are not vulnerable — they are strong, resilient communities who have been targeted, attacked, exploited, and systematically blocked from resources and opportunities.

Example: Systemic racism, unchecked greed, and decades of disinvestment have created an economy that fails young Black workers and everyday Americans, leaving many behind.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

2

Unite under the notion that racism is a tool to divide us all.

Acknowledge the ways racism is embedded — both historically and currently — in American policy and other systems. Name racial scapegoating or deliberate division as a tool villains use to profit, harming us all.

Example: The cost of college began to rise quickly in the 1970s — the decade after the Civil Rights Act prohibited racial discrimination in education. Over the next several decades, a system designed to keep people of color out of schools grew to impact anyone who is not wealthy, regardless of their race.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

3

Explicitly connect racial and economic justice.

Reiterating the interconnectedness of racial and economic justice helps people see that to build economic power for young Black people, we have to tackle both.

Example: Capitalism is fueled by a myth of scarcity — a story that there are not enough resources for everyone — which leads to employment and economic policies that harm young Black workers.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

4

Trace the history of systemic injustice and connect individual stories to systemic injustice rather than blaming individuals.

When announcing new data or new statistics about young Black workers, tell the story of how our economic systems came about as a result of racism, and a history of exclusion, discrimination, and disinvestment.

Example: America was founded on a dream of freedom, but only the few have been able to realize our country's full promise.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

5

Lead with shared values.

Shared values are points of agreement among different audiences and shared goals will resonate with target audiences, tap into their emotions, and motivate them to act.

Example: We all deserve equal access to opportunity so we can live safe, stable, thriving lives; that includes Black youth.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

6

Contextualize the problems facing young Black workers.

The challenges that young Black workers navigate are a threat to shared values and shared prosperity because of structural racism.

Example: Even young Black workers who mastered the rules of the game are still cheated out of the American Dream.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

7

Define villains or economic bad actors who have led to the current conditions faced by young Black workers.

Be specific about the actions villains who hurt everyday people and our economic well-being.

Example: Elites have built the structures of our institutions, policymaking, and systems on the theft and abuse of Black people. They shape who has upward mobility, who can generate wealth, who is valuable, and who is expendable.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

8

Tell stories that promote system level change, rather than individual-level change.

Use individual stories as windows into greater societal challenges. Make connections between the systems that people must navigate and the difficult choices they have to make because of it.

Example: Why Black Workers in NYC Are Unemployed at Critical Levels — and What Can Be Done

MESSAGING ELEMENT

9

Tie policy solutions to shared prosperity.

Emphasize how policies that empower and materially support young Black workers benefit everyone in order to boost broad support.

Example: In the wealthiest nation in the world, there are no failed people — only failed systems.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

10

Focus on asset-based framing.

When referring to young Black people (as well poor people and working families), talk about all the ways they contribute to our economy and communities.

Example: Investing in young Black people is an investment in our collective future.

MESSAGING ELEMENT

11

Offer well-rounded portraits of young Black people in every group and social background.

Show the complexity of their character outside of their paid labor, the range of emotions they experience, the scope of their ambitions, and the richness of their relationships to destigmatize them, humanize the issue, and build empathy.

Example: "Everyone isn't going to be a doctor or an attorney, but they went to school, they have a good job, and they're still impacting people; I feel like we always bring up Black excellence, but we never just let ourselves be [regular]."

MESSAGING ELEMENT

12

Include the voices of those closest to the problem.

Look for ways to make space for young Black people to speak.

Example: "I have tattoos, I have my nose pierced, but that doesn't mean I can't get the job done. Just because I wear box braids doesn't mean I can't get the job done."

MESSAGING ELEMENT

13

Focus on the stories of young Black workers, not just the numbers.

Humanize widespread social problems by putting faces, names, and stories to them. Statistics are useful for demonstrating the prevalence of a problem, but stories are what trigger empathy, cooperation, and memory and move people to address the problem.

Example: Remote work gave them a reprieve from racism. They don't want to go back.

RESOURCES

The elements in this guide draw from resources and guidance developed by:

1. Community Change.
2. Color of Change.
3. FrameWorks Institute.
4. Insight Center.
5. The Opportunity Agenda.
6. Race-Class Narrative Project.
7. Radical Communicators Network.
8. Winning Jobs Narrative Project.