



Talking Human Rights in the United States

Core Message: *It is better for everyone to live in a society that pays attention to human rights, rather than one that ignores human rights.*

Our research shows that the American public is ready to hear more about upholding and promoting human rights at home. Americans hold a clear and positive concept of human rights and place social justice issues in a human rights framework—including economic and social rights. However, this understanding of and support for human rights is not rooted in treaties and does not translate to urgency in moving forward with an explicit human rights agenda. To build a case for doing so, we recommend that advocates both connect human rights to familiar and core values and make the case for a human rights approach with concrete examples of how using such a framework can have a positive and concrete effect on people’s lives.

Themes to Guide Message Development

- **Lead with values.** Fairness, dignity and opportunity, and pride in America’s heritage and founding principles, were ranked highly by all audiences as a reason why human rights are important. Connect human rights issues to these values, drawing particularly on American experiences and history and our continuing struggle to make our founding ideals a reality.
- **Begin with supportive audiences and work outward.** See the “Identifying Target Audiences” section of this toolkit for more ideas on this strategy.
- **Emphasize consensus issues to introduce the idea of human rights generally.** Equal opportunity, freedom from torture, education, and health care are each widely accepted as human rights.
- **Start conversations with the goal—upholding human rights—rather than the process.** Audiences have almost no knowledge of treaties and mechanisms and care less about their existence than they do about the conditions such vehicles are meant to address.
- **Then move to specific examples.** This will illustrate the effectiveness of thinking about social justice issues through a human rights lens. Audiences do not immediately see the implication of viewing an issue as a human right and are likely to view human rights merely as inspiring ideals without concrete examples of their impact.

Specific Challenges and Opportunities

- **Concern about the role of government.** Many audiences are concerned about the ability and propriety of government providing for certain rights, such as health care and education, and view it as a protector. It’s important to point out cases in which the government has successfully upheld social and economic rights, such as in the instances of Social Security and Medicare.

- **Concern about “personal responsibility.”** People are often preoccupied by the idea that too much government assistance removes personal ambition and responsibility. To balance this concern, focus on instances in which we all need to work together for solutions and where policy is a better answer than telling people to figure things out on their own. For the audiences receptive to human rights arguments, health care is a good place to start.

Social Justice Issues and Human Rights at a Glance

Belden Russonello & Stewart developed the following chart to provide guidance around how to promote different social justice issues effectively through a human rights lens.

Issues	Human Rights Framework
Treaties	It is better for everyone to live in a society that pays attention to human rights, rather than one that ignores human rights. Human rights treaties provide tools to help ensure the basic rights of all people are upheld.
Health Care	Health care, as a public good, is as essential as food and water and no one should have to go without this basic human right.
Juvenile Life Without Parole	The opportunity for rehabilitation is a human right that should be upheld for young people who commit crimes.
Racial Profiling	Racial profiling violates the human rights to fair treatment and freedom from discrimination and violates American values of fairness and justice.
Due Process	American values of justice and fairness stand strong only when we uphold the human right to due process.
Immigrant Issues General (framework should be used cautiously with selected issues)	We need workable solutions to immigration that uphold our nation’s values and allow people who contribute and participate to live in the country legally with their human rights protected.