

#DontLookAway

Talking about issues highlighted by Usher's song and video "Chains"

Usher's new song and interactive video experience, "Chains," are powerful statements on racial injustice and police violence. Together, they offer an important platform and news hook to build support and push for change. To maximize the impact of these compelling artistic works, this memo suggests ways of talking about the works' themes, which can inspire supporters, persuade skeptical audiences, and counter opponents.

Sample Messages

We recommend framing messages in terms of Value, Problem, Solution, and Action. For example:

"Usher's new song and video are a powerful call for equal justice and police reform that echoes the hopes and aspirations of millions of people around the country. We need to work together to answer that call."

Value: "Our justice system is supposed to keep all communities safe and treat all people fairly—to give everyone equal justice."

Problem: "But there are too many cities and towns across the country where that's just not the reality. In too many places, police officers are carrying dangerous stereotypes, violent tactics and, sometimes, tanks and military weapons. That's bad for everyone, and for our nation."

Solution: "The good news is that there's a lot our country can do to protect equal justice and safety for everyone. We have to challenge the stereotypes that we all carry with us, sometimes without even realizing it. This is especially true when police hold the power to determine the freedom, life, and death of so many black Americans.

"What's making a difference when it comes to police bias and violence is better training, better information, real accountability for police abuse, and working to revitalize and support communities instead of just policing them. Young people, especially, have to be part of the conversation and part of the solution. Where that happens, it saves lives and builds stronger communities."

Action: "Contact your police department to make sure they are using proper training, accountability, and community policing." OR "Sign the ColorofChange.org petition to create a federal database of police killings: <http://act.colorofchange.org/sign/policeforcedatabase/>"

Additional Messages

- **The problem is widespread across our country.** In too many places, police are more likely to stop, search, and detain people of color than white people in the exact same circumstances. They are more likely to use excessive force and to shoot and kill unnecessarily, yet they are far less likely to be held accountable for their actions.
- **We all need equal justice and freedom from police violence.** That means both universal protections and addressing the particular types of discrimination and violence facing men and women of color, transgender people, immigrants, and other communities.
- **We know how to fix this.** Experts and experience around the country point to concrete policies that can serve and protect all people and communities.

- **Racial profiling harms all Americans.** It violates the American value of equal justice that we all depend on. It disrespects and discriminates against millions of young people and others around the country. It threatens public safety and can ruin people’s lives. It’s time to end racial profiling and focus law enforcement on evidence and public safety.
- **We need effective community policing that upholds equal justice and protects public safety.** Police departments need training, rules, and oversight to avoid racial stereotyping. Congress must pass the End Racial Profiling Act to ensure fair and effective law enforcement that serves all Americans.
- Sample Tweet: “New @Usher song #CHAINS a call to end police violence and discrimination. Take action by... <http://chains.tidal.com/>”
- Sample Tweet: “Look in the eyes of victims of racial injustice and hear #CHAINS by @Usher @Nas @BibiBourelly_ #DontLookAway <http://chains.tidal.com/>”

Suggested Answers to Frequent Questions about Usher’s Song “Chains”

Q: The song includes the refrain “light it on fire.” Isn’t that likely to incite violence of the kind we’ve seen in cities around the country?

A: “Light it on fire” is a call to shine a light on what’s happening and propel our leaders to take action. It’s the torch being passed to a new generation of young activists who are calling for peace and justice. The refrain “light it on fire” embraces all of those ideas.

Q: #BlackLivesMatter activists have criticized people like Martin O’Malley for using the phrase “All Lives Matter.” Do you think “All Lives Matter” is a racist term, or do you embrace it?

A: This is a human rights issue. Because everyone’s life is precious *and* because it’s black lives that are most at risk of police abuse and violence, we have to say loudly and proudly that Black Lives Matter.

Q: Some commentators have pointed out that far more black people are murdered every year by other black people than by police officers. Why don’t the song and video focus on that?

A: “Chains” talks about many types of violence and injustice. But when the police shoot and kill based on race and stereotypes, there’s an urgent need to address those actions directly.

Q: The song talks about shooting in church. Is that a reference to the Charleston church shooting?

A: Unfortunately, we’ve seen shootings in churches, in parks, on college campuses, and lots of other places. The shooting in Charleston was an especially terrible event, because it was motivated by racial hatred. The bottom line is that we have to make guns less available to people who want to hurt others. We have to get to know each other better across race, gender, and sexual identity, so that that violent impulse starts to fade.

Communication Themes:

Lead with Values: Lift up the values and vision that motivate the song, video, and campaign—a society that keeps **all communities safe** and upholds **equal justice and opportunity for all; commonsense** approaches that **respect the dignity and voice of all** people and communities.

Talk about Problems with the System: Underline systemic problems, not just individual injustices—a system infected with racial bias and stereotypes that turns to force and violence as a first resort instead of a last resort and, too often, lacks compassion or common sense.

Highlight Solutions: Point to the concrete solutions—policies as well as individual behavior change—described by the short film and by activists around the country. Training, monitoring, and accountability for police officers, for example, should go hand in hand with questioning our own biases and connecting across lines of difference.

Drive Audiences to Action: Always tell audiences what they can do to help solve the problem—joining an online campaign, contacting an elected official, donating money for change, or getting the word out through social media.

Q: The song says “we’re still in chains” and “try to put me in chains.” Do you feel that black people are still enslaved in the United States? Have we made progress?

A: There has been progress since slavery and Jim Crow, but we still have a long way to go. Discrimination and stereotypes are still holding our country back. They deny people of color the opportunity for equal justice and access to quality education, housing, and well-paying jobs.

Selected Facts on Discrimination, Police Violence, and Equal Opportunity

The following facts and data can be used to support comments about the issues discussed in *Chains*:

- African Americans killed by the police are twice as likely to be unarmed than are whites. The *Guardian* found “that 32% of black people killed by police in 2015 were unarmed, as were 25% of Hispanic and Latino people, compared with 15% of white people killed.”¹
- African Americans make up only 13% of the U.S. population and 14% of unlawful drug users, but are 37% of the people arrested for drug-related offenses in America.²
- The job’s not done, but we’re seeing an important turnaround on discriminatory stop-and-frisk practices in New York City—as a result of protest, lawsuits, and action by the mayor and police commissioner. In 2013, police stopped New Yorkers 191,558 times. People of color bore the brunt of those stops: 56% were black, 29% were Latino, and 11% were white. So far this year, the stop-and-frisk numbers are way down (only 13,604 stops by the end of summer 2015), but black folks were still disproportionately stopped (56% of stops but just 25% of the NYC population.³ Alongside those changes, major crimes in New York City are near record lows.⁴
- The Los Angeles Police Department has made some important progress from the bad old days of the 1980s and ‘90s. There’s more to be done, but a positive example is a special LAPD unit that works with mentally ill folks in crisis to provide help and treatment instead of arrest or deadly force.⁵
- The U.S. Sentencing Commission reported that African Americans receive 10% longer sentences than white people through the federal system *for the same crimes*. Between December 2007 and September 2011, the most recent period covered in the Commission’s report, sentences of black men were 19.5% longer than those for similarly situated white men.⁶

Additional Communication Resources

Go to www.OpportunityAgenda.org for additional communications tools, research, and examples, including:

- [Equal Justice and Public Safety: Promoting an End to Racial Profiling](#)
- [Ten Lessons for Talking About Racial Equity in the Age of Obama](#)
- [Visions, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit](#)

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¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/01/black-americans-killed-by-police-analysis>

² <https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-racial-discrimination>

³ <http://www.nyclu.org/content/stop-and-frisk-data>; <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/3651000.html>

⁴ <http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2015/07/01/new-york-city-crime-down/>

⁵ <http://www.scpr.org/news/2015/03/09/50245/police-and-the-mentally-ill-lapd-unit-praised-as-m/>

⁶ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324432004578304463789858002>