

# MEMO: USING AFFIRMATIVE LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE TO RECONSIDER	ALTERNATIVES
Immigrants <b>aren't</b> violent criminals.	Immigrants <i>are</i> our neighbors, <b>our friends</b> , and a vital part of our communities.
Our sanctuary policy <b>doesn't</b> protect violent criminals.	Study after study has <b>shown</b> sanctuary cities <i>are safer</i> .  Sanctuary policies protect due process for everyone, including immigrants. These policies allow immigrants to report abuses and crimes – like wage theft, dangerous rental conditions, or domestic violence – and engage with public safety officials without fear of deportation.

## RELEVANT RESEARCH

1) **Myth busting reinforces myths.** A large body of social science and linguistic research has found that “myth-busting” serves to reinforce rather than challenge misinformation.

- “Debunking false information, or contrasting myths with facts, intuitively feels like it should effectively correct myths. But research shows that such correction strategies may actually backfire, by making misinformation seem more familiar and spreading it to new audiences.”<sup>1</sup>
- Research shows that “repeated information is often perceived as more truthful than new information.”<sup>2</sup>

2) **Negation muddies comprehension.** A recent study<sup>3</sup> led by NYU researchers found that negation, that is, inserting “not” into a sentence, “mitigates rather than inverts meaning” and “slows down the processing of meaning.” Following are quotes from the a press release announcing the study’s findings:

- .... when we’re told “This coffee is not hot”? Does that mean we think it’s cold? Or room temperature? Or just warm? ... A team of scientists has now identified how our brains work to process phrases that include negation (i.e., “not”), revealing that it mitigates rather than inverts meaning—in other words, in our minds, negation merely reduces the temperature of our coffee and does not make it “cold.”

3) **The danger of “collocation.”** The repeated placement of the words “immigrant,” “crime” or “criminal” in close proximity to each other may encourage implicit bias. A large body of research studies the co-occurrence or co-association of words, whereby words frequently occurring near to each other may be seen to have similar meanings. As one linguist noted: “words tend to keep certain company, and the company they keep guides how we understand them.”

<sup>1</sup> Eryn Newman, Amy Dawel, Madeline Claire Jalbert, and Norbert Schwarz. “Seeing is believing: how media mythbusting can actually make false beliefs stronger,” *The Conversation*. May 25, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Aumyo Hassan & Sarah J. Barber. “The effects of repetition frequency on the illusory truth effect,” *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications* volume 6, Article number: 38 (2021)

<sup>3</sup> Devitt, James. “How Does “Not” Affect What We Understand? Scientists Find Negation Mitigates Our Interpretation of Phrases,” *NYU News*, May 30, 2024.