

# *Stories and Talking Points About the Ways AI is Creating Harm, Today*

Advocates calling for greater governance of artificial intelligence (AI), both generative and predictive, have named the importance of communicating the current, real-world harms of AI. When an issue is perceived as larger than life, rooted in the future or impossible to solve (read: sentient robots), it can feel difficult to hold accountable the people and companies who are responsible for current, real-world harms. But together we can—by describing the problem as solvable and naming the people responsible for fixing it.

This fact sheet includes talking points and story examples of current-day, real-world harms from AI. The messages below are tools for you to incorporate in your presentations, writing, interviews, briefings, hearings and other communication materials. Make it your own!

## **Why this works**

- Elevating the impact of harmful and extractive technologies on hiring, safety and health that are happening today in conversations brings the solutions that are needed today into the frame. The way you describe an issue sets up the listener to understand what should be done about it and who is responsible for doing that. If we let Big Tech focus on future robots or abstract AI issues, we're missing an opportunity to build urgency now for civil rights policy solutions and governance.
- Using stories to evoke an emotional response from the listener is highly motivating (whether that's someone reading your op-ed or listening to you speak on a panel).
- As advocates, we also need to be clear about the policy solutions that directly relate to the harms and name and point to the specific people, companies and legislators who have responsibility to solve these issues.
- Establishing the problem is important. And we should never stop there with our messaging. We encourage advocates to use this resource to supplement Spitfire's narrative guidance on technology justice. Communicate what's possible when technology works for people and not the other way around.

## **Housing** *Digital Redlining*

- **We have documented cases of AI and algorithmic systems pushing housing further out of reach for Black and brown communities.** This includes through the creation of unfair and unreliable tenant screening algorithms.
- For example, RealPage has come under scrutiny for its tenant screening software, which has a history of denying housing for Black and brown renters. The automated tenant screening tool takes an applicant's

information and generates a report detailing the applicant's background and history. These reports are typically shared with the landlord without further review for accuracy, and in [too many cases](#), prospective renters are denied housing due to inaccurate identity matches.

- In Tennessee, [Davone Jackson](#) was denied housing when RealPage inaccurately reported that he had a criminal history after misidentifying him with two other individuals with the same last name.
- **These tools have also put non-white buyers at a disadvantage — a process known as digital redlining.** An example of this was Redfin's minimum price tool, which helped the company identify properties below a certain price that would not receive its full services. The minimum price tool [automatically excluded sellers](#) of properties under a certain value from receiving fair treatment and low-cost services, which the company was sued over. Redfin ultimately settled the lawsuit and stopped using the tool, but the undercurrent to this issue remains.

## Safety

### *Predictive Policing*

- **The consequences of algorithmic prediction gone wrong are catastrophic, particularly in policing.** Police departments have started deploying algorithmic risk-assessment tools that use statistical formulas to predict the likelihood of an individual — including youth — committing a crime.
- One example of this is in Pasco County, Florida, where police have been turning common disruptions and behavioral issues in school into [potential criminal indicators](#).
- For Robert Jones and his then 16-year-old son, an expulsion at Bobby's previous school in another county was enough for Pasco County sheriffs to make dozens of warrantless home searches. When Robert attempted to assert his legal rights and refuse entry into his home, he Pasco County sheriffs then monitored him and [arrested him five times](#) within a six-month period. None of the arrests resulted in a conviction, and Robert had no previous criminal history.
- Following a lawsuit and two federal investigations into the program, the Pasco County Sheriff's Office ended its prolific offenders program in 2023. But we know that this is just one story, and similar technologies are still under wide use today and growing.
- **Surveillance technology tools are most often deployed in Black and brown neighborhoods, exacerbating discriminatory race-based policing.** Law enforcement departments across the country deploy audio surveillance technology, ShotSpotter, in local communities. Through an analysis of ShotSpotter sensor locations, [reporters at WIRED found](#) that nearly 70% of people living in a neighborhood with at least one ShotSpotter sensor identify as Black or Latino/a/e.
- Recently, police in Chicago were alerted to a home where a [teenager was setting off fireworks](#). ShotSpotter picked up the sound as gunfire and alerted police. When the police arrived at the home, they expected to encounter a shooter and opened fire on the teenager.
- **In the case of facial recognition technology, police use of these tools have led to numerous wrongful arrests, specifically of Black and brown people.** In Detroit, the use of facial recognition technology has led to at least three known false arrests, including [Robert Williams](#); [Michael Oliver](#); and most recently, [Porcha Woodruff](#).

- At eight months pregnant, Porcha was arrested for carjacking and robbery after facial recognition technology deployed by the Detroit Police Department misidentified her as a suspect, despite the fact that the victim never described the carjacker as visibly pregnant. These are just a few examples of the bias baked into these systems.

## Hiring

### *Discriminatory Hiring*

- **Businesses that rely on resume screening tools are at risk of having applicants quickly screened out based on societal biases like gender and race rather than qualifications.** Algorithms reflect the same biases as the people who create them, whether consciously or not. Nearly 80% of U.S. employers, and virtually all Fortune 500 companies, use AI in the hiring process.
- Today, this means that when an applicant applies for a job, a computer will likely decide whether they ever receive an interview. [Amazon built an AI tool](#) to help the company filter through resumes and identify top-performing applicants. Research found that Amazon’s tool was screening out women applicants, especially if their resumes included the word “women.”
  - Amazon never used the tool for hiring, but after the trial phase showed these biases, the company scrapped the tool altogether.
- **Corporate use of automated hiring tools is perpetuating ableist biases and further discrimination in hiring for applicants with disabilities.** For workers with disabilities who have always experienced bias and discrimination in the hiring process, the use of these tools simply [exacerbates existing inequities](#). One example of this is through the use of personality tests or games to measure an applicant’s potential job performance. These tests often ask applicants to answer questions about their happiness, energy levels or whether they perform tasks with enthusiasm — all of which have nothing to do with how an applicant will perform on the job. This is [especially harmful](#) for people who experience depression, anxiety or other disabilities.

## Labor

### *Workplace Surveillance*

- **In the workplace, companies use algorithms to standardize an inherently ableist image of productivity and efficiency.** For example, Amazon’s Flex program uses an app to track Amazon delivery drivers with the intent of either incentivizing or penalizing them based on their speed of delivery. This discounts the experiences of workers with disabilities, and Amazon’s algorithmic management system has been [reported](#) to fire the slowest people — regardless of the individual’s disability or access needs.
- This is used to create completely inhumane circumstances on Amazon warehouse floors, focused on speed over all else — even human lives. When Rick Jacobs [died working on the factory fulfillment floor](#), managers set up a light barricade around his prone body, and those working around him were forced to continue. Rick is one of many Amazon employees who have had major health events or died fulfilling orders, under the guise of efficiency and production speed.

## Health

### *Discrimination Against People with Disabilities*

- **Governments are using risk-assessment algorithms to determine a child's health and well-being, and it can have catastrophic results for parents who have disabilities.** The Allegheny County Department of Human Services in Pennsylvania uses AI to predict children who could be at risk of harm.
- New parents [Andrew and Lauren Hackney](#) of Allegheny Country both have intellectual disabilities. Shortly after they took their infant to a pediatrician for refusing her bottle, the infant was placed in foster care. The Hackneys suspect the county's AI tool singled them out because of their disabilities. [Analysis of the tool](#) found that Allegheny's algorithm automatically drove up risk scores for children with parents who had previously accessed mental health services from the county.
- **People with disabilities have lost critical day-to-day support as a result of state governments using algorithmic tools in public benefits determination.** Bradley Ledgerwood, a man with cerebral palsy, receives day-to-day care through Arkansas' Medicaid program. When Arkansas began using an algorithm to determine the number of hours of support a patient qualified to receive [under the state's Medicaid program, Bradley's in-home care was cut](#) — from 56 to 32 hours per week.
- In 2018, testing by legal aid organizations determined that a similar algorithm proposed for use by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services would [disqualify as many as 66% of currently eligible people](#). For people with disabilities who face higher rates of poverty due to existing inequities and discrimination, the process for regaining access to those benefits requires an [exhaustive and costly effort](#).

## Labor

### *Devaluation of Workers*

- **Companies continue to state, on the record, that they see AI as an opportunity to increase profits by cutting their workforce.** Between May 2023 and February 2024, U.S. companies had laid off roughly [4,600 workers](#) because they were either seeking to hire people with AI experience or the technology replaced their tasks.

## Labor

### *Stolen Art*

- **Generative AI tools are built using hundreds of thousands of original, human-made art without consent from the artists.** Algorithmic developers rely on original works of art and writing to build and train all forms of generative AI tools. From writers to musicians and visual artists, their work is scraped from the internet and other publicly available sources and baked into the algorithm to generate images, videos or text that are all simply a compilation of the work the tool was trained with. In 2023, a group of visual artists [filed a copyright lawsuit](#) against Stability, Midjourney and other companies creating AI image generators for training tools with their art without authorized use.

# Messages That Bring Solutions Into the Frame

Focus on what people need or don't have in their daily lives. How does this impact the *material conditions* of someone's life?

Remember that how you describe a problem triggers for people *what to do about it*. Be sure to describe systems and not just people so that you name systems as the needed fix.

Name *what we want* — not just what we don't. What would it look like if technology worked for everyone?

Always stick to describing *current-day harms*, not speculative, scary robots.

When you name the problem, name who is *responsible for solving a problem*.

## Overarching Messaging

The harms of AI and algorithmic systems are varied and, sadly, well established. They can be seen across nearly every aspect of our lives, every region of the country and around the world:

- From pushing housing further out of reach for Black and brown people
- To catastrophic instances of mistaken identity that lead to police shootings and wrongful arrests
- To the criminalization of youth based on common, nonviolent behaviors in school
- To the surveillance and over policing of Black and brown communities

- To discriminating against workers with disabilities in the hiring process and on the job
- To devaluing human labor
- To undermining human creativity and stealing the work of writers, artists and creators
- To exacerbating the climate crisis

These technologies are clearly causing real harm today. This is all reflective of the consequences of letting companies self-regulate — and it doesn't work.

- We need strong civil rights protections in addition to consumer, artistic, etc.
- We need nonuse to be a meaningful option.

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