



# EVERYONE NEEDS A SAFE PLACE TO SLEEP

*Message guidance  
executive summary*

PREPARED BY

HOUSING •   
NARRATIVE LAB

# INTRODUCTION

The Housing Narrative Lab, in partnership with the National Homelessness Law Center, conducted national public opinion narrative research to understand what the

public thinks about efforts to arrest, fine and ticket people who experience unsheltered homelessness, and identify messaging that builds support for effective, compassionate solutions.

## THE GOAL OF THIS PROJECT IS TO:

- ✓ Create momentum for the housing justice movement and expand support for housing and supportive services as the solution to homelessness.
- ✓ Encourage officials, the public and other stakeholders to reject ticketing, fining and arresting people experiencing homelessness.

Lake Research Partners administered the research, which included a nationwide QualBoard conducted on March 6-7, 2024 among 24 adults. The QualBoard informed the national dial survey, which was conducted from March 25 - April 2, 2024 with 1,302 adults, including oversamples of 101 African Americans, 100 Latino/as and 100 Asian American Pacific Islanders. Survey respondents were drawn from an online panel and screened to be adults residing in the United States. To ensure the sample reflects attributes of the actual population, the

base sample was weighted by region, gender by region, age, race, race by age, race by gender, party identification, party identification by gender, and education. The Black oversample was weighted by gender and age. The Latino/a oversample was weighted by age and party identification. The Asian American Pacific Islander sample was weighted by gender, age, party ID, and education. The oversamples were weighed down into the base to reflect their actual proportion of adults in the U.S.





# Key FINDINGS

- ▶ **A significant majority – 72% of people – reject plans to jail, ticket or fine people** for sleeping outside if there's no shelter available. Three out of five respondents say rent or housing being too expensive for people to afford is a major factor that contributes to people sleeping or living outside.
- ▶ **It's important to name the housing and support services you are advocating for.** People responded more positively to messaging that includes a specific call to action and solutions. People recognize homelessness is a big problem, but need to be convinced that housing and compassionate solutions are effective.
- ▶ **The majority of survey respondents have personal experience with unstable housing (two-thirds) or homelessness (almost 3 in 5)** so messages should emphasize the connection between widespread housing instability and homelessness.
- ▶ **Three out of five people (60%) believe homelessness is caused by economic factors,** such as high rents, not enough housing people can afford or jobs that don't pay enough. Three years ago when the Housing Narrative Lab conducted national research, less than half (49%) of respondents believed that economic factors caused homelessness. This is a significant shift in public mindset about the root causes of homelessness.

## THE BIG SHARED NARRATIVE

**Everyone needs a safe place to sleep. We thrive and our communities thrive when everyone is housed. But homelessness is increasing as too many of us struggle to afford a place to live. We solve homelessness when we provide access to housing that everyone can afford and the support services they need to be healthy and stable.**



## TOP TESTED MESSAGES

Our top messages work among both like-minded (base) and persuadable and across race. The messages titled We All Need a Safe Place to Sleep and Personal Story are the best arguments against the criminalization of homelessness. In political debates about public investments and to counter arguments about encampment sweeps, Shifting Resources works best.

### We All Need a Safe Place to Sleep

*"No matter our race, gender, or income we all want to get and keep a roof over our heads. But homelessness is increasing across the country as more households struggle to make ends meet. Rent is too expensive, wages are too low, and we have seen decades of failed housing policies. We should focus on solutions like building more housing options for all income levels, not trying to arrest our way out of homelessness. Arresting or punishing people experiencing homelessness makes things worse. The real solution is providing access to housing they can afford and the support services they need to become stable. Handcuffs do not get anyone closer to housing."*

### Personal Story

*"Homelessness was not part of my plan, but after I lost my job, I was evicted and forced to live on the streets. This was stressful and taught me that homelessness can happen to anyone. Thankfully, I wasn't fined or thrown in jail for trying to survive and sleep in the public park. Instead, thanks to resources in my community, I received the help I needed to secure stable housing and a permanent job. The housing programs and support services made available to me helped me get back on my feet."*

### Shifting Resources

*"Homelessness can happen to anyone. Today, more than 600,000 people experience homelessness, including 250,000 who sleep outside with no access to shelter. Studies show unhoused people have lower life expectancies and are four times more likely to have attempted suicide. Increased housing costs, not enough housing options, mental health crises and financial insecurity all contribute to increased rates of homelessness. There are proven ways to help and provide people with lifelines – shifting resources to programs that keep housing affordable, ensuring people have access to support services and funding shelters and transitional housing options."*

## TOP TESTED MESSAGES

Our top tested messages emphasizing compassionate solutions to homelessness outperformed the opposition's messages across demographics and political affiliations. The top performing messages:

### Messages that worked tended to:

- ▶ Start with shared values like strength, inclusivity and housing as a basic need.
- ▶ Use inclusive language like “no matter our race, gender or income, we all want to get and keep a roof over our head.”
- ▶ Name the problem of homelessness and link it to economic factors such as wages not keeping up with rising rents.
- ▶ Include clear and tangible solutions to ensure everyone has a safe place to live and name how ticketing and fining people will only make the problem worse. For example, “We should focus on solutions like building more housing options for all income levels, not trying to arrest our way out of homelessness. Arresting or punishing people experiencing homelessness makes things worse. The real solution is providing access to housing they can afford and the support services they need to become stable.” Focus on solutions that non-experts can easily understand like “build housing that is affordable to people of all income levels.”

### Messages that fell short tended to:

- ▶ Name problems that seem disconnected from homelessness to many listeners, such as medical debt.
- ▶ Name vague solutions such as “create more housing” or “changing local building codes.”
- ▶ Talk about “handcuffs” or “punishment” or “crime,” which activates well-established (and unfortunate) narratives in the U.S. that there must be a “good” reason for people to be in handcuffs or be punished.
- ▶ Focus on drug use and mental illness as the primary causes for homelessness, advocate for homelessness solutions in the name of protecting property values or highlight violence and crime.



# AUDIENCES

A key to building a housing justice movement is how we communicate with others, so they move to action. When deciding where to disseminate your messaging, think about whether you want to motivate your base to action or shift the views of persuadables. **Match your audience and message to meet your goals.** Be clear on who you aim to reach and what you want them to do.

- ▶ **Insiders:** Are a small group comprised of community leaders, young college-educated people in progressive pockets, organizers, advocates, service providers and people who work in the housing sector. They believe housing is a human right and respond best to messages rooted in justice and equity.
- ▶ **Like-minded (base)** are people who agree with all or most aspects of your messaging and solutions. People who are under 45, women, lean Democratic, Black, Latino, or have person connection to housing instability are more likely to be in this audience. This is the group we want to mobilize and encourage to bring others in and take action. This audience is most likely to respond to messaging rooted in values of justice and human rights, but because of public frustration about encampments and narratives of disorder, it is important to emphasize the structural causes and specific solutions to homelessness.
- ▶ **Persuadable audiences** are the “movable middle.” Made up of

people reflected across the broader population, persuadable audiences can hold two opposing ideas at the same time (i.e. Housing is a human right AND homelessness is caused by bad choices). We want to move them to our side through targeted, values-based messaging. This audience, like the base, responds well to messages that connect the economy and homelessness and name the source of problems and available solutions. They can also be swayed by the opposition’s messaging that encourages ticketing and arresting people who are unhoused, so it is important to proactively communicate with this audience.

- ▶ **Rural and suburban audiences** are more likely than urban residents to believe a person’s homelessness is the result of bad personal choices, substance use or lack of family ties. Use storytelling that dispels these stereotypes, such as a working person who was evicted, to help shift understanding in addition to consistent, shared-values messaging.

## AUDIENCES (continued)

► **Black and Latino audiences**

are more likely to think policing, ticketing, fining and jailing further marginalizes people experiencing homelessness. When communicating directly to these audiences, you can and should connect racial inequity and homelessness and make strong calls to action.

► **Younger adults (under 45)**

are likely to have a personal connection to housing instability

and homelessness. When communicating with this audience, emphasize how housing insecurity and homelessness are problems that affect most of us and provide a clear call to action. Believe a person is more likely to experience homelessness because there isn't affordable housing, jobs don't pay enough to cover rent, and people can't get by, forcing them to live on the streets or in their cars.

## MESSAGES IN ACTION

Here are some sample ways to put the messages into action:

**Highlight solutions: Sample Instagram caption for a campaign**

- Homelessness can happen to anyone. I know, because when the pandemic eviction protections ended I was evicted from my home. When people face hard times they should get support, not get thrown out. That's why I'm voting no on measure X. Arresting and ticketing people with nowhere else to go will only make homelessness worse. Solutions like eviction protections and rental assistance ensure everyone in our community is able to get – and keep – a place to live they can afford.

**Lead with inclusive shared values: Statement to elected officials**

- No matter our race, gender or where we were born, we all need a safe place to sleep at night. We can choose the kind of communities we live in. Will we make homelessness worse by punishing people who sleep outside when they have nowhere to go or will we shift resources to help people get and stay housed? Everyone can have a safe place to sleep at night when we focus on solutions like emergency rental assistance and turning unused buildings into homes that everyone can afford.



# WORDS

## to replace and embrace

### REPLACE

✗ Criminalizing

✗ ... does more harm

✗ In my neighborhood....

✗ Affordable housing

### EMBRACE

✓ Arresting or ticketing people; punishing people; levy thousands of dollars on people

✓ ... makes things worse

✓ In my community....

✓ Housing that is affordable for all income levels

### WHY

People have a visceral understanding that arrests and tickets have serious consequences. Criminalizing is more vague and theoretical with a third of people confused or unsure of what it means.

"makes the cycle of harmlessness worse" or "makes things worse" tests better than "does more harm."

Because of economic and racial segregation, people are more likely to see the need for solutions in their community than in their specific neighborhood.

Avoids negative stereotypes people have about affordable housing and uses language that explicitly connects housing to economic factors.

### Sample Content

The Housing Narrative Lab partnered with IntoAction Labs to create this [GIF Library](#) that puts the research into action. View, download, and repost!

#### Show Shared Values



#### Show Root Causes



#### Name Solutions

