

HOUSING THE HEARTLAND:

Messaging research on housing and homelessness in three Heartland communities.

INTRODUCTION

To solve homelessness in every community across the United States we have to build broad support for proven solutions. This includes understanding the current views, challenges and opportunities of the Heartland region. Today, much of the national conversation and public opinion research about rising housing costs and homelessness focus on large coastal cities. Less attention has been paid to what residents of our nation's Heartland region are experiencing in terms of housing instability, the values that resonate with them, or their reactions to messages and policies that would address the growing housing and homelessness issues facing many communities.

Between December 2022 and March 2024, Housing Narrative Lab conducted three research projects with local partners in Tulsa, OK, Omaha and Lincoln, NE, and the state of Minnesota. While the specific goals of each project varied slightly, all three sought to understand how local residents understand the challenges of housing instability, unaffordable housing and homelessness. All three projects also helped determine what values and messages increase people's support for effective solutions.

This document provides a brief overview of the messaging and public opinion research conducted among residents of Tulsa, OK, Omaha and Lincoln, NE and statewide in Minnesota. We hope the information will support national and regional advocates in their work to build broad support to solve the challenges of housing affordability and homelessness.

Identifying and Motivating Specific Audiences

A key to building a housing justice movement is how we communicate with others so they move to action. While we all have unique experiences and opinions, people tend to have underlying beliefs that 1) shape how they interpret messages and 2) motivate them to action. When conducting public opinion and messaging research, we ask a series of questions to help identify the underlying values and priorities a person already holds. For example, some people believe strongly that the government should, for the most part, get out of the way, while others think the government should strengthen the social safety net and create opportunities for people to succeed. Based on answers to these questions, people are sorted into three main audience groups:

- **Base or “Like-minded” Audiences** are people who agree that structural forces create racial or economic inequality and, for the most part, agree with values and solutions that provide everyone a safe, affordable home. Our key task with this audience is to motivate them to increase their support and take action.
- **Persuadable Audiences** are people who can and will change their view on housing issues if the information resonates with their core values and motivations. Persuadables often hold competing or contradictory beliefs, such as believing that racism is caused by structural inequality but that the government should get out of the way, not make stronger safety nets. Our key task in communicating with persuadables is to build their support for our solutions and increase the likelihood they’ll take action with us.
- **Opposition Audiences** are people who largely oppose efforts to ensure everyone has a decent place to live and are unlikely to change their minds. They are much more likely to think homelessness is caused by personal failings and that police should ticket and arrest people who are unhoused. Our task is to avoid repeating the opposition’s argument by shifting the conversation into our frames and keeping our energy focused on motivating the base and winning over the persuadable audiences.

Usually, we see groups of people with shared identities or experiences cluster into one audience or another. For example, people with lived experience of housing insecurity and Black women are more likely to be part of the “Base/Like-Minded” audience in all our research. White men making over 40k a year are more likely to be part of the Opposition group. However, it doesn’t mean every person in a certain demographic holds the same belief. Rather, it points to trends within demographic groups, which can help communicators make informed and strategic decisions about who to communicate with and which messages are most likely to resonate with them.



COMMON FINDINGS ACROSS THE THREE COMMUNITIES:

The majority of people in each of the three Heartland communities we surveyed think housing unaffordability and homelessness are big problems and addressing them should be a high priority for elected officials.

- For example, the majority of Omaha and Lincoln residents across demographics are concerned about both the costs to rent or own a home (74%) and homelessness (57%). A solid majority (85%) say it's important to address how much it costs to rent or own a home, including 62% who say it is very important.

The majority of people connect economic factors with housing unaffordability and homelessness. Residents see the connection between wages not keeping up with the cost of housing or the rising cost of rent and rising homelessness.

- In focus groups and polling, when asked to identify contributing factors to homelessness, respondents often name economic factors such as inflation and unexpected expenses like job loss or the high cost of rent.

Narratives and messaging work best when they draw on inclusiveness and unity. For example, a top-tested value statement in the Minnesota research was: “No matter our race, gender or income, we all want to get and keep a roof over our heads.”

- Key messages for Persuadable audiences can and should name race and other differences — in a way that's inclusive. Differences should be presented as part of a whole. For example, **“No matter our race, gender or income, we all need a safe place to live.”**

The top-tested messages start with a shared value that the majority of people will resonate with such as *strength, family, community, stability or opportunity*.

- STRENGTH was a core value of the top messages for each of the three regions.
- The top-tested message in all three Heartland research projects used a variation of this message, which uses strength as the shared value:

When hard-working Nebraskans – from teachers and nurses to firefighters and waitresses – are struggling to keep up with rising housing costs in our community – you know there is a problem. If we come together to ensure everyone can afford to live here, our communities will not only be better, they will also be stronger. By building more housing of all kinds and by making sure people – whether our loved ones or complete strangers – have a safe place to lay their heads at night, we can make sure everyone who is part of our community can not only live here, but thrive.

DIFFERENCES ACROSS THREE COMMUNITIES:

What's unique to Omaha and Lincoln

The audiences considered Base/Like-Minded and Persuadable are different for Omaha than for the other two regions and different from our national polling groups. As explained above, people are sorted into these audiences based on their core attitudes on the role of government, why people experience homelessness and whether people experiencing homelessness need to take personal responsibility for improving their situation.

- Usually, people making over \$40k are a core part of the Persuadable audience in the rest of our polling and people making under \$40k are a part of the Base/Like-Minded audience. But in Omaha and Lincoln, the trend was reversed. People making over \$40k answered similar to the Base/ Like-Minded audience, while those making under \$40k answered questions that aligned with Persuadable audiences. This indicates an opportunity for sustained, deeper engagement with individuals making under \$40k in the Omaha region to move more members of this group into the Base.



- Unlike Tulsa and Minnesota, non-Black People of Color (Indigenous people, Asian Americans, Latino/a/e and other racialized people) surveyed in Omaha were analyzed as one subgroup because the sample size for the individual racial subgroups was not statistically large enough to break out in analysis. Usually, non-Black People of Color are consistently among the Base audience. However, in Omaha, they are solidly in the Persuadable audience.

Our Overarching Message Recommendation for Omaha and Lincoln:

No matter our race, gender or income, when every Nebraskan can afford a place to live, our communities will not only be better, they will be stronger.

WHAT'S UNIQUE TO MINNESOTA:

- Contrary to conventional wisdom that our messages would resonate differently with rural/Greater Minnesotans than urban and suburban Minnesotans, our top messages worked well across all communities.
 - » This research shows opportunities for future statewide message testing and engagement in the Heartland region.
- Minnesotans frequently identify economic factors as causes of housing instability and are key to the housing and homelessness solutions they support.


Our Overarching Message Recommendation for Minnesota:

Making sure our families and future generations of Minnesotans can live and thrive here by making stable housing affordable.




Tom Foster • 1st
McCormick's Grocery
1d • 🌐

I love my job and I love this state but my commute is ridiculous. Minnesota needs more housing for people like me – “essential workers.” Next time you wait in line because there’s not enough staff, please know it’s because there’s not enough housing near our jobs that we can afford. We want to live where we work.




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Sarah Thompson • 1st
Owner, C'est Chic Boutique
1d • 🌐

My business can't grow or even survive unless I have a reliable workforce and I can't hire people because there's nowhere for them to live nearby. We have to build more housing that's affordable to our retail workers, cooks and front office staff so people can live where they work. Building housing is one of the best ways to support our local businesses and our local economy.



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WHAT'S UNIQUE TO TULSA:

- Tulsans, more than the other regions surveyed, want specific solutions named in messages. For example, a solution such as “build more housing” was not as strongly supported as “convert abandoned empty buildings to create more housing.”
 - This tested policy proposal was overwhelmingly supported by a margin of 97 to 1 among respondents in the Base group and 85 to 10 among those in the Persuadable group: “Ensure building homes that are affordable to Tulsans at different income levels is a priority for any future housing development that benefits from state or local government funding and incentives.” While all three communities had some sensitivity to solutions that could raise taxes, Tulsans had a strong preference for converting motels or abandoned buildings into housing for people and families.

Our Overarching Message Recommendation for Tulsa:

Tulsa and our neighborhoods are stronger when every Tulsan of every income level has a roof over their head.



HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED:

The Housing Narrative Lab conducted public opinion narrative research in partnership with Lake Research Partners and community-based organizations in each region including The Zarrow Foundation (Tulsa, OK), Front Porch Investments (Omaha & Lincoln, NE) and the Minnesota Housing Partnership (Minnesota). Each research project started with listening sessions among key stakeholders in the community such as people with lived experience of housing insecurity, faith leaders, business owners, elected officials, organizers and service providers to inform the research questions.

- **In Tulsa**, four virtual focus groups were conducted to better understand people's beliefs about housing in their city and/or state. Following that 600 Tulsa residents completed an online dial survey, including an oversample of 100 Black adults, meaning we included more Black adults in the sample than would be reflective of their actual proportion of the city in order to ensure the subgroup's sample size was large enough to analyze.
- **In Omaha and Lincoln**, 500 adults in Omaha completed a text-to-online survey, which includes a base sample of 400 adults and an oversample of 100 Black adults in Omaha. One hundred Lincoln residents were also surveyed.
- **In Minnesota**, four virtual focus groups were conducted to better understand people's beliefs about housing in their communities. Following that 850 Minnesota residents statewide completed an online dial survey, including oversamples of Black adults and rural residents (defined as residents outside of Hennepin, Ramsey, Anoka, Dakota, Washington, Scott, and Carver Counties).

The Housing Narrative Lab is a national narrative research, storytelling and strategic communications hub focused on shifting mindsets and building support for solutions to housing unaffordability, housing insecurity and homelessness. For more resources on communicating for impact, view the resources page of our website, housingnarrativelab.org/resources.



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