

ADVANCING NARRATIVES FOR HOUSING AND CARE IN A REACTIONARY LANDSCAPE

UPDATED Message Guidance Based on 2024 National Narrative Research About Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

No matter our race, our income or where we come from, we all need a safe place to sleep. Housing that people can afford, paired with supportive services if needed, is the most effective way to ensure everyone in our communities has a safe place to live. In June 2024, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that the city of Grants Pass, Oregon can ticket, fine and jail individuals who sleep in public places, even when they have no other place to go. This decision overturned legal precedent in the western United States that had stopped states and cities from levying fines, clearing encampments and arresting people because of where they sleep. Since the decision, some elected officials have chosen to arrest, ticket and fine people living on the streets, while others reaffirmed their commitment to create housing and care services for people now and in the future.

With proactive solutions that prioritize housing, care and coordination, 2024 could mark the year things began to improve for unsheltered people, ushering in new norms of housing and care response. Or, it could make homelessness worse and increase the profoundly inequitable rates of homelessness and housing instability among low-income Black and Brown people.

The decisions elected leaders make now about how to solve homelessness are also decisions about racial and disability justice. Because Black, Indigenous and other communities of color are already more likely to experience housing and job discrimination and have less access to generational wealth than white people, members of these communities experience homelessness more often. Additionally, when a person has a criminal record or unpayable tickets and fines, they have an even harder time finding a decent, affordable place to live.

The Housing Narrative Lab, in partnership with the National Homelessness Law Center and Lake Research Partners, conducted national research in early 2024 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.

We share this *updated* message guidance to help community leaders reframe the conversation and build strong public will for a racially just and effective response to unsheltered homelessness – focused on housing and supportive services, not fines or arrests.

Elected officials have a choice in how to respond: Will they shift resources and lead coordinated efforts to ensure everyone in their community has a safe, accessible and decent place to live? Or, will they react with short-sighted, ineffective actions that will only make homelessness worse and threaten the security and future of people who have nowhere to live but the street? Their decisions will shape the future of our communities for years to come.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS:

A significant majority – 72% of people – reject plans to jail, ticket or fine people for sleeping outside if there's no other 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.

A significant majority of survey respondents have a personal connection to unstable housing (two-thirds) or homelessness (almost 3 in 5), meaning they or someone they know have experienced these issues, 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, slightly 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 as more people are seeing the nation's housing challenges play out in their lives.

THE BIG SHARED NARRATIVE:

No matter our race, gender or income, we all need 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.

How the Research Was Conducted

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/a/es 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 reflected 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/e 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.

TOP TESTED MESSAGES:

Our top messages work among both like-minded (base) and persuadable audiences 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 we all can afford and the support services we all 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.”

THE KEY TO HIGH PERFORMING MESSAGES

Our top tested messages, which emphasize compassionate solutions to homelessness, out performed the opposition’s messages across demographics and political affiliations.

Messages that worked tended to:

- Start with shared values like strong communities, 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.”

Messages that fell short tended to (cont.):





- 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.

- **The insider audience** is a small group – made up of community leaders, progressive organizers, advocates and activists, service providers, people who work in the housing justice and affordable housing sectors and young college-educated people in progressive pockets. They believe housing is a human right and care about intersectional issues. They are people who are deeply informed and already taking action. If you’re reading this, you’re probably part of the Insider audience! Insiders respond best to messages rooted in justice and equity with clear calls to action.
- **The like-minded (base) audience** includes people who agree with all or most aspects of your messaging and solutions but aren’t deeply involved in day-to-day activism or advocacy on the issue. People who are under 45, women, lean Democratic, Black, Latino/a/e, or have personal connection to housing instability are more likely to be in this audience. This is the group we want to mobilize into action and encourage them to repeat our messages. This audience is most likely to respond to messaging with values that include community, opportunity 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 with this group.
- **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. the idea that 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 responds well to messages that connect the economy and homelessness and name the source of problems and available solutions. Our research shows 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.

- **Opposition audiences** are people who hold fixed views that are aligned with our opposition’s talking points and are unlikely to change their mind. They often prioritize values such as order and security and believe homelessness is caused by poor choices and that police, tickets and jail are appropriate responses to the problem of homelessness. We don’t encourage messaging directly to this audience, though some messages that resonate with persuadable and like-minded audiences also resonate with opposition audiences. For example, messages about broad community benefit or creating strong communities can keep this audience from deepening their resistance to our messages and policy proposals.

| AUDIENCE | SIZE | LIKELY MEMBERS | TALK ABOUT |
|-----------------|---|---|---|
| Insiders |  | YOU. People you see at protests. Nonprofit staff. The leaders in your organized base. | Housing is a human right. Insiders want to hear bold messages rooted in racial justice and equity. |
| The Like-Minded |  | Renters, women, Black, Latino/a/e, Indigenous ppl, under 45, lean Democrat, under \$40k, have experienced housing insecurity or homelessness. | Housing is a basic need we all share. Like-minded are open to messages connecting housing with racial equity but should not be considered as progressive as insiders. Need motivation to act. |
| Persuadables |  | Reflect the wider population More likely to not have a 4-year college degree. | Economic forces impacting housing and inclusive messages such as “no matter our race, gender or income we all need a safe place to sleep.” Persuadables respond well to clear, concrete solutions like repurposing empty buildings. |
| Opposition |  | Men, college educated, homeowner, higher income, lean Republican. | Shared values, broad community benefit (message this group if you need to counteract harmful dominant narratives led by NIMBYs for example). |

Based on national research with Lake Research Partners and the National Homelessness Law Center.

- **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 (cont.)

- **Black and Latino/a/e 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. They believe a person is more likely to experience homelessness because there isn't affordable housing or that jobs don't pay enough to cover rent.

FRAMING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT REACTIONARY RESPONSES

If some elected officials in your community are considering arresting, ticketing or fining people who are sleeping outside or trashing their belongings, it's time to go on the offense.

DO:

Connect the root causes of homelessness and how this will make it worse:

- Tell stories that help people see how the high housing and a tattered safety net are what causes homelessness. When people understand the causes, they're more open to solutions that get to the root of the problem.

Talk about race and make the connections between policing, homelessness and racial inequality:

- Remind elected officials and community members about the histories of racism in housing and policing and emphasize how this reaction will impact Black, Indigenous and new immigrant communities, who are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness.

Share stories of people who are or have experienced homelessness and invite people into concrete actions of support:

- Empathy and connection last longer than outrage, so go on the offense telling real stories of the complex struggles people who experience homelessness face and be ready with meaningful actions that a housed community member can take.

DON'T:

Repeat the frame or claims of elected officials who want to arrest or fine as a way to address homelessness:

- Characterize the problem in your own terms, not the one a reactionary official is using. If they say they're "cleaning up the streets," reframe it as "throwing away people's belongings" or "threatening people with arrest who have nowhere else to go."

Ignore community concern about people living on the streets:

- The vast majority of people don't like seeing people sleeping on the streets and think it's a problem that needs to be solved. Our messages can and should center the needs of people who experience homelessness but that doesn't require ignoring people's dissatisfaction with rising homelessness. Instead, show them how arresting or fining people who are homeless will make the problem worse and make life more dangerous for the people who have no place to live. Then offer effective solutions.

CONNECTING HOMELESSNESS TO RACIAL (IN)EQUITY

Name how decisions to arrest and ticket people will make racial inequity worse.

When talking to the like-minded and persuadables, include people of all races in the conversation. For example, "No matter our race, our zipcode or where we were born, we all need a safe place to live."

Example Message to Insiders:

- We are working to create the thriving communities we all want and deserve, especially for Black communities that bear the brunt of unfair evictions and harsh treatment by police. Arresting and ticketing people for having nowhere else to go will make it even harder for people to stabilize their lives. We need each and every one of us to fight this action and the first step is calling into the city council meeting at X time.

Example Message to Base:

- No matter our race or how much money we earn, we all deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. But the choice of (these specific elected officials) to arrest people who sleep outside because they have nowhere to go will make homelessness worse and Black and Brown communities, which are the most targeted by police, will bear the brunt of their reactions. Police, tickets and arrests do not solve homelessness; housing and supportive services will.

Example Message Persuadables:

- We want communities where we all have a safe home and opportunity – no matter our race, gender, ability or income. Sending police to do the job of social workers or service providers will make homelessness worse. It will make our communities less stable, fair and equitable, particularly for our neighbors who are Black and Brown and most targeted by police. Arresting and fining people who have nowhere to go will only make it harder for them to get on a path to wellbeing. Instead, (name specific elected officials) should shift resources to actually solve homelessness with housing and the support services people need to become active members of our communities.

MESSAGES IN ACTION

Here are some simple ways to put the pieces of the best-tested messages into action:

Highlight solutions:

Sample Instagram caption for a ballot measure campaign

- Homelessness can happen to anyone. I know, because when the pandemic eviction protections ended I was evicted from my home and had to sleep in my car. 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:

Sample statement to elected officials (or by elected officials who support housing and services solutions)

- No matter our race, gender or where we were born, we all need a safe place to sleep at night. As elected officials, *you/we (if you are an elected official who supports housing and services)* have a specific responsibility to strengthen the community and have the opportunity to make a difference. Tonight *you/we* have a choice: Will *you/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 such as emergency rental assistance or turning unused buildings into homes that everyone can afford. That's why *I'm asking you to vote NO on this measure/we need to vote NO on this measure*, which will make the problem worse. Instead, we need to shift resources to the housing and services that will truly make our community stronger.

Connect the root causes of homelessness and how this will make it worse:

Video script for social media

- No matter our race, our gender or where we were born, we all need a home we can return to each night. But the rising cost of housing means too many seniors and people on fixed incomes have been pushed out onto the streets. Now, instead of helping people get a place to stay, the city wants to ticket and arrest people who have nowhere else to go and are just trying to survive. We shouldn't send police to do a social worker's job. Arrests, tickets and fines will further burden people struggling to survive. And I worry that [people who look like me OR Black and Brown people, depending on the messenger's race] will bear the brunt of this choice because we know police target Black and Brown people more often. The solution to homelessness is housing and care services that get people on the path to wellbeing. That's what our elected officials should focus on.



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 the Root Causes



Name Solutions

