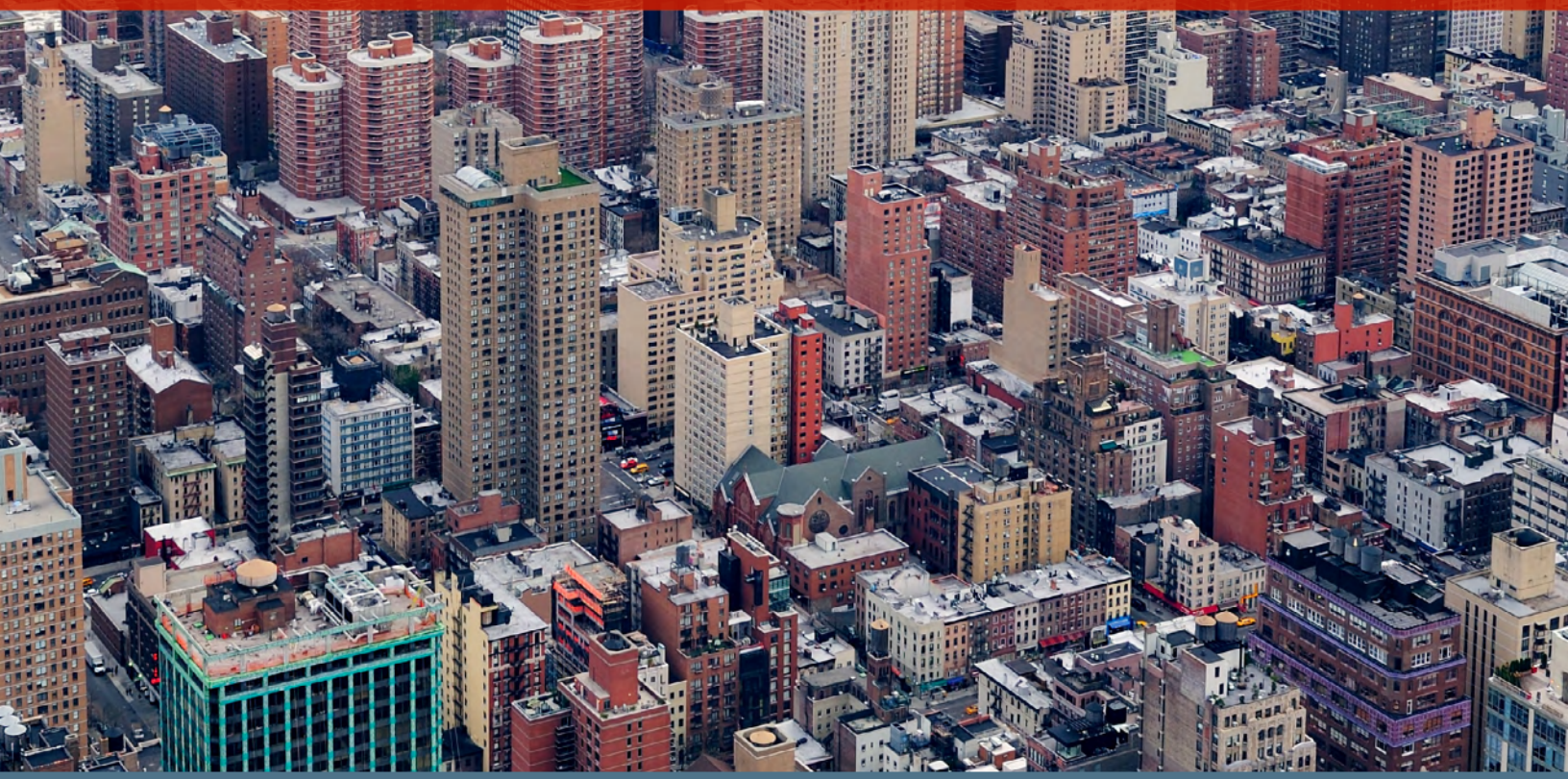
"You Don't Have to Live Here"

Why Housing Messages Are Backfiring and 10 Things We Can Do About It



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October 2016

Introduction

"That's the part people don't understand. No one is forcing you to live in one of the most expensive areas in the country. If you want cheap rent, go to South Carolina or somewhere else that's dirt cheap. You don't have to live here."

—Reader's comment, *Southern California Public Radio,* 2015

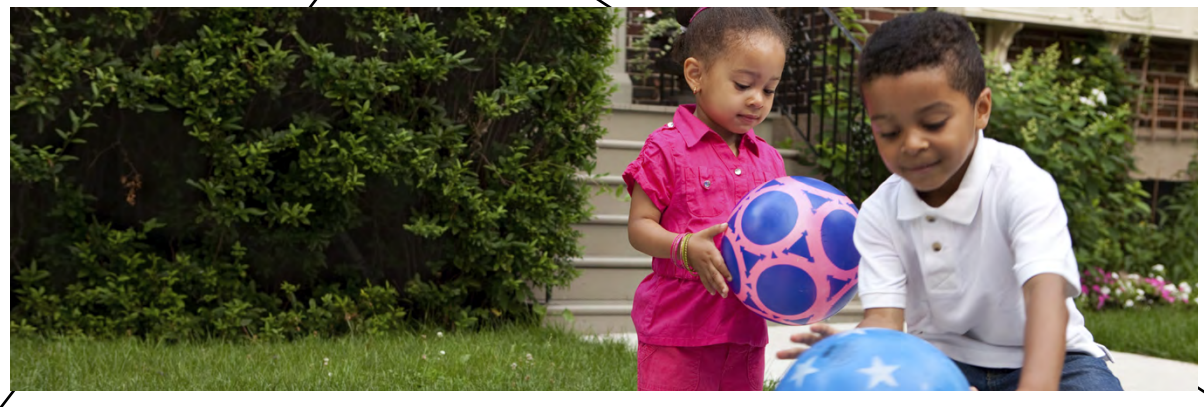
"If you cannot afford DC, there is a simple solution, it is called moving. … No one is entitled to live here if they can't afford to do it on their own dime."

—Reader's comment, *Washington Post,* 2016

There is a strong and growing movement among housing advocates to advance policies and programs that ensure that all people—regardless of their income level, racial or ethnic background, or country of origin—have access to healthy and affordable housing. This movement is increasingly focused on building support for quality, affordable housing in all communities and helping people understand why housing is vital to our collective prosperity.

When it comes to building public support for this agenda, there is a lot of work to be done. While the housing and community development movement is growing, the public discussion seems to be stalled. Broadening public thinking on housing issues, increasing support for necessary policies, and sparking action and engagement is more challenging than ever before. There is a general difficulty among the public to see housing as an issue that requires greater attention from policymakers, and people struggle to see the connection between housing, equity and inclusive communities. To the extent that public support is necessary to enact policies and establish programs that promote equity and inclusion, advocates face an uphill battle.

In this paper, we lay out the challenges that advocates face and use new research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute to put forward evidence-based messaging recommendations that can be used to advance a strong affordable housing and community development agenda. Our goal is to equip housing and community development advocates with evidence about which messages work (and which don't) as well as to use communications to expand the public discourse on housing issues—ostensibly paving the way for real and lasting systems change.

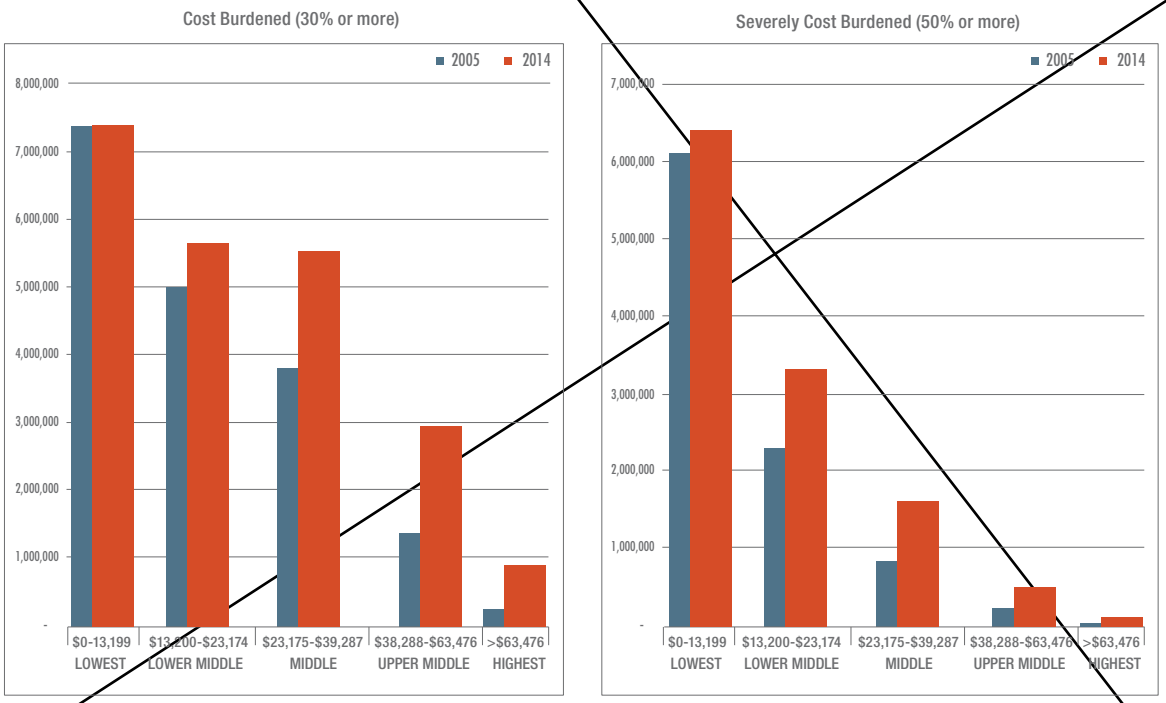


The Window Is Opening, but Do We Have Enough Public Support to Navigate New Housing and Community Development Policies, Programs, and Investment Vehicles Through It?

Today, stories about the difficulties that ordinary people face in finding quality affordable housing appear in the news in every major American city with increasing frequency. Unlike stories about the housing bubble and the financial crisis that dominated the airwaves a decade ago, today's stories about housing are focused almost singularly on people. Vivid anecdotes of individuals facing rising rents and mortgages told against the backdrop of falling and stagnant wages abound, and accounts of families who find themselves priced out of the housing market are front-page news.

Most of these stories frame this issue as a crisis. This crisis messaging is emerging in part as a reaction to the fact that housing affordability issues are no longer just about those living on low incomes. People across a much wider socioeconomic spectrum are increasingly facing the same problem—rents and mortgages are increasing at rates that outpace growth in income and earnings.

Housing Cost-Burdened Renter Households Are Increasing Across All Income Bands



Source: Enterprise Community Partners analysis of 2014 American Community Survey Data

Housing and community development advocates have been able to ride this growing tide of anxiety to get new housing proposals in front of policymakers and city leaders. Recent fair-housing decisions by the Supreme Court and rulings related to disparate impacts of current policy are also giving advocates hope. Even at the federal level, where meaningful systems change has been relatively slow, housing issues seem to be gaining momentum and relevance. Moreover, the intersection of housing and our country's deep problems of racial discrimination and segregation are raising the salience of fair housing as a public concern and renewing interest in housing as a platform for racial equity.

In many ways, this seems to be a watershed moment for housing and community development advocates—ushering in the potential for real, transformative systems change. Yet, while there is significant excitement among advocates about the possibility of this moment, there is also angst. How long will this window of opportunity remain open? Will we be able to galvanize enough support to realize meaningful and lasting change that really benefits people at the lower ends of the socioeconomic spectrum? Are we building enough public will to fully capitalize on the opportunity for serious, long-term change? In short, are we doing everything we can to elevate the prospects for change in this moment?

In this paper, we will argue that building a wide base of public support is vital to sustaining housing's presence on the nation's policy agenda and that the work to build the public will to address housing challenges may be even tougher than many realize. Our experience and research show that, while our advocates are lifting up policy and programmatic solutions, we are missing the opportunity to change the narrative about ***why*** housing matters; ***what*** "affordable housing" means; ***why*** housing is a shared public concern; and ***what*** needs to be done to fix this problem.

…the work to build the public will to address housing challenges may be even tougher than many realize. Our experience and research show that, while advocates are lifting up policy and programmatic solutions, we are missing the opportunity to change the narrative about ***why*** housing matters; ***what*** "affordable housing" means; ***why*** housing is a shared public concern; and ***what*** needs to be done to fix this problem.

This is deeply challenging work. To do it well, we have to do a much better job connecting housing issues to the chief concerns of public audiences. These audiences can be tough to influence; may not have time to listen to all of the facts and data we have to offer; are concerned that their housing values may go down if "affordable housing" is located nearby; and are not won over by the sad stories we have to tell about the growing number of individuals who are facing impossible housing constraints. To make matters worse, while the evidence that housing matters is strong, our pie charts, facts and figures have limited utility when people feel disconnected from housing as a shared public concern. To understand how to connect in new ways, we need to first understand why our current messages are failing to win the day. We need to understand why our messages are backfiring.

How Are Our Messages Backfiring?

> *"This country was built on mobility. Moving to places where one can get a better life. Some of us want or need to live in Los Angeles because of what we do. But most people can live far better lives in the 90 percent of the country that is not Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco."*
>
> —Reader's comment, *Southern California Public Radio,* 2015

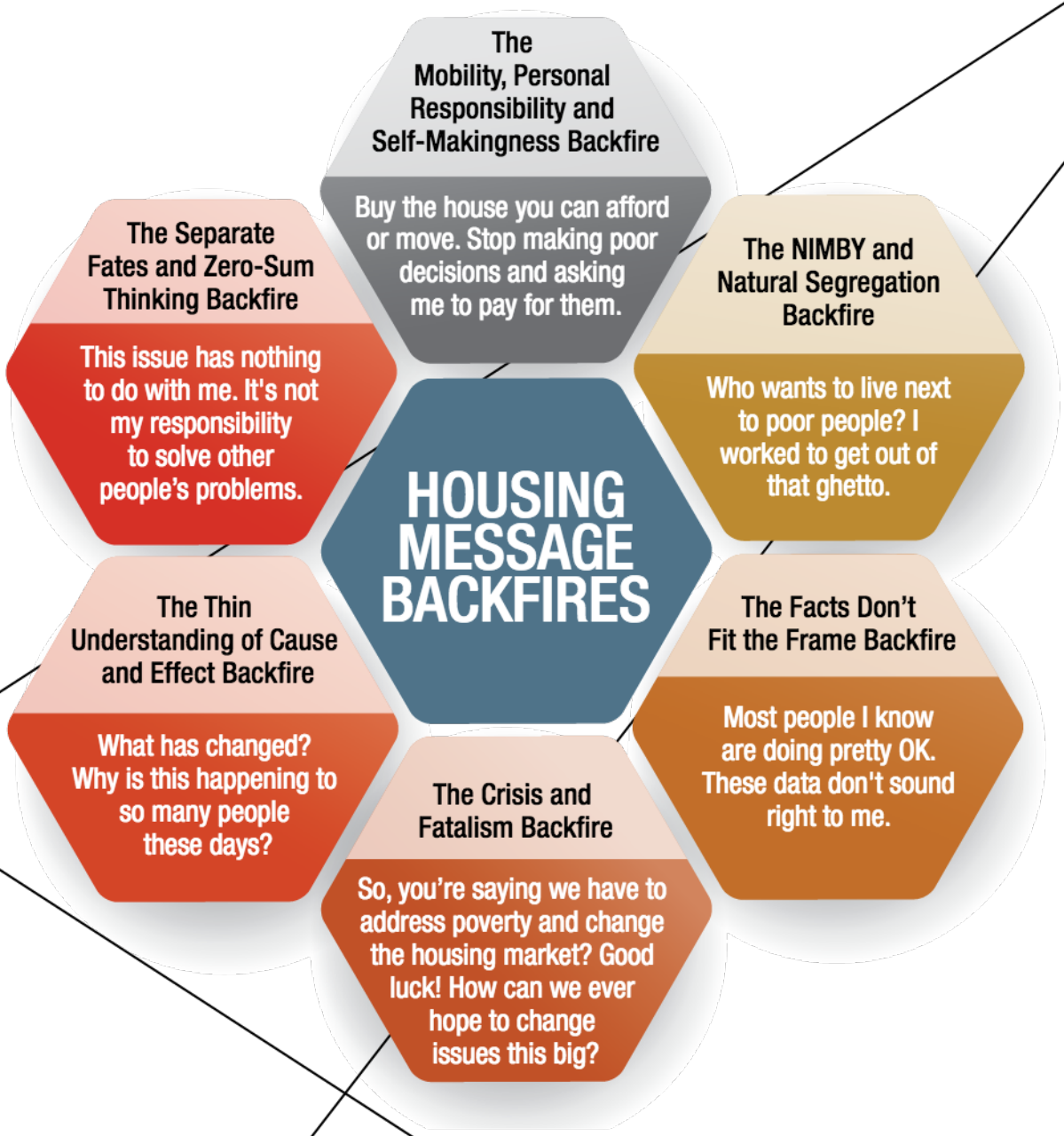
Over the last 20 years, the research about how housing matters has come a long way. For example, we have more evidence than ever before that housing is a vital social determinant of health and one of the most efficient ways to improve a wide range of health outcomes. Moreover, housing often determines who has access to transit, grocery stores that sell fresh produce, jobs that pay living wages, safe parks and good schools. That is, a wide range of present and future outcomes are all inextricably tied to housing.

As the evidence for the impacts of quality affordable housing grows, catalyzing public support might seem like an easy task. Yet the field has struggled to communicate the message that housing is a shared, public concern that requires increased public support, investment and attention. The irony is that as data about the importance of housing pile up, our messages seem to be losing traction and actually making things worse. Facts, data and vivid stories about individual troubles are not increasing public understanding, and some of our initial research suggests that they may in fact be both depressing public support for housing issues and reinvigorating misinformation.

On this front, housing is not unique. For more than 30 years, cognitive and behavioral scientists have been studying the "backfire effect"—the phenomenon in which people become more entrenched in false beliefs when confronted with evidence that contradicts their views. Studies show that attempts to refute false information often lead people to hold more firmly to their misperceptions. For example, researchers at the University of Michigan found that "when misinformed people were exposed to corrected facts in news stories, they rarely changed their minds. In fact, they often became even more strongly set in their beliefs. Facts, they found, were not curing misinformation. Like an underpowered antibiotic, facts were actually making the misinformation even stronger" (Keohane, 2010).

With piles of data but no alternative frame to hang them on, housing advocates may be seeing renewed interest from local legislators but are facing an increasingly unsympathetic public.

Part of the explanation for this backfire effect is "confirmation bias"—the tendency to accept arguments that confirm our views. But message backfires are also related to the way our brains are wired to process information. Research has shown that "people will resist abandoning a false belief unless they have a compelling alternative explanation" or frame from which to think about new information (Ignatius, 2016). With piles of data but no alternative frame to hang them on, housing advocates may be seeing renewed interest from local legislators but are facing an increasingly unsympathetic public.



What perspectives are housing messages failing to overcome? How are these perspectives undermining efforts to increase the salience of and build support for affordable housing reforms?

Below we review the major counter-narratives that housing and community development advocates are often inadvertently activating. For the purposes of illustration, we use a select set of reader's comments from prominent media stories about affordable housing and community development. We use these comments to help advocates understand how messaging can activate highly predictable counter-narratives, and we explain why these types of reactions interfere with attempts to build public will.

The Mobility, Personal Responsibility and Self-Makingness Backfire

"All the people listed in that example made poor life choices. … Had those people gotten an education and tried to get a real job, they wouldn't be 'forced' to live like they are. As far as the people on Social Security, why didn't they save for retirement? This is nonsense."

— Reader's comment, *Southern California Public Radio*, 2015

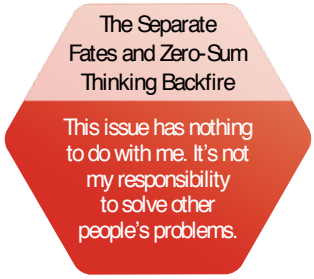
Self-Makingness as an idea assumes a significant amount of agency on the part of residents, positions housing as a consumer choice, and stigmatizes people or families who find themselves unable to solve housing problems. In this way, cash-strapped residents are admonished to move, to avoid living in homes they cannot afford, and for making "bad choices"—in much the same way that someone might be chastised for buying too many shoes or expensive purses.

The most common and predictable backfire happens as the public tries to reason about what the people highlighted in our messages should be doing to resolve their problems. Faced with messages about the need to make housing more affordable, the public reasons that people who are struggling with housing challenges (and especially with affordability) are: (1) poor money managers who have made bad decisions about their resources; (2) irresponsible and unwilling to take ownership of and solve their own personal problems; and (3) lazy and unwilling to take the initiative to move to better places where housing is more affordable.

The last part of this thinking—about mobility, or the idea that people ought to be open, able and willing to move to address housing issues—is a particularly strong backfire. In a review of news articles on affordable housing, we found hundreds of comments that posited the simple answer of mobility: ***"I've never met anyone who has said they couldn't afford to move. If you are really poor, why can't you put your stuff in a couple suitcases and take a bus or rent a U-Haul if you have furniture to move? I've known people so broke they had to borrow bus fare, but they still managed to move"*** (Reader's comment, *Washington Post,* 2016).

This backfire is the result of what, in the parlance of framing, is called *Self-Makingness*—the deeply entrenched cultural belief that people are "self-made" and ultimately accountable for their own circumstances, achievements and difficulties. It is important to note that *Self-Makingness* thinking assumes complete agency on the part of residents, positions housing as a consumer choice, and stigmatizes individuals who find themselves unable to solve housing problems. In this way, cash-strapped residents are admonished to move, to avoid living in homes they cannot afford, and for making "bad choices"—in much the same way that someone might be chastised for buying too many shoes or expensive purses.

The strength and prevalence of this highly accessible narrative is particularly problematic for those working on housing issues. When housing advocates engage the public in thinking about affordability issues, these ideas of *Self-Makingness* make it easy to dismiss the problems that residents face and give people the sense that there is an easy fix: Just move! This is clearly not the takeaway that housing advocates intend. Yet, the *Self-Makingness* backfire makes it difficult to engage the public as advocates on behalf of their struggling neighbors and difficult to help the public see the need for any action other than better decision-making, greater individual resourcefulness and motivation to relocate.



The Separate Fates and Zero-Sum Thinking Backfire

"Why should we bail you out of your poor decision?"

—Reader's comment, *NPR*, 2016 (emphasis added)

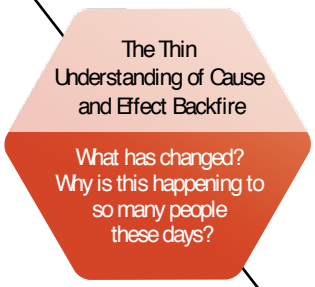
Housing insecurity is a problem that affects almost every community in the nation today. Yet there is not a strong public sense of connectedness to this issue or to the people who are experiencing housing challenges nor an understanding of how housing impacts the vibrancy and health of communities. This leads to a second, fairly predictable message backfire. Reasoning from a *Separate Fates* perspective, people struggle to see how the issue relates to their interests or circumstances.

At worst, people may actually see the issue not just in terms of *Separate Fates* but of competing interests. When seen in *Zero-Sum Thinking* terms, solving the housing issues for "other" people implies sacrifices for everyone else. ***"Thanks for screwing over your neighbors who stayed put. Your deed-in-lieu dropped their home values even further"*** (Reader's comment, *NPR*, 2016).

One of the most pernicious areas of message backfire in this category comes as housing advocates bring up the tradeoffs that low-income families often experience in trying to make ends meet. Recognizing that families are often making deep sacrifices in allocating what little resources they have, researchers have examined the depth and intensity of those tradeoffs. While findings from this work are important in developing programs and policies, effectively sharing this information with the broader public has been a struggle. Comments and reactions to stories about these tradeoffs clearly show the way that this discussion can backfire. For example, in one story outlining how many families actually sacrifice grocery monies to pay rent when money is tight, a reader commented: ***"With American obesity at an all-time high, cutting the grocery budget is a good thing"*** (Reader's comment, *CityLab*, 2016). A second reader asked who, other than the very rich, doesn't struggle and have to make tradeoffs when it comes to family finances: ***"While I agree there's a housing affordability problem … doesn't everyone except the very rich have to give up some purchases in order to afford top priorities like housing? I know I would spend more on other things if I didn't have to meet the mortgage payment first."*** (Reader's comment, *CityLab*, 2016).

As a result, messaging meant to highlight the unique challenges that low- and moderate-income residents face easily backfires and often morphs into *Zero-Sum Thinking*—triggering the perception of competition

for scarce resources. This backfire creates clear and obvious problems for advocates trying to build greater public support and advance housing as a shared, public concern. As a result, the way in which advocates bring forward the unique challenges that low- and moderate-income residents face is not only important, but critical to our work to expand the base of support.



The Thin Understanding of Cause and Effect Backfire

"Washington, DC, and the region itself, is not doing enough to get rid of affordable housing. Our crime problems in DC are not coming from those in upper-middle class households. They are coming from those living in public housing and income-capped and subsidized housing. The sooner the people living in this 'affordable' housing (which, by the way, is a code-word for low-income housing) are pushed out of the region, the better. Gentrify DC, gentrify every last bit. Push the criminal and parasite class out of the city for good."

— Reader's comment, *Washington Post*, 2016

Affordable housing issues are complex. The significant public investment needed to make most affordable housing projects feasible and the significant number of regulatory steps involved in these developments pose significant challenges for advocates, requiring significant time and expertise. Unfortunately, our research has shown that public understanding of how affordable housing is created (as well as why there is a shrinking pool of it in most places) is thin. That is, the public generally has little understanding of the causes of the nation's housing problems and of their effects, as well as the means necessary to address them and improve outcomes.

This complexity has been terribly difficult for advocates to fully convey in ways that would help the public understand the solutions we propose. For example, advocates across the country are talking quite frequently about the issues of gentrification and the displacement of lower income residents that often results when neighborhoods experience significant infrastructure investments. Gentrification is in part a process of bringing in new businesses, investments and people who add value to neighborhoods—which is a good thing. However, if those investments are not carefully designed and coordinated, existing residents can be displaced, which is directly at odds with the goals of fair and affordable housing advocates. The challenge here, of course, is that without a robust understanding of how development works, it appears that the very thing that advocates are seeking—greater investment in struggling neighborhoods—is the cause of the problem they want to engage the public about. Ultimately, this conversation is terribly confusing to public audiences who have little understanding about housing to begin with.

Efforts to engage the public in understanding the issues involved in housing and community development are difficult. To avoid activating the backfire that comes from the lack of public understanding, we will need to be clearer in how we talk about these complex issues and provide our explanations in ways that are much more accessible to the public. Without an emphasis on better explanation, widening support for new policies, programs and investments will remain a difficult proposition.

The **Crisis** and **Fatalism** Backfire

"I also think that this discussion should not ignore that housing authorities and their voucher programs have done more to perpetuate poverty from one generation to the next. They have reversed the American Dream and should not be entrusted with the new tax dollars to administer their stupid and bureaucratic voucher program."

—Reader's comment, *NPR*, 2016

When housing messages adopt a crisis tone and focus on the urgency and severity of housing problems, they risk activating people's sense that housing affordability is yet another in a long line of large, unwieldy, intractable problems. Thus, messages that focus on urgency—especially when they posit these issues as "crises"—end up backfiring because people feel powerless against the weight of these large and looming issues. This backfire gets worse when advocates implicate government as a necessary and responsible player in addressing housing affordability issues. Such calls for government responsibility cue strong senses of skepticism about government's ability to meaningfully address large-scale issues and deliver constructive solutions. The public's strong sense of the inability to address social issues and of government's futility in attempts at change conspire to create a powerful backfire in response to messages that focus on urgency, the extent of the problem and the government's responsibility for solving these problems.

"Make it so that landlords can throw out tenants who don't pay rent and you'll see rents go down. … I have no problem with rent control. I have a HUGE problem with state-sponsored theft. Government programs just further distort the market. Spend money on training so residents can afford the rents and the whole city will benefit."

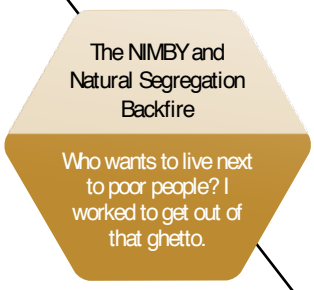
— Reader's comment, *Washington Post*, 2015

Moreover, when the focus on the government's role backfires, it often invokes the personal responsibility narrative. That is, when people push back on government and policy as solutions, the fallback is usually to personal responsibility and *Self-Makingness*—where both the problem and solutions are cast at the individual level rather than systems or policy levels.

"It's a slippery slope. When someone see[s] that he/she can get something for free, motivation to make smart choices and to work for things goes down. Perhaps we can do something, but it would have to be for a short time only, even though I still disagree that this is a proper role of government. It's the whole 'teach a man to fish rather than giving him a fish' idea. There is nothing stopping you from giving more to charities or to bring someone into your own house or whatever else YOU want to do. I don't think we should all be FORCED by government to pay for someone else."

— Reader's comment, *NPR*, 2016

As with a lot of tough social problems, the public's distrust and skepticism about government's ability to create and sustain viable solutions is a major problem for housing advocates. Addressing the challenges identified by housing advocates requires partnership with government agencies (at all levels). When the role of government is not framed with great care, messages can backfire and leave people with a sense that nothing can be done and that housing outcomes are beyond the scope of meaningful change.



The Not-in-My-Backyard and Natural Segregation Backfire

"Nobody wants to live with low-class blacks, not even middle-class blacks. The best we can do is keep them in de facto *reservations, like East St. Louis and Camden, NJ. Anything more than that is just a waste of time and money. Spreading them around more is a recipe for all kinds of trouble."*

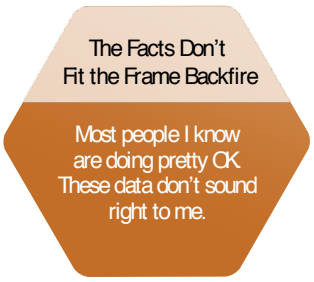
— Reader's comment, *Washington Post*, 2015

Both housing researchers and policy advocates are increasingly trying to raise the issues of racial and economic segregation as significant issues of public concern within the context of housing. As researchers publish evidence about the growing concentration of poverty, racial wealth gaps and other racial/ethnic disparities that are in large part due to housing, it has become a larger looming issue.

It should come as no surprise that issues of racial and economic segregation are areas of backfire. Race and racial disparities (in particular) continue to be hot-button issues where deep divisions within the public consciousness exist. Many whites (although certainly not all) think about the problems of race discrimination as a thing of the past—we solved that! We have an African American president who rose from humble beginnings and we have Latinos and Asian Americans (many of whose backgrounds were just as humble) who are now counted among our nation's richest elite. Clearly this is evidence that hard work and perseverance pay off across racial lines and as a result, any disparities across race and economic class lines must be the result of a lackluster effort.

In fact, in our interviews with ordinary Americans across the country, we found a general attitude that racial and economic segregation was natural. Those who are wealthy want to live with other wealthy people and so they choose communities that allow them to do so. Racial minorities (particularly new immigrants) want to live in communities where they can support each other, reinforce cultural traditions and have easy access to their own networks. This is seen as natural and, in the words of one of our research participants, "just the way it works."

As a result, as housing advocates push for housing policies that specifically address racial and economic segregation, concentrations of poverty and relevant racial disparities in access to opportunity, their advocacy is often met with not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) concerns and community opposition. Our messages about the benefits of diverse and inclusive communities are disregarded when the public reasons from this point of view. Thus our advocacy on behalf of racial equity and inclusion, when it is not presented in well-framed messages, actually backfires—activating community opposition, NIMBY concerns and, ultimately, making it even harder to expand public support.



The **Facts Don't Fit** the **Frame** Backfire

"I'm an LA resident and have been for the past 7 years. This article is complete bunk. $33 an hour is about $5,000 dollars a month working 40 hours a week; to say that you need that in order to afford an apartment for $1,700 is well, not fit for print. Then I realized some academic organization at USC was nice enough to bestow a new, albeit arbitrary, meaning for 'affordable,'—that is to say 30 percent of one's paycheck on rent is considered 'affordable,' anything beyond it is not. Leave it to the colleges to redefine words for political purposes."

— Reader's comment, *Southern California Public Radio*, 2015

While housing advocates have been increasingly able to draw on new data, research and strong evidence about the positive impacts of affordable housing, attempts to present these data frequently backfire. When faced with the latest data and research about the challenges that housing insecurity poses for communities, or the benefits that new policies and investments might bring, many people remain unconvinced by such evidence.

Social scientists have long studied this as a classic example of confirmation bias—when the information disconfirms what people already think they know, they challenge or push back on the data and the source rather than changing their opinions. This type of backfire effect is common in the housing field, where advocates increasingly rely on newly created data and emerging evidence from research to advocate for new housing and community development options. The challenge comes when the data do not conform to the way that people already understand the issue (remember, housing is understood as an issue of personal responsibility and a consumer choice). Without a messaging strategy that helps the public imagine or see housing differently, new data or research does little to undermine the backfire—rather it ***becomes*** the focus of the backfire. Data and evidence should be used to enliven a bigger messaging frame. That is, data and research cannot ***be*** the message; rather, they should ***enhance*** a more effective overall message.

Why Does the Backfire Effect Matter?

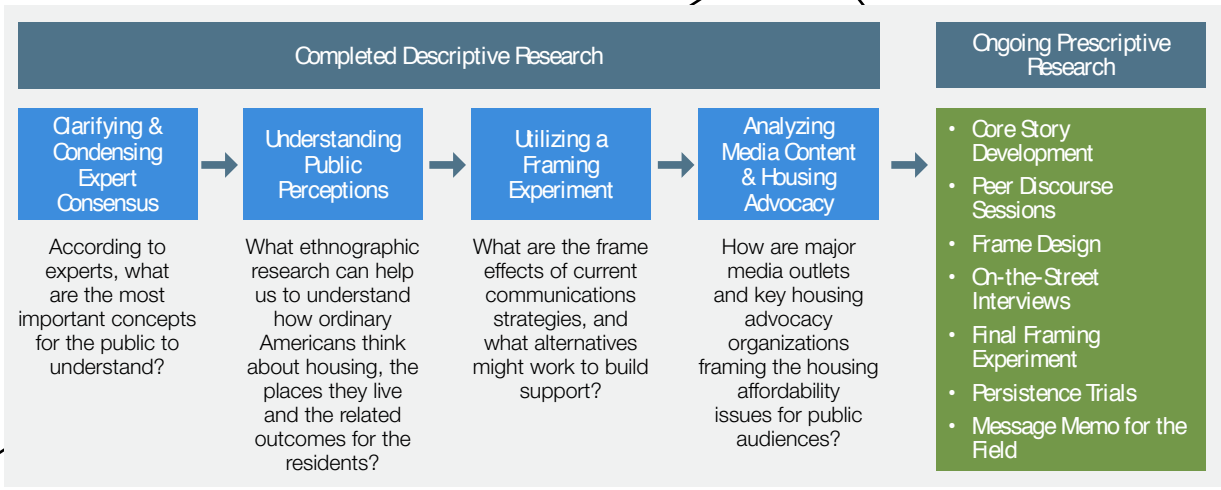
Addressing housing challenges and creating more inclusive communities will require new policies, programs and investments. Making and sustaining these changes over the long term will require engagement from a broad range of stakeholders as well as public will. The backfire effects described above limit the field's success in these key ingredients of change. We need ways of turning down the backfire and turning up public understanding of these issues. This is a precondition for generating support for necessary policies and interventions. Building public will requires both better evidence about the relative benefits of alternative solutions and also more effective ways of using this evidence to lift up stories about housing as an important shared concern.

While there are many aspects of our current messaging strategies that are backfiring, there is also evidence that these challenges can be overcome. New research commissioned by Enterprise Community Partners and conducted by the FrameWorks Institute is helping us to understand the backfire effect and is testing the effectiveness of messages aimed at increasing public engagement, policy support and understanding of housing as a shared concern.

FrameWorks researchers are using Strategic Frame Analysis®—a method pioneered more than a decade ago—to harness insight from the cognitive and behavioral sciences to create more effective messaging. FrameWorks has demonstrated that it is possible to reframe the public conversation on social issues, from climate change to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education to economic mobility and more. FrameWorks tests messages for their effects on public attitudes, knowledge, policy preferences and willingness to engage. A frame "works" when it builds support for multiple aspects of a comprehensive, evidence-based policy agenda.

Until now, housing has not benefitted from this kind of analysis. The research described here is thus a unique opportunity for the sector to navigate around these backfire effects and use frames that expand public support for housing policy and systems change. The research examines how frames influence thinking and support on a range of progressive housing policy issues, creating equity issues between renters and homeowners; encouraging economic development; addressing economic disparities; developing mixed-income communities; making connections between affordable housing and healthy housing; and more.

The research is divided into two phases—descriptive and prescriptive. The descriptive phase allows us to see how public thinking shapes the effects of our current messaging and explains why our messaging consistently backfires. This part of the research uses cognitive interviews, media content analysis and quantitative studies to fully assess what advocates are up against. The second phase of research is prescriptive and tests potential reframes against existing messages to identify frames that increase support for our efforts to reshape the public conversation. This prescriptive work includes both qualitative and quantitative methods. In particular, the research relies on a series of experimental surveys with a nationally representative sample of the American public as well as with several subsamples that allow us to draw particular insights from a wide range of demographic groups. We are currently in the middle of this prescriptive research but are already harvesting insights that can help the field improve its current efforts.



What Does the Research to Date Tell Us About How to Avoid Backfires?

While we are still in the prescriptive phases of the research, we have much to offer the field in terms of initial insights. Here we highlight a few of those insights in hopes that they can be useful to advocates actively engaged in efforts to build public will around housing and community development.

Recommendation #1: Tell stories that balance the people, places and systems perspectives.

Ideas of individualism (self-makingness, personal responsibility and mobility) consistently backfire and shut down the broader perspectives that are necessary to see the benefits of many of the most important solutions advocated by housing and community development advocates. Unfortunately, individualism is easily cued by telling stories that focus narrowly on an individual or family experiencing housing challenges. While telling stories that put a "human face" on these issues is certainly good practice, if such portrayals are not balanced by a focus on the places, environments and systems that should be functioning to support "self-makingness," it becomes easy for the public to individualize housing problems and hard to see how public policies and programs can make improvements. Our research suggests the need for more balanced messages. Advocates need to tell stories that position people, places AND systems as active characters. Adding place-based context, in particular, can help position housing challenges and their effects in alignment with *where* those challenges are occurring and *where* interventions might be usefully employed or targeted. Broadening our messaging in this way provides the public with needed practice in thinking about how places and systems, in addition to individual efforts, shape how well or poorly our communities function.

Recommendation #2: Don't directly contest the public assumptions about mobility, consumer choice and personal responsibility. Instead explain the role of systems in shaping outcomes for people and the communities in which they live.

Stories about choice and effort make it hard to think about housing as anything more than an individual concern or to see how policy plays a role is shaping individual "choices." However, directly refuting these ideas is unproductive and can backfire, further reinforcing these ideas. Instead of telling people that individual choice is *not* the driving factor behind housing affordability issues, advocates should develop illustrative stories that show people the ways in which public policies shape the problems that individuals experience and play a leading role in addressing these problems.

Recommendation #3: Tell a "Story of Us" rather than a "Story of Them."

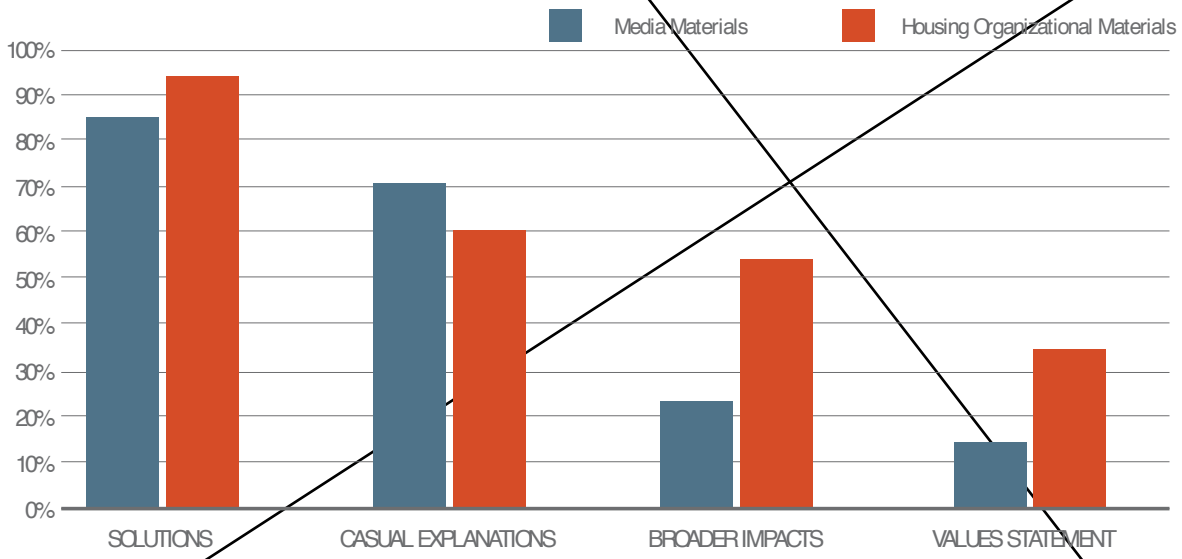
Thinking in terms of separate fates or of housing as an individual-level issue is easy for people to do. But these ways of thinking allow people to tune out housing issues because they don't see their connection to or stake in the issue. The best remedy is to consistently widen the lens and tell a bigger story—one that makes it clear that housing issues have broader impacts for everybody. In so doing, it is key not just to make the *problems* collective (that we are all negatively impacted when quality affordable housing is in short supply) but to also make it clear that there are collective *benefits* in addressing housing affordability issues.

Across a wide range of issues, we have found that messages that lead with values (like prosperity and ingenuity) more consistently position our concerns as collective problems with collective benefits. Values help people to get "up and over" the issues of *Separate Fates* and to see the solutions housing advocates pose as benefitting everybody (rather than "those people"). This values-based messaging allows us to tell a bigger story—a story about how housing affects all of "us" rather than a "story of them." Values can be especially important as housing advocates often need to gain support for policies and programs that are targeted to less influential constituents—people who are poor or homeless, people of color, seniors and others. Without values-based messaging, housing advocates will continue to face opposition because people have difficulty seeing their stake in our efforts to bring housing reforms.

Recommendation #4: Bring the connection between housing and other issues into sharper focus.

When communicating about housing, be sure to make the case that housing affects all of us and also that housing intersects with almost every other social issue and outcome, from education and health to employment and public safety. Housing and community development advocates often miss the opportunity to broaden the audience when we fail to connect housing with other issues. Our research found that the field does use this "broader impacts" frame—but not often enough to shape public debate (see the chart below). As a result, this point is largely absent from media coverage of affordable housing issues. Connecting housing to other issues allows housing advocates to align with advocates for education, health, labor and other issues and expand and unite the movement. The latter is incredibly important if we are to raise the salience of housing on the nation's policy agenda and create a more favorable policy climate for expanding housing affordability policies, programs and investments.

What We Already Know From the Research:
Frequency of Key Narrative in Media & Housing Industry Materials



Source: O'Neil, M., Volmert, D., Kendall-Taylor, N. (2016). Not Telling the Whole Story: Media and Organizational Discourse about Affordable Housing. FrameWorks Institute.

Recommendation #5: Help people connect the causes and effects of housing insecurity.

Some of the housing message backfires result from the public's lack of understanding about how housing works: *How is the housing supply determined? What does it mean to say housing is "affordable"? What is "quality" housing? What should be done to address issues of affordability?* Again, this lack of understanding is entirely understandable, as the answers to these questions can be complex and technical.

FrameWorks research shows that providing a short, clear explanation of the cause and effect of housing insecurity increases support for policies and programs aimed at housing affordability. While current housing messages expend a great deal of effort in establishing the problem, these messages would be more powerful with stronger explanations of ***why*** this is happening or ***how*** the problem would be affected by alternative policies.

For example, we tested the following language, which has positive effects on issue understanding and policy support:

"Quality rental homes are incredibly scarce and breathtakingly expensive, yet wages are stuck in place. In recent years, tight standards for mortgage loans and high home prices have made it impossible for many people to buy homes, causing more people to become renters. Large numbers of renters and a scarce supply of rental housing have driven up rents. Rent has increased but wages for low- and middle-income households have not, forcing more families to spend large portions of their incomes on housing and leaving less money for other needs, like nutritious food, good health care and quality child care. To make sure people can get decent housing at reasonable costs, we need to take steps to fix these problems with the housing market."

Advocates need to consistently advance a clear, evidence-based, and "sticky" explanation that pinpoints the sources of rising housing problems and connects them to actionable changes in public policy. Failing to explain the causes and effects of housing insecurity—a key "plot" element in the story about housing—allows the public to "fill in the blanks" about underlying causes with familiar, but unproductive, explanations. These include the beliefs that housing problems are the result of people's failure to take responsibility for their lives or for their choices, or of immovable and mysterious market forces that are beyond anyone's control. These beliefs have a powerful effect on public thinking about housing: people struggle to understand and support progressive alternatives.

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Messaging Frame:
Where You Live Affects You

The places where we live shape our lives and our health. Our communities and neighborhoods affect our health in important ways. When people's homes are near parks and bike paths, exercise is easier. When people live near grocery stores where good food is available, it's easier to eat healthy. Things within our homes, like lead, mold, and other toxins can make us sick. And when housing is really expensive, it makes it hard to afford to go to the doctor, join sports leagues, or eat well, which harms our health.

Recommendation #6: Make it clear that where you live affects you.

FrameWorks researchers also found that framing housing using a place-based frame was able to broaden the public conversation about housing. In particular, the idea that "where you live affects you" helped people to see outcomes as being shaped by aspects of the surrounding built environment. Moreover, this frame helped people understand the connections between specific features of housing and specific outcomes. Perhaps most important, this frame made people less apt to blame poor outcomes (like poor health and poor housing conditions) on individuals and more likely to see how community-level factors shape health—increasing the visibility of systems and policy solutions.

Recommendation #7: It's okay to raise challenges of the past, but focus on the kinds of change that lead to better outcomes.

Recent Supreme Court decisions are giving air to discussions of the importance of fair housing and energizing advocates who work on housing as a social justice issue. Some of the discussion and energy focuses on the deep historical connections between policy, systems and segregation. While policy has long played a major role in creating and then perpetuating patterns of housing segregation, there is evidence to suggest that, as a communication strategy, this social analysis may not be the best way to shift public thinking and build support for fair housing policy. There is a strong belief among the public that discrimination is both a thing of the past (that racism has been eliminated through legal reform) and that where it still exists, it lies in the hearts of "a few bad apples." Both of these perspectives impede productive engagement with policies designed to address discrimination at a systems level.

While it is important to recognize and explain how the policies of the past have had a deleterious impact on the racial, ethnic and economic housing issues of today, these subjects are unlikely to be the most effective ways of starting communications nor the best subject matter on which to focus messages that are meant to expand public support. Instead, advocates should hone in on the ways in which enacting reforms today helps us better address problems and improve outcomes, with a specific focus on the ways in which fairer and more inclusive housing benefits everyone in society.

Recommendation #8: Use robust examples that show how new housing policies worked.

Housing and community development advocates have no shortage of solutions to share and are successful in getting them into the media coverage (see chart on page 14). The problem is that these solutions are often offered without explanation or concrete examples that show how an action leads to better outcomes.

Without explanation or explanatory examples, pointing to policies, solutions and needed programs will be met with a general sense of pessimism about the prospects for meaningful change on housing and community development issues. To begin to address this pessimism, advocates should continue to get solutions into the discourse but also move beyond description and develop short, crisp explanations and examples that help people see *how actions work to improve outcomes*. FrameWorks research shows that the challenge is not to convince the public that the system is broken, but rather to show people that it can and must be fixed and how this can be done. This is a particularly important recommendation because of the way in which the public casts rising costs as an inevitable reality of the housing marketplace and adopts highly pessimistic attitudes about the possibility of improvement (especially where government is framed as a primary change agent). People need to understand that fairer, healthier and more affordable housing is possible, and they need to see the potential of specific strategies to achieve these outcomes.

Recommendation #9: Avoid leading with or over-relying on the terms "housing" or "affordable housing."

Our research shows that people have problematic associations with the terms "housing" and "affordable housing." When asked what "housing" meant to them, participants responded in ways that were structural and basic (e.g., housing is "four walls and roof") or descriptive (e.g., housing is "a place to lay my head" or "a place to live"). Some associated the term "housing" with public and subsidized housing—the worst and most unproductive associations from a communications perspective. These conceptions are very narrow and often racialized. Without explanation, these associations limit public thinking about the importance of affordable housing, the importance of quality (and healthy) housing, the ways in which housing is connected to other issues, and most importantly, options for change. While it is not possible to completely avoid using the terms "housing" or "affordable housing," we recommend using language and strategies that broaden the idea of housing beyond these basic, narrow and unproductive associations. For example, it is more effective to talk about how much a "home" means to individuals or families than it is to talk about housing. Even better, provide examples of how deeply people are affected (in both positive and negative ways) by what surrounds them. In short, we advise against leading communications with or relying heavily on the terms "housing" or "affordable housing." Instead, whenever possible, develop alternative language and examples to help people understand underlying concepts and avoid cueing powerful (and unproductive) associations with these terms.

Recommendation #10: Widen the public's view of who is responsible for taking action and resolving outcomes.

Be careful to handle the role of government very skillfully and to widen the range of local and national actors (beyond government) who can affect change and bear responsibility for moving reforms. The public can see that government bears some responsibility for improving outcomes for people as well as that government has a role to play in regulating the rental market. However, they also view government intervention as inefficient, ineffective, and in most cases, counter-productive. This is true across a wide range of social issues, but it is especially true when it comes to housing. That's because people see housing as shaped by free-market principles and as a consumer good. As a result, when housing advocates advocate for policy reforms that rely exclusively on government as partners or when they invoke the pivotal role of government early on in the messaging, it has the impact of turning people away, cueing pessimism about our potential to meaningfully improve outcomes.

In lieu, we need to position government as one of many partners in our reform efforts. We need to show how public policies can effectively address housing affordability issues and make it clear that a wide range of stakeholders—including those in the public and private sectors, nonprofits and charities—bear responsibility for enacting such solutions. Instead of leading with government as the problem or as the primary actor, emphasize the broad array of actors and how they collectively (working in unison or separately) bear responsibility for reform. As we widen the range of stakeholders and actors, it also allows us to position a wider array of solutions: zoning, land trusts, alternative models of development, assisted housing and more. Embedding the discussion of solutions in a broad narrative that explains the shortage of quality, affordable housing and lays out the ways in which it can be addressed by a wide range of local and national actors gives our advocacy efforts more credibility and positions as broad a range of solutions as possible.

Conclusions

FrameWorks research provides new evidence and practical recommendations for how housing and community development advocates can begin to engage the public and build public support and political will to address housing issues. The research described here identifies the ways that our current messaging is backfiring and explains why our communications frequently have unintended effects. Most importantly, it puts forward a set of recommendations that will enable us to bring more firepower to our efforts to reshape the public conversation about these important issues.

As social scientists who study social movements, we know that progressive social change requires a wide range of tools. We also know that framing and effective messaging—especially when they bring together disparate groups to pursue common goals—are critical. Our research casts doubt on the effectiveness of many of our common "go-to" communications and framing strategies. Individualism and consumerism run deep in public thinking about housing issues. We are daunted by these findings—but undeterred by and even optimistic about the potential of alternative narratives to advance community development and housing issues. We are confident about the frames that are emerging from this work and eager to continue to subject these communication strategies to rigorous testing. When completed (in the spring of 2017), this research will point to frames—and indeed an overarching communications strategy—that can lift support for quality, affordable housing.

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Acknowledgments

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About the FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multimethod research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonproift sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.FrameWorksInstitute.org.

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