A GUIDE TO TALKING ABOUT POVERTY AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY IN AMERICA

One key goal of the Poverty and Economic Mobility in America convenings (hosted by Ad Council Edge in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) is to build greater understanding of economic mobility and poverty within the advertising and media industries.

One way to do that is to reframe the language we use in a way that:

+ Honors the dignity and uniqueness of every person and their potential.
+ Reframes poverty from a story about personal failure to one about structural inequities and lack of resources.

This guide is designed to help you think about the language and words you use to inform your future projects and creative work.

EXISTING NARRATIVES ON POVERTY

When thinking about new narratives, it’s important to understand the existing narrative and why they’re so harmful. Most of the existing narratives blame people in poverty for their condition, reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, undermine support for needed anti-poverty programs and policies—or do all of these things. Creating a context for social change requires changing these narratives.

WHAT THE NARRATIVE SAYS OR SIGNALS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why does poverty exist?</th>
<th>Who is to blame for it?</th>
<th>What should be done?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meritocracy</td>
<td>Lack of effort by people in poverty</td>
<td>The individual in poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bootstraps</td>
<td>Personal weakness and lack of grit among people in poverty</td>
<td>The individual in poverty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pathology of Black Urban Poverty</td>
<td>The “bad culture” of urban Black communities</td>
<td>Black people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfair System</td>
<td>Our economic system unfairly benefits some while failing others</td>
<td>Elites who rigged the system, or the source of poverty is unspecified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic (recessive)</td>
<td>Poverty is a natural part of society</td>
<td>No one. It’s just the way things are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart is from Talking About Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories from FrameWorks. For the full report, click here.
So when taking care to avoid harmful narratives on poverty (as outlined above), what narratives should be used? Truthfully, as FrameWorks notes in Talking About Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories, there is less consensus around counter-narratives. In part, this is because there is less research that has tested how new narratives affect people’s perceptions of poverty and people living in poverty and support for anti-poverty programs and policies. However, the below counter-narratives are a good place for storytellers to start when developing language or initiatives.

**+ THE SYSTEMS NARRATIVE**
This target narrative takes the most productive existing narrative — Unfair System — and expands it to provide a more comprehensive account of the collective choices that cause and perpetuate poverty and the systemic solutions that are needed to address it.

> Poverty is a product of our choices as a society. Through our collective decisions, we have designed an economic system that produces poverty. By changing policies and institutions, we can redesign the system, change the outcomes it produces, and solve poverty.

**+ THE HUMANITY NARRATIVE**
This target narrative is based on the experiences and humanity of people experiencing poverty. It may function to counter stereotypes that flatten and belittle people in poverty by providing rounded and compassionate portraits of them.

> People experiencing poverty are real people who confront enormous challenges with grit, creativity, love, and humor. They are elders and children, veterans and the disabled … they are our family, friends, and neighbors. Faced with difficult choices and operating under unfair constraints, they do remarkable, inspiring things.

**+ THE SOLIDARITY NARRATIVE**
This target narrative integrates ideas of racial and economic inequalities with appeals to solidarity across racial difference as an animating source of systemic change. With its focus on how economic systems and racism are intertwined, this narrative aims to dismantle the Pathology of Black Urban Poverty narrative and spotlight the racism at the heart of our economic system, calling for a united response.

> We need to join together across racial differences and stand up against systemic injustices. Working people — whether Black, white, or brown — are hurt by systems that only help the rich. By coming together and not letting them divide us we can achieve a better future.

Citation: Talking About Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories from FrameWorks. For the full report, click here.
**HOW PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT POVERTY**

These are four audience segments identified by Harmony Labs of 2,600 Americans (August, 2020). The researchers grouped participants into these four audience segments based on how people view who lives in poverty and why:

+ **People Power:** Community-minded, politically engaged, and ready to fight for system reform to solve social issues like poverty.

+ **If You Say So:** Independent realists who know the system is broken but are skeptical that there are real solutions to society’s problems.

+ **Tough Cookies:** Family-first rule followers who believe that — while the system may be broken in America — hard work can still create success.

+ **Don’t Tread on Me:** Conservative, achievement-oriented, and strong believers that equal opportunity already exists in the United States.

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**PEOPLE POWER**

“We have to liberate ourselves from the status quo. It’s time to live up to our ideals, especially for the marginalized and oppressed. All kinds of people coming together in community can fix the system. This goes for nearly every problem, not just poverty.”

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**IF YOU SAY SO**

“It’s complicated. Politicians lie, cheat, and steal — corporations too. The system can’t be trusted. We have to look out for ourselves, here and now. Why not have fun doing it? I wish I could solve poverty, but a lot of people suck, and there’s no way the system is going to change anytime soon.”

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**TOUGH COOKIES**

“We play by the rules, just like our parents. We learned to treat others right, and that family comes first. With a little faith and some hard work, there’s no reason this country’s problems can’t be solved.”

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**DON’T TREAD ON ME**

“Everyone’s got the same shot at making it. Race just isn’t a factor. We work hard for what we have. Our boys in blue protect that. The mainstream media wants you to believe otherwise, but, with blood, sweat, and tears, anyone can achieve the American Dream.”

For more details on the research, visit Narrative Observatory.
LANGUAGE AND MESSAGE FRAMING CONSIDERATIONS

+ **Focus on systems not the individual**: Many stories about poverty tend to blame people, not systems, by portraying low-income people as lazy or inherently flawed. The reality is that millions fight heroically to live because poverty is close to inevitable for low-wage workers and their children.

+ **Always keep the human person at the center** of any description or depiction of poverty. It’s better to say “people living in poverty” versus “the poor.”

+ **Be respectful of people’s individual stories** in a way that avoids stereotypes and judgments. This often requires a deeper level of engagement such as extra conversations with people or more research or reading.

+ **Avoid stereotypes and clichés** that imply judgment, like “welfare queen”, “inner-city neighborhoods” or “minorities”, which imply a lesser status. These phrases racially demonize communities of color and play into stereotypes and prejudices. They also confer blame on people, not systems.

+ **Avoid easy generalizations** such as the “urban” or “rural” poor. Instead, use phrasing like “an area suffering from poverty.” Every person and place suffering from poverty has a unique story that is constantly evolving. These generalizations also tend to be racially coded and shape our ideas of who “deserves” society’s compassion.

+ **Be as specific as possible** in order to avoid stereotypes and generalizations that demean people. Every human life is a complicated mix of triumphs and setbacks, which may include some periods of poverty. Use tangible examples that illustrate a person’s experience (i.e. struggling to make ends meet, choosing between paying for rent or medications, scraping by each month) rather than abstract statements (i.e. experiencing systemic deprivation or living below the federal poverty line).

+ **Emphasize our common humanity and the normalcy** of people’s lives, even if they are suffering from poverty. People living in poverty are like everyone else—they have hopes, dreams and fears. They also have birthday parties, barbecues and family reunions. Since most upper-income Americans are unlikely to have neighbors – or classmates - who are poor we tend to separate ourselves from people in poverty and fall into a belief that “this could never happen to me.”

+ **Think carefully about how you approach a story and the messages you’re sending to people with limited incomes.** Ask yourselves these questions: Am I making class-based assumptions? Am I questioning the structural causes of poverty (vs blaming the individual)? Is this approach or the language I’m using going to offend, demean or be relatable to people who are currently experiencing poverty or have experienced it in the past? Am I covering this topic as though lower-income individuals are reading, listening or watching? Am I treating lower-income people as though they are an equally important part of my audience?

+ **Avoid associating poverty with certain habits or lifestyle choices** (i.e. personal habits like smoking, coffee or soda drinking, watching certain kinds of TV shows, or food choices like fast food)
LANGUAGE DO’S

+ People/person currently living in poverty
+ Area suffering from poverty/deprivation/disinvestment
+ Cyclical poverty/generational poverty
+ Food/housing insecure
+ Economically fragile community
+ Economically mobile
+ Individual narrative
+ Living in poverty because of...
+ Entrepreneurial
+ Hard-working
+ Resilient/determined
+ Structural reasons for poverty (blaming systems, not people)
+ Barriers to generational wealth creation

LANGUAGE DON’T’S

+ Poor people
+ Minorities
+ Color blind
+ Welfare queen
+ Disadvantaged
+ Less fortunate
+ If they’re willing to work hard
+ Weakness of character
+ Winner and losers
+ Poverty-ridden
+ Cheap, trashy
+ Poor white trash
+ Ghetto
+ Victim

GUIDELINES FOR COPYWRITING

When writing copy that tells a story about poverty, you have the opportunity to recast societal narratives in a positive way that reflects the possibility of economic mobility or addresses the structural reasons for poverty. We recommend using language and images that highlight the humanity and agency of individuals and avoid stereotypes and clichés.

When telling a story about a person living in poverty, ask yourself these questions:

+ Does the story only focus on an individual’s negative situation right now? If so, how can you be more specific? What circumstances shaped their path, and what are they hopeful about for the future?

+ Does the story depict a cliched situation of people or poverty? If so, what angle can you focus on instead that highlights their unique journey?

+ Are you using stereotypes or generalizations, when referring to individuals? If so, how can you instead shine a light on your subject’s individuality? What other, more positive language can you use to describe your subjects?

+ Who is the antagonist in your story? Often, our narratives blame the individual and cast them as the villain/cause of their own suffering.
“Broken Family” / “Broken Home”  
Black families are not “broken” and do not need to be fixed. In the context of describing families facing challenges, the “broken family” term aims to ascribe blame to family structure, rather than the social structures, institutions and policies that have failed those families. This term is most frequently assigned to Black families and is part of the larger set of narratives that hold white and non-white people to different standards.

“Absentee Fathers”  
“Absentee fathers” only seem to come in one color: Black. Though there are fathers of all races and ethnicities who have a minimal presence in their children’s lives, “absentee” isn’t used to describe most of them. This racialized term uniquely targets Black fathers, inaccurately (and often purposely) signaling that they willfully abandon their children.

“Out of Wedlock”  
It would be unthinkable for journalists today to use the terms “illegitimate” or “bastard” to refer to a child born to unmarried parents, yet “out of wedlock” is no different. It’s an antiquated, sexist term that suggests that children born to unmarried parents are less valuable and less viable. “Out of wedlock” is often used to cast judgment on single mothers and is a dog-whistle that elicits racist “welfare queen” stereotypes—it is rarely applied to people of wealth and privilege.

“Thug”  
“Thug” is used to elicit stereotypes of dangerous Black male criminality and to blame Black people for social unrest and violence while publicly declaring property is more valuable than Black lives. Similar actions taken by white men are often met with compassion and calls for civil conversation, and defended as the rightful exercise of freedom. Moreover, it is often used to undermine or de-legitimize behavior among young Black men that is threatening to people in power, such as maligning protestors or those who speak out or express anger about racism. There is never a good reason for white people to use this term in the context of discussing social issues, in news coverage, or in conversations in which white people are talking about Black people, etc.

“Ghetto”  
Ghetto is a racist and classist term that has become shorthand for a poor and Black neighborhood that white people should disparage, dismiss and fear—one that government policy has had no role in creating and cannot do anything to “save.” It is a way of giving society permission to neglect or punish Black families. It should not be used by people who do not live in those communities, not even in jest or for “ironic” effect.

“Baby Mama” / “Baby Daddy”  
What’s the difference between having a “blended family” and having “baby daddies” or “baby mamas”? Typically, it’s the race of the family members. These terms have a context-specific meaning within Black culture. But when used by people who are not Black, and especially when used by white people or anyone in an official capacity (such as a newscaster) the meaning changes. These terms, which may masquerade as playful and harmless, have the effect of undermining the seriousness of a relationship or implying lack of personal responsibility, and are especially aimed at women.

“Working Class” / “Working Families”  
While other terms in this section are harmful in the ways they target Black families, this term is harmful in the way it excludes them. The image of “working class” families is one that is largely coded as “white” within the public imagination, frequently associated with rural, suburban and exurban communities. Rather than eliminating the use of this term, it is important to continue to expand its meaning, and the range of people whose image it evokes. One way to do that is to explicitly insert Black people into the narrative it carries, for instance, by talking about Black, white and other working class communities, or by talking about Black, white and other working families.

This report is based on research funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.