



## A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte Creating Causal Chains

One way to improve the public's understanding of complex social problems is to create and use causal chains. In this FrameByte, we will look at what causal chains are, how they can improve communications about social issues, and how to write them. (For more information about causal chains, please view the pre-recorded webinar at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/webinars).)

Merely presenting a particular piece of data or a list of consequences does not help people understand why the situation exists, who or what is responsible for the condition, and how to change it. Without this understanding, policy options are "hard to think." In contrast, causal chains are a communications tool that can help people see the consequences of social problems. It can help them think about who is responsible for the problem, and support solutions that are focused on structures and systems, rather than on fixing individuals. It can also build a bridge from the way of problem is understood by advocates and experts to the more limited understanding of the public.

Causal chains usually contain the following three parts: an initial factor, a final consequence, and a mediating factor, which provides the explanation that links the two. Effective causal chains should be expressed as brief, powerful explanations of causation so that the reader understands the connection among the factors. Here are some examples of typical communications, first in their original form, and re-written, incorporating causal chains.

### Example 1:

*Most uninsured children (89%) have parents in the workforce. Fewer American Indian and Alaska Native and Latino children are likely to be insured, in part because fewer of them are offered insurance through their parents' employer: 54% and 42% respectively, compared to 75% of white children, have job-based health insurance. About 60% of African American children have job-based insurance.*

This statement contains a lot of statistics about job-based health insurance, as well as an explanation about how this affects children ("fewer of them are offered insurance through their parents' employer"). It can be strengthened by linking these components together more clearly, in proper order, so that the reader can get a mental picture of the connections.

### As a Causal Chain:

*Most health care coverage for children in California is provided through job-based insurance (Initial Factor), but as fewer and fewer employers offer this insurance (Mediating Factor), American Indian, Latino and African American children*

*increasingly lack insurance although most of their parents are employed. (Final Consequence) Seventy-five percent of white children have job-based health insurance compared to 54% of American Indian, 42% of Latino and 60% of African American children.*

### **Example 2:**

*"... among those with active asthma, racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to be adversely affected by the disease. Specifically, they are more likely to have ED visits for asthma, missed school or work days due to asthma, and poorer overall self-perceived health status. Potential explanations for the disproportionate burdens of asthma in these populations include their relative lack of access to health care... [exposure] to potential indoor triggers such as environmental tobacco smoke and cockroaches inside the home."*

This statement contains a list of problems (ED visits, missing school and work, poorer health status) and a list of possible explanations (lack of access to health care, indoor triggers). What's missing by this reliance on a list of factors is the connection between facts and causes, and an understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the problem. Without these components, readers are left to their own creative explanations for disparities in asthma.

As a Causal Chain:

*"Racial and ethnic minority groups are exposed to higher levels of indoor pollution such as second-hand smoke and cockroaches (Initial Factor) because they often must live in substandard housing. (Mediating Factor) This results in more asthma attacks. (Final Consequence)*

### **Example 3:**

*In some neighborhoods, liquor stores, gas station markets and bodegas are the only convenient and affordable source of food. Often those same neighborhoods also lack safe places for families to play and be active. Streets are often unsafe for pedestrians or bicyclists, for a variety of reasons.*

This paragraph contains a list of problems, but leaves the reasons completely up to the reader. A causal chain can help direct attention to the structural factors (such as road congestion) that can be remedied through public policy.

As a Causal Chain:

*As existing roadways become increasingly congested, (Initial Factor) the ability to easily bike or walk to destinations decreases, (Mediating Factor) which leads to less physical activity among children and adults (Final Consequence).*

**Example 4:**

*The care infants experience lays a foundation of learning that influences their basic biologic functioning in terms of emotion regulation, sleep and wake patterns, attentional processes, perceptions of self/other, and ultimately psychosocial functioning, interpersonal relationships, and competence.*

In this example, all of the elements of a causal chain are present, but they are not linked together in a causal way. It becomes a lengthy list of factors, with little understanding of how these outcomes develop.

**As A Causal Chain:**

*Children's basic biological functioning is determined by the kind of early care they receive. (Initial Factor) Children who don't get proper early care have difficulties with emotional regulation, sleep and wake patterns, etc. (Mediating Factor) When these essential developmental stages are disrupted, it affects psychosocial functioning, interpersonal relationships, and competence later in life. (Final Consequence)*

Causal chains work to connect the dots between causes and consequences, and they work especially well when people are struggling to connect conditions to human actions. They are a simple and extremely effective tool that can offer the public a richer and deeper understanding of how social problems arise and where the solutions lie.

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