



A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte Sharing Solutions

One of the most effective communications strategies for advocates is to help the public understand that we have the ability to solve many pressing social problems. However, it is remarkable how much of our communication is spent describing every aspect of a problem in great detail, trotting out statistic after statistic accompanied by memorable case stories, without discussing solutions in detail. Often, when solutions are presented, they are highly rhetorical and abstract, in contrast to the vivid and concrete picture we paint of the problem. This leaves the public feeling that social problems are overwhelming and unsolvable. This FrameByte will look at a study of how Americans overestimate common social problems affecting children, and discuss why it's important to tell stories of successful public solutions that yielded public benefits.

In 2003, ChildTrends published a research brief on a survey of American's beliefs about some common social problems and trends affecting children. (The brief, "How Children Are Doing: The Mismatch Between Public Perception and Statistical Reality" is available at www.childtrends.org/Files/PublicPerceptionsRB.pdf). This brief offers a cautionary message to advocates who want the public to understand and support their issues.

Survey respondents greatly over-estimated the extent of child poverty and lack of health insurance, and most assumed that problems facing children have grown worse, contrary to the actual data. The single area where people were correct – the increase in overweight children – was the one negative trend included in the survey.

Obviously, both the media and issue advocates have been quite successful at convincing people that children face dire problems. It is worth considering if we need to continue to expend large amounts of time and energy continuing to make this case. The real, and more challenging, task is to help people understand the factors that contribute to these problems and what policy solutions are available.

Survey Question	Most Common Answer (% Who Selected It)	Actual Answer
As far as you know, what percent of children are living in poverty?	30% (49%)	15%
What percent of all children, do you think, have no health insurance?	30% (67%)	10%
Since welfare reform was passed in 1996, do you think the number of children receiving welfare has increased or decreased?	Increased (40%)	Decreased
In the last 5 years, do you think then percent of children living Single-Parent Families increased, decreased or remained about the same?	Increased (76%)	Remained the Same
Over the past 10 years, has the percentage of teens who commit violent crimes increased, decreased or remained about the same?	Increased (66%)	Decreased
During the last 5 years, do you think the teenage birth rate has increased, decreased or remained about the same?	Increased (45%)	Decreased
In the past 10 years, has the percentage of school-age children who are overweight increased, decreased or remained about the same?	Increased (76%)	Increased

It's not as if advocates lack solutions to many pressing social issues. In the last two decades, social science and public health research has advanced significantly. Many social policy solutions have been tested and evaluated, at least in small-scale interventions, and in many domains, such as reducing child poverty or decreasing births to adolescents, there is an emerging consensus among experts about effective strategies to address the problem. Numerous communities have demonstrated successful efforts to improve vexing social problems, including crime and violence, youth substance abuse, and school readiness among low-income children. There are numerous organizations and websites devoted to disseminating best practices to improve child well-being and health.

We need to be telling the public about these solutions. However, because the belief that social problems are intractable is so entrenched and reinforced, it is not enough to simply share contrary data. The facts will not be believed because they run counter to the public's deeply held perceptions. FrameWorks research has demonstrated time and time again that through appealing to Level One values, making effective use of simplifying models, and paying attention to other frame elements such as tone and messenger, advocates can tell persuasive stories of efficacy and problem-solving.

Finally, although we have been taught to present the solution after the problem, FrameWorks research strongly suggests that, to counter the default assumption that there is no solution to entrenched social problems, the way to engage people is to announce a solution and then back into problem definition. Here's an example of how that works for health care system reform:

“We know how to fix our broken health care infrastructure. We have an opportunity now to build a modern, 21st century system where everyone is included. In the last 50 years the United States has built a series of modern networks that are essential to our economy and our quality of life – our power grid, phone systems, water systems, interstate highways, and the Internet. But with health coverage we're stuck in the 1940s, because we never built a modern Health Coverage Infrastructure. Instead, we still have primarily job-based insurance, with which has become an increasingly hit-or-miss, inefficient and unreliable approach. We have the equivalent of scattered wells, individual generators, and county roads but no Health Coverage Infrastructure we can rely on, no system for helping people stay healthy.”

Most of us remember the story of Chicken Little, who one too many times told the other animals, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” Of course, eventually, they ceased to listen to yet another prediction of crisis. This is the story that we tell too often in our publications, speeches and media interviews, and it fails to help the public understand the source of the problem and its possible solutions.

There are so many better stories to tell. For example, an excellent and under-told story is found in the children's book *Stone Soup*. In this story, a community works together to create a delicious soup, everyone making a small contribution to create something wonderful together. This is the kind of story that Americans desperately need to hear, and the story that we can learn how to tell.

Diane Benjamin, for the FrameWorks Institute
June, 2007