Moving Toward Collective Health and Prosperity Means Putting Hunger and Poverty in the Rearview Mirror

An evidence-based strategic framing guide created for Share Our Strength

FRAME WORKS

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Introduction

The terrain of public thinking about hunger and poverty, and especially about the root causes of these social ills, is fraught with unhelpful assumptions and associations—including harmful, dehumanizing stereotypes. Fortunately, certain helpful public perceptions and widely shared values exist as well, though these tend to require a bit more coaxing. As communicators, we need to tread carefully, considering the impact of not only what we say but how we say it, and even what we leave unsaid.

This strategic framing guide draws on a deep reservoir of culture and communications research by the FrameWorks Institute, covering a range of relevant social issues from food access and healthy housing to parenting and racial justice. The recommendations that follow offer communicators and social change advocates an evidence-based framing strategy for productively shifting cultural mindsets and changing the public conversation about hunger and poverty.

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Recommendations

1. Give people a clear vision to rally around and work toward

The basic idea:

A grim fact about hunger and poverty in the United States is that these topics are highly stigmatized and also racialized.[1] Just mentioning them can easily and almost instantaneously evoke a sense of "us versus them" or even more pernicious sentiments characterized by anti-Blackness and blame. Even among the most sympathetic audiences, talking about big social issues like hunger and poverty can lead people to feel discouraged and overwhelmed, which in turn makes them want to tune out or change the channel. To productively engage the public and keep them engaged, we need to give them a sense that change is possible by providing a clear and detailed vision of the future we're striving for.

How it works:

Through intentional language choices and by adopting a tone that balances urgency with possibility, we can ease the public's feelings of fatalism. Strategically framed communications can help people see that when we roll up our sleeves and work together, even our biggest problems can be solved. Moreover, shifting the focus from what we're up against to what we're fighting for disrupts negative patterns in thinking about the people and groups who are disproportionately impacted by hunger and poverty. Positive portrayals of people of all races in all regions of the country actually weaken racist stereotypes and chip away at social stigma.[2]

Ways to implement the recommendation:

— **Wherever possible, tilt the spotlight away from the particular hardships that people experiencing hunger and poverty face, and shine it instead on the common aspirations we all share.** For example, shift the focus from poverty to prosperity, from hunger to health, and from the vulnerability of certain groups to opportunities for system redesign. High-profile text, such as titles, headings, pull-out quotes or statistics, and photo captions, as well as imagery, offer prime opportunities to reposition the emphasis.[3]

Instead of this:	Try this:
We are committed to ending hunger and poverty in the United States and around the world.	We are committed to building a society where nutritious food is readily available in every community, wages and incomes allow working families to thrive, and all children grow up healthy and strong.

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— **Appeal to deeply held and widely shared cultural values—like broadly resonant commitments to ensure *fairness* and exercise *ingenuity*.** Invoking these cherished principles has the potential to inspire and engage a broad public base.[4]

Instead of this:	Try this:
2.4 million rural households struggle with hunger, and 23 percent of rural children are poor compared to 18 percent in cities. Eighty-six percent of counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity are in rural areas.	Whether a child is raised in a city, on a ranch, or in a mountain town shouldn't determine whether or not their developing bodies are well nourished. Improving access to healthy food in rural areas is a matter of basic fairness.

— **Avoid the temptation to directly refute harmful assumptions and ugly stereotypes.** Addressing them by name only reinforces their prominence and amplifies their impact.

Instead of this:	Try this:
Being poor is not a choice, but the majority of the country still seems to believe it is. The reality is that even full-time employment is not enough to escape from poverty when it's a minimum wage job. And 75 percent of minimum wage workers are women.	The current minimum wage is well below what's required to raise and support a family, and 75 percent of minimum wage workers are women. This leaves a majority of single mothers, including those who are employed full time, with no good options.

2. Use the metaphor of a *Transportation Grid* to help people grasp the bigger "system"

The basic idea:
Hunger and poverty tend to be conceived of narrowly as problems that concern poor people. Relevant communications easily evoke images of individual trauma, unhealthy living conditions, and personal misery. All of this enables a widespread attitude that "It's 'their' problem, and doesn't involve me." To expand public thinking about hunger and poverty as complex social issues that involve everyone, we need to widen our lens and bring in the larger context to which we all belong.

How it works:
Metaphors are powerful framing tools. They can help translate difficult concepts, explain complex processes, and even activate new patterns in thinking. In this case, by invoking the metaphor of a *Transportation Grid*—a network of roads, barriers, toll booths, and fueling stations—we can help people appreciate that food and other resources are essential public goods that require an interconnected and robust infrastructure.[5]

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Ways to flex the metaphor:

— **Highlight the importance of easy access, well-maintained highways and favorable road conditions to ensure everyone can get where they're going.** (Note: Resist the urge to focus on individual drivers' actions.)

> School meals **fuel** better health and education outcomes for kids by allowing all families to **get more mileage** from their food budgets. In particular, they **propel** single-parent households **to go farther** on one income, **paving the way** for full-time caregivers to be able to put away savings or work on **accelerating** their own careers.

— **Describe how barriers and roadblocks can cause widespread disruption.**

> Federal nutrition programs like SNAP and WIC were designed to keep families with young children **moving forward** even after hitting **bumps in the road** or **unexpected detours**. The process for enrolling in these programs, however, can present its own **obstacles**, like English language requirements or even fear of deportation for immigrant families.

FrameWorks research shows that several similar metaphors effectively expand public thinking on closely related social issues. For example:

The *Power Grid* metaphor[6] helps explain the geographic causes of hunger in the United States.

The *Solid Tracks* metaphor[7] builds public understanding of the coordinated systems of support required for children's well-being.

The *Navigating Waters* metaphor[8] expands thinking about the social context in which parents operate.

The *Overloaded Truck* metaphor[9] builds understanding about the many responsibilities that weigh on caregivers and can strain families.

The *GPS Navigation* metaphor[10] explains how community-level data can inform public policies and decision-making.

The *Public Structures* metaphor[11] sparks productive thinking about the role of government in supporting thriving communities.

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— **Explain that experiences of racism can "overload" families.**[12] The public understands that raising children under the best of conditions is hard work and an enormous responsibility. Stretch this idea to talk about the effects of racism as an additional weight that families of color must carry.

> Just as a truck **can only bear so much weight before it stops moving forward**, challenging life circumstances can **stall** families' abilities to provide the supports children need to grow, develop, and thrive. The effects of racism **add to the load** that families of color **must bear**. Discrimination in employment and lending add to financial strain, housing insecurity, and hunger. Racial stereotypes and outdated policies make it more likely that families of color are scrutinized and sanctioned by child protection agencies, immigration agencies, and other systems, **piling on** the fear and stress of family separation. These are just some of the system-level factors that shape **the rules of the road** for families of color. We have an obligation to **offload these weights** and stop them from being added in the future— and to support families and communities who are already **burdened** by them.

3. Highlight underlying causes of social problems (not just symptoms)

The basic idea:
The American public struggles to understand or even perceive the root causes of hunger and poverty. They see a person who can't pay the bills or get enough to eat and wonder, "*Why doesn't that person make better decisions?*" Until the public has a better grasp of the structural factors that lead to these social ills, the people who are most directly impacted and most severely harmed will also continue to be unjustly blamed.

How it works:
Pointing to the underlying structural causes of hunger and poverty can help people better grasp the true nature and scale of these systemic problems—including who or what holds the power and the responsibility to fix them.

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Ways to implement the recommendation:

— **Be explicit and specific about the social conditions and policy decisions that allow poverty and hunger to persist.**

Instead of this:	Try this:
To truly end childhood hunger, we must effectively address its root cause—poverty— and open pathways to sustainable family economic mobility.	To truly end childhood hunger and poverty, we must address its root causes—from the high costs of housing and transportation to the inaccessibility of healthy foods.

— **Indicate who's responsible, not just who's affected. Focus less on what certain people need and more on the structural improvements we should all support and contribute to.** Use a broad and generous "we" to indicate that we all have a role to play.

Instead of this:	Try this:
To be financially stable, single mothers need increased income to meet the expenses of raising children.	To increase financial stability for families, we've got to bring income levels up to par with the expenses of raising children.

— **Connect the dots between causes and consequences to tee up appropriate solutions, including (first and foremost) collective actions aimed at prevention, but also targeted, short-term interventions.**

Instead of this:	Try this:
Single mothers carry responsibilities that often make it difficult or impossible to enroll in educational or training programs that involve forgoing income in the present to increase long-term income prospects. Without addressing the complex web of challenges single mothers face, many career advancement "solutions" fail to lift single mothers out of poverty.	Career advancement is staggeringly expensive in the United States. It typically requires a substantial upfront investment of time and money, even though a future payoff isn't guaranteed. As a result, it's simply not a viable option for many single mothers. We can change that through lower enrollment costs, flexible scheduling, and cash assistance.

4. Center—and explain—the concept of racism

The basic idea:

While words like "racist" and "racism" are commonly used, their meanings are often superficially understood at best. For example, the fact that racism operates at institutional, structural, and systemic levels is largely off the public's radar altogether.[13] Instead, most people narrowly understand racism interpersonally—as the animus that an individual holds in their heart or exercises through their actions against another individual of a different skin color. To broaden the public's understanding of how

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widely accepted practices, policies, and programs perpetuate and reproduce racial discrimination, and how prevailing cultural narratives legitimize it at the same time, we need to move from merely naming racism as the culprit to explaining it.

How it works:

Whereas simply asserting that racism exists does little to change people's attitudes or minds, and sometimes actually invites defensiveness or pushback instead, offering a careful explanation of how racism works can effectively deepen public understanding.

Ways to implement this recommendation:

— **Use the terminology of multiple "levels" of racism to scale up thinking.**[14]

Instead of this:	Try this:
2020 was a year that exposed racial inequities and pushed us to have serious conversations about systemic racism and the steps we must take to fight it.	2020 was a year that exposed racial inequities at the institutional, community, state, and national levels. We must take steps to address racism wherever it lives.

— **Talk about racism as a feature of the environment that kids grow up in.** Highlight the uneven impacts of policies on different places to helpfully orient public thinking about these impacts on various communities and groups.[15]

Instead of this:	Try this:
Structural racism causes a vicious cycle of economic hardship, stress, poor eating habits, and health issues. Children of color experience diabetes, obesity, and heart disease at much higher rates than white children, all of which carry costly implications in later life.	Outdated zoning policies make it difficult for grocery stores to get permits in low-income neighborhoods, which have a disproportionate number of non-white residents. As a result, kids of color are more likely than white kids to encounter junk food at corner shops and fast food chains.

— **Take care to distinguish race from racism.** Instead of simply reporting on disparities by race, which can reinforce racial stereotypes and misdirected blame, point to the problematic policies or processes that lead to disparate outcomes.

Instead of this:	Try this:
According to a recent survey, Black and Latino households have had higher rates of food insecurity during the pandemic, at 36 percent and 32 percent, respectively, versus 18 percent for white households. Food insecurity is not a new concern for communities of color as this has been an ongoing issue for decades.	The pandemic hit Black and Latino households even harder than white households, in part because it disrupted critically important programs like reduced and free school meals. As a result, pre-pandemic racial disparities in food insecurity have significantly increased.

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5. Show how partnering with people and communities can drive the needed change

The basic idea:
Many people are resigned to thinking that hunger and poverty are intractable problems: terrible and sad, but simply endemic to the human condition. Convincing the public otherwise requires more than telling, it requires showing.

How it works:
Talking about specific initiatives that have worked in the past, and naming actual policies that have had a positive impact, helps people to see that change is not only possible, but practical and feasible. It also paints a vivid picture in people's minds of the kind of society we could be, which inspires further public thinking about potential interventions we should support and conceivable community-level actions we can take.

Ways to implement this recommendation:

— **Provide concrete examples of systemic solutions and draw on real-world success stories whenever possible.**

Instead of this:	Try this:
Families from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds need access to wholesome and nutritious foods that are compatible with a wide range of lifestyles, values, customs, and traditions.	Unlike programs that aim to address hunger but overlook the cultural dimension, Operation Fish Drop delivers salmon to Yukon river villagers, providing nutritional and cultural sustenance.

— **Feature community members from directly affected groups as engaged citizens and partners in problem-solving rather than passive beneficiaries.**

Instead of this:	Try this:
Bonton Farms, located in a food desert of South Dallas with high poverty rates, is bridging the digital divide for residents by designing a mobile food-delivery platform—a phone app—that's easy to use and meets their needs.	Residents of South Dallas are helping local decision-makers and businesses identify their community's strengths and needs. They've teamed up with Bonton Farms to design an easy-to-use phone app for arranging food deliveries.

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— **Highlight supports for single mothers in particular as a powerful lever for social change.**

Instead of this:

Single mothers hold the dual roles of primary caregiver and earner, making it very challenging for them to achieve career advancement.

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Try this:

Single mothers hold the dual roles of primary earner and primary caregiver, so increasing their incomes would have double the impact for families.

Conclusion

Ending hunger and poverty in the United States and around the world is a monumental endeavor—every bit as necessary as it is ambitious. Success will require a broad coalition, a clear forward direction, and impatient persistence.

Likewise, it calls for a social justice-informed communications strategy: one that can productively shift cultural mindsets, build public understanding, and mobilize collective action. The framing recommendations presented above were created for advocates, community leaders, decision-makers, and everyone who is fighting for a healthy and prosperous future for all. By implementing them together across various contexts, organizations, issue areas, policy campaigns, and geographical regions, we can harmonize our voices, increase our volume, and amplify our impact.

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Endnotes

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About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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