

**From It to I to Us:  
A Language Analysis of Discourse on Housing**  
ASO Communications

**Introduction**

We all want to believe ourselves creatures of reason, swayed chiefly by the facts before us. But much of the cognitive process we use to formulate judgments is beyond our conscious awareness and thus outside our deliberate control. We can know only what we *think* that we think; evidence shows that a turn of phrase, the ordering of an argument or color of a graphic alters what we deem “true” and what we desire in terms of public policy.<sup>1</sup>

So, how should advocates fighting for affordable housing make their case? How do we move from reacting to the toxic frames of our opposition that relegates housing to a commodity to speaking persuasively for a progressive future where all of us have a place to call home?

To begin to answer these questions, we’ve explored how people make sense of and come to judgments about HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS, RENT, EVICTION<sup>2</sup> and related notions. These findings emerge from analysis of discourse from advocacy, opposition, social media, news media and popular entertainment. The present data set is over 1,100 tokens — unique constructions attesting to reasoning. Also included in this analysis are previous explorations into public perception of housing issues.<sup>3</sup>

Here, we proceed from the assumption that our task is to improve the conceptual terrain from which our audiences will hear arguments about our issue. As such, we’re not exploring how to advocate for a specific solution or policy intervention. Instead, this is a look at how our core arguments can be worded to most effectively prime positive associations and tamp down undesirable ones within our target audiences.

We start our exploration with a deep dive into a familiar messaging mis-step: shielding the culprits for present-day problems from view. After examining this issue in close detail, and offering correctives where possible, we move into how advocates hinder their efficacy by arguing from their opposition’s frames. Next, we interrogate the prevailing default of presenting housing as an individual or familiar concern, thereby necessarily backgrounding social harms and the need for collective action.

This document is admittedly heavy on diagnosis and light on cure – an inescapable aspect of this phase of research. Happily, the subsequent pieces of research move from this detailed examination of what falls short today (with some suggested immediate fixes) toward crafting and then empirically testing new language.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> SMALL CAPS signals a concept or frame rather than the word’s meaning in commonplace usage.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Piecing It Together*, Frameworks Institute; *More Homes, All Shapes and Sizes*, Sightline Institute; *Creating Affordable Housing Opportunities Means Talking Equity*, Tiffany Manuel and Nat Kendall-Taylor.

## Methodology

Using a variety of techniques from *cognitive linguistics*, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, we've examined how people reason, formulate judgments and come to conclusions about social and economic matters.

Principally, these conclusions emerge from *metaphor analysis*. This involves cataloging the common non-literal phrases in discourse. Noting patterns in these expressions reveals how people automatically and unconsciously make sense of complexity.<sup>4</sup> Each metaphor brings with it *entailments*, or a set of notions it highlights as "true" about a concept. Priming people with varying metaphors has been shown to alter not just how they speak but the ways they decide, unconsciously, what "ought" to be done about a given topic. We judge a metaphor's efficacy on how well it advances and amplifies what advocates wish the public would get about an issue.

For example, researchers at Stanford University showed that individuals primed with a metaphor of crime as disease (*plaguing* our communities, *spreading* around) came up with preventative solutions for crime such as after school programs and preschool for all. Conversely, subjects exposed to the metaphor of crime as opponent (*fight* crime, *beat back* homicide) thought harsher punishments were the answer.<sup>5</sup> For those working for prevention, these results suggest it best to liken crime to a disease and avoid opponent evocations. A three-strikes advocate would want to do the opposite.

Even single words can make a detectable difference in audience responses. In another study, investigators asked participants whether they'd *vote* in an upcoming election and others whether they'd *be a voter*. Where just over half of those asked about voting intended to do so, 87.5% of those asked about being a voter desired to get to the polls. Voting records showed 96% of those surveyed about being a voter actually pulled the lever.<sup>6</sup> A simple word difference from "will you vote" to "will you be a voter" is also a conceptual shift from action to identity — a shift from *what you do* to *who you are*. The words we use shape what's true for our audiences.

## Findings

We turn now to what applying these aforementioned tools to this particular language data tells us. Here, we find some common messaging missteps — visible across issue areas — and explore how these manifest and can be corrected in this particular sector. We also raise concerns that are very unique to this topic.

Specifically, we begin with an exploration of over-reliance on passive constructions. For this, we examine the tendency to frame problems without clear origins, present solutions without firm directives, and even veer into seeming to blame the very people for whom we advocate.

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<sup>4</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky, "Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning." *PloS One*, February 23, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Bryan, Greg Walton, Todd Rodgers and Carol Dweck, "Motivating Voter Turnout by Invoking the Self," *Proceeding in the National Academy of Sciences*, June 22, 2011.

## Who does what to whom?

Altering descriptions of events influence how audiences assess culpability and determine what they believe a fair outcome will be. In particular, varying verb forms between agentive (transitive) and non-agentive (intransitive) can create significant changes to audiences' judgments about real world events. In one experiment, using the infamous "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl Halftime Show in 2004, researchers found that respondents who read that a named agent (Justin Timberlake) "tore" another's (Janet Jackson's) clothing attributed blame and sought to levy at least 30 percent more in indecency fines than those who read a description that said "the clothing was torn." This is especially telling because all the participants first watched the same video footage, which clearly shows Timberlake ripping Jackson's clothing.<sup>7</sup>

This research and its antecedents bring into focus a major challenge any social justice-seeking organization faces in communication: defining the problem it seeks to solve. The first step in this is, of course, to describe the problem itself.

### *Obscuring the origins of problems*

Across the progressive landscape the tendency is to name problems without naming how they came to be. Here are some of the countless examples<sup>8</sup> from the present data describing a whole host of concerns about housing:

Extremely low-income renters in the U.S. **face a shortage** of seven million affordable and available rental homes.

The number of American families with 'worst case' housing needs **continues to grow**, while the **inventory** of affordable housing **shrinks**.

Vulnerable people in changing neighborhoods are **too often pushed out by the rising costs of living**.

Colorado is **experiencing an affordable housing crisis**, and entire communities of color that have been in the city for decades **are being displaced** to make way for fancy new high-rise apartments.

In addition to the displacement of long-time residents, **gentrification also results** in a loss of the wealth that is created through equity.

Black homeowners **were disproportionately hurt** by the 2009 financial crisis, despite **experiencing** the slowest growth in homeownership out of any racial group leading up to the crash.

Public housing in Houston **has been kept out** of predominantly white and upper income neighborhoods, including the city's west side.

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<sup>7</sup> Caitlin Fausey and Lera Boroditsky, Subtle linguistic cues influence perceived blame and financial liability, *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, September 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this document, sources are deliberately not cited and potentially distinguishing details are omitted. This is to ensure that examples are read as attesting to a wide spread pattern rather than impugning any one author or organization.

Unfortunately for many Massachusetts residents, **wages are not keeping up** with housing costs

Financial hardships and housing instability **caused by the lack** of affordable housing have significant consequences for the health and well-being of poor families.

Research has shown that the nation's youngest children are **at highest risk of experiencing poverty**, and that the achievement gap between rich and poor children is not only substantial, but also increasing.

Public housing funding **has not been adequate** to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, including our children and seniors.

Families who **lose** their housing -- whether due to home foreclosure or the loss of affordable rental housing -- **can experience** devastating disruptions.

While overt discrimination was outlawed by the Fair Housing Act, today's **credit scoring system** and **lending practices continue as barriers** to minority homeownership

When women fleeing abuse **encounter housing problems**, their children bear much of the cost.

Low-income renters **too often confront** food deserts, limited access to mass transit, unsafe housing conditions, and crumbling public schools. When communities succeed in revitalizing neighborhoods, **this turnaround often pushes out** the very people who were meant to benefit from the new development.

The need for affordable housing in communities across the country is greater than ever, while **threats** to funding for programs that make affordable housing possible **are more severe** than they have been in decades.

**Homelessness is ticking up** nationally—and it is rising fastest in high-cost areas with rising rents.<sup>27</sup> The pain has spread further up the income spectrum as well, with moderate-income renters increasingly burdened.

Today, **new development is producing** far fewer affordable rentals than in 2001, despite increased need, and is far more concentrated at the upper end.

**Rising rents** in hot markets have created increased incentives for owners to opt out of participating in federal housing assistance.

A major obstacle advocates have in explaining why people face all the difficulties they do is **frequent use of non-agentive constructions**. In the examples above and the many others we could add to them, there is never a single culprit or even an actor named. If, as above, homelessness is “ticking up” and people “experience” housing issues, then there is no obvious means to change conditions.

Gentrification merits its own entry in the passive pantheon as it is almost always described as a personified force:

The true enemy in new development is the **upward rent pressure that leads to displacement**.

**The displacement crisis unfolding** across the region **is contributing** to regional resegregation and widening racial and socio-economic inequalities. **Market-driven investments can force** residents to leave their communities and move to suburban jurisdictions far from work, social services, faith communities, and accessible public transit, or to move into overcrowded and substandard housing in their own communities.

When **properties become unaffordable** just as neighborhoods improve, residents may **be displaced, losing** the opportunity to benefit from decreased crime rates, and enhanced access to jobs, quality schools, and reliable transit that often comes with economic growth.

As the U.S. population continues to rapidly increase and demand to live in cities returns, low-income families **are being pushed** to the edges away from jobs and services.

Neighborhoods across the country **are grappling** with the effects of gentrification.

As a descriptor, “displacement” seems to offer greater promise than “gentrification.” Firstly, it puts focus on the consequences of changing neighborhoods and boundless rent increases and it reminds us that people were in these places all along. Further, “gentrification” is a high register word that, while well understood by insiders, may make little sense to the average listener.

However, even with the use of “displacement,” as we see above, it’s still very easy to leave actors out of the scene. This attachment to obfuscating sources of harms generates sentences like the following that aren’t merely inoperative, they’re incomprehensible: “The relative **supply** of affordable and available rental homes **improves** as incomes increase.” It’s totally unclear what is causal in this assertion and, by extension, why specific policy interventions would or could be useful.

We can, instead, rewrite the first five examples of passive structures, repasted here for ease of reference, into active structures:

Extremely low-income renters in the U.S. **face a shortage** of seven million affordable and available rental homes.

*Lawmakers in the U.S. have passed policies that deny people struggling to make ends meet any affordable place to rent.*

The number of American families with ‘worst case’ housing needs **continues to grow**, while the **inventory** of affordable housing **shrinks**.

*The number of American families who have no options for where to live continues to increase as lawmakers fail to create adequate amounts of affordable housing.*

Vulnerable people in changing neighborhoods are **too often pushed out by the rising costs of living**.

*Landlords and corporate developers choose to force long-time residents in changing neighborhoods.*

[State] is **experiencing an affordable housing crisis**, and entire communities of color that have been in the city for decades **are being displaced** to make way for fancy new high-rise apartments.

*[State] lawmakers are helping to force out entire communities of color from their long-standing neighborhoods in order to hand over unrestricted profits to corporate developers building high rise apartments and contributing handsomely to their campaigns.*

All of the problems renters must **face** are disproportionately **visited upon** low-income Black and brown women, particularly those who are also LGBTQ.  
*All of the problems landlords inflict on renters are even greater for low-income Black and brown women, particularly those who are also LGBTQ.*

Conveying causation is almost always a central communication objective in advocacy. When we don't specify *why* something is, people will automatically and unconsciously fill in the details for themselves.

Thus, rather than characterize “skyrocketing rents” or “escalating evictions” we can use verbs that convey clear causation such as *choose* and *decide*. For illustration, *the administration's choice to slash funding or the city council's decision to hand landlords total control over working people's wellbeing.*

And in the realm of enumerating harms, instead of passive verbs like *experience*, *suffer*, *have* and so on, we can use verbs that convey human causation: *manufacture*, *produce*, *create*, *bring [into being]*, *cause*, etc. And, as these new verbs imply, flip the subject and object positions. Instead of describing outcomes — e.g. what people of color “face” — we describe how those outcomes come into existence.

*LOSE, LACK and GAP*

We find certain words that signal and emerge out of this tendency to not attribute blame: LOSE, LACK and GAP.

As we see in one example above and commonly in housing discourse, people purportedly “lose” or “lost” their housing: “When you're spending that much on housing, you're living one misstep away from **losing your home.**”

In fact, it's impossible to misplace an entire building or even a modest dwelling. And by using this particular verb we shield from view the many powerful actors who elected to confiscate homes.

In the present data, it's not just individuals or families who purportedly “lose” housing. Entire jurisdictions seem to misplace vast quantities of would-be housing:

While the various public partners initially committed to produce a total of 7,500 affordable housing opportunities, to date, the partners have only produced approximately 2,300 opportunities, and in 2018, [city] **lost more affordable housing opportunities** than it created.

We also find, in the data, people “lack” housing:

The **lack of new affordable rental construction** in the private market and insufficient housing assistance force extremely low-income renters to rely on private-market housing that filters down in relative price as it becomes older.

People from all walks of life are increasingly concerned about **the lack of housing** they can afford; they know it most negatively impacts low-income people; they see how it spills over into other areas of life; and they are looking for an energetic response from the federal government.

While verbs like “lack” don’t preclude an agent entirely, in the way “lose” does, they certainly don’t place an actor at the front of our awareness.

Third among our culprits in the standard passive triumvirate is GAP:

The homeownership **gap** between black and white Americans is **yawning**, with 41 percent of black adults owning their homes compared to 71 percent of white Americans.

Affordable housing options located in high-opportunity areas with low poverty and economically-diverse schools can raise the academic performance of low-income students and **narrow the achievement gap** between them and their more affluent peers.

In this discourse, as we find in discussion of income, wealth, academics and health, systemic differences between groups are characterized through the metaphor of PHYSICAL SEPARATION.

This language of HORIZONTAL DISTANCE has proven itself ineffective in talking about broad-based economic inequality and it stands to reason that it will prove equally unhelpful in the housing debate.<sup>9</sup> “Gap” is all what and no why; it tells us that two distinct groups have different outcomes but remains silent about the reasons for this “disparity.”

When we are silent about the origins of an issue, we leave our audiences room to fill in the story for themselves. And, unfortunately, the tale they’re all too likely to tell is one of individual culpability. In short, the reason for the “gap” between groups is that the one on the “right” side of the chasm did as they should while the other failed.

We have previously found that reframing INEQUITY AS IMBALANCE, describing a system that is *off-kilter*, *off-balance*, *unstable*, helps respondents understand our interconnected needs. Where a GAP implies that outcomes across racial or income or other groups are unconnected, we know, of course, that some people are as rich as they are because others are so poor. IMBALANCE helps reframe the system as an interconnected whole made dangerous when some are so disproportionately powerful and wealthy.

Indeed, we find talk of *stability* and, conversely, *imbalance* in this issue if only infrequently:

America’s housing-finance system stands at a crossroads. We can restructure the mortgage-finance system to **restore balance to the housing market** and provide credit to a broad and diverse population, or **we can** live with a system in which credit and housing choices are more costly, more limited, and less sustainable, especially for

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<sup>9</sup> Anat Shenker-Osorio, Thank you for talking about inequality, Salon, April 11, 2014.

minority and low- and moderate-income households. **The choice we make** will determine not only the sustainability of a robust housing market, but also future economic opportunities for millions of families.

What's especially noteworthy about this example is its helpful insistence on rendering this issue volitional. It's our choice to make the future we desire.

### *The market as agent*

Another popular way to evade human agency is by making the HOUSING MARKET itself the culprit. Here, we present examples of this popular construct immediately followed by rewrites that highlight human choices:

**Housing markets don't** naturally preserve affordable housing in gentrifying neighborhoods, and they don't readily support new development of housing for lower-income families in high-opportunity neighborhoods.

*Corporate landowners and billionaire developers deliberately eliminate housing for everyday working people in their own neighborhoods and often oppose creating new housing for these families in neighborhoods with built-in advantages.*

**The private market does not** produce housing that is affordable for very low-income renters—government subsidies are required to fill this gap.

*A handful of corporate housing developers and landlords bar many Americans, especially those longest denied fair wages and quality housing, from having any place to live. Only through government action can we ensure that every one of us can be housed.*

Indeed, we hear *the market* referenced as a seemingly sentient, autonomous being: “**The private market provides** too few homes affordable to the lowest-income renters.”

To be sure, this language is meant to highlight how leaving housing at the mercy of private money-maximizing forces harms people. But this framing provides the listener no entry point. You can't go protest at or send a petition to *the private market's* offices. Further, instead of using these constructions to signal how wrong it is to leave a life and death issue like housing to the profit-seeking domain, they sometimes have advocates inadvertently affirming that it is indeed the job of the market to supply housing.

### *Passive petitions*

It's not merely in the articulation of problems that we find a tendency to obfuscate actors. In our calls for desired policy changes, we also tend not to put people in power on the spot:

Safer housing options **are needed** for families currently residing in harmful situations, such as crowded living spaces.

**We confront** serious shortfalls of available, appropriately designed, and affordable housing for our rapidly growing senior population.

**We also should** expand and improve other programs, like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, to better serve the lowest income renters with the greatest need for assistance.



Many states require utilities to invest in programs that support energy efficiency, but **significant work remains to ensure** that meaningful savings and benefits **are realized** in affordable multifamily housing. Federal **investment is needed** to leverage utility company and other private financing sources, and further incentivize private investment in efficient affordable housing infrastructure, by ensuring that owners can benefit from utility cost savings and by expanding pay for success programs.

Support for legal representation **has been championed** by advocacy nonprofits in recognition of the fact that more than 90 percent of tenants go to eviction court without a lawyer.

**Enforcement mechanisms can be** designed to minimize the displacement of vulnerable tenants, for instance, by working in tandem with rent control.

Strong “just cause” (or “good cause”) eviction **protections are essential** to prevent landlords from evicting tenants in order to raise rents and **should be** embedded in rent control laws if such laws do not already exist.

Lawmakers are, no doubt, relieved to hear these “asks” as they include no particular timelines, consequences or even precise directives.

Again, we can reword these presently passive approaches to be more effective as follows:

Safer housing options **are needed** for families currently residing in harmful situations, such as crowded living spaces.

*Lawmakers must create safe housing options for families currently in harmful situations.*

**We confront** serious shortfalls of available, appropriately designed, and affordable housing for our rapidly growing senior population.

*Our lawmakers have chosen to deny our senior population with sufficient appropriately designed and affordable housing.*

**We also should** expand and improve other programs, like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, to better serve the lowest income renters with the greatest need for assistance.

*Our elected leaders must expand and improve other programs, like adding \$X to the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit in this year's budget to ensure renters struggling most to make ends meet have a secure place to live.*

We do see certain advocates effectively buck this trend and get very clear about their demands. Notably within the issue of homelessness:

This is what we mean by Housing First: that homelessness is a problem with a solution, and that **the solution is housing. For everyone.** Whether you follow the rules or not. Whether you are “compliant” with treatment or not. Whether you have a criminal record or not. Whether you have been on the streets for one day or ten years. **Permanent housing** is what ends homelessness.

#### PROBLEMS AS DISEASE

The passive voice problem also crops up metaphorically. We find in this discourse, among advocates and opponents alike, a tendency to reference present housing

problems through the language of AFFLICTION. From our opponents it sounds like the following:

We also suggested that the key **remedy** to California's housing challenges is a substantial increase in private home building in the state's coastal urban communities.

The data clearly illustrate **a chronic and severe** shortage of affordable homes for the lowest income renters who would be harmed even more by budget cuts and other restrictions in federal housing programs

Proposition 10 **targets a symptom**: soaring rents that are pricing some people out of the market. But it **ignores the disease**: a shortage of apartments and other housing units.

In this metaphor, insufficient housing is an AILMENT. Residents, or the state itself standing in for its people, are made ill due to lack of housing. Interventions like rent control, according to our opponents, do nothing to bring true *relief*. They merely dull or mask expressions of the underlying *illness* – the way syrup, for example, suppresses a cough but doesn't kill the virus producing it.

Advocates also apply this metaphor to argue for our desired policies:

Rent control is the only policy tool that can immediately **provide relief** to renters facing unaffordable rent increases.

Shame on us for thinking that our current way of addressing the needs of people with such high needs is to simply keep **putting a band-aid on** and pushing them through the system.

Even in terms of the other **afflictions of poverty**, drugs and gangs receive more attention than housing.

Each year, thousands of poor tenants **suffer** evictions that could have been **prevented** with sensible, adequately-funded programs – programs that are a fraction of the cost of the shelter system.

[City] Mayor [name] and his administration knew they had to **stem the growth** in chronic homelessness and break this homelessness-jail cycle.

Ensuring solutions to end **chronic homelessness** will take more than righteous indignation or good intentions. To accomplish our goal, we must organize and act.

We also find, albeit less frequently, intentional attempts at metaphorical extension – casting desired policies as *cures* for the issues that arise from inadequate housing:

Stable homes make **healthy families**

Housing Is Similar to **Drug Prescription**

Habitat is a really successful model. The land bank in Houston is a really successful model. The Seattle Housing Levy is a successful model. The problem is that they are for the lucky minority of low-income families that benefit from them. We just have to **increase the dosage**.

While advocates map the roles of DISEASE AGENT, AFFLICTED PARTY and REMEDY differently than their opponents, the default assumptions inherent in this metaphor apply. We generally think about diseases as occurring randomly – not being deliberately inflicted. Our loved ones are struck by cancer or our kids get ear infections. Generally, with most illnesses, no one intentionally made them unwell.

It's an empirical question – not an analytic one – whether this metaphor serves us. However, there are reasons to be skeptical. Where getting clear about agents is an integral part of an effective narrative, HOUSING PROBLEMS AS DISEASES doesn't lend itself to this task.

We find this metaphor across the housing policy debate; it occurs in a very particular form in discussions of eviction. There, one word stands out, as these examples attest:

Nationally, as many as one in seven children may have experienced eviction in the last decade. And, just as the foreclosure crisis disproportionately hit African-Americans, so does the eviction **epidemic**.

We believe that it is not possible to tell an honest and complete story of the eviction **epidemic** in Virginia without talking about race.

Across the country, affordable housing is under threat, and people are getting evicted not by the tens or the hundreds or thousands, but by the millions. We have an eviction **epidemic** in America.

The use of “epidemic” to characterize the practice of forcibly removing people from their homes is a well-meaning attempt to encapsulate the ubiquity and destructiveness of eviction. In addition to “epidemic” we find eviction referenced within this disease frame in other ways: “I realized not only that had we overlooked this very central aspect of poverty, but **eviction was coursing** through the American city and acting as a cause, not just a condition, of poverty.”

Like the broader DISEASE metaphor from which they stem, these characterizations of eviction do not indicate a clear origin for the problem. And, with this, it's unlikely to catalyze desire for intentional solutions. Again, this is an empirical question that should be explored in subsequent testing.

#### *HOMELESSNESS AS AFFLICTION*

Housing discourse already demonstrates a deliberate – and increasingly widespread – push to change dominant wording choices and, with this, how issues are perceived. We refer here, of course, to the shift from labeling people as “homeless” to the adjectival form (e.g. “experience homelessness.”) In this, advocates shift the concept from a permanent characteristic to a conditional (presumed temporary) state. This effort is intended to mitigate stereotyping. Ideally it creates a bridge to empathy rather than relying on sympathy, which has proven less effective at maintaining and growing interest for policy change. “Experience” is certainly the most common verb in this reframe but not the only one:

People with chronic illnesses and disabilities are significantly more likely to **experience homelessness**.

Most states have chosen to use their HTF investment to build and preserve affordable rental housing for extremely low-income veterans, seniors, people with disabilities or special needs, and people **experiencing homelessness**.

Most homeless trust funds provide grants to organizations that provide housing and essential services for individuals and families striving to end their **state of homelessness** and becoming self-sufficient and permanently housed.

LGBT people, who sometimes have to escape abuse and discrimination from landlords, employers, and their own families, are **vulnerable to homelessness**.

Since July 2017, 7,710 people in families have successfully **avoided homelessness** with the help of rental and legal assistance.

A disproportionate share of people with alcohol or drug problems **end up** homeless or incarcerated.

This is a laudable and noteworthy push to alter default language. And it merits exploration in the next phase where we will turn to testing language for its persuasive and mobilizing effects.

However, it's also worth noting that characterizing the state of homelessness, in lieu of allowing "homeless" to stand in as an identity, may be insufficient. Again, we find in this framework similarities to likening homelessness or problems with housing writ large to a DISEASE. There is no obvious source for how people "end up" unhoused. And this renders it all too easy to assume it's due to their own misdeeds.

To be clear, this does not mean we should return to allowing three-dimensional human beings to be reduced to one – generally not volitional – aspect of their life story as their total identity. However, it's also possible to *not* embrace the label "homeless" and not shield from view the reasons why people "experience homelessness." Consider, for example, the following rewrites of some of the quotations above:

People with chronic illnesses and disabilities are significantly more likely to **experience homelessness**.

*People with chronic illnesses and disabilities are significantly more likely to be barred from having anywhere to live.*

Since July 2017, 7,710 people in families have successfully **avoided homelessness** with the help of rental and legal assistance.

*Since July 2017, 7,710 people in families have successfully escaped having nowhere to call home with rental and legal assistance bolstering their own earnings.*

Another visible, though less common, shift within this same discourse applies the word "unhoused." This may help partly through pure novelty. Due to its ubiquity, "homeless" has likely become a frozen term that conjures up the salient exemplar of people on the street laying near their possessions. This dominant frame

Further, “unhoused” more squarely hints that the problem is in the lack of available dwellings.

#### *HOMELESSNESS AS BARRIER; HOUSING AS DESTINATION*

While the AFFLICTION metaphor is more dominant (again, likely due to the laudable efforts of advocates to make a narrative shift), HOMELESSNESS AS BARRIER or CONTAINER also appears in the data.

Before delving into this frame, we must first make a detour into the overarching metaphor from which it stems: HOUSING AS DESTINATION. And, in order to understand this we must begin by touching upon the root metaphor that serves as its origin: LIFE AS JOURNEY.

The notion that we can liken the passage of time in our lives to the steps taken along a path is so commonplace, it’s cliché. We speak, for example, of “being at a crossroads” have “dead-end relationships,” not knowing where we’ll “land” with some new endeavor.

As such it’s totally expected that we find obtaining secure housing likened to ARRIVING IN A DESIRABLE PLACE. (Indeed, given that home is actually a location, expressions within this frame need not be strictly metaphorical. Sometimes, we literally come home.)

However, in its metaphorical form, HOUSING can be abstractly likened to a PATHWAY to wealth or wellbeing:

When many of our parents bought homes, it was less about a **ticket to wealth**, and more about an opportunity to escape the uncertainties of renting and to trade crowded city neighborhoods for the suburbs.

The shift affirms **housing as a vehicle** for equality, dignity and inclusive community, rather than for inequality and the concentration of wealth.

Housing can be a means to arrive where we’d like to in life. Or, conversely, the inability to secure housing can impede our journey. Further, this JOURNEY story can be about individuals or it can describe the collective “movement” of a society:

For a low-income family, moving into a high opportunity area is about more than just the chance for their children to attend a quality school. It’s about more than living in safety, or being closer to good job opportunities, or enjoying the benefits of a robust local economy. It’s all of the above – **transcending** the structural **barriers** that keep too many low-income people of color **stuck** in poor living conditions. It’s a **step** toward a more equitable, fairer, more integrated city.

Further, efforts to root out housing discrimination are essential to **break down barriers** that **block** certain groups of households from **reaching** new homes.

Building affordable housing can be a **long journey** with approval needed from many groups and individuals along the way.

From this established notion – that passage of time can be conceptualized through movement in space (LIFE AS JOURNEY) and thus our desired policy goals can be likened to a desirable end point (HOUSING AS DESTINATION) – we see homelessness characterized as an impediment to this forward motion and even an all-encompassing container:

It is unlikely that any two people have the same **path out of homelessness**. Some will find long term stability by reconnecting with family or friends. Others will find new housing, get a new job, or connect with benefits that quickly allow them to **exit homelessness** on their own.

When residents of high opportunity areas rally against affordable development, there are often very real consequences: The **barriers** keeping away low-income people of color **get higher**; the doors to good schools and improved chances for children are shut.

These funds may be used to assist homeless individuals and families gain access to adequate housing, prevent at-risk individuals from becoming homeless, address the root causes of homelessness, track and report on homeless-related data, and **facilitate the movement** of homeless or formerly homeless individuals **along the housing continuum** toward more stable and independent housing.

For many of the working poor in [state], just one bad break—car trouble, illness, a job layoff—can suddenly **plunge them into homelessness**.

I swear, this shit is like **quicksand**—the harder we try to **get out**, the harder it is to get out.

Whether it will prove more effective to present HOMELESSNESS AS AN AFFLICTION or an IMPEDIMENT TO MOTION is an empirical question. Analytically, we would suspect more promise from the latter because it primes an expectation of external causation. BARRIERS do not come from nowhere – they’re deliberately constructed and placed.

### *Blaming those effected*

Another troubling consequence of not calling out villains is that it can veer into suggesting that those harmed are actually at fault. Because all messaging occurs within a broader context of shared assumptions, cultural imprinting and dominant narratives, seemingly benign statements can tread perilously close to implying people who are struggling are the cause of their own woes:

Right now, one in six families in the United States **spends more than half of their income** on housing.

Households are considered housing cost-burdened **when they spend more** than 30% of their incomes on rent and utilities.

71% of extremely low-income households are severely cost burdened, **paying** more than half of their limited income on rent.

**Families should** be able to afford safe shelter and food, utilities, and healthcare.

This leaves many **renters spending far more than they can reasonably afford** on housing costs and little money left over to pay for other essential needs such as food, transportation, and healthcare, or for savings and investments that are essential for a more secure future.

A disproportionate share of people with alcohol or drug problems **end up** homeless or incarcerated.

These kinds of constructions leave open to interpretation why households or families can't make their rent payments. And, as we know, our opponents are at the ready with explanations from laziness to living beyond your means as a choice. These storylines are highly present and thus all too readily called to mind.

We need leave it open to interpretation whether the people for whom we advocate are actually to blame. Consider, for example, the following claims and rewrites as illustrations for making the directionality of cause and effect clear:

Right now, one in six families in the United States **spends more than half of their income** on housing.

*Right now, landlords in the US extract more than half of the income that one in six families has.*

The bill would create a new refundable tax credit to bridge the gap between **what households can afford to pay** in rent and their rental costs.

*The bill would create a new refundable tax credit to overcome the barrier between what landlords take in rent and the resources families have.*

While it's most common to inadvertently blame people for their housing problems, we also sometimes cast aspersions on the programs we support: "The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit **falls short** of meeting its potential to help poor families move to low-poverty neighborhoods with strong schools and low crime." This program hasn't done an inadequate job. Lawmakers have decided to rob it of the resources to deliver on its mission.

*Rendering people in need as inactive*

Besides seeming to impugn people with housing problems for their hardships, we also find a tendency to eclipse from view what these people are doing for themselves. We find advocacy discourse that suggests that housing assistance efforts are gifts bestowed to a seemingly inactive set of recipients.

Firstly, this happens through the use of the words "serve" and "assist":

We believe that aligning systems that **serve** low-income populations is the future of **better delivery for programs** at the federal level.

While stable housing is crucial to **assist these populations**, by better aligning delivery systems that are too often siloed, inflexible, and inefficient, **we can broaden and deepen efforts** from housing, education, and health organizations **to achieve positive long-term outcomes**.

Yet, as noted, only a small fraction of the millions of low-income renters who struggle with the high cost of housing **receive assistance**.

Prior to conservatorship, Fannie and Freddie **served** underserved markets and borrowers in a variety of ways.

By not explicitly mentioning everything recipients are doing, these kinds of constructions reinforce the all-too-common assumptions about people without adequate resources as lazy or incapable.

The following example demonstrates this arguably unhelpful framing wherein programs do things for people (while not telling us what people do) but at least tempers this by calling out how the rich have received “service” all along: “The economic viability of our families, communities, and indeed the nation, depend on the government supporting communities that have been **under-served** the same way it **has helped** the broader market since our country's inception.”

It's hard to think of a better rejoinder to the notion of “under-served” than this one: “I hate the word phrase underserved. Now, we've been served plenty. A big help of housing discrimination, a double scoop of predatory lending, shitty school casserole.”

*Serve* and its corollary, *under-served*, suggest that ensuring people have shelter is some sort of gift provided to them. This flirts closely to affirming the helplessness of people who are generally exerting enormous force and employing tactical brilliance to survive under nearly impossible odds.

Instead of using these phrases, we can discuss needed programs in ways that keep the actions of their recipients in plain view. Here are some rewrites of the examples above:

We believe that aligning systems that **serve** low-income populations is the future of **better delivery for programs** at the federal level.

*We believe that aligning systems that bring down barriers deliberately put before people struggling to make ends meet is the future of ensuring their tireless efforts achieve success.*

While stable housing is crucial to **assist these populations**, by better aligning delivery systems that are too often siloed, inflexible, and inefficient, **we can broaden and deepen efforts** from housing, education, and health organizations **to achieve positive long-term outcomes**.

*While stable housing is how we address the problems speculators, corporate developers, and the lawmakers beholden to them have created for people, by better aligning programs that are too often siloed, inflexible, and inefficient, we can make a greater dent in the barriers erected to well-being through housing, education and health services.*

Yet, as noted, only a small fraction of the millions of low-income renters who struggle with the high cost of housing **receive assistance**.

*Yes, as noted, only a small fraction of the millions of low-income renters who struggle under the extortion of landlords have external support to make payments demanded of them.*

Prior to conservatorship, Fannie and Freddie **served** underserved markets and borrowers in a variety of ways.



*Prior to conservatorship, Fannie and Freddie were among the only financial institutions not practicing outright discrimination in lending.*

“Serve” and “assist” are not the only formulations that leave out of view all that people do for and by themselves:

By working with the whole family, **multiple challenges can be addressed** concurrently, creating a better environment for success.

LIHTC developments in high-opportunity neighborhoods with low poverty, low crime, and strong schools can **deliver particularly powerful benefits** for their residents.

Preserving affordable housing is fundamental to **enabling residents to benefit** from great opportunities.

Put simply, the ability to carry out the core mission of **providing affordable rental housing** to the nation's most vulnerable populations is in jeopardy.

Instead of holding up how programs “deliver,” we can describe how “residents thrive” in good housing situations. Indeed, in the last example above, there’s a clarifying second sentence that showcases the efforts of people in affordable housing: “[Affordable housing] also allows employers to fill critical jobs across the spectrum of wages **without forcing the poorest workers to shoulder the burden** of long and expensive commutes.”

In addition to programs seeming to do all the work, we also find RENT CONTROL construed as a GIFT to renters:

Like all consumer protections, rent control applies to renters of all incomes. But rent control **disproportionately benefits** low-income tenants, seniors, people of color, women-headed households, persons living with disability and chronic illness, families with children, and others who have the least choice in the rental market and are most susceptible to rent gouging, harassment, eviction, and displacement.

Instead of suggesting an essential baseline like reliable rental rates are a special extra, we can shift our language to make visible the actions of residents:

Low- and moderate-income New Yorkers, people of color, immigrants, and other marginalized populations deserve the **right to remain in the homes and communities they have built**, instead of facing predatory practices that displace them.

It is **the platform** from which people can continue to grow and thrive in their communities.

### *Approaching agency*

To be fair, we *do* see examples of sentences that either conform or get admirably close to what we short-hand as the *people do things* rule:

The crisis is the result of New York’s worsening housing affordability crunch and the disastrous homeless policies of the past decade, which saw previous **State and City**

**administrations sharply reduce** permanent housing assistance to the neediest New Yorkers, with predictable results – a soaring homeless population.

**Powerful interests continue to advance an agenda of property rights over human rights**, and the **real estate lobby** in particular is expending considerable political and financial capital to **undermine local community efforts** to advance equitable policies for renters.

Facing the current crisis of sky-high rents and displacement, **today's growing tenant movement is advancing** rent control measures and other tenant protections at local and state levels.

**The reform choices we make** now could provide credit to a broad and diverse population, increase the supply of affordable apartments, and result in a larger, more stable housing market.

For generations, **because of intentional public policy**, the predominantly African-American families that live in Houston's public housing have been **forced to live** in racially segregated neighborhoods where public services are minimal, schools are low performing, economic opportunities are few, crime is high and upward mobility is limited.

**Private equity companies and predatory real estate investors** are buying up mobile home communities, raising rents, and getting richer off the backs of poor people.

Manufactured home communities increasingly have gone from 'mom and pop' enterprises to ownership by large corporations and private equity firms. **Corporate ownership has brought** with it an unsustainable business model of rapidly escalating lot fees – the rent residents pay for the land on which their homes sit — and decreasing investment into community operation.

Vacant lots in their neighborhood were being **snapped up by speculative developers** in anticipation of the expansion of a nearby medical campus.

We provide research and communications infrastructure and strategic support for organizations working on campaigns to win structural change by directly taking on the **financial elite that are responsible for pillaging communities of color, devastating working class communities, and harming our environment.**

**Landlords are raising rents** faster than incomes are increasing and evicting tenants for no reason. **We need rules** to make the relationship more fair.

**Corporations are** tearing down old apartment buildings, kicking out the people who live there and putting up fancy new buildings that nobody can afford. Instead, we should preserve the places that people already call home.

The **financial and corporate elite use structural racism**, targeting Black and Latino communities in particular, to **divide us and pit us against each other** while they **destroy** our livelihoods.

Since the mortgage crisis of 2008, large **Wall Street financial institutions** — like the global private equity firm Blackstone — **have gobbled up** millions of foreclosed single-family homes.

The effective premium that tenants pay through late fees is a systematic penalty that the lightly regulated rental market **inflicts** on those who are economically fragile, not dissimilar from the interest rate penalties that **subprime lenders inflict** on those with previous credit challenges.

Our **city government** didn't have a plan for us, meaning **they had a plan for us not to be** in our community, but we are still here.

WE HAVE A RIGHT TO RECLAIM, REMAIN IN AND REBUILD THE COMMUNITIES WE CALL HOME! WE REFUSE TO BE DISPLACED!

However, the kinds of constructions we find above are infrequent and thus insufficient rejoinder to the prevailing sense that today's terrible conditions are of origins unknown while desirable changes are similarly unsourced. Further, in some of them, despite there being a named agent, sentence structures still revert to the passive instead of making that actor the subject of the verb.

One short-hand that may be worth testing as we move into the empirical phase of this research is *predatory renting*. Like in "predatory lending," the common construction from which it draws its origins, the notion predation helpfully suggests a culprit.

#### *HOUSING AS INTERVENTION*

Finally, another promising direction for offering up more agency in every element of the housing story comes from the metaphor of INTERVENTION. We find in the data examples of programs, organizations and actions likened to military or political campaigns that alter the conditions on the ground:

Long-term housing **interventions** must work with an adequately-funded emergency shelter system to ensure all the Commonwealth's children are able to receive the assistance they need—when they need it—to stay safe and healthy.

Local community organizations are often the most effective **first-line defense** that a neighborhood has to stop the loss of affordable housing.

It was the **latest showdown** in the tension over Austin mobile home parks, where displacement of low--income residents and vanishing space has narrowed options for those who own a mobile home but must rent a site for it.

My housing plan starts by **attacking** the growing cost of rent in America.

As these examples attest, this INTERVENTION frame can bring front and center the status quo is deeply problematic. In contrast to the aforementioned SERVICE language, utilizing this frame could help characterize programs as vital correctives to injustice – not special treats for certain people.

#### **Bringing in race**

Laudably, we find throughout this data a willingness to speak about race, among other demographic divisions at the heart of current housing problems and, by extension,

absolutely vital to desired solutions. Indeed, more than in other issues, we find advocates here speaking truth to race.

Presently, there are two dominant approaches we see framing this element of the housing conversation. For convenience, we've named them (1) the dependent clause approach and (2) structural racism approach.

The first is the one most common to progressive advocacy across issues, when race is named at all. At its core, this rhetorical strategy involves characterizing an economic issue and then inserting a reference – usually in a dependent clause – to race. In housing it can sound like the following:

The face of the eviction epidemic is moms with kids, **especially poor moms from predominantly Latino and African American neighborhoods.**

While the crisis reaches across race, income, and geography, **communities of color have been hit the hardest.**

We have fought for and stopped many foreclosures in the [neighborhood], **keeping Black families in their homes in our city.**

All of the problems renters must face are disproportionately visited upon **low-income Black and brown women, particularly those who are also LGBTQ community.**

Using a range of possible tools, the secondary market can encourage lenders to provide all Americans access to safe, affordable mortgages, **including traditionally underserved populations such as Hispanics, African Americans, rural residents, low- and moderate-income families, Asians, Baby Boomers, and Echo Boomers.**

What's conveyed here is that our primary concern is an economic issue, but we also want to say something about race. Testing has shown that this approach can leave audiences across racial groups cold. For Black, brown and other people of color these constructions can make their needs and concerns sound like an afterthought. And for many whites, it can sound non-sequitur. How did we get from lending, foreclosures, or evictions to race?

Basically, this is another example of the issue already named – when we do not tell people an origin story for the problems we describe, they fill one in for themselves. And so, when we say, “Native American, black, and Hispanic renters are more likely than white renters to have extremely low incomes,” we may be priming our readers to confirm their prejudices about the talents and ambitions of these groups.

Notably, there is a second approach to bringing in the role of race into the issue of housing. And it places the origin story front and center:

From the theft of indigenous land, the enslavement and exploitation of Africans, the denial of land ownership to black and other communities of color, the creation of federal backed GSE's to support white & suburban homeownership while redlining and dis-investing from entire communities of color, to predatory lending, the destruction of

public housing and gentrification of historically black and brown neighborhoods, **white supremacist ideology has shaped land & housing policy for centuries.**

Not only are lower income people overwhelmingly likely to be renters, but America's **housing market is built upon a foundation of discriminatory policies and practices**—from the appropriation of land to redlining to predatory lending and more—that have made achieving or maintaining homeownership especially difficult for Indigenous people, African Americans, and other people of color.

**Historic discriminatory housing policies** have encouraged white homeownership and have simultaneously created obstacles for African American homeownership and housing stability.

As these examples attest, the reasons for differential outcomes by race are made clear. Rather than simply noting that one racial group “experiences” worse problems than another, this STRUCTURAL RACISM framing is explicit about the reasons for these discrepancies.

Previous testing among sub-groups of communities of color (African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Native Hawaiians and Native Alaskans) has proven this approach somewhat effective at garnering *agreement*. Although this varies greatly by racial sub-groups. But it's also shown to be de-mobilizing.

In other words, majorities of different communities of color register some level of agreement with statements about how policies rooted in racism explain the world today. However, reminders of how old, pervasive and entrenched these issues are diminishes belief that we can change things for the better. This approach appears to unleash the much-merited cynicism in our base, especially among communities of color, that change is possible.

This said, because structural racism is so clear cut in housing, it may be worth continuing to experiment with these arguments. However, as we do this, it's vital to interrogate our wording choices along multiple dimensions. We must test not merely for agreement but also efficacy at catalyzing and sustaining action.

As you may know, recent research<sup>10</sup> has demonstrated that linking issues of race to class, by explaining how the right wields deliberate division and scapegoating to abet their plutocracy, delivers best results in terms of persuasion and mobilization across target audiences. As we move into testing, we should definitely experiment with applying what we've termed the Race Class Narrative to housing and holding this up against current efforts to speak about race.

### **Fighting on our opposition's turf**

Unwittingly blaming the people harmed for what befalls them is a particular case of a broader problem: reinforcing our opposition's arguments while trying to make the case for our own. In this section, we'll explore a series of commonplace messaging habits

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<sup>10</sup> See topline and full results of national and state-based Race Class Narrative research at [asocommunications.com/research-1](http://asocommunications.com/research-1)

that have advocates unintentionally hampering their own efficacy by walking onto the others side's field and trying to fight for hearts and minds from there.

*Giving our opposition more airtime*

In this data, we find a familiar tendency to hand opponents precious airtime. In its simplest form this occurs through direct negation:

On balance, **rent control** does not **hurt new construction** or **increase rents** in non-regulated units.

**Rent control** also does not lead to **declines in maintenance** when effective code enforcement policies are in place, and can help provide tenants greater standing to seek needed repairs.

It's not **just a renters' issue**. We all rely on rent control, to have a vibrant community.

If there are not enough schools in an area for class sizes to appropriately match population growth, the answer is not to **exclude low income families** who want to make a better life for themselves.

**Credit rating agencies** are neither **objective** nor **independent**.

The landlord lobby continues to perpetuate the myth that **rent control discourages new construction**.

When we repeat our opponents, in a laudable effort to discredit them, we risk cementing their false claims.

Fortunately, negation is the simplest to fix among examples of repeating our opponents. We simply state what we are for. Thus, for illustration, we'd can rewrite the above as follows:

On balance, **rent control** does not **hurt new construction** or **increase rents** in non-regulated units.

*Rent control maintains existing level of new constructions and rental rates in unregulated unit.*

**Rent control** also does not lead to **declines in maintenance** when effective code enforcement policies are in place, and can help provide tenants greater standing to seek needed repairs.

*Rent control coupled with effective code enforcement policies keep maintenance at present-day levels and, in fact, can help provide tenants greater standing to seek needed repairs.*

It's not **just a renters' issue**. We all rely on rent control, to have a vibrant community.  
*It's an issue that affects everyone. We all rely on rent control, to have a vibrant community.*

If there are not enough schools in an area for class sizes to appropriately match population growth, the answer is not to **exclude low income families** who want to make a better life for themselves.

*If there are not enough schools in an area for class sizes to appropriately match population growth, the answer is to create more options that allow us to ensure every child a quality education, no exceptions.*

**Credit rating agencies** are neither **objective** nor **independent**.

*Credit rating agencies are dependent and compromised.*

The landlord lobby continues to perpetuate the myth that **rent control discourages new construction**.

*The landlord lobby peddles false claims to cover up their single objection to rent control: their greedy demands to infinite profits at every cost to the rest of us.*

## HOUSING AS PRODUCT

Venturing back into metaphors, we find one that likens HOUSING to a PRODUCT. Previous research has shown that this view of housing dominates public thinking.<sup>11</sup> This is not surprising, of course, because housing is presently very much a thing we buy and sell.

One academic encapsulates what is wrong with framing HOUSING AS MARKET GOOD:

Most literature on rent regulations comes from the discipline of economics. While this perspective is critical, economic literature typically **treats housing as an exchangeable commodity and focuses on the monetary value of homes** by comparing rents and home prices. However, **the value of housing in most people's lives and the importance of housing in society cannot be captured solely through a market analysis**. Housing fulfills important social needs—it provides stability, safety, and security to individuals and families, outcomes that are valued but not always tagged with a market price.

The fact that allowing HOUSING to be discussed as a COMMODITY is deeply problematic isn't news to advocates. They routinely, and rightly, make assertions to counter this notion.

However, direct assertions trigger rational argumentation. Hearing them, listeners contemplate how they accord with their own beliefs and experiences and if they've heard arguments to the contrary. Presuppositions, like the metaphors we rely upon, slip by undetected. And, as such, are far more potent in terms of activating or swaying beliefs. Unfortunately, we see advocates falling into the trap of likening HOUSING to a MARKET GOOD:

We invest a significant amount of public money in subsidized affordable housing—primarily through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program. We tend to justify this investment primarily based on how those buildings affect the families who live in them. But think about how **adding new supply** at the lower end of the market impacts the rents that everyone else will pay. Just like with high-end housing, the benefit accrues most noticeably within the same sub-segment of the market where new building happens. When we add lower-income units, **we increase the supply** and reduce competition for lower-cost housing and the benefit filters out in both directions to help people renting in the market segments just above and below.

The collaborative advocates for the preservation and **production of affordable housing** for people within the [name] metropolitan region and places a special emphasis on the

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<sup>11</sup> Finding a Better Frame, Frameworks Institute

needs of the most vulnerable in society - seniors, people with disabilities, veterans, low-wage workers and low-income families.

Currently, the City does not have the resources to meet **the demand** for affordable housing for its service workers, musicians, culture bearers, and its most vulnerable populations

While we may assert that “housing is a human right,” our other words too often betray that we too have imbibed the dominant model. And are reproducing it.

Given that this dominant frame of HOUSING AS COMMODITY bolsters arguments *against* rent control, subsidies, fighting displacement and the whole litany of progressive priorities, it’s not at all surprising to see the opposition embrace it. Here are just a few of many examples as this is their dominant frame:

Deregulation of land use and housing markets are key to improving economic opportunity, **consumer choice**, and social welfare across the income spectrum.

Controversy over that message is nothing new for Rolfe, who once told reporters that a mobile home park is ‘**like a Waffle House** where the customers are chained to their booths.’ He later said the quote was meant only to describe the **consistent revenues of a business** where people are unlikely to leave.

Where market rents really are spiraling, capping them to prevent so-called ‘economic eviction’ dampens the incentive for developers to **bring new supply** to market.

To be sure, it isn’t possible to abandon the HOUSING AS OBJECT frame from which the more specific PRODUCT language emerges. But there is some distance between this and giving all the way over to suggest housing is rightly construed as a commodity, bought and sold in a commonplace market.

For illustration, this phrase likens housing in the aggregate to an OBJECT: “Stable housing is increasingly **out of reach** for many Americans, as both rentals and homes to own grow more expensive and options dwindle.” “Stable housing” is construed as a particular thing that exists in some fixed point in space and is presently “out of reach.”

This is not the same as using language of “supply” “demand” “production” and so forth. In lieu of “produce” or “supply,” the word “create” doesn’t automatically trigger the market frame. We “create” delicious meals for our families; but we “produce” widgets in factories. And instead of “demand” we can say, for example, “need.”

*Putting “the economy” first*

Another way advocates reinforce their opponents’ frames is by reifying economic growth as the core policy objectives. We’ve seen previously across issue areas that arguments for progressive policies boosting economic indicators fall flat. They lend credence to the idea that the reason to do things is to increase GDP, rather than to better people’s lives. And yet we find these approaches frequently among housing advocates:



Diverse, inclusive communities with access to good jobs, schools, health care, transportation, and housing are **crucial to our nation's prosperity** in the 21st century. A hard-learned lesson from the recent economic crisis is that when some of our communities are targeted for discriminatory practices, all of our communities are harmed. **Our global competitiveness** is challenged when all of our communities do not have the opportunity to succeed together.

**A healthy housing market**, when coupled with appropriate protections to ensure responsible and sustainable lending, **offers opportunities for young people to begin building wealth** through homeownership, for growing families to access good schools and high-opportunity neighborhoods, and for older people to choose whether to age in place or seek a smaller or more supportive environment.

While **we must work to reduce our nation's deficit** over the long-term, balancing our budget should not be done on the backs of our nation's low-income people and families.

Rent control is **cost-effective**.

**Reliable wealth building** should be the goal of federal home ownership policy.

Public housing is **critical for national economic success** in three key ways. Lowers health care costs. Improves student achievement. Bolsters economic productivity.

Housing is typically the largest household expense, and tenants have little flexibility to move to a lower cost home in the face of rent increases, especially when affordable homes are scarce. This increases landlords' power over tenants' lives, including to charge whatever they wish, creating an important role for government to mediate the landlord-tenant relationship to **ensure a fair and functioning rental housing market**.

In all communities, preservation **protects the billions of taxpayer dollars** already invested in affordable rental housing and results in a more environmentally sustainable and efficient use of resources.

Saving decent, affordable housing means **protecting a critical community asset**.

Placing the goal of access to affordable, sustainable credit at the center of the new system's mission will provide the greatest benefit in the long run not only to families but also to lenders and investors while **protecting taxpayers from future bailouts**.

Here, affordable housing is discussed as a preventive measure to reduce public cost rather than a desirable step towards inclusiveness or expansion of rights. With this, we tacitly reaffirm the notion that saving "taxpayer dollars" or increasing economic growth should be our primary and perhaps sole aims. Researchers have found that arguments about affordable housing strengthening the economy by facilitating workforce participation and consumption were ineffective at altering policy preferences and attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of the truth of the above statements, being good for the economy is not the brand strength of our side. And so, when we agree to these terms of debate, we

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<sup>12</sup> Piecing It Together, Frameworks

immediately disadvantage our position. In contrast, being good for people is something people associate with us and is a far more appealing goal to our audiences.

### *Reinforcing scarcity*

A more particular form of bowing down at the altar of dollars has advocates reinforcing claims of scarcity:

We believe a key principle of federal public housing policy **must be that scarce resources are used** in ways that are most appropriate to the local housing market, as determined by local housing providers, including PHAs, in consultation with their residents and community partners.

Existing resources are, of course, scarce and totally inadequate. However, this is a choice based in not allocating funds to housing and not levying necessary taxes. Suggesting that current resources are a fixed pot feeds into the scarcity story that works against our solutions and the pressure we must exert to increase funds for housing.

### *'Just cause' evictions*

As we saw above in exploration of the disease metaphor, eviction rightly occupies a prominent place in current housing discourse. Advocates in many jurisdictions are battling to change the rules that presently allow landlords to force people from their homes with little notice or cause.

Presently, most advocates have adopted the language of "just cause" or "good cause" for their desired eviction laws, as we see in these examples:

JUST CAUSE (OR "GOOD CAUSE") EVICTION LAWS: Tenant protection designed to prevent arbitrary, retaliatory, or discriminatory evictions by establishing that landlords can only evict renters for "just cause" such as non-payment of rent, breach of lease, illegal activity, nuisance, plans for immediate owner-occupancy, and demolition plans by the landlord.

[Name] State tenants are building power to demand #UniversalRentControl #GoodCauseEviction protections and more!

These are critical, and in most places, long overdue policy interventions. However, modifying the word "eviction" with positives like "good" and "just" is very unlikely to advance this particular effort. It likely privileges the unhelpful storyline that renters who have challenges – whether subjected to eviction or not – are responsible for their plight.

Instead, we could flip this around to call for a *landlord code of conduct* or *tenant bill of rights*. The first option places the landlord's behavior front and center, rather than reinforcing the connection between "eviction" and "cause" that's presumed to be tenant malfeasance. A *tenant bill of rights*, on the other hand, makes them focal but within a frame of what they are due, not the misdeeds they have purportedly done.

## *Making “homeownership” the objective*

The valorization of owning a home is an integral part of our national storyline. Indeed, conservatives gained considerable conceptual terrain by shifting the meaning of the “American Dream” from broadly-defined mobility (the next generation will be better off) to the very specific ideal of buying your own home.

This home, with its white picket fence, came to represent more than just a core American aspiration. It became our stand-in for every kind of security – from corporeal to financial – as the assumed increase in our home’s value was what we were meant to count on in lieu of pensions, guaranteed health care, and free education.

We see this from our opposition until today:

We’re lifting up forgotten communities, creating exciting new opportunities, and helping every American **find their path to the American Dream** — the dream of a great job, **a safe home**, and a better life for their children.

Ever and always, conservatives frame this “American Dream” in terms of individualized pursuits and payoffs. “A better life for their children” could easily be delivered with quality free education, universal health care, healthy built and natural environments but that’s not the story told here.

Making a privately-owned house, as opposed to a reliable social safety net, people’s rightful source of economic security is bad enough. Worse still, this ethos has also helped reinforce the overarching conservative story that what’s privately-owned is best. The house with its yard and personal car in the driveway came to be the center of American family life – undermining not only the needs for public parks, public transit and public commons but even the desire for or expectation of having them.

Thus, it’s troubling to see “homeownership” held up as the correct objective among some advocates. Note that these examples specifically name “ownership,” not simply having a place to call home:

Decades of racial discrimination in real estate, lending practices, and federal housing policy have made **homeownership difficult to obtain** for minorities.

Not only are lower income people overwhelmingly likely to be renters, but America’s housing market is built upon a foundation of discriminatory policies and practices— from the appropriation of land to redlining to predatory lending and more—that have made **achieving or maintaining homeownership** especially difficult for Indigenous people, African Americans, and other people of color.

**Homeownership may not recover** to traditional levels without housing finance reform.

What is especially odd about these examples is that there appear to be no people, even *homeowners*, in them.

## *Housing before humans*

Ownership is not the only spot where advocacy for things gets ahead of arguments for people. Sometimes – but, happily, not often – advocates seem to be fighting for the buildings themselves and not so much those residing within them:

We have seen how years of underfunding and disinvestment in public and affordable housing has been **detrimental to the fabric of the nation's housing stock** and housing stability.

Housing advocates must address a range of issues that affect **housing security**, including affordability, protection from displacement, housing quality, discrimination and broader issues of community health.

[Name] is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to **preserving and improving affordable housing**, ensuring that privately owned rental housing remains in our affordable housing stock and is accessible to low-income families and sustainable over time.

Using the tools of real estate development, rehabilitation, finance, and policy advocacy in conjunction with sustainable practices, [organization] is responsible for **saving more than 36,000 affordable homes** in all 50 states, leveraging more than \$1.2 billion in financing

In lieu of privileging ownership or seeming to advocate for housing and not humans, we can reframe our objective as ensuring everyone has a place to call home:

There is a simple truth that connects every person in every city, town and village across America: They want a safe, affordable **place to call home**. A **place** to raise their families, enjoy meals with friends and rest their heads at night. But for too many people across the country, that vision of home is not accessible, affordable, or in many cases, available.

**A place to call home** is the foundation for every healthy person.

It is wrong to use state power to protect profits while millions are without **a secure place to live**.

Shifting away from the housing itself to what it enables for the people in it seems a wise step. But, in so doing, we must also reckon with a final conceptual concern: to what degree are we reinforcing a core story of individualism over a sense of the collective?

### **No I in home**

At the crux of many political issues is an underlying debate over whether individuals alone are responsible for what befalls them or whether social forces both create bad outcomes and are responsible for delivering desirable ones.

In housing, this essential question is perhaps even more challenging to swing to the social than for public education, labor protections, healthcare and the like. While by no means easy, advocates in these other arenas have some existing conceptual anchors about collective action being essential and yielding demonstrable results.

Housing, on the other hand, exists in most people minds squarely in the private sphere. People think about their homes as their sanctuaries; the place where they get to choose who is around and what happens within. Improvements to home – from things like renovations to securing a more desirable rental – happen through individual or familial efforts. The idea that you make where you live better through collective action comes with very few tangible examples and thus credible proof points.

The centrality of positing housing within the frame of what matters and happens to an individual or family is the norm throughout our culture. So, it's unsurprising to see advocates defaulting to this even as they overtly champion collective efforts and needs.

Even where we find advocates widening the frame to link housing to a whole array of social issues, this still remains within the realm of the individual or familial:

Home is so much more than four walls and a roof. It is **somewhere to live in peace security and dignity**. Although it is increasingly being treated as a commodity, **housing is a fundamental human right**.

Home is the center of life. **It's where we go to be safe, to be ourselves.**

We want everyone to have access to affordable housing so **they have one of the basics of life: shelter**. One cannot focus on higher achievement until their **basic needs are met**. Let's all take care of our fellow human beings and thus we will begin to be a better human being ourselves

I want to see that **everyone has a warm and safe place to stay** this winter.

This is America, and I believe **every family deserves the security of being able to keep a roof over their head**.

As the role of housing as a determinant of **success in life** — affecting health, access to education, and the opportunity for upward mobility — becomes better understood, cities face the daunting task of eliminating the affordable-and-healthy housing shortfall.

Residents struggle to afford not just a place to live, but a stable **home that supports their health and well-being**.

Housing is a human rights issue — **it makes or breaks us**. It is the difference between life and death.

In these examples and most others, HOME is talked about both as the core of a person's life and also a locus for identity construction. Home is connected to family life and basic shelter, but also self-realization. All of these are a reaffirmation of the dominant idea that housing is rightly construed within the realm of what people – not societies or communities – need.

Contrast this, for illustration, with commonplace arguments about public education. While self-actualization and individual aspirations form a mainstay in discourse about schooling, we also find and readily produce language attesting to the social benefits of this issue. And, by extension, we create a foundation for insisting it requires collective solutions in order to win these socially desirable outcomes.

Given how centrally housing is processed through the lens of the individual and familial, it may well prove challenging to reject this framing. This is, once again, an empirical question that should take a prominent place in the subsequent phases of research.

In the meantime, when we are speaking from within this individualized frame, we can focus on ensuring it's rendered tangible and vivid with clear examples of people living their lives.

Rooting problems in lived experience has been shown to improve the persuasiveness and appeal of messaging across issues. So, for example, instead of describing "paid family leave," we speak instead of "being there the first time your baby smiles." And, in lieu of "raising the minimum wage," we call for "making enough to put food on your table."

In the present data, we find some worthy examples of rooting language in people's real lives:

We know from previous studies that one of the biggest things that people do after getting a voucher after years on the waiting list is they **buy more food**, because for the poor, **the rent eats first**.

More people are forced to choose between **putting food on the table and keeping a roof over their head** than ever before, and most poor folks and communities of color simply don't have any place safe or affordable to live.

However, far more common is the tendency to profile intangibles, as these examples and most of what we've already seen above attest:

Stable, affordable homes deliver immediate and **positive benefits** to people and communities. But, even more importantly, they are the essential foundation for families and children to achieve **a decent education** and **pursue healthy and prosperous lives**.

Our shared mission is to help millions of people gain access to affordable homes and thriving communities that offer **economic opportunity** and an **enhanced quality of life**.

Guiding our approach is a singular belief that **developing vibrant communities** and **growing opportunity** begins at home.

Children need housing security to **physically and mentally thrive**.

As a general rule, we should ask of our messaging that it enable listeners to paint a picture of what's happening. "Economic opportunity," "enhanced quality of life" and "prosperous lives" are absolutely great pay offs. However, it's challenging for the average person to really see what that would look like in the world.

Yet, even as we first take care to express benefits in more tangible term, it's also worth interrogating whether our default to reinforcing housing within the framework of individual or familial concerns is harming us.

It is, indeed, possible to describe housing issues within the framework of shared responsibility, community building and social efforts. And we find examples in the present data that place housing within the social domain:

The question about of these newcomers is they a welcomed addition to the **local environment** or invasive species?

You know, [city] wasn't perfect, but at least **we were together**.

CLTs benefit the larger communities too as they promote and protect housing for long-term residents helping to **build stronger and safer and higher quality diverse neighborhoods** contributing to greater educational attainment, employment opportunities and health outcomes.

Without the ability to **plant roots and invest in your community** or your school—because you're paying 60, 70, 80 percent of your income to rent—and eviction becomes something of an inevitability to you, it denies you certain freedoms.

The segregation of the rich—which is growing rapidly in U.S. metropolitan areas—results in the hoarding of resources, amenities, and disproportionate political power. The segregation of the poor often **creates neighborhoods** besieged by crime and severely limits life chances in schooling, employment, health, intergenerational mobility, and other vital outcomes. More pragmatically, **local economies require income diversity**: It is not sustainable or efficient for low-wage workers to travel long distances to work where higher-income households spend money.

Winning means pushing for a new vision for **manufactured home communities**: an end to exploitative, profit-driven **ownership of our communities**.

We offer technical assistance and policy support to **create housing with lasting affordability** and to **build equitable neighborhoods**.

We're planning to fail low income and communities of color by failing to plan in a way that includes all neighborhoods in **co-creating our city**. The outrageous inequality we see **across neighborhoods** is directly the result of our current approach.

Housing stability is critical to **building up communities** and helping people move up the economic ladder. Stability was part of the **social safety net** for those of us who remember growing up in **multi-generational neighborhoods** where **kids played as elders stood watch** from front porches and stoops.

Inclusionary housing policies that help make sure **every neighborhood has housing for people across the economic spectrum**.

We believe our government has a responsibility to create and strengthen laws and programs that will **allow our communities to flourish**.

We want policies that allow us to **strengthen the bonds we build with each other in our communities**, and which help us to survive in the face of resource scarcity, economic hardship, environmental degradation, and political marginalization. To this end, we call for an end to speculation driven development in our cities that produces housing **our communities can't afford**.

I'm advocating for support of ETPA to help save not only thousands of homes for people who live here, but to **save the community we have here** in [name.]

[Organization] vigorously defends policies that **support our American home**.

We know eviction tears apart **the fabric of the community** and thwarts its political capacity.

We seek to **unite urban communities** and allies around a common frame and theory of change that supports the rights of poor and working-class families of color to live and work with dignity **in the city**, benefit socially and economically from the city, **participate actively and fully in decision-making about the city**, and **contribute actively and fully to, and enjoy the culture of, the city**.

Generally speaking, in order to prime desire for collective solutions, we must posit our problem within the realm of social concern. We find in this array of examples a range of options for making housing an issue for a broader we.

Indeed, it might be worth experimenting with the label other countries already apply to what we call "public housing" here: Social Housing. And we may also try exploring a shift from arguing for "affordable housing" to "affordable neighborhoods."

We may also do well to learn from our opponents in making this admittedly massive pivot. Painfully, Airbnb has nailed this in their messaging:

We believe that no matter who you are, where you're from or where you travel, you should be able to **belong in the AirBnB community**.

**Belong to anywhere** with AirBnB.

The world is full of cities and towns constantly growing larger, but the **people within them are less connected**. Yet, we are all **yearning for a sense of place**. We're all **seeking to belong**. We all want to **connect and share**.

A world where every door is unlocked, and every host treats you like family. Where **every city is a village, every block a community, and every kitchen table a conversation**. **Friendships** are created and memories are imprinted. **Worlds** are discovered and **cultures** are exchanged...Together we aim to enable 1 billion guests to belong, and in the process what it means to be home. Welcome to **a host-led world**.

Another approach to exiting the frame of housing as individual or familial issue is to flip to the question of who can live where, as opposed to where can any one individual live. We see this at work in the following examples (notwithstanding other issues within them like lack of agents):

Our housing crisis is pushing out **our teachers, our service workers, and countless other residents who are to integral to [city]**.

The market dictates...plays a vastly important role in **destabilizing their communities**, but we just didn't know a lot about it.



Note that approaching affordable housing from the vantage point of who can live where does *not* necessarily absolve us from reinforcing individualism. As this example attests, it's possible to make inclusion and exclusion focal without bringing attention to housing as principally a social issue:

Where a person lives **defines their access** to schools, employment and community. Living in less desirable neighborhoods means fewer opportunities and, without real housing alternatives, **individuals and families cannot** move on to lead better lives.

## The World We Want

In order to capture the hearts and minds of our audiences, we need to articulate what we're fighting **for**. We need to underscore what a world where respect for the rights and needs of all people and our families is made real looks like. And it's here that we find advocates with the least to say.

Indeed, our present tendency is to describe the problems we are seeking to solve – the harms and deprivations we want to eliminate. Here are a few examples and possible revisions to them:

Most of [city] residents support long-term solutions to **end homelessness**.  
*Most of us want this to be a city where everyone is housed.*

The more restrictions that are overlaid in a state, the harder it becomes for cities to **respond to housing challenges**.  
*The more restrictions that are overlaid in a state, the harder it becomes for cities to ensure all of us can have a secure place to live.*

Coupled with stability services, such as counselors and legal aid, this program would extend an emergency cushion to families in crisis, helping them **avert the downward spiral** of housing instability and homelessness.  
*Coupled with stability services, such as counselors and legal aid, this program would extend an emergency cushion to families in crisis, helping them remain stably housed.*

This emphasis on ending or averting bad things leaves out of view how people's lives should and can be. It tells us what we need to fix but not what desirable thing will emerge once we've done so. Further, it asks of the listener to want to add yet another problem to the already long list of concerns every individual has. Most people are not out looking for new problems. If they're able to be drafted into a new cause it's generally out of a desire to create something good.

While revising our negations into affirmations is a critical first step, truly contending with our tendency to present our position as denial and rejection requires having a clear articulation of our vision. Until we have a clear, shared, articulation of the way we'd like things to operate, we will be left - at best - improving how we word our critique.

Sustained participation in mass movements requires an opportunity to create something good, not merely diminish something harmful. Or, in pithier terms, there must be a *dream* not merely a series of (absolutely justified) complaints.

Marriage Equality campaigns the world over offered us a great illustration of pivoting from a problem fixing orientation to implementing a solution framing. Where we could talk about this issue, and indeed still sometimes do, as “ending discrimination” or “fighting bigotry,” effective campaigns embraced positive framing with exhortations to *equality, freedom and love*.

We’ve seen, for example, in previous work that a shift from “ending poverty” to *creating shared prosperity* or *ensuring people’s welfare* has measurable impacts on audience’s desire to get involved. Similarly, “prevent all forms of violence” proves more effective when rendered *ensure all people live in peace*. Even seemingly small tweaks from, for example “reform our broken immigration system” to “create a fair immigration process” have measurable impacts on public perception.

We should experiment with similar tweaks from problem to solution-focus, and from critique to vision. Unearthing wording to enable this forms a large part of our next step in the process — elicitation interviews among advocates.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This language analysis represents a kind of “you are here” dot. This is the range of ways people currently reason. The work of advocacy is, of course, to act as a thermostat not a thermometer. We are here to *change* the temperature, not to take it.

Thus, we can’t be satisfied with where people are. We must explore where they’re capable of going. And how, supported by our messaging and advocacy, we move them to this better mental place. This is the objective of the cognitive elicitation interviews currently underway.