

Building Safe and Healthy Communities

**A Messaging Playbook for Proven
Solutions to Homelessness, Addiction,
and Mental Health**



Why a Shared Story

Both homelessness rates and overdose deaths are at historic highs in the United States. Combined with the intersecting issue of unmet mental health needs, these challenging and complex issues represent a national crisis.

Policy experts, public health officials, and service providers have proven tools that are already saving lives and helping people get the care and support they need to thrive: like health care, drug and mental health treatment, overdose prevention services, and affordable and supportive housing.

This is the big story: ***No matter who you are, where you live, or how much money you have, we all need a safe and affordable place to live, access to health care, and the feeling of safety and belonging in our communities in order to live good lives. When we invest in these things, our communities are safer and healthier for everyone.***

Sharing and telling the same big story amplifies a shared vision for safe and healthy communities and provides a proactive counter message to fear-based narratives.

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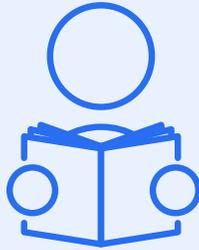
Shared messages help us:

QUICK TIP

Research shows that who carries a message is just as important as what the message says.

JUMP TO

[The Role of Trusted Messengers](#) to dig deeper.



Tell cohesive stories that both show how homelessness, drug policy, and mental health actually intersect and reach everyday people with a positive vision for the future.



Counter “us” vs. “them” narratives that divide and stoke fear with proactive narratives that build unity, connection, and community instead.



Build broader coalitions of support across issue areas that everyday people can see themselves in and mobilize around.



Create repetition so ideas become sticky, break through the noise, and build strong support for proven, care-based solutions.

Who This Guide Is For



This guide is for organizers, advocates, service providers, journalists, policymakers, and communicators working on housing, drug policy, mental health, and community safety.

It synthesizes research and messaging guidance from experts in [drug policy, community safety, housing, and public health](#) who came together around a shared goal: Our issues intersect and so must our stories and messages. The recommendations in this guide reflect the collective wisdom, messaging, and research of this ongoing work.

Together, we can build and share the messages that resonate and break through the fragmented media landscape and build strong support for caring, evidence-based solutions that build safe and healthy communities.

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1. Shared Messages for Safe and Healthy Communities

Clear, positive, shared messages create the resonance and repetition needed to break through our fragmented media ecosystem. This section explores shared message construction across homelessness, drug policy, and mental health.

QUICK TIP

In today's multichannel world, adapting messages for the medium and moment is vital. Use graphics and images to help convey elements of the message when space is limited.

How to Construct a Message

1	Name shared values (e.g., we all want safe communities, we want to see less homelessness, we want to protect our loved ones from overdose)
2	Uplift personal stories and lived experience in plain language
3	Name the problems or acknowledge the challenge, and then move on
4	Emphasize tangible and concrete solutions in plain language (This is critical – a message without solutions is not effective.)
5	Articulate the larger vision/goal and highlight that we've already made progress
6	Provide a clear call to action (e.g., contact your senator, join our webinar to learn more, add your name to the safe and healthy communities petition)

Messaging Examples

Overarching theme: **Safe and Healthy Communities**

1

Shared values: No matter where we come from or what we look like, we all want to live in safe and healthy communities.

2 + 3

Personal stories/lived experience + name the problem: But right now, more people are sleeping on the street than ever, overdose deaths are at historic highs, and too many people are struggling with mental health challenges in an uncertain world. And some elected officials are cutting funding for care and support services that help people rebuild their lives.

4

Pivot to solutions: It's time our leaders invest in the proven solutions that are already making a difference but are too often in short supply: housing with support services to help people off the streets and rebuild their lives, overdose prevention centers and naloxone that save loved ones, and mental health and addiction support for long-term treatment and recovery.

5

Show larger vision: Building safe and healthy communities means everyone has a safe place to sleep at night, health care we can afford, good-paying jobs, a supportive community service system for life-saving overdose prevention, and mental health treatment when we need it.

6

Call to action: *[Insert call to action, e.g., Learn more about our campaign to build safe and healthy communities]*

Overarching theme: **Stability to Thrive**

1

Shared values: A safe and stable place to live, a good-paying job, health care we can afford no matter your income –these are the things our communities need to thrive.

2 + 3

Name the problem + personal stories/lived experiences: But these days, too many people are struggling to make ends meet. Maybe a family member lost their job and can't find a safe place to live, or a friend can't get the life-saving overdose treatments they need. We know ticketing and arresting people who need care only traps them in a downward spiral.

4

Pivot to solutions + show progress: That's why we need our leaders to invest in complete strategies that help people get the care and support they need to rebuild their lives—proven solutions like supportive housing, overdose prevention services, and mental health care that are already making a difference in people's lives.

5

Show larger vision: Because our entire community is healthier and safer when everyone has what they need to thrive.

6

Call to action: *[Insert call to action, e.g., Click to contact your members of Congress]*

2. Defining And Understanding Your Audience and Why It Matters

Defining audiences is key for any communications effort. Before creating content, take a moment to define the primary audiences for engagement.

There are many ways to parse out a specific audience for a communications campaign (e.g., by demographics, zip code, political alignment).

When trying to build support for a position, communications experts typically split up audiences into active insiders, inactive supporters, the persuadable middle, and those in opposition.

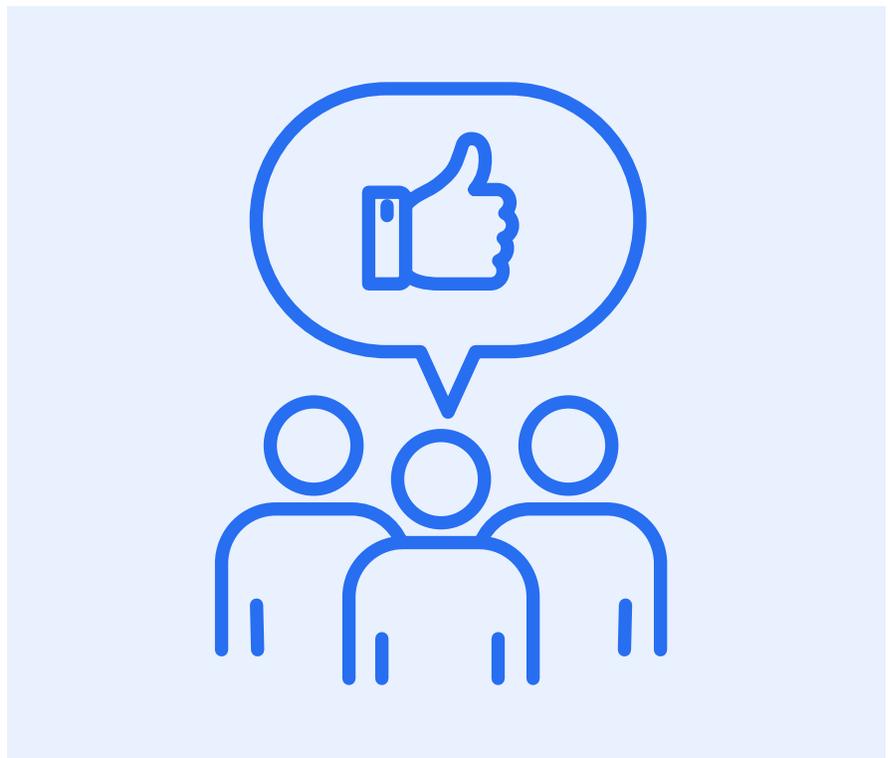
QUICK TIP

A helpful way to think about audience strategy: Activate the base, move the middle, isolate the opposition (but watch for backlash triggers). Together, these strategies maximize persuasion, build support, and shape public opinion.

Active Insiders: Already Aligned and Taking Action

Who they are:	Messaging approach:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you're reading this document, you're an insider. Insiders are already thinking and taking action aligned with the big story:• Volunteers, donors, advocates, activists• Show up to events, share content, and participate in advocacy actions• Already aligned, and support is strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shared language and messages to tell consistent stories across organizations and issue areas• Clear calls to action, strategies, campaigns, and mobilizations to help mobilize the base and reach persuadables with messages

REMEMBER: Insiders are not the target audience for most messages but can help amplify. Insiders disseminate messages to both inactive supporters and persuadable audiences.



QUICK TIP

The goal is to move these individuals from passive support to active participation – turning inactive supporters into mobilized insiders.

Inactive Supporters: Ready for Activation

Who they are:

- Ideologically aligned, but not fully mobilized
- Might show up to an event, share content, and participate in advocacy actions, but move in and out of mobilization
- are likely to sign up if engaged

Messaging approach:

- Clear calls to action
- Tools to become messengers: share language and actions they can use with less-engaged or persuadable friends and family

QUICK TIP

Persuadable people can hold multiple, contradictory beliefs at once. Think of pots on a stove – some beliefs are on high heat, actively shaping their opinions, while others are simmering on low. Effective messages turn up the heat on the values and beliefs that support our collective work (compassion, shared community, safety and health) and turn down the heat on the ones that don't (individual blame, punishment, fear of crime and disorder).

Persuadables: The Movable Middle

Who they are:

- Not deeply engaged with these issues
- Often hold conflicting beliefs. For example, might say “the system should do more to help people” and also “people need to take personal responsibility”
- Invested in the long-term success of people

Messaging approach:

- Values-based messages that connect to proven solutions and human stories
- Evidence that supportive, care-based, non-punitive solutions actually work and make our communities healthier and safer
- Plain language – don't expect people to be familiar with terms like “harm reduction” or “criminalization” or “root causes”
- Patience – meet persuadable people where they are, listen to their concerns, and repeat, repeat, repeat, core messages
- Focus on emphasizing the positive solutions that help people thrive long-term



QUICK TIP

There is always an exception to every rule, including that it is unproductive to attempt to persuade someone in deep opposition. Sometimes it does make sense to make efforts to engage and share evidence, in plain language and through connecting values.

BUT REMEMBER: Use the core messages with every audience as much as possible and across channels to increase their resonance and adoption.

The Opposition: Those Who Support Punitive Policy Solutions

Who they are:	Messaging approach:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Least likely to be persuaded • Ideologically committed exclusively to punitive responses, believing, for example, that homelessness is a choice, addiction is a weakness or moral failing, and that the solution is enforcement and incarceration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful distance – don't try to persuade the opposition, but be mindful not to cause a backlash with overly moralistic or ideological triggers • Monitoring – watch the effect of messages on the opposition to understand how they land and to know what messages the opposition is using • Limit time spent responding to opposition messages. Focus on the big story and proactive, positive messaging



Talking to Policymakers and Elected Officials

Policymakers and elected officials can come from any of these four audiences and have specific needs that are helpful to keep in mind. Use a targeted audience approach that connects back to core messages.

- **Lead with values.** And add the data and evidence as proof points.
- **Show constituent support.** Policymakers need to know voters are on board and care.
- **Provide specific, evidence-backed policy solutions.** Give specific examples from other jurisdictions or communities, and provide evidence that they have worked. Demonstrate that these solutions are not at odds with their other policy positions.
- **Address fiscal concerns directly.** Show policymakers that the solutions are cost-effective in addition to evidence-based.
- **Connect policymakers with trusted messengers.** Ask trusted messengers to share their stories directly with policymakers or share content from trusted messengers with policymakers to add lived experience to your message.
- **Help policymakers carry the messages with their audiences.** Policymakers and elected officials have wide reach. Provide them with tools to talk about the issues persuasively with their constituents.

3. The Role of Trusted Messengers



QUICK TIP

Selfie-style videos recorded on phones are an easy way to get personal stories and sometimes even outperform highly produced videos. The story, authenticity, and trust of the messenger matter the most.

Research shows that who carries your message matters *a lot*, and in fact, may be the most persuasive element in your communications.

The most effective messengers build (or already have) community trust with target audiences and are *not perceived* as having a personal agenda that aligns with your own.

Examples of trusted messengers:

- Parents who lost a child to overdose
- Law enforcement professionals
- People who rebuilt their lives after supportive housing
- Health care professionals (e.g., doctors, nurses)
- Local business leaders

Service providers and advocates can be seen as biased, but can be better heard if you follow messaging best practices *and* work in coalition with trusted messengers. Don't carry messages alone.

BOTTOM LINE: Match messengers to your target audience: spokespeople who reflect the culture, geography, or demographics. Give them tips, but empower them to speak authentically and from their lived experiences.

4. Countering Misinformation



Disinformation, misinformation, malinformation – it’s everywhere these days. Here’s what we know: Confronting people who believe misinformation and telling them they’re “wrong” or “misinformed” usually backfires and reinforces the lie. Why? Because the feelings behind the beliefs are very real. The goal is to acknowledge those feelings – *without validating the lie* – and redirect people toward the truth.

Defining the Terms

Misinformation is a term for false or inaccurate information, whether it’s spread intentionally or not.

Disinformation (or malinformation) is a specific type of misinformation that is spread deliberately, often with malicious intent.

While misinformation and disinformation are distinct concepts, in practice misinformation is often used as an umbrella term to encompass both

The Truth Sandwich

The “truth sandwich” is a technique for responding to misinformation without amplifying it.

Truth Sandwich Example

1. Lead with the truth. Acknowledge the shared value behind the feeling or fear.

- Lead with an affirmative statement grounded in shared values. For example, “We all want to feel safe when we walk down the street...”
- Don’t negate the myth. For example, avoid “Being homeless is not a crime.” Negation repeats and reinforces the lie. Most people will only recall what was being negated, not the negation itself.

1. **Truth + value-based acknowledgement:** I understand that you, like all of us, are concerned about loved ones using addictive drugs. The truth is that overdose prevention medications like naloxone save lives and give people a second chance at recovery from addiction.

2. Briefly acknowledge the misinformation exists. Name the motive.

- Let people know they may have encountered false information, but don’t dwell on the misinformation or make them feel bad. Name why bad actors might be pushing misinformation.

2. **Misinformation:** You may have heard some false claims about naloxone. They’re often put forward by those who mistakenly believe that drug users deserve punishment more than support...

3. Return to the truth with more detail.

- Reinforce the affirmative message with additional detail and pivot to solutions. End with what’s true and what works. Keep grounded in shared values and positive vision.

3. **Truth + solution:** But the reality is that naloxone saves lives, helps families stay whole, and gives them the chance to connect with the care and treatment they need to get well and rebuild their lives.

5. Reframe to Win the Game: Responding to Opposition Messages

QUICK TIP

Take elements from the core messages and pivot back to what's really at stake, rooted in the shared values that trigger community and collective action.

It will feel like you've said the same thing a thousand times before it finally breaks through – that's the game.

Messages don't live in a vacuum. Opposition messages that promote criminalization, punitive approaches, and involuntary commitments will continue to flood the media landscape.

Don't play within oppositional frames or worldview. And don't repeat their framing or worldview by negating them or myth-busting. [Research](#) shows this is ineffective and inadvertently reinforces their positions. See [Countering Misinformation in this guide for myth-busting tips](#).

As an example, when opponents attack “harm reduction,” they focus on the act of drug use and often lead with fear. Trying to defend the term within their framing or negate their framing (e.g., “harm reduction doesn't promote drug use”) is a losing strategy. Instead, pivot to a positive values-based frame – that it's common sense and keeps people alive, just like seatbelts or bike helmets.

The same can be said for attacks on “housing first,” where the opposition focuses on providing people free housing. Instead, show how providing people with housing and the services they need to rebuild their lives is good for them and our communities.

Note: The responses below provide a detailed counter to opposition messages. Adapt for the moment, messenger, and medium. Use a sentence or two, clip a talking point, use the entire message, or reconstruct as needed.

When You Hear...	You Can Say...
We need to crack down on crime	We all want safe communities. Real safety means investing in what actually keeps us safe: housing, health care, good jobs, and preventing violent crime, not policies that make the problems worse.
Homeless people are dangerous / on drugs / criminals	We all want to live in communities that feel safe and are thriving. The reality is that most people experiencing homelessness are facing tough times – job loss, medical bills, rising rents, health problems. But they won't get the help they need if they're arrested or forced into treatment.
People choose to be homeless	People are pushed into homelessness when they lose a job, can't afford rent, or deal with personal trauma/tragedy.
We don't have enough money for affordable housing for all / We already spend so much money on other supportive services, and we haven't fixed the problem	<p>It can be frustrating to see someone struggling with substance use or finding a safe place to live, but we have made progress with care-based and supportive solutions. Just look at [insert specific example from your work or another city/program].</p> <p>Cutting funding would only make things harder for people who need help – and too many people these days are just one major expense away from needing help in the future.</p> <p>That's why we need to shift resources toward housing and supportive services so everyone can get on the path to rebuild their lives.</p>
Harm reduction and mental health care won't stop criminals	<p>Our communities need a holistic approach to keeping our people safe. Right now, we're putting too many responsibilities on the police.</p> <p>We need mental health responders to help people in crisis and de-escalate situations, outreach workers and other trained experts to connect people to the care they need.</p> <p>That way, police can focus on actual violent crime and health professionals can focus on treatment and support.</p> <p>Partnerships between care providers and police strengthen our communities and make everyone safer.</p>
We need more police / enforcement	Real safety comes from investing in housing, health care, life-saving treatments, good-paying jobs, so police can focus on actual violent crime – and be accountable to our communities. We need investment in things that actually keep us safe and healthy.
Our elected officials are finally getting tough on crime	<p>We already know what makes communities safe:</p> <p>Safe communities are built by funding programs that prevent violence in the first place – programs that give people with affordable housing, food, employment, mental health care, and educational opportunities. We also need to make sure that police are transparent, accountable, and trustworthy.</p>

When You Hear...	You Can Say...
Fentanyl is killing people; we need to secure the border	<p>No one wants to see fentanyl spreading in our communities. But we have smarter ways to keep people healthy and safe – life-saving solutions like naloxone, test strips, and treatment centers that save lives.</p>
Not in my neighborhood / Keep them out of our community	<p>We need lasting solutions to help people get a safe, stable place to sleep.</p> <p>That means investing in proven solutions: supportive housing and treatment that helps people get back on their feet. That makes every community healthier and safer and helps us all do better.</p> <p>No community is immune to these crises, and ignoring them won't make them go away. We need to use tools that address overdose and homelessness before they happen.</p>
The streets are out of control / Public disorder is ruining our cities	<p>We all want to feel safe in our communities. When you see someone struggling on the street, it's a symptom of deeper problems: not enough housing, not enough good-paying jobs, unmet health needs, and health care that's too expensive.</p> <p>Arresting people who need care often creates a cycle of arrest and release that sets progress back. Instead, we need to invest in proven solutions that help get people what they need and on a pathway to better health and stability.</p> <p>When people have the stability, support, and care they need, we create safe and healthy communities for all of us to thrive.</p>
They just need to get a job / Personal responsibility	<p>It's hard to hold down a job when you don't have a safe place to sleep, or can't get the treatment and health care you need.</p> <p>People need safety and stability – housing, health care, support – to get back on their feet and rebuild their lives. Or maybe they never had a fair shot in the first place.</p> <p>The fact is, too many of us are one major bill away from losing our homes. That's why we need solutions that help people – things like housing, overdose prevention, and mental health care we can afford – no matter your income.</p>
We can't rely on health and social programs / The government is cutting funding for these programs	<p>When funding is cut for supportive housing, life-saving treatment, and mental health, our communities are less safe and healthy.</p> <p>If leaders really cared about creating safer, healthier communities, they'd shift resources toward these proven solutions, not cut them. We need to hold them accountable for funding life-saving services.</p>
If people don't want treatment we need to mandate it / Force them into treatment	<p>Before we mandate treatment we should make sure it is easily available to everyone who wants it. The truth is that quality treatment is too hard to come by for the many people who want it.</p> <p>We all want our loved ones safe and healthy, but forcibly institutionalizing someone against their will can sometimes worsen mental health struggles and increase overdose risk.</p> <p>We need to shift our resources toward scaling up quality treatment services so people can access real care on their own terms.</p>

6. Go-to Phrases and Soundbites

These soundbites are organized by where they fit in a message. Use them as building blocks, stand-alones, or adapt for your audience, messenger, and medium.

COLOR-CODED KEY:

SHARED VALUES

NAME THE PROBLEM

SOLUTION

LIVED EXPERIENCE

VALUES: We know what keeps our communities safe and healthy: good jobs, housing, mental health care we can afford, and life-saving overdose prevention services that keep people alive to get the help they need.

VALUES: Regardless of who we are or what we believe, we all want to live in a safe and healthy community, where we have what we need to build a good life.

VALUES + **SOLUTION:** We need to ensure everyone – no matter their income – can get the life-saving care they need, like overdose prevention and mental health care, and has a safe place to call home.

PROBLEM + **SOLUTION:** Everybody wants to solve homelessness and overdose deaths, but how we do it matters. We need to get people the life-saving care and support they need instead of sending them to jail and giving them criminal records that make it harder to get a job, housing, or education – and often return them to the streets with their needs unaddressed, and with more instability and trauma.

PROBLEM + **SOLUTION:** Arresting people who don't have a safe place to sleep at night or who can't get mental health care only makes things worse—for them and our community – by trapping people in a cycle of arrest and release. It's time to shift our resources toward effective approaches that address why someone is homeless or struggling in our streets.

PROBLEM + **SOLUTION:** Police have their role. We need them to focus on violent crime—not punishing people who need help and care. We need more social workers, outreach workers, and health providers who understand addiction, trauma, and mental health – trained providers who can connect people to the resources they need to rebuild their lives so police can focus on violent crime.

PROBLEM + **SOLUTION:** Increasing access to mental health care and treatment for addiction makes our communities safer and healthier because it addresses the underlying problems – not arresting or ticketing people, which often disappears someone for a few days until they are released without any meaningful connection to care.

LIVED EXPERIENCE + **SOLUTION:** Many people have valid concerns about fentanyl and drug overdoses. That's why we need to smartly spend our money on things that actually keep us safe and healthy and support the bridge to recovery, like test strips that can detect fentanyl, naloxone that reverses an opioid overdose, and overdose prevention centers where trained professionals connect people to care and reverse overdoses at the earliest sign.

VALUES + **SOLUTION:** When we invest in housing with supportive services, overdose prevention, and mental health care, we are connecting people to the care and help they need to improve their lives. Everybody benefits when we invest in housing, health care, and care-based treatment, and our communities are safer and healthier.

7. Words to Replace and Embrace

Quick tips for replacing jargon with plain language that moves persuadables.

Replace	Embrace
<p>Being homeless is not a crime</p> <p>Homelessness is not a choice</p>	<p>Most people become homeless because housing costs are too high; there aren't enough places that are affordable for most working people.</p> <p>Too many of us are one job loss or critical illness away from not being able to pay the rent or mortgage.</p> <p>We need solutions that help people, not punish them.</p> <p>People need safety and stability – housing, health care, support – to get back on their feet and rebuild their lives. Or maybe they never had a fair shot in the first place.</p> <p>Homelessness is a result of the expensive cost of living today and elected officials' failure to fix rising costs.</p> <p>Punishing people for not being able to pay a bill does nothing to fix the fact that it's too expensive to keep a roof over our heads. We need to invest in housing everyone can afford.</p>
Criminalization	<p>Arresting or ticketing people</p> <p>Punishing people</p> <p>Burdening people with more debt</p> <p>Sending people to jail</p>
Does more harm	Makes things worse
<p>Housing not homelessness</p> <p>Homes not jails</p>	<p>We all need a safe place to sleep</p> <p>Everyone needs a home</p> <p>Housing is a basic need</p>
<p>Ending homelessness</p> <p>Reducing homelessness</p>	We need to solve homelessness

Replace	Embrace
Affordable housing	<p>Housing that everyone can afford at every income level</p> <p>Housing that meets our needs and reflects what we can afford</p>
We need more funding / investment / money	<p>We need to shift resources toward</p> <p>We need to spend our money smartly on what we know works</p>
Harm reduction	<p>Overdose prevention</p> <p>Keeping people alive so they can get the help they need</p> <p>Saving people from overdoses</p> <p>Preventing overdoses</p> <p>Reducing overdoses in our community</p> <p>Bridge to recovery</p> <p>Name concrete services. For example: syringe service programs, naloxone, fentanyl test strips, supplies for safer use</p>
Intersectional approach	Complete strategy
People need to hit rock bottom	Circumstances can change
Crime is actually going down...	<p>We all want to feel safe</p> <p>We all deserve to live in safe and healthy communities. That's why [solution]</p>
The data shows... / You don't need to be afraid of...	<p>Many people have valid concerns about [name concern]. That's why we need [solution]</p> <p>People have valid concerns about [name concern]. Here's how we actually create safe and healthy communities: [solution]</p>

8. Research Appendix and Further Reading

This guide was informed by ongoing public opinion polling, message testing, and narrative research on homelessness, drug policy, and community safety from a coalition of organizations working together on these issues. A high-level review of selected data is linked here.

While this guide intentionally limited data citations throughout, we encourage you to explore the individual resources linked below for additional insights and deep dives into the data.

ACLU

**The Action Lab at
Northeastern University**

**Big Cities Health
Coalition: Overdose
Prevention Messaging**

Drug Policy Alliance

**Housing Narrative Lab
Research**

Reporting on Addiction

**Vera Action:
How to Fight and Win the
Crime Debate**

