



# Reframing Homelessness in the United Kingdom

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A FrameWorks MessageMemo

In partnership with Crisis

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## Introduction

The concept of ‘home’ looms large in British culture, and has for centuries shaped its national identity. Cognitive science tells us that our thought processes are as much a product of our culture as the books on our shelves and the films in our cinemas, though less immediately visible. What influence do these deeply entrenched cultural ideas about home – and its opposite, being ‘un-homed’ – have on how members of the British public make sense of homelessness? More importantly, how can experts use communications to shift these deeply held ideals?

Recognising that engrained cultural perspectives can act as obstacles to building public will for the large-scale solutions necessary to address homelessness effectively, Crisis sponsored a multimethod, multidisciplinary investigation of the shared cultural assumptions that the British public draws upon to reason about homelessness, and of the framing strategies that can best help communicators negotiate this mental landscape. This MessageMemo is the culmination of that investigation. The research presented here builds on earlier findings about the patterns evident in people’s views on homelessness and the ways media and third-sector communications influence those patterns. This MessageMemo provides a response to the communications challenges identified in that prior phase of research: a set of empirically tested framing recommendations on how to move the conversation on homelessness into more productive territory.

The overall framing strategy detailed in the body of the MessageMemo suggests that homelessness experts and communicators need to shift from a charity narrative to a *Common Experience* meta-frame. This frame includes three core ideas:

- 1. People’s fundamental commonality.** The meta-frame reminds audiences of people’s *shared* moral status as human beings or common members of society. By highlighting what we all share, the frame helps people to avoid the tendency to ‘other’ people who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness.
- 2. The lived experience of homelessness.** The meta-frame helps people understand and identify with the range of *lived experiences* of homelessness. Rather than evoking pity or sympathy for ‘them’, a framing strategy with an experiential dimension gives people a sense of what housing insecurity feels like and motivates them to think about how we can prevent and address it.
- 3. The role of systems.** The meta-frame generates a systemic understanding of the causes of and solutions to homelessness. By enabling people to see the issue in systemic terms, the frame brings into view the spectrum of types of homelessness, and creates understanding of and support for policy solutions that can prevent and reduce homelessness in all its forms.

The homelessness sector can advance this frame using a set of specific values, metaphors, stories and solutions.

Figure 1 below outlines the set of questions pursued in the research, the methods used to collect and analyse data and details about the project's sample sizes. The rest of this MessageMemo unfolds in three parts:

1. *Anticipating Public Thinking* outlines the differences between expert and public perspectives on homelessness, and pinpoints the implications of the public's overarching assumptions for advancing an informed public conversation about the causes of and solutions to homelessness.
2. *Redirections* outlines a series of rigorously tested communications tools and techniques for reframing homelessness.
3. *Moving Forward* offers concluding thoughts and a call to action.

Figure 1:

## What Communications Research Does a Field Need to Reframe an Issue?

### What does the research on homelessness say?

To distil expert consensus on homelessness, the FrameWorks Institute conducted interviews in July and August 2016 with 15 leading homelessness researchers and policy experts. This data was supplemented by a review of relevant academic and advocacy literature, and refined during a series of feedback sessions with Crisis staff.

### How does the public think?

To document the cultural understandings people draw on to make sense of homelessness, FrameWorks conducted in-depth cognitive interviews with members of the public, and analysed the resulting transcripts to identify the implicit, shared understandings and assumptions that structure public opinion. Twenty interviews were conducted in London, Manchester, Glasgow, Belfast and Aberystwyth in October 2016.

### What are the existing communications strategies?

To identify the framing strategies groups are already employing to talk about homelessness, FrameWorks researchers conducted a systematic analysis of over 300 media and third-sector materials that address the issue of homelessness.

### Which frames can shift thinking?

To systematically identify effective ways of talking about homelessness, FrameWorks researchers developed a set of candidate messages and tested them with members of the British public who lack expert knowledge about the issue. Two primary methods were used to explore, winnow and refine possible reframes:

- On-the-street interviews involve rapid, face-to-face testing of frame elements for their ability to prompt productive and robust understandings and discussions of a topic. Interviews were conducted in July 2017 in London, Swansea and Edinburgh with a total of 51 people.
- A series of experimental surveys involving a nationally representative sample of 9,900 respondents was conducted to test the effectiveness of a variety of frames on public understanding, attitudes, support for programmes and policies and willingness to donate money.

All told, more than 10,000 people from across the United Kingdom were included in this research.

## Anticipating Public Thinking

Members of the public share deeply ingrained cultural assumptions and patterns of thinking that influence their interpretation of homelessness as a social problem: its causes, consequences and solutions. A systematic assessment of where and how public and expert understanding of homelessness differ is a critical first step in developing communications strategies that can help align public thinking more closely with the homelessness sector. The summary below highlights the most important gaps between expert and public thinking, and their implications for an overall framing strategy to communicate with the public about homelessness. For a more in-depth discussion of this research, please read [Finding a Better Frame: How to Create More Effective Messages on Homelessness in the United Kingdom](#),<sup>1</sup> which presents the complete findings of that investigation.

### What Is Homelessness? A Spectrum of Insecure Housing vs. Rough Sleeping

Experts define 'homelessness' broadly, as a term encompassing many types of insecure housing. People may be considered homeless if their tenancy in a residence is threatened by physical, psychological or emotional danger, if they live in overcrowded conditions, or if they lack an affordable, stable place to live over a period of time. Experts understand that homelessness can often be invisible; for example, when an individual sleeps at a friend's or family member's home but has no expectation of permanent residency there ('sofa-surfing'), or when tenancy is tenuous because the individual is at risk of experiencing physical or emotional abuse. Though homelessness may be transitory or long term, depending on a number of factors, experts agree that even short stints of homelessness may have serious and long-lasting consequences for a person's health and wellbeing.

By contrast, in the public's mind, homelessness is narrowly defined as 'rough sleeping' or the complete absence of housing. This default understanding, in which homelessness means 'living on the street' – and not sofa-surfing or other forms of housing insecurity – prevents people from thinking about homelessness as a broader issue, affecting a larger population and shaped by a variety of contributing factors.

To build support for policies and programmes that can address the full range of insecure housing and its causes, communicators need framing strategies that can expand the public's definition of homelessness beyond rough sleeping.

### Who Is at Risk of Homelessness? Populations Experiencing Other Social Disadvantages vs. a Limited Number of 'Types'

Experts recognise that some groups are at greater risk of homelessness than others. Income, race, sexual orientation, age and time spent in state-sponsored institutions, including prisons and the care system, all

factor into a person's risk status. People experiencing social disadvantages in these areas are less likely to have the resources – financial, social, health-related – to obtain and maintain stable housing.

In contrast to experts' understanding of the social conditions that escalate some groups' risk of homelessness, members of the public overwhelmingly default to three specific **prototypes** when asked to think about who is at risk of homelessness: middle-aged men, youth and abused women. These prototypes then structure people's reasoning about the causes and consequences of, and solutions to, homelessness. Each of these prototypes is attended by certain cultural models that constrain the public's understanding of what can or should be done to address homelessness. When thinking of the middle-aged man prototype, for instance, people typically assume that addiction or mental illness are causal factors, which in turn leads them to blame homelessness on the individual and to express a sense of fatalism about what options exist to address the problem.

These deeply entrenched cultural prototypes restrict people's ability to see homelessness as a social issue that affects different kinds of people. This makes it difficult for experts to initiate conversations about how to address this problem for people who do not fit these dominant prototypes. To broaden people's understanding of *who* is homeless, experts need to build public understanding of the underlying *causes* of homelessness, as well as the diversity of experience and identity among those who experience it.

## What Causes Homelessness? Structural Deficiencies vs. Individual Decision-Making

Experts understand that homelessness is the result of deficiencies in the social structure, such as a lack of affordable housing, wage stagnation, discrimination and cuts to social welfare programmes. The economic insecurity caused by these various systemic factors can push people into a variety of insecure housing situations.

Unsurprisingly, however, the public tends to assign blame for homelessness to individual actors: people whose personal failings, poor mental health or calculated decisions led them to rough sleeping. Both the third sector's and the media's stories about homelessness rarely take the time to explain its structural causes. Instead, the public is more commonly exposed to illustrative stories that focus on the circumstances of a particular individual – especially those who are rough sleeping, the type of homelessness that is both the most extreme and the most familiar to the public. Though this framing strategy may be intended to generate sympathy and concern, such stories inadvertently feed people's stereotyped expectations about who is homeless and why. When these prototypical examples of homelessness – rough sleeping by a handful of 'types' – are highlighted to the exclusion of other examples and without systemic context, the public overwhelmingly identifies individual decision-making as the chief causal factor. This dominant perception limits the public's ability to see how systems-based solutions are needed or appropriate, since people may reasonably assume that individuals who have caused their own problems ought to take responsibility for resolving those problems, too. Further, when homelessness is perceived as a choice, the public is more likely to support punitive measures, such as jail time for

vagrancy, reasoning that this will positively affect the decision-making calculus of would-be homeless people or forcibly increase their willpower and drive to adopt behaviours that help them to avoid homelessness.

The individualist lens severely constricts people's thinking about the causes of homelessness, its salience as a social issue, who is responsible for addressing it and what role public policy should play. To broaden people's perspective, communicators need ways to explain how flaws in economic and wage policies, housing and other social structures propel some groups towards a financial precipice that can lead to housing insecurity. Without this awareness, the public will be less prone to support the types of wide-scale policy changes that can effectively prevent or reduce homelessness.

## What Can Be Done about Homelessness? Prevention and Benefits vs. No Solutions

Experts agree that homelessness is a large and complicated issue, but one for which there are feasible, policy-based solutions – with enough public will. They identify several steps that can be taken to prevent homelessness and call for bold action in this area – including broad policy changes that together, according to experts, could significantly reduce homelessness.

Public thinking about homelessness, on the other hand, features a deep fatalism. Non-experts struggle to comprehend how changing social contexts through policy can prevent homelessness – structural changes that can increase access to stable, affordable housing are simply not on the public's radar. What's more, the public thinks of homelessness and poverty as discrete issues. This means that people typically fail to think of broader, antipoverty economic policies or solutions, such as ensuring a strong benefits system or stable jobs with good wages, as ways to end homelessness.

When pressed for solutions, people generally turn to immediate but temporary forms of crisis management, such as finding people shelter or hospitalisation for mental illness or addiction. Because homelessness becomes visible to the public only when people are on the streets, the public focuses its thinking about solutions on the events that prompt people to lose all shelter. But even here the public may discount important solutions, because of both its belief that adequate intervention services already exist for those who want them and its focus on charity-based efforts, rather than on the policy shifts needed to effect real change.

The public's engrained pessimism about the likelihood of preventing and reducing homelessness presents one of the biggest challenges any framing strategy must overcome. Communicators need a frame that helps people see that homelessness *can* be effectively addressed by tackling its structural causes.



## Redirections

The research presented below suggests that, to build support for the policies and programmes that can end homelessness, communicators should use a *Common Experience* meta-frame. This frame counters the public's unproductive assumptions by getting at three key aspects of the issue:

1. **People's fundamental commonality.** Homeless people are, like all of us, human beings and members of society. The right values, metaphor and stories can orient people to what we all share.
2. **The lived experience of homelessness.** Metaphor and stories about various types of housing insecurity, when told in the right ways, can help people understand what it feels like to be homeless.
3. **The role of systems.** The values, metaphor and solutions that help to make up the frame encourage systemic thinking about how homelessness happens and cultivate support for systems-level policy change to bring about solutions.

It is important to emphasise that **effective framing requires getting at all three aspects of the issue.** If communicators evoke or explain one aspect of the issue without getting at the others, this will undermine key goals. For example, giving people a visceral sense of the lived experience of homelessness without pointing to systems-level policies, or reminding people of what we all have in common, risks evoking a charity response. People may pay attention and feel terrible for people who endure such stressful experiences, but they may not understand that public policy impacts rates of homelessness, and that policy shifts are needed to prevent it from happening.

The recommended strategy detailed below includes a set of frame elements that, taken together, get at these three aspects of homelessness. These tools proved highly effective, in qualitative and quantitative studies, in shifting public thinking about homelessness. Values effectively connect people to the issue of homelessness, remind them of our shared humanity, and place the issue in its social context. Metaphor and experiential stories are particularly well suited to give audiences a sense of the diversity of lived experiences of homelessness and connect those experiences to their systemic sources. Solutions promote prevention and systems-level thinking. Communicators can use these tools flexibly and adapt them to their specific communications context. More detail on the methods used to arrive at these recommendations can be found in Appendix A.

## Which frame ‘works’? That’s an empirical question.

To arrive at a set of framing tools and tactics that advocates can use with confidence, FrameWorks’ researchers designed a series of qualitative studies and quantitative experiments that tested the effects of different frame elements on communicating expert perspectives on homelessness. The frame elements included different ways of using values, explanatory metaphors and narratives.

To determine the effects of alternative frames, researchers first created short messages that incorporated one or more frame element. From a large, nationally representative sample of UK residents, a survey experiment randomly assigned participants to different messages, and then asked them to complete a survey probing their knowledge, attitudes and policy preferences about issues around homelessness.

Table 1:

### Desired Communications Outcomes: Improved Knowledge, Attitudes and Policy Preferences.

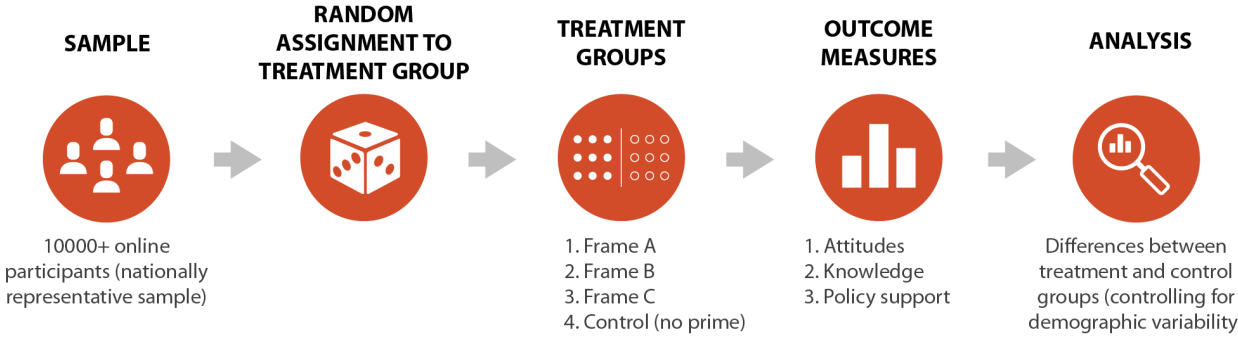
A frame ‘works’ when it leads to the desired communications outcome. To determine the effects of different frame elements, researchers tested alternative frames head-to-head, and looked to see which messages made the most difference on questions like the ones illustrated below.

SCALES	SAMPLE QUESTIONS
Expanded definition of homelessness	People who have a place to sleep at night are homeless if they feel unsafe in the place where they are staying ( <i>Strongly disagree; disagree; slightly disagree; neither agree nor disagree; slightly agree; agree; strongly agree</i> )
Social origins of homelessness	How important do you think lack of adequate mental health and addiction services is in explaining why there is homelessness in this country? ( <i>Not at all important; slightly important; moderately important; very important; extremely important</i> )
Support for preventative policies to address homelessness	People who have experienced domestic violence should automatically qualify for secure, long-term social housing. ( <i>Strongly oppose; oppose; somewhat oppose; neither favour nor oppose; somewhat favour; favour; strongly favour</i> )
Support for policies that address homelessness	The government should pay for permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness, rather than place them in temporary accommodation. ( <i>Strongly oppose; oppose; somewhat oppose; neither favour nor oppose; somewhat favour; favour; strongly favour</i> )
Homelessness as a priority/salient issue	In your view, how serious of a problem is homelessness in this country? ( <i>Not at all serious; slightly serious; moderately serious; very serious; extremely serious</i> )

Collective efficacy about reducing homelessness	If the government takes the right steps, we can get rid of homelessness. <i>(Strongly disagree; disagree; slightly disagree; neither agree nor disagree; slightly agree; agree; strongly agree)</i>
Collective responsibility	If there is homelessness in our society, our country has failed in our responsibilities. <i>(Strongly disagree; disagree; slightly disagree; neither agree nor disagree; slightly agree; agree; strongly agree)</i>
Behavioural action	If you were directly asked to do so, how likely would you be to run in or sponsor someone to run in a marathon in support of a homelessness charity? <i>(Not at all likely; slightly likely; moderately likely; very likely; extremely likely)</i>
Policies addressing benefits	The rules about who is eligible for benefits should be expanded so that more people can receive them. <i>(Strongly oppose; oppose; somewhat oppose; neither favour nor oppose; somewhat favour; favour; strongly favour)</i>

The results associated with each frame were compared with each other and with the responses of a control group, which received no messages but answered the same survey questions. This design allows researchers to pinpoint how exposure to different frames affect people’s understanding of and attitudes toward homelessness and their support for relevant policies. In addition, researchers controlled for a wide range of demographic variables (including age, race, class and gender of respondents) by conducting a multiple-regression statistical analysis to ensure that the effects observed were being driven by the frame elements rather than demographic variations in the sample.

**Figure 2:**  
A sound experimental design for determining effective frames.



This sound experimental design – a hallmark of Strategic Frame Analysis® – allows researchers to feel confident that any differences between treatment groups are due to the frame and not extraneous factors.

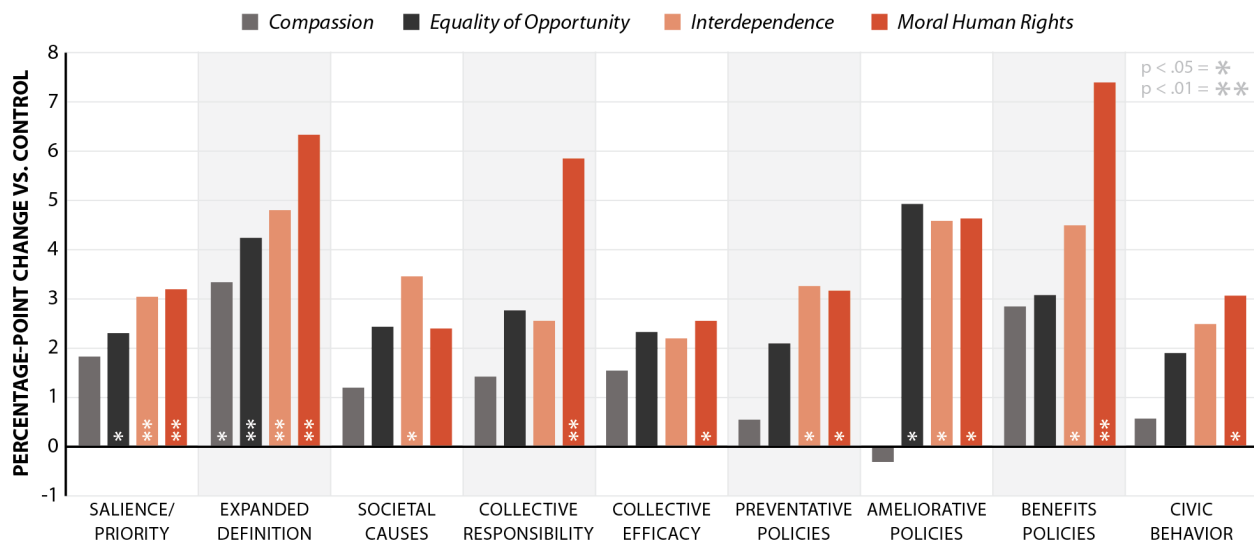
## Use Proven Values to Expand Support for Collective Action

Values are enduring, widely shared principles or beliefs that can prime your audience to see an issue from a certain perspective. When communicating about a social problem, values that encourage people to see the issue as a matter of public concern work best, because they generate interest and engagement in collective or policy-based solutions. Used at the start of the message, values set the course and tone for the interaction that follows. And when that powerful opening gets support from further ‘doses’ of the value incorporated into the rest of the message, the re-priming effect keeps audiences on track.

In earlier phases of the research, FrameWorks analysed third-sector communications materials and found that a majority (nearly 63 per cent) lacked any value statement. This means that audiences were not consistently hearing messages about why public action is necessary to address homelessness – or what is at stake if we fail to take action. One important communications shift, therefore, is for experts to include explicit values statements in their communications. But identifying which values work to expand support for collective action is a research question.

To determine the most effective values, FrameWorks’ researchers conducted two experiments testing several candidate values against a control condition. The values included in the experiments were chosen because of their current use among experts or their effectiveness in other fields in which FrameWorks has conducted research. As Graph 1 illustrates, two values – *Moral Human Rights* and *Interdependence* – outperformed other values, producing gains in knowledge, attitudes and policy support. Critically, both values work by appealing to our shared humanity or membership in society – what connects and unites all people – and undermining the tendency for people to ‘other’ homeless people.

Graph 1:  
Effects of Values



## Appeal to a *Moral Human Rights* Perspective to Connect with People and Drive Policy Support

A *Moral Human Rights* appeal – the idea that, as human beings, we all have the moral right to be treated with dignity and respect – is a particularly effective way of framing homelessness. Arguing that everyone has a right to dignity and respect as part of our basic humanity increases people’s sense of responsibility for addressing homelessness and boosts support for policy change. This unifying *Moral Human Rights* value dislodges the public’s tendency to see homeless people as ‘other’ and homelessness as an issue that doesn’t warrant public concern or attention.

This value showed large, statistically significant effects on people’s thinking in eight of nine outcome categories, including support for a range of different types of policies (for example, those that strengthen benefits, prevent homelessness and address homelessness); issue salience, expressions of both collective responsibility and collective efficacy; and willingness to engage in various individual behaviours to address homelessness (for example, volunteering and donating) (see Graph 1 above). Communicators should note that the frame effects of this value were especially large for an experiment of this type. Exposure to the value, for example, increased support for benefits policies by an average of more than seven percentage points – a strikingly large number, given how entrenched and polarised attitudes towards benefits in the United Kingdom are. The value performed similarly among Labour and Conservative voters, producing gains on multiple outcome scales for each – including support for better benefits policies.

### Example of the *Moral Human Rights* Value

Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity. Living with dignity means having access to decent housing.

Let’s commit to protecting this essential human need. Right now, hundreds of thousands of people in our country are homeless – forced to sleep on friends’ sofas and floors, live in crowded or unsafe places, sleep on buses or in cars or even stay out on the streets. We can do better.

### ⚠ User Note

Critically, the *Moral Human Rights* value is not an assertion of *legal* rights but rather of moral status. Communicators must explain how homelessness violates our fundamental *moral responsibility* to treat all human beings with decency. By emphasising our shared humanity in this way, communicators can connect powerfully with the sense that society must take action to put things right.

## Advance a Sense of *Interdependence* to Place Homelessness in Social Context

A second value, *Interdependence*, also showed strong frame effects. As a framing strategy, *Interdependence* brings the social causes of homelessness into view by highlighting the connections and inter-reliance among all members of our society. Importantly, *Interdependence* was the only value tested for effectiveness that affected whether people understand the systemic causes of homelessness. Note that the value, as tested in FrameWorks' research, draws attention to the ways in which we are all connected both socially *and* economically. The reminder of our intertwined economic fortune reinforces the idea that we are all members of the same society and addressing homelessness strengthens society as a whole.

### Example of the *Interdependence* Value

What affects one of us affects all of us. When some people are struggling, it hurts everyone. Right now, many people are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, which makes it harder to contribute to and share in our country's prosperity. Making sure that everyone has safe, stable housing benefits us all by creating a stronger, more productive society where everyone can contribute and we all benefit.

Appealing to *Interdependence* at the start of a message increases people's recognition that homelessness is a problem that society causes and society must address.

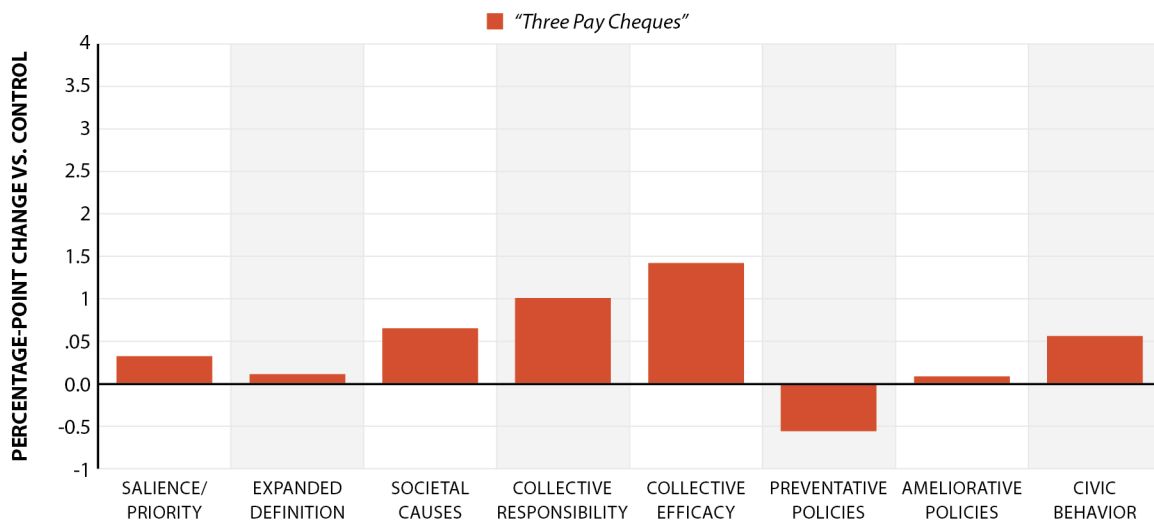
In contrast, other values tested in the study did not show as robust effects on the outcome measures. Although the values of *Compassion* and *Equality of Opportunity* have been shown to be effective in other issue areas, such as poverty, they are not as effective on the issue of homelessness. The reason for this difference is that *Moral Human Rights* and *Interdependence* help people access two of the three key aspects of the meta-frame described above. First, there is an experiential quality to both values; *Moral Human Rights* calls to mind what it means to live with dignity, and *Interdependence* evokes the day-to-day, real-life interactions with other people that form the basis of society. Second, both emphasise our commonality; while *Moral Human Rights* emphasises our common moral status, *Interdependence* points to common social ties. By contrast, *Equality of Opportunity* does not carry the same experiential dimension; it offers no real insight into the lived experience of homelessness. *Compassion* likely fails to evoke a sense of commonality because it is open to an 'othering' interpretation – that is, it asks 'us' to feel compassion for 'them'.

Instead, communicators should emphasise our common humanity and interconnection to collectivise people's orientation towards homelessness.

## Avoid Messages that Claim We Are All at Risk of Homelessness

Existing advocacy communications often make the claim that homelessness is a condition that can potentially affect anyone. Campaigners use this strategy in an effort to elevate the issue’s salience among the public. To test whether this strategy is effective, FrameWorks’ researchers included a version of this message: a commonly used statement explaining that ‘we are all three pay cheques away from homelessness’. This appeal to the universal risk of homelessness failed to shift public attitudes or beliefs on any of the outcome scales tested in the experiment, including issue salience, collective responsibility, preventative measures and collective efficacy. Importantly, it failed to broaden people’s understanding of the types of homelessness and the economic causes of homelessness – key intentions of the overall framing strategy.

Graph 2:  
Effect of “Three Pay Cheques” Message



One reason for this finding may be that the fear such a message evokes fosters paralysis and fatalism, rather than the sense of optimism about solutions that can move people to action. Evidence from the cultural models interviews conducted in an earlier phase of this project suggests another explanation: The message simply does not ring true to members of the public when they begin to think it through. Instead, this claim appears to conflict with people’s lived experience of inequality, and their recognition that some people are *not* at real risk of becoming homeless because they will always have the necessary resources and social supports.

Given these results, communicators should avoid trying to forge connection and concern by claiming that ‘homelessness could happen to any of us’. Instead, rely on the *Moral Human Rights* and *Interdependence* values for this framing task.

## Use Explanatory Strategies to Fill in Cognitive Holes

Communications that explain and illustrate how something works are powerful. Through vivid comparison, communications can have the power to give people a sense of what housing insecurity feels like. In addition, by giving people a memorable mental picture of how poverty and other social factors cause homelessness, we enable people to see beyond individuals to systems. This creates fertile ground for considering the importance of new policies and different types of solutions. FrameWorks tested several explanatory tools for their ability to align the public's definition of homelessness more closely with experts'. Among those tested, the metaphor of *Constant Pressure* – including telling experiential stories, avoiding telling charity stories and providing concrete solutions – demonstrated an ability to achieve overarching framing goals.

### Use the Metaphor *Constant Pressure* to Explain How Homelessness Happens

Earlier phases of the research showed that people struggle to see the systemic nature of homelessness and do not consistently connect poverty to someone's likelihood of experiencing housing insecurity. An important part of testing a new framing strategy was to measure whether communications could inspire more systems thinking among members of the public, and if poverty could play a more central role in people's understanding of homelessness. To do this, researchers turned to metaphor: a framing strategy designed to 'translate' complex concepts. Explanatory metaphors compare an idea or concept that is not well understood to a familiar event, object or process to give people new ways of reasoning about or understanding the idea or concept. Strong explanatory metaphors are also memorable, which makes them effective framing tools because they pass easily from one person to another, widening the reach of a message.

Of the metaphors FrameWorks' researchers tested in on-the-street interviews and a large-scale survey experiment, one – *Constant Pressure* – proved highly effective in shifting how people think about homelessness. As illustrated in Graph 3, exposure to the *Constant Pressure* metaphor led to significant gains in respondents' expanded definition of homelessness, their understanding of homelessness as a salient issue, their sense of collective efficacy and their willingness to engage in activities to address homelessness. In addition, the metaphor produced gains in policy support and collective responsibility that approached statistical significance. While in this test the metaphor did not increase people's understanding of the societal causes of homelessness, on-the-street interviews provided strong evidence of its potential to do so, and – as we will discuss shortly – experimental research confirmed that, when paired with other tools, the metaphor does have the capacity to move this outcome. By contrast, the *Unravelling* metaphor, which compared the experience of homelessness to a piece of fabric that is coming apart, did not produce any statistically significant gains. (To learn more about this experiment and what other metaphors were tested, see Appendix B.)



Graph 3:  
Effects of Metaphors



The *Constant Pressure* metaphor is also a highly productive and vivid way to explain how homelessness happens.

**Example of the *Constant Pressure* Metaphor**

Poverty puts constant pressure on people. If the pressure builds up, people can be pushed into homelessness: sleeping on friends’ sofas and floors, living in crowded or unsafe places, sleeping on buses or in cars or even being out on the street.

This pressure comes from high housing costs, low wages and inadequate government support, which can build up to a breaking point. A sudden increase in pressure from a life event – like losing a job, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis – can quickly become a rushing flood that pushes people into homelessness.

The analogy draws on people’s familiarity with pressure and what can go wrong when the pressure is too great. It equates this phenomenon with the ways in which structural inequities, such as low wages, a lack of affordable housing and discrimination, can have compounding effects that push people into homelessness. By making it easier to envision how poverty ‘wears away’ at people’s ability to find secure, stable housing and leads to precarious housing arrangements, the metaphor allows people to recognise the external factors that contribute to homelessness and steers them away from the unproductive assumption that ‘people make their own choices and lot in life’.

Importantly, metaphors work because they are visceral, vivid and help people simulate the experience of a phenomenon – even if they have not lived through the exact situation. This has everything to do with the way our brains process language. Ample research suggests that when we encounter a word or idea, we make sense of it by simulating the experience of the thing that the word or idea represents. For example, when we read the word ‘run’, the parts of the brain that govern the physical act of running are involved in that processing. This means that one way we understand metaphorical language is by imagining, at some level, that it is literally true.<sup>2</sup>

With respect to *Constant Pressure*, then, exposure to the metaphor may cause people to feel a simulated sense of the experience of seeing water pressing against a dam, which in turn may foster a stronger, more visceral understanding of what it feels like to live in poverty, under the constant pressure of housing insecurity. By helping people understand what it feels like to experience housing insecurity and homelessness, the metaphor helps overcome the tendency to see homeless people as ‘other’, and instead helps people put themselves in their place.

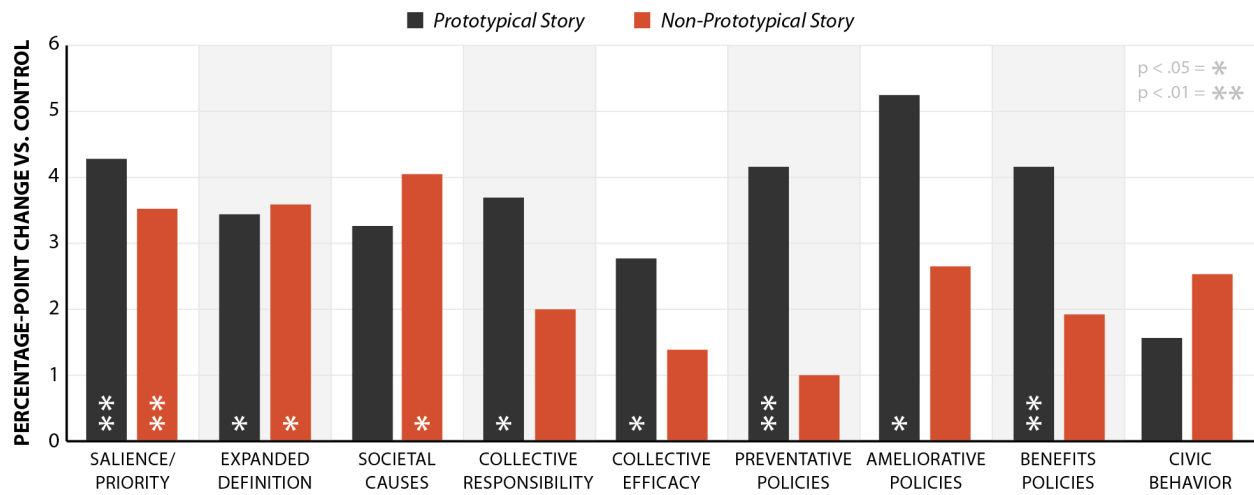
When using the metaphor, communicators should adapt it creatively to suit their communications needs and consider using a variety of synonyms, images and turns of phrase that convey the metaphor’s central concept.

### **Include Experiential Stories as a Part of the ‘Systems Story’ to Expand People’s Definition of Homelessness**

An analysis of how the third sector and media frame homelessness revealed that messages often focus on individual stories of rough sleeping as a result of untreated addiction or mental health problems.<sup>3</sup> Knowing that expanding the public’s understanding of homelessness is a key communications goal, FrameWorks investigated whether, and how, stories that focused on a variety of experiences of homelessness could lead to broader public understanding. As demonstrated below, stories that describe the lived experience of homelessness are a powerful way to engage people, expand their understanding of homelessness, raise the salience of the issue and generate concern.

In a first phase of quantitative testing, researchers tested a prototypical story (a person who lost his or her job and was forced to rough sleep) versus a non-prototypical story (person who lost his or her job and was forced to move between other peoples’ sofas, his or her car and crowded housing). As Graph 4 demonstrates, both kinds of stories were able to increase people’s sense of the importance of the issue and, in turn, affect other outcomes. The prototypical story was also effective in increasing people’s sense of collective responsibility and efficacy, as well as bolstering support for preventative, ameliorative and benefits policies. The non-prototypical story did not have a statistically significant effect on these measures, but was able to increase people’s ability to think about the societal causes of homelessness.

Graph 4:  
Effects of Experiential Stories



On the surface, these results might seem to validate the existing practice of telling stories about rough sleeping; but, on close inspection, things are more complicated. The results do indicate that describing the lived experience of homelessness *is* a way of generating concern and boosting salience, confirming that experiential stories have an important role to play within a broader framing strategy. And it is unsurprising that prototypical stories about rough sleeping, which match people’s existing mental picture of homelessness, most easily raise salience – they tap into something that is already in mind and leverage it to quickly motivate personal concern. As we discuss shortly, non-prototypical stories can be equally effective in connecting people to the lived experience of homelessness – with the added benefit of truly expanding people’s understanding of the issue. But people need additional help processing these stories.

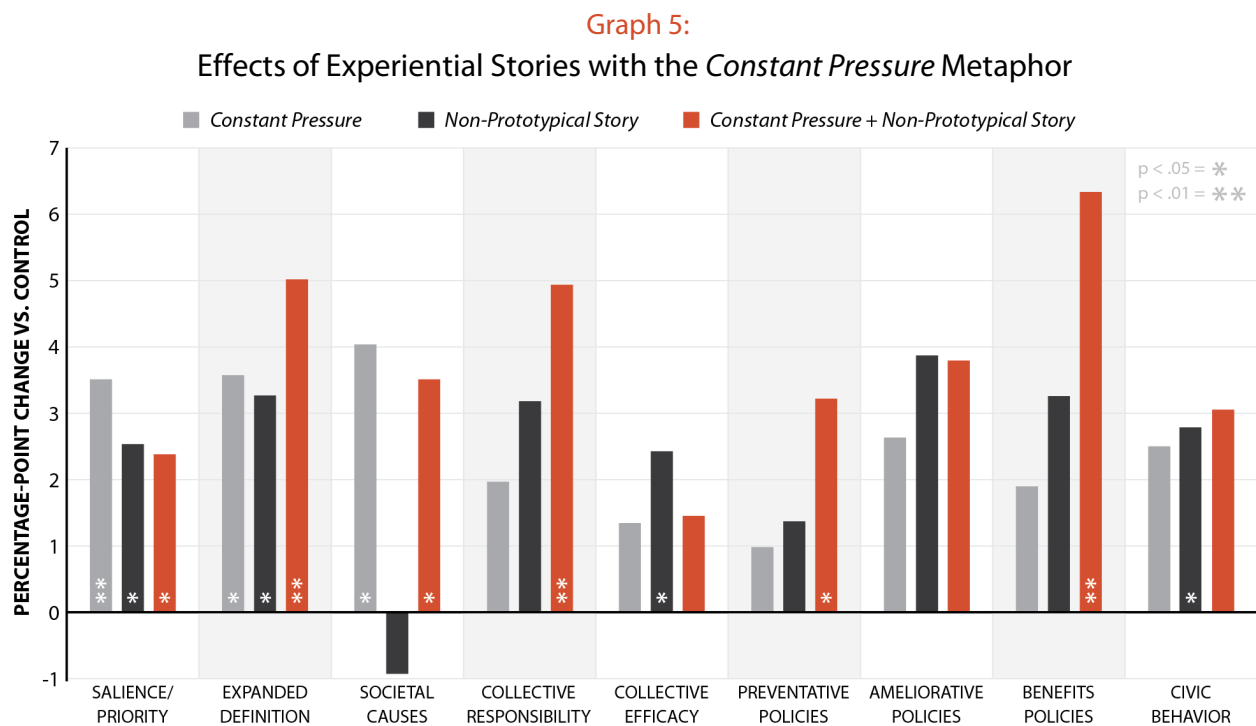
Yet the experiment results should *not* lead to the misimpression that telling stories about individuals’ experience of homelessness in isolation is a good strategy. We know from cultural models research that when people think about individual cases of homelessness – particularly prototypical cases – they do *not* reason towards systemic solutions. Telling individual stories that don’t situate these cases within a systemic perspective does not give people the tools to reason towards such solutions.

Why, then, do we see policy gains from these experiential stories when tested on their own? To understand this, we have to look at the survey experiment context. Respondents read stories that effectively boosted their concern about the issue, and then were asked to weigh in on a set of policies. In effect, the survey questions themselves extended the message, providing a set of policy ‘asks’ that placed the issue in systemic perspective. In other words, the survey itself provided a key dose of systems thinking. As we discuss in greater detail below, systems-oriented solutions are a key component of communications.

As we have already noted, people need help making sense of non-prototypical stories, such as stories about ‘sofa-surfing’ or other experiences of unstable housing, precisely because they don’t fit people’s

mental image of homelessness. Yet with the right scaffolding, these stories are a critical part of the *Common Experience* frame.

As Graph 5 indicates, we found the combined message of embedding non-prototypical stories within the *Constant Pressure* metaphor to be highly effective in broadening people’s understanding of what homelessness is and what causes it, and boosting support for ‘upstream’ policy solutions. Combining the non-prototypical story and the metaphor amplifies the effectiveness of each element. The metaphor, by placing the experiences described in the story in a broader social context, helps people see the story as one case along the spectrum of housing insecurity caused by the constant pressure of poverty. The story deepens and reinforces the metaphor’s ability to connect people to the lived experience of homelessness and to help them identify with it. Together, these elements strongly evoke the *lived experience* of homelessness and illustrate *the role of systems* in both causes and solutions – two of the three key aspects of homelessness that the broader reframing strategy gets at.



The research makes it clear that communicators should not tell stories about only one kind of homelessness. While communicators can tell stories about rough sleeping, it’s also critical to tell experiential stories that *don’t* fit people’s existing mental image. By coupling these stories with the *Constant Pressure* metaphor, communicators can, over time, expand what people think about when they think about homelessness. That way, people will come to recognise that homelessness includes many types of housing loss or insecurity.

### **Combining the *Constant Pressure Metaphor* with a Non-Prototypical Example:**

Poverty puts pressure on people, like water pushing against a dam. Scott was under constant pressure from his high rent and low-paying, zero-hour-contract job. When he got ill, the pressure became too much and Scott was pushed into homelessness. Now, he's sleeping on sofas and floors. People welcome him in for a few nights, only to tell him that he'll have to find somewhere else to go. His health continues to crumble and there's nothing he can do about it.

Scott's story shows us what happens when our society leaves people exposed to this kind of pressure. We need to make sure that no one has to face Scott's situation by working to prevent homelessness. This means making sure that that people have access to stable, affordable housing.

## **Don't Tell Charity Stories**

While individual stories are a crucial part of an effective framing strategy, it is critical to note that the experiential stories we recommend are *not* charity or pity stories. Experiential stories help people connect in meaningful ways with those who have experienced homelessness, using language that helps people identify with the experiences of homeless people. Experiential stories close the distance between people who have not experienced housing insecurity and people who have.

Charity stories, by contrast, use 'othering' language. This creates distance, evoking sadness or pity for 'them'. While charity stories may lead people to donate money to help people who are experiencing homelessness, they do not emphasise our *fundamental commonality*.

## **Cement Understanding by Providing Concrete Solutions**

Public will for a collective response to a social issue like homelessness requires an understanding of not only the problem but also its solutions. When a message lacks a clear policy 'ask', people are likely to assume either that the problem is too big to be solved or that it's up to the people directly affected by the problem to find their own solutions. To avoid feeding this sense of fatalism, it is critical that advocacy communications do not leave solutions to the public's imagination.

FrameWorks' researchers deliberately paired tested values and metaphors with statements about systemic solutions. To capitalise on the power of these framing strategies, communicators must follow this model and be explicit about the changes needed to address homelessness.

### **Sealing the Story Using the *Moral Human Rights Value***

If we want to treat all people with dignity and humanity, we need to make sure everyone can afford a safe and stable home. We need to create more affordable housing, help people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing, and strengthen the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times.

### **Sealing the Story Using the *Constant Pressure Metaphor***

We can decrease the pressure on people's lives by creating more affordable housing and helping people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing. And we can reinforce the dam that protects us from homelessness by strengthening the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times.

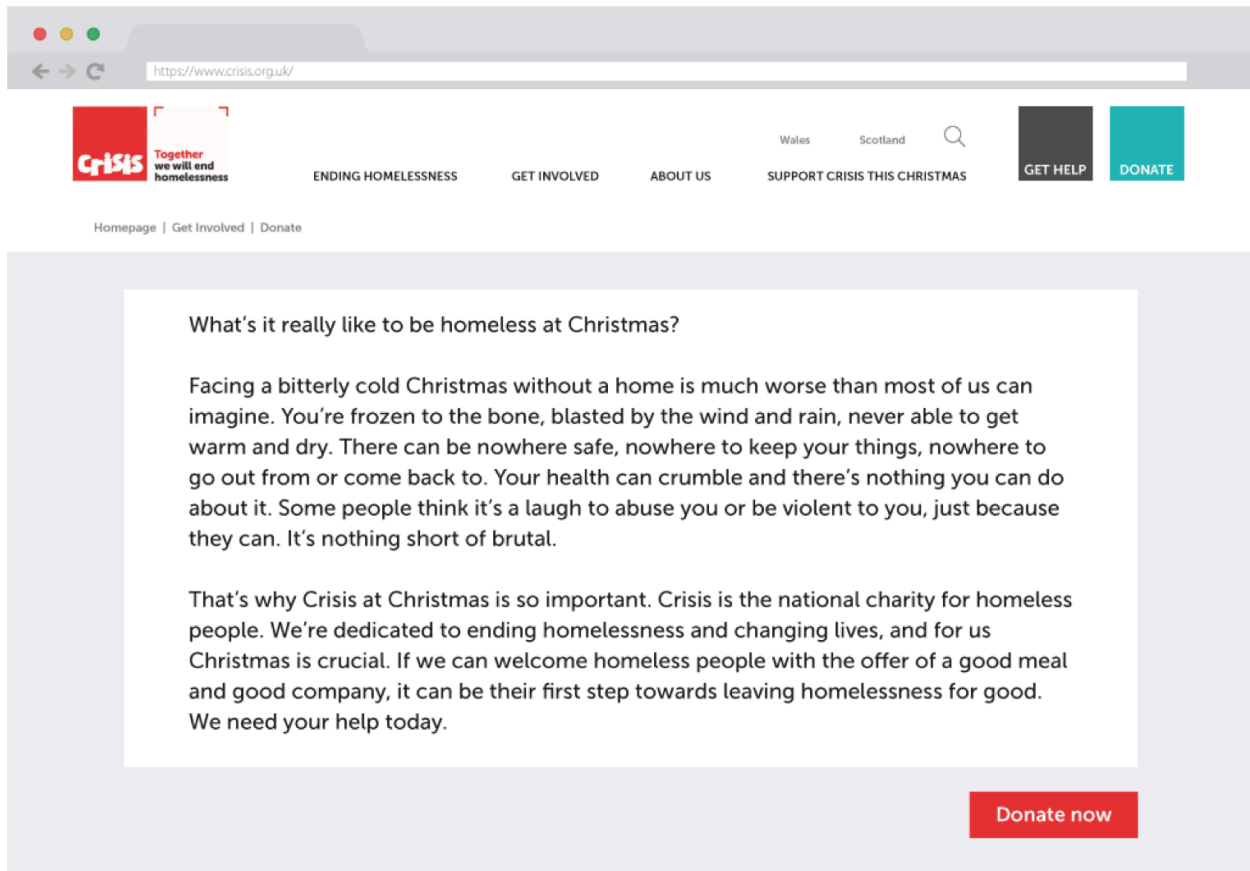
## **Use Fundraising Appeals as an Opportunity to Reinforce More Productive Thinking**

As every third-sector organisation knows, fundraising is an ever-present, ever-critical piece of the work for social change. Conventional wisdom states that crisis-ridden stories of abject human misery are the best way to raise pounds for a cause. But a raft of research shows that a steady diet of stories like these tends to reinforce people's stereotypes about issues, as well as people's sense of fatalism. In this way, fundraising can work at cross purposes with the homelessness sector's goal of expanding understanding and promoting systemic change and impede the sector's ability to make progress towards lasting, large-scale solutions.

Communicators wanted to know whether framing strategies that work to shift thinking about homelessness could also be used effectively in fundraising appeals – without undermining people's willingness to give. To find out, FrameWorks' researchers conducted an online survey experiment designed to test how differently framed fundraising appeals affect people's attitudes and understandings, on the one hand, and their willingness to donate to Crisis, on the other.

To understand the effects of reframing Crisis' fundraising appeals, researchers started by adapting its existing appeal to give to Crisis at Christmas. Text was drawn directly from Crisis's materials and formatted to look like a message on its website (see Figure 3). This message centres on a prototypical story about the experience of being homeless at Christmas, followed by an explanation of why giving to Crisis would make a difference.

Figure 3:  
Fundraising Message Example



Researchers manipulated the appeal in three ways:

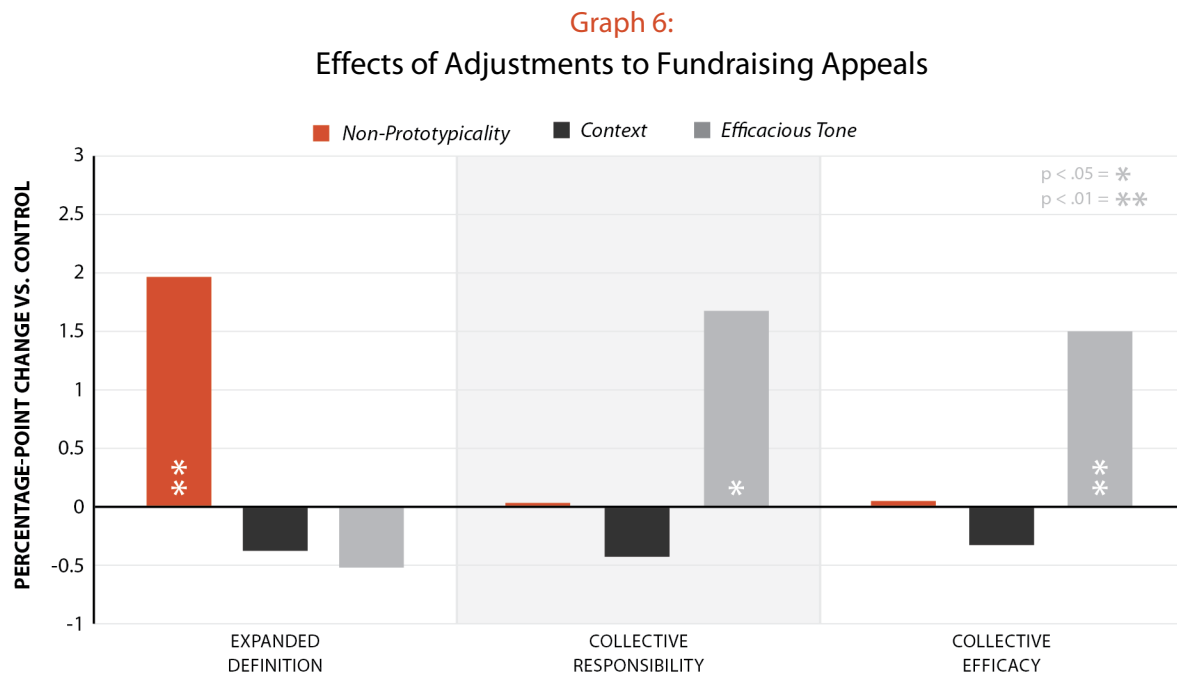
- Swapping the story about rough sleeping with a *non-prototypical story* about housing insecurity;
- Inserting an *efficacious tone* (readers were told we can end homelessness by acting now); and
- Adding *context* about the social causes that contribute to people becoming homeless.

Researchers tested eight versions of the appeal in total, alternately adjusting the appeal in one of these ways, two of them or all three.

To determine the effects of these adjustments, researchers used two sets of outcome measures. The first was a measure of people's willingness to donate. Immediately after exposure to one of the appeals, respondents were informed that one in every 500 survey-takers would be selected to win £100, and that they could choose to donate a certain portion of this money to Crisis. They were then asked how many pounds they would like to donate if they won. Respondents were then asked the same survey questions

used in the other survey experiments to determine whether the appeals shifted people’s attitudes, understandings or policy support.

Results showed that even in the context of this short, web-based fundraising appeal, the non-prototypical conditions significantly expanded respondents’ understanding of what homelessness is, and the efficacy manipulation boosted their sense of collective efficacy and responsibility (see Graph 6). Adding context had no effect, and none of the adjustments affected other outcomes.



The positive results from the non-prototypical and efficacy adjustments are in precisely the places we would expect: Non-prototypical stories help people recognise that homelessness can involve different types of experiences, and using an efficacious tone can help people understand that we can – and therefore should – do things that will make a difference. The lack of an effect from adding context is likely due to two factors. First, the dose of context added was very small to avoid doing violence to the basic structure of the appeal, and this likely limited its effects. Second, the fundraising experiment was conducted before research identified the best strategies for explaining the social origins of homelessness (*Interdependence* and coupling the *Constant Pressure* metaphor with non-prototypical stories). We would expect that these tools could be used within a fundraising appeal to expand understanding of the social origins of homelessness.

But what effects did these adjustments have on donations? None at all. Changing the fundraising appeal in these ways had no statistically significant effect on donations – positive or negative. As such, incorporating these framing strategies into the appeal did not harm fundraising, compared to Crisis’ normal donor appeal. These findings suggest that slightly reframing fundraising materials can boost key



knowledge and shift attitudes among recipients while simultaneously keeping intact the ability to raise money.

It is important to acknowledge that effects on understandings and attitudes in this experiment were small – considerably smaller than the effects of the other experiments discussed above. This is unsurprising, because the changes we made to the appeals were quite minor. However, the fact that we *did* see effects suggests that incorporating frames into fundraising materials is a way of reinforcing the effect of other communications. Because millions of people view these fundraising messages multiple times during annual fundraising campaigns, the cumulative impact of the relatively small changes the framing strategies produced can, over time, be profound.

The bottom line is this: Fundraising appeals that incorporate more examples of non-prototypical cases of lived experiences of homelessness and a more efficacious, ‘can-do’ tone will contribute productively to efforts to reframe public discourse without affecting donations. It is important to note that this is just an initial attempt to test frames in fundraising. Future research would ideally test incorporating other frames into appeals, as well as testing these strategies in a real fundraising environment. But initial results suggest that framing while fundraising can be a win-win situation.

## Moving Forward

Homelessness experts face the challenge of building support for solving housing insecurity in a time of lively public debate about issues such as raising the minimum wage, immigration policy and increasing wealth disparities. The task is made more difficult by its complexity: There are many kinds of homelessness, many causes, many groups affected and many solutions that must be carried out to achieve lasting change.

As if that were not enough, the lack of public understanding about homelessness presents additional challenges. The public is generally unaware of the systemic causes of homelessness, the breadth of its reach and the scope of its consequences. They do not see it as a direct consequence of economic marginalisation.

The research findings presented here, however, demonstrate that strategies exist to shift public thinking in new directions: towards issue salience, support for significant policy change, a sense of collective responsibility and efficacy and a willingness to engage with the issue in meaningful ways. We offer these recommendations with optimism that members of the homelessness sector will use them to tell a new and powerful story about 'home' that can guide the public to a future in which everyone in the United Kingdom is housing secure.

## Appendix: Methodology

To measure the effectiveness of different frames, Frameworks’ researchers conducted a series of survey experiments between October 2017 and March 2018. In total, over 10,000 respondents participated in this research. Our sample comprised residents of the United Kingdom over the age of 18, and was matched to national demographic benchmarks for gender, race/ethnicity, income, education, age, country of residence and political party. The table below provides a demographic breakdown of the total sample:

### Sample Demographics

	<b>Per cent of participants</b> (Total n=10,047)
<b>Age</b>	
18–29	25%
30–44	23%
45–59	24%
60 and older	28%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	51%
Female	49%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
White	86%
Asian/Asian British	8%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	3%
Bi- or Multi-Racial/Ethnic	3%
<b>Income</b>	
Less than £10,400	11%
£10,400–£20,799	23%
£20,800–£31,199	24%
£31,200–£51,999	24%
£52,000 or More	16%
<b>Political Party</b>	
Conservative	35%
Labour	39%
Liberal Democrat	7%
Scottish National Party	3%
Green	3%
Democratic Union	1%
Sinn Fein	<1%
Plaid Cymru	1%
Other	11%

Survey experiments were designed to understand how exposure to framed messages affects public thinking about homelessness. In each experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to receive one message treatment or to a null control. After reading the message (or, in the case of those assigned to the null control group, no message at all), all respondents were asked an identical series of questions designed to measure knowledge, attitudes and policy preferences related to homelessness. Each battery consisted of multiple questions, and the order of all questions was randomised across participants.

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether there were significant differences in responses to questions between the treatment groups and the control group. To help ensure that any observed effects were driven by the frames rather than demographic variation in the sample, all regression models controlled for the demographics mentioned above. A threshold of  $p < 0.05$  was used to determine whether treatments had any significant effects.

## Experimental Treatments

All experimental treatments were prefaced with the following instructions: *Below, we have provided a brief selection from an article that recently appeared in the news. Please read this carefully. In the questions that follow, you will be asked for your thoughts and opinions about the topics and ideas that the article raises.*

### **Values Treatments:**

#### *Compassion:*

In our society, we believe in showing compassion towards others and making sure that everyone can live with dignity. Yet right now, hundreds of thousands of people in our country are homeless – forced to sleep on friends' sofas and floors, live in crowded or unsafe places, sleep on buses or in cars or even stay out on the streets. And many more are at risk of becoming homeless. Caring for one another means making sure that all people in our country have safe, stable housing.

To make sure that our society shows decency towards all people, we need to address the economic conditions that place people at risk of homelessness. When people are already in poverty or are struggling to pay for housing, all it takes is a single event, like losing a job, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis, for them to fall into homelessness.

If we want to treat everyone with dignity and respect, we need to make sure everyone can afford a safe and stable home. To do this, we need to create more affordable housing, help people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing and strengthen the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times. Taking these steps to address homelessness is an important part of being a compassionate society.

### *Equality of Opportunity:*

In our society, we believe in equality and making sure that everyone has the same opportunities in life, no matter who they are or where they come from. Yet right now, our country doesn't provide equal opportunities for everyone. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people are homeless – forced to sleep on friends' sofas and floors, live in crowded or unsafe places, sleep on buses or in cars or even stay out on the streets. We must make sure that opportunities are equal and that all people in our country have safe, stable housing.

We need to address the unequal opportunities in our economy that place people at risk of homelessness. Because many people lack opportunities, too many people are in poverty. And when people are already in poverty or are struggling to pay for housing, all it takes is a single event, like losing a job, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis, for them to fall into homelessness.

If we are truly committed to equality, then we need to make sure everyone has the same chances to have a good life, so that everyone can afford a safe and stable home. To do this, we need to create more affordable housing, help people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing and strengthen the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times. To address homelessness, we must make sure that everyone has equal opportunities in life.

### *Interdependence:*

In our society, what affects one of us affects all of us. When some people are struggling, it hurts everyone. Right now, hundreds of thousands of people in our country are homeless – forced to sleep on friends' sofas and floors, live in crowded or unsafe places, sleep on buses or in cars or even stay out on the streets. And many more are at risk of becoming homeless. This makes it harder for people to contribute to and share in our country's prosperity, which affects us all. Making sure that everyone has safe, stable housing benefits us all by creating a stronger, more productive society.

To make sure that everyone can contribute to and share in our prosperity, we need to address the economic conditions that place people at risk of homelessness. When people are already in poverty or are struggling to pay for housing, all it takes is a single event, like losing a job, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis, for them to fall into homelessness.

If we want a truly prosperous society that benefits us all, we need to make sure everyone can afford a safe and stable home. To do this, we need to create more affordable housing, help people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing and strengthen the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times. We must take steps to address homelessness because our country's prosperity depends on us all being able to contribute.

### *Moral Human Rights:*

In our society, we believe in universal human rights. Yet right now, we are not protecting these rights for everyone. Hundreds of thousands of people in our country are homeless – forced to sleep on friends' sofas and floors, live in crowded or unsafe places, sleep on buses or in cars or even stay out on the streets. All

human beings have a right to decent housing, and we need to protect this right for everyone in our country.

To make sure that we uphold everyone's basic human rights, we need to address the economic conditions that place people at risk of homelessness. When people are already in poverty or are struggling to pay for housing, all it takes is a single event, like losing a job, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis, for them to fall into homelessness.

If we want to treat all people with dignity and humanity, we need to make sure everyone can afford a safe and stable home. To do this, we need to create more affordable housing, help people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing and strengthen the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times. We must take these steps to address homelessness to live up to our commitment to protect the rights of all people.

### *Three Pay Cheques Away from Homelessness:*

Taking steps as a society to reduce homelessness is in everyone's interest. We are all three paychecks away from homelessness, so all of us benefit from measures that can prevent and address homelessness.

The fact that homelessness is on the rise in this country should be of concern to each and every one of us. All of our housing situations can be unpredictable and unstable, which means that any one of us could find ourselves without a home and things could go badly at any moment. Failing to address the root causes of homelessness and refusing to fund services that address the immediate needs of homeless people is a failure to protect ourselves from becoming homeless and ensures that we will be left without help should we find ourselves homeless. We must strengthen our social welfare system and make sure people can get good jobs, because it reduces everyone's risk of becoming homeless and being left without help. It is also in our own self-interest to address rising housing prices and rents, which increase the risk of homelessness. And, it would be wise for us to provide housing to people who are currently homeless and address their immediate needs so that, if we ourselves were ever to become homeless, we would have the support we need.

Simply put, we must take active steps as a society to prevent homelessness and address homelessness where it exists because we could all be homeless some day and it is in our own self-interest to do so.

### **Metaphor Treatments:**

#### *Current:*

When people are living in poverty or struggling economically, it's like they're being pulled by a strong current that makes it difficult to keep their head above water. And when people are already in that current of poverty and struggling to get by, people can easily get pulled under into homelessness if something happens like losing a job, getting a divorce or becoming disabled. We need to make sure there are strong lifelines to keep us all out of the undertow, by strengthening the social welfare system, providing secure, well-paying jobs for everyone and making sure that all people have good, low-cost housing.

Strengthening these lifelines will pull people out of poverty and make sure that no one is pulled under into homelessness.

*Erosion:*

When people are living in poverty or struggling economically, it erodes their ability to find and keep stable housing. And if the defenses that protect against this erosion are weakened, people can easily slide into homelessness when a storm of misfortune—like losing a job, getting a divorce or becoming disabled—hits. We need to shore up these defenses by strengthening the social welfare system, providing secure, well-paying jobs for everyone and making sure that all people have good, low-cost housing. Shoring up these defenses will make sure that everyone is on solid economic ground and no one slides into homelessness.

*Constant Pressure:*

When people are living in poverty or struggling economically, it puts pressure on their housing situation like water pressure affects a dam. The constant pressure wears away at people's housing situation over time. If there is a sudden increase in pressure from things that happen in life—like losing a job, getting a divorce or becoming disabled—people's housing situation can easily spring leaks or crack, sweeping people into homelessness. We need to head off the problem of poverty upstream and reinforce people's housing situation by strengthening the social welfare system, providing secure, well-paying jobs for everyone and making sure that all people have good, low-cost housing. Taking these steps to address poverty and reinforce people's housing situation will reduce the pressure on people's lives and make sure no one is swept into homelessness.

*Constant Pressure (revised version tested in later wave of the experiment):*

Poverty puts pressure on people, like water pushing against a dam – it's constant and strong. If the pressure builds up enough, the dam can break and people can be pushed into homelessness: sleeping on friends' sofas and floors, living in crowded or unsafe places, sleeping on buses or in cars or even being out on the street.

People in poverty face constant pressure from things like high housing costs, low wages and inadequate government support. Over time, the pressure builds up, until it's close to a breaking point. If there is a sudden increase in pressure from a life event – like losing a job, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis – leaks or cracks in people's lives can quickly become a rushing flood that pushes people into homelessness.

We need to prevent homelessness by working upstream. We can decrease the pressure on people's lives by creating more affordable housing and helping people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing. And we can reinforce the dam that protects us from homelessness by strengthening the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times. By taking these steps, we can make sure no one is pushed into homelessness.

*Anchoring Housing:*

When people are living in poverty or struggling economically, it leaves their housing situation unsecured, just like a ship at sea at the mercy of the weather and waves. And if a strong gust of misfortune comes

along – like losing a job, getting a divorce or becoming disabled – it can set people adrift and into homelessness. We need to anchor people’s housing securely by strengthening the social welfare system, providing secure, well-paying jobs for everyone and making sure that all people have good, low-cost housing. Providing these anchors to secure everyone’s housing will make sure that everyone has more economic stability and no one drifts into homelessness.

### *Unravelling:*

When people are living in poverty or struggling economically, it frays the fabric of people’s lives. And if something happens that pulls on threads that are already loose, like losing a job, getting a divorce or becoming disabled, people’s lives may completely unravel, leading to homelessness. In order for the fabric of our lives to be durable, we need to reinforce the fabric by strengthening the social welfare system, providing secure, well-paying jobs for everyone and making sure that all people have, low-cost housing. Reinforcing people’s situations with these durable threads will make sure that no one’s life unravels into homelessness.

### *Unravelling (revised version tested in later wave of the experiment):*

Poverty can fray the fabric of people’s lives. If too many of the threads that make up our lives come loose, it’s all too easy for life to unravel into homelessness – sleeping on friends’ sofas and floors, living in crowded or unsafe places, sleeping on buses or in cars or even being out on the street.

For people in poverty, things like high housing costs, low wages and inadequate government support tug at the threads that hold people’s lives together. Over time, the fabric starts to stretch and come apart, placing people at risk of homelessness. Then if something happens that pulls on the fabric when the threads are already loose – like losing a job, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis—people’s lives can unravel, leading to homelessness.

We need to prevent homelessness by preventing the threads of people’s lives from fraying in the first place. We can keep the fabric strong by creating more affordable housing and helping people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing. And we can reinforce the fabric so it doesn’t unravel into homelessness by strengthening the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times. By taking these steps, we can make sure that no one’s life unravels into homelessness.

### *Experiential Story + Constant Pressure treatment:*

Poverty puts pressure on people, like water pushing against a dam – it’s constant and strong. If the pressure builds up enough, the dam can break and people can be pushed into homelessness: sleeping on friends’ sofas and floors, living in crowded or unsafe places, sleeping on buses or in cars or even being out on the street. The constant pressure from things like high housing costs and low wages creates strain, so a sudden increase in pressure from losing a job or a health crisis can push people into homelessness.

Michael’s story is a reminder of what happens when our society leaves people exposed to this kind of pressure. Recently, Michael lost his job as a fast food worker and became homeless. Having to face winter without a stable home is much worse than most of us can imagine. He’s sleeping on sofas and floors, begging for favours from people he hardly knows, constantly fearing that tonight there’ll be nowhere to go. He sometimes sleeps in his car or pleads to squeeze into a crowded flat for the night. He’s



often scared for his safety and there's no end in sight. His health is in jeopardy of crumbling and there's nothing he can do about it. Some people welcome him in, only to tell him that he'll have to find somewhere else to go. Michael's life is nothing short of brutal.

We need to make sure that no one has to face Michael's situation by working upstream to prevent homelessness. We can decrease the pressure on people's lives by creating more affordable housing and helping people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing. And we can reinforce the dam that protects us from homelessness by strengthening the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times. By taking these steps, we can make sure no one is pushed into homelessness.

## **Narrative treatments**

### *Prototypical without context:*

Recently, Michael lost his job as a fast food worker and became homeless. Having to face a bitterly cold winter without a home is much worse than most of us can imagine. He's often frozen to the bone, blasted by the wind and rain, never able to get warm and dry. He's left out on the street begging for help. There's nowhere safe, nowhere to keep his things, nowhere to go out from or come back to. His health is in jeopardy of crumbling and there's nothing he can do about it. Some people think it's a laugh to abuse him or be violent to him, just because they can. Michael's life is nothing short of brutal.

Homelessness is a serious problem and there are people like Michael all over the country right now who need our help.

### *Non-prototypical without context:*

Recently, Michael lost his job as a fast food worker and became homeless. Having to face winter without a stable home is much worse than most of us can imagine. He's sleeping on sofas and floors, begging for favours from people he hardly knows, constantly fearing that tonight there'll be nowhere to go. He sometimes sleeps in his car or pleads to squeeze into a crowded flat for the night. He's often scared for his safety and there's no end in sight. His health is in jeopardy of crumbling and there's nothing he can do about it. Some people welcome him in, only to tell him that he'll have to find somewhere else to go. Michael's life is nothing short of brutal.

Homelessness is a serious problem and there are people like Michael all over the country right now who need our help.

### *Non-prototypical with context:*

When people are already in poverty or are struggling to pay for housing, all it takes for them to lose stable housing and fall into homelessness is a single unfortunate life event, like losing a job, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis. And government actions are making the problem worse. By cutting spending on social welfare and failing to ensure that everyone can get a good education and a good job, we've left many people without the opportunities and resources they need to do well. Our country has allowed housing and living costs to get out of control, which makes it hard for many people to afford a decent life.

Michael's story is a reminder of what happens when our society doesn't provide the opportunities and resources we all need. Recently, Michael lost his job as a fast food worker and became homeless. Having to face winter without a stable home is much worse than most of us can imagine. He's sleeping on sofas and floors, begging for favours from people he hardly knows, constantly fearing that tonight there'll be nowhere to go. He sometimes sleeps in his car or pleads to squeeze into a crowded flat for the night. He's often scared for his safety and there's no end in sight. His health is in jeopardy of crumbling and there's nothing he can do about it. Some people welcome him in, only to tell him that he'll have to find somewhere else to go. Michael's life is nothing short of brutal.

Homelessness is a serious problem and there are people like Michael all over the country right now. To make sure that no one in our society has to face Michael's situation, we need to make sure that everyone can afford a safe and stable home. This means creating more affordable housing, helping people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing and strengthening the social welfare system so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times.

## Fundraising Appeal Treatments

All experimental messages were prefaced with the following instructions: *Below, we have provided a screenshot from the website of Crisis, a national charity for homeless people. Please read this carefully and answer the questions that follow.*

### *Prototypical, No Context, No Efficacy:*

What's it really like to be homeless at Christmas?

Facing a bitterly cold Christmas without a home is much worse than most of us can imagine. You're frozen to the bone, blasted by the wind and rain, never able to get warm and dry. There can be nowhere safe, nowhere to keep your things, nowhere to go out from or come back to. Your health can crumble and there's nothing you can do about it. Some people think it's a laugh to abuse you or be violent to you, just because they can. It's nothing short of brutal.

That's why Crisis at Christmas is so important. Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We're dedicated to ending homelessness and changing lives, and for us Christmas is crucial. If we can welcome homeless people with the offer of a good meal and good company, it can be their first step towards leaving homelessness for good. We need your help today.

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facing this reality. When you're already on the brink and you lose your job, your relationship breaks down, or you get ill, you may suddenly find yourself without a home.

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Together, we can end homelessness. But we must act now. If we don't take action, too many people will face the stark reality of what it's like to be homeless at Christmas.

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*Non-Prototypical, No Context, No Efficacy:*

What's it really like to be homeless at Christmas?

Facing Christmas without a stable home is much worse than most of us can imagine. You're sleeping on sofas and floors, begging for favours from people you hardly know, constantly fearing that tonight there'll be nowhere to go. You're scared for your safety and there's no end in sight. Your health can crumble and there's nothing you can do about it. Some people welcome you in, only to tell you that you'll have to find somewhere else to go. It's nothing short of brutal.

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## Survey Outcome Measures

### *Salience of homelessness*

1. In your view, how serious of a problem is homelessness in this country? [5-point Likert scale: 'Not at all serious'; 'Slightly serious'; 'Moderately serious'; 'Very serious'; 'Extremely serious']
2. How important do you think it is to reduce homelessness in this country? [5-point Likert scale: 'Not at all important'; 'Slightly important'; 'Moderately important'; 'Very important'; 'Extremely important']
3. How much of a priority do you think it should be to reduce homelessness in this country? [5-point Likert scale: 'Not at all a priority'; 'Low priority'; 'Moderate priority'; 'High priority'; 'Extremely high priority']

4. How common do you think homelessness is in this country? [5-point Likert scale: 'Not at all common'; 'Slightly common'; 'Moderately common'; 'Very common'; 'Extremely common']

#### *Expanded definition of homelessness*

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. [7-point Likert scale: 'Strongly disagree'; 'Disagree'; 'Slightly disagree'; 'Neither agree nor disagree'; 'Slightly agree'; 'Agree'; 'Strongly agree']

- a. People aren't homeless as long as they have a place to sleep indoors every night. [reverse code]
- b. People who have a place to sleep are homeless if they aren't sure they can return there the next night.
- c. People who are sleeping at a friend's house for a bit because they don't have a place of their own are homeless.
- d. People who have a place to sleep at night are homeless if they feel unsafe in the place where they are staying.
- e. People who have a place to sleep at night are homeless if that place is overcrowded and they lack space and privacy.

#### *Societal causes of homelessness*

How important do you think each of the following is in explaining why there is homelessness in this country? [5-point Likert scale: 'Not at all important'; 'Slightly important'; 'Moderately important'; 'Very important'; 'Extremely important']

- a. Bad personal life choices
- b. Problems saving or managing money
- c. Living in a culture that devalues work
- d. Lack of affordable housing
- e. Low wages
- f. Insufficient benefits

#### *Support for policies that address benefits*

Please indicate how much you favour or oppose each of the following government policies. [7 point Likert scale, 'Strongly oppose'; 'Oppose'; 'Somewhat oppose'; 'Neither favour nor oppose'; 'Somewhat favour'; 'Favour'; 'Strongly favour']

- a. The rules about who is eligible for benefits should be expanded so that more people can receive them.
- b. The government should invest in public education to inform citizens about which benefits they qualify for.
- c. Housing benefits should be increased to make sure they cover the real cost of renting.

### *Support for preventative policies to address homelessness*

Please indicate the extent to which you personally favour or oppose each of the following policies. [7 point Likert scale, 'Strongly oppose'; 'Oppose'; 'Somewhat oppose'; 'Neither favour nor oppose'; 'Somewhat favour'; 'Favour'; 'Strongly favour']

- a. Government should increase spending on job centres and training programs that help people find work.
- b. Government should increase spending on social housing.
- c. People who have experienced domestic violence should automatically qualify for secure, long-term social housing.

### *Support for preventative policies to ameliorate homelessness*

Please indicate the extent to which you personally favour or oppose of each of the following policies [7 point Likert scale, 'Strongly oppose'; 'Oppose'; 'Somewhat oppose'; 'Neither favour nor oppose'; 'Somewhat favour'; 'Favour'; 'Strongly favour']

- a. The government should pay for long-term housing for homeless people, rather than temporary accommodation.
- b. Job centres should provide personalised support to help homeless people back into employment.
- c. Councils should increase funding for counselling services for children and families at risk for homelessness.
- d. There should be more funding for mental health and substance use services for homeless people.
- e. Funding for mental health and substance misuse services for homeless populations and those at risk of homelessness should be increased.

### *Collective efficacy about addressing homelessness*

1. In your view, how much can our society do to reduce homelessness?  
[7-point Likert scale: 'Nothing at all'; 'A very small amount'; 'A small amount'; 'A moderate amount' 'A large amount'; 'A very large amount'; 'An extremely large amount']
2. There will always be homelessness in our society, no matter what we do [reverse]. [7-point Likert scale: 'Strongly disagree'; 'Disagree'; 'Slightly disagree'; 'Neither agree nor disagree'; 'Slightly agree'; 'Agree'; 'Strongly agree']
3. If the government takes the right steps, we can get rid of homelessness. [7-point Likert scale: 'Strongly disagree'; 'Disagree'; 'Slightly disagree'; 'Neither agree nor disagree'; 'Slightly agree'; 'Agree'; 'Strongly agree']
4. How optimistic or pessimistic do you feel that we can get rid of homelessness in our society? [7-point Likert scale; 'Extremely pessimistic'; 'Pessimistic'; 'Somewhat pessimistic'; 'Neither optimistic nor pessimistic'; 'Somewhat optimistic'; 'Optimistic'; 'Extremely optimistic']

### *Collective responsibility for addressing homelessness*

1. If there is homelessness in our society, our country has failed in our responsibilities. [7-point Likert scale: 'Strongly disagree'; 'Disagree'; 'Slightly disagree'; 'Neither agree nor disagree'; 'Slightly agree'; 'Agree'; 'Strongly agree']
2. In your view, how much of an obligation does our society have to get rid of homelessness? [7-point Likert scale: 'No obligation at all'; 'A very small obligation'; 'A small obligation'; 'A moderate obligation'; 'A large obligation'; 'A very large obligation'; 'An extremely large obligation']
3. Who do you think is primarily responsible for doing something to reduce homelessness? [Sliding response scale—only the two end points and the mid-point should be labelled: Endpoint 1: 'Homeless people are primarily responsible'; Endpoint 2: 'Society, as a whole, is primarily responsible'; and midpoint: 'Homeless people, and society, as a whole, are equally responsible' serves as midpoint of slider]

### *Willingness to engage in behaviours to help address homelessness*

If you were directly asked to do so, how likely would you be to do each of the following? [Randomise order of activities; 5-point Likert scale: 'Not at all likely'; 'Slightly likely'; 'Moderately likely'; 'Very likely'; 'Extremely likely']

- a. Volunteer with an organisation working to reduce homelessness.
- b. Run in or sponsor someone to run in a marathon in support of a homelessness charity.
- c. Visit a café or shop that offers training opportunities or employment for people experiencing homelessness.
- d. Donate to an organisation working to reduce homelessness.
- e. Campaign for a homelessness charity on an issue that addresses homelessness.

*Willingness to donate to help address homelessness* [NB: This was asked first in the fundraising experiment.]

In this survey, one out of every 500 people will be randomly selected to win £100 (yes, we're really going to give out cash). If you win, how many pounds of the £100 would you like us to donate to Crisis? If you win, you will receive £100 minus whatever you instruct us to donate to Crisis. [Enter amount here.]



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> O'Neil, M., Pineau, M. G., Kendall-Taylor, N., Volmert, D. & Stevens, A. (2017). Finding a better frame: How to create more effective messages on homelessness in the United Kingdom: *A FrameWorks Strategic Report*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Riemer, Nick, ed. *The Routledge handbook of semantics*. Routledge, 2015. *Routledge Handbook of Semantics*, 142. See also Bergen, Benjamin. "Embodiment, simulation and meaning." *The Routledge Handbook of Semantics* (2015): 142.

<sup>3</sup> O'Neil, M., et al. (2017). Finding a better frame: How to create more effective messages on homelessness in the United Kingdom.