

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Hart Research Associates
DATE: June 19, 2015
RE: Effective Communication and Messaging to Elevate a Discussion on Housing Policy

Contextual Background for Messaging

Housing affordability continues to be an issue of serious concern among the American public. While indicators point to perceptions of a stabilizing housing market, the pressure has not lifted off of many Americans who still struggle to afford their rent or mortgage payments.

- There is a strong consensus that housing affordability is a real and serious problem in America. Fully 60% of Americans say housing affordability is a serious problem, and this is the prevailing view among majorities of Americans across generations, income levels, and partisanship. Only a small minority (15%) of Americans take the opposite view that housing affordability is not a problem at all. These findings suggest that to create even more support within the public for housing policy reform, it will be necessary to increase the urgency of the issue further and to communicate in a way that appeals to the broad swath of the American public.
- The American public continues to make personal sacrifices in an effort to stretch their dollars in order to afford their housing costs. More than half (55%) of Americans report that they have had to make at least one sacrifice in the past three years to cover housing costs, most commonly taking on a second job or working extra hours (21%).
- The majority of the public believes that in their community it is challenging to find affordable, quality housing, whether to rent (58%) or to buy (60%). While the challenges are particularly acute for low-income families, with nearly all (89%) Americans agreeing that it is challenging for a family earning \$24,000 to find affordable housing in their community, a strong majority (65%) say the same about a family earning the median income.

These challenges Americans experience in their own lives and see others face in their community contribute to a lingering skepticism about the health of the housing market overall and profound pessimism about social and economic mobility in America.

- Even as experts say we are on the road to recovery, most Americans are not seeing the improvements themselves. A majority (61%) of Americans continue

to believe that we are in the midst of the housing crisis or the worst is yet to come. Still, it is worth noting that there has been a small uptick in the proportion of the public who believes that the housing crisis is pretty much over (20% in 2013 to 35% in 2015).

- Americans see the challenges individuals and families face obtaining stable, affordable housing as part of a larger problem related to social and economic mobility. Four in five (79%) Americans think it is more common today for middle-class people to fall into a lower economic class than for people in lower economic classes to rise into the middle class (14%). Another 75% say that achieving a middle-class lifestyle is harder for young Americans today than it was in the past.

There is a very significant mismatch between the level of priority the public would like to see their elected leaders place on housing affordability issues and what they perceive elected leaders are doing on the issue. Without strong guidance from elected leaders, Americans are left without a clear understanding of how government can make a positive impact on housing, especially at the federal level.

- Americans see their elected leaders falling far short on housing affordability. Three in four (75%) Americans want their elected leaders in Washington to make housing affordability a priority (including 49% who want it to be a high priority), but only 43% believe that their leaders in Washington actually are making housing a priority (and only 14% say they make it a high priority).
- Similarly, 79% want their local and state leaders to make housing a priority (55% want it to be a high priority). By comparison, only 54% say their local and state leaders are actually making it a priority, and only 14% say they are making it a high priority.
- One of the challenges housing advocates will need to overcome in elevating housing policies is that the public is skeptical about how the federal government can actually affect change in this domain. Follow-up qualitative interviews with survey respondents revealed that many Americans lack a clear vision of what government can do to improve housing affordability. It will be critical to provide examples of housing policies that have had success improving housing options for a wide array of American families and communities.

Key Findings on Communication and Messaging

In the opinions of the American public, there are compelling reasons why housing affordability issues should occupy a central place on the policy agenda. The most resonant messages highlight the impact that having (or lacking) quality affordable housing can have on children’s social and emotional development and educational success.

- Out of 10 messages tested, three emerged as the most convincing reasons to the American public to ensure that more people have access to quality affordable housing. More than three in four rated each of these messages as convincing, and more than three in five rated each as very convincing. These three messages are the top-tier, regardless of age, education, income, and partisanship.

The **chronic stress experienced by families who live in unsafe neighborhoods** can negatively affect young children's mental and social development. (73% very convincing)

Having **quality, stable housing is directly linked to children's ability to do well in school** and when a family has to move frequently it reduces a child's educational achievement and can have a negative effect on the whole classroom. (62% very convincing)

Increases in the cost of rental housing are placing a serious burden on too many families. Today, **11 million Americans pay more than half their income on rent**, leaving less money for essentials such as food, transportation, and healthcare. (61% very convincing)

- These top-scoring messages reveal that connecting the quality of housing to children’s ability to thrive and reach their full potential strongly resonates with the American public and enhances the urgency of this issue. In addition, facts about the number of Americans spending more than half of their income on rent makes a strong case to Americans, likely because so many can relate personally to having to make sacrifices to afford their housing.
- Neighborhood safety is also of the utmost importance for communications about housing. This survey tested an alternative version of the top-scoring message by reading half of respondents the same message about the relationship between chronic stress and children’s mental and social development, but ascribing the stress to living in low-quality or unaffordable housing. Though three in five (59%) Americans rated this description as very convincing, it is still less compelling than focusing on neighborhood safety, which 73% rate as very convincing.

Hart Research Associates

While improving access to affordable housing for low-income families undoubtedly is a critical component of housing policy, it is less effective as a leading communication strategy for the expansive American public. Advocates for housing policy can build a broader and stronger coalition by emphasizing the connection between quality, affordable housing and the ability for children to reach their full potential.

- Messages that focus on impoverished neighborhoods and the effects of housing on low-income families are significantly less convincing overall and only appeal to a narrow segment of the public.
- The four lowest-testing messages all emphasized low socioeconomic status in some form, and three of the four explicitly focused on housing for low-income families and high-poverty neighborhoods. Only 35% of Americans rate the description below, which tested lowest overall, as very convincing. These kinds of poverty-centric messages appeal primarily to people who do not need convincing of the importance of housing—for example, those who already recognize that housing affordability is a serious problem in America.

If a child moves from a high-poverty neighborhood to a lower-poverty neighborhood, he or she will earn significantly more money as an adult. Research indicates they will earn about 30% more than if he or she had remained in a high-poverty neighborhood. (35% very convincing)

Hart Research conducted quantitative public opinion research to inform the work of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's How Housing Matters Initiative. Telephone interviews, including both landline and cell phones, were conducted from April 27 to May 5, 2015, among a nationally representative sample of 1,401 adults.