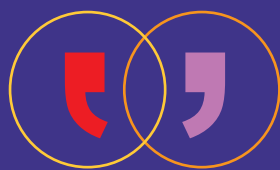


The  
Workshop

# Talking about Poverty and Welfare Reform in Aotearoa *A Short Guide*

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# Background

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As part of a collaboration to improve the uptake of recommendations from the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG),<sup>1</sup> The Workshop undertook research to identify messages that:

- improve the New Zealand public's understanding of the causes of poverty
- improve their understanding of the role of benefits in overcoming poverty
- increase their willingness to act to do something about poverty.

We tested five messages based on The Workshop's evidence-led principles for effective communication and existing research. Four messages were adapted from messages that had been shown to be effective in the UK, and one message was uniquely developed for the New Zealand setting.

We used a rigorous methodology to test the effect of these messages. Specifically, we used a randomised control trial. This involved allocating a representative sample of New Zealanders (2,507 people from an existing research panel) to hear one of the five messages or no message at all (a control).

We wanted to find out whether each message was better, the same or worse than no message at all at helping people think more productively about poverty and welfare. We tested whether each message had an effect on key attitudes about poverty and intention to act in support of anti-poverty policies, including welfare changes. We compared this to receiving no message, where people would draw on their existing beliefs and ideas about poverty.

We were particularly interested in what effect the different messages would have on persuadable people. These are people who don't have strong attitudes about the causes of or solutions to poverty prior to hearing a message. Before the message testing, we identified persuadable people from the answers they gave to three questions about poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> WEAG. (2019). *Whakamana Tāngata – Restoring Dignity to Social Security in New Zealand*. Wellington, New Zealand: Welfare Expert Advisory Group. <http://weag.govt.nz/assets/documents/WEAG-report/aed960c3ce/WEAG-Report.pdf>

# Findings

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## Two messages tested better with people who didn't have fixed attitudes about poverty.

**The first message** was constructed to highlight a shared positive vision for children, identify that family poverty is a problem, describe the causes of family poverty and argue for welfare as a solution. We called this the **underinvestment in families** message:

- “ We all want children in New Zealand to experience a thriving, happy childhood. But too often that doesn't happen, despite parents' best efforts.

*We've had a long period of low wages and high housing costs. At the same time, people in government have underinvested in key services that help the lowest-income families, like public housing and income support.*

*Instead, governments have prioritised policies that help the already well-off, including property speculators. As a result, too many parents are under-resourced, overstressed and unable to give their children real opportunities to thrive.*

*Most families in poverty have housing costs that take up over half of their income. More than half of children in poverty have a working parent.*

*The government can release the pressures on families and children by providing good public services to all families with children and by increasing benefits, which can unlock opportunities for those doing it hardest. ”*

This message caused a shift in declared belief about the causes of poverty. Respondents who read it were more likely to indicate they think the cause of poverty was due to housing and less likely to indicate the cause was bad luck or low wages. Respondents were also less likely to think benefits should be lower and that there is very little poverty in New Zealand.

**The second message** that tested well was constructed to lead with values of compassion and justice. It highlighted poverty impacts and argued for welfare as a solution. We called this the **compassion and justice** message:

|| *As New Zealanders, we believe in justice and compassion. We want everyone in New Zealand to have the opportunity to thrive. But, right now, hundreds of thousands of people in our country are living in poverty.*

*Despite our differences, we share a responsibility to make sure everyone in our country has a decent standard of living and the same chances in life.*

*Poverty in New Zealand affects people of all ages and situations – children and their parents, young adults, people in and out of work and people with disabilities.*

*The stress that comes with poverty can erode people’s mental and physical health. Showing compassion as a society means making sure no-one has to endure the harms of poverty.*

*By providing good income support, that gives real options in life, the government can make it possible for everyone to do well. Strengthening benefits would help people escape the constraints of poverty. ||*

Respondents who read the compassion and justice message were less likely to agree that poverty is caused by people being lazy and that lower benefits help people stand on their own two feet.

Respondents who were persuadable were more strongly affected by this message and were less likely to think benefits should be lower.

**Based on these findings, this is our general advice for people talking about poverty and the role of the welfare system in overcoming it:**

- ➔ Start with a vision about overcoming child and family poverty.
- ➔ Use better explanations about what caused poverty in New Zealand, the impacts and the solutions (a + b = c).
- ➔ Name the agents responsible (the government).
- ➔ Lead with the intrinsic values of compassion and justice.

Communicators could experiment with combining these elements in longer communications.

# Recommendations

## These are our specific recommendations based on the findings:



### → Start with a shared positive vision about childhood.

People's brains take a number of cognitive shortcuts that make it difficult for them to conceptualise systems and structural change and think change is possible. Describe the better future that we want for children and families in concrete terms to help orient people to deeper ways of thinking. Starting with a positive vision is an effective strategy.

### → Describe the barrier or problem as one of poverty, not a broken welfare system.

The solution is better welfare. Leading with the suggestion of a broken welfare system doesn't help people think more productively. This may be because there is an existing cultural narrative in which welfare is seen as causing dependence. What works better is starting with the real problem we are trying to solve with welfare – poverty.



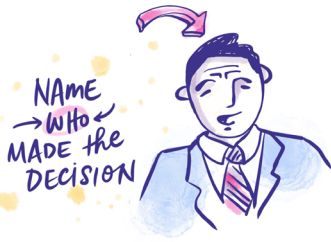
### → Use intrinsic values to lead conversations (compassion and justice). Avoid extrinsic values (money and achievement).

Compassion and justice were the intrinsic values that moved people's attitudes in this research. We need to improve the likelihood that people will act on big collective issues like poverty. A growing body of research shows we need to engage all people with our shared helpful values. These are known as intrinsic values – when what matters most to us are things that are important and valuable in and of themselves.

### → Use better explanations about how poverty happens. Avoid leading with facts.

Include an explanatory chain ( $a + b = c$ ) about what caused poverty, the impacts and the best solutions in New Zealand. This helps people think more productively about the causes of poverty. Such explanations should come after the values and vision.





➔ **Make it clear that people in politics are responsible for solutions to poverty.**

People find it hard to imagine how issues like poverty can be solved. Draw their attention to the humans whose actions have created and can solve the problems you describe. This helps people believe that change is possible and see how a solution like restoring the welfare system could work.

Foreground the issue ➔

“ We all want children in New Zealand to experience a thriving, happy childhood. But too often that doesn’t happen, despite parents’ best efforts.

Explain the external causes ➔

We’ve had a long period of low wages and high housing costs. At the same time, people in government have underinvested in key services that help the lowest-income families, like public housing and income support.

Name agents and explain the impacts ➔

Instead, governments have prioritised policies that help the already well-off, including property speculators. As a result, too many parents are under-resourced, overstressed and unable to give their children real opportunities to thrive.

Use two facts carefully to progress the system’s story ➔

Most families in poverty have housing costs that take up over half of their income. More than half of children in poverty have a working parent.

Explain the solution ➔

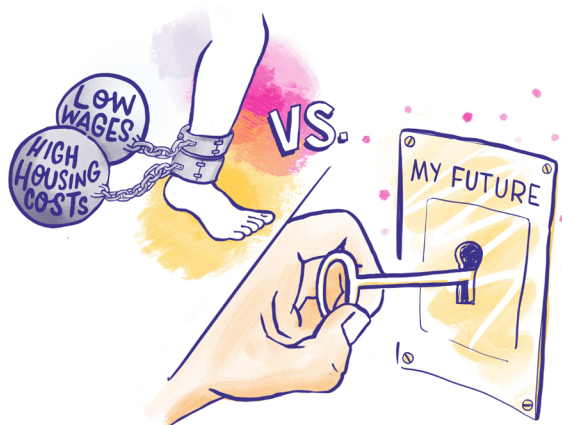
The government can release the pressures on families and children by providing good public services to all families with children and by increasing benefits, which can unlock opportunities for those doing it hardest. ”

→ **Use tested metaphors to help explain structural causes and responses to poverty.**

The most effective messages we tested contained two metaphors that had tested well in the UK – ‘restrictions and constraints’ and ‘unlocking poverty’. We recommend using these metaphors. These strategies compare poverty to a constraint and talks about people being locked in by the constraints of poverty, e.g. “the constraints of poverty lock people out of opportunities and make it impossible for them to create a different future”. The solutions (e.g. benefits) work by unlocking those constraints, e.g. “increasing benefits can unlock opportunities for those doing it hardest” or “strengthening benefits would help people escape the constraints of poverty”.

» **Restrictions and constraints.**

In the compassion and justice message: “Strengthening benefits would help people escape the constraints of poverty.”



» **Unlocking poverty.**

In the underinvestment in families message: “Increasing benefits can unlock opportunities for those doing it hardest.”

→ **Target attitudes about poverty, avoid assumptions based on political affiliation.**

Political affiliation is not always a good proxy for attitudes about poverty. People across the political spectrum can hold a range of existing beliefs and attitudes and may be more or less persuadable on issues like poverty. We found, for example, that people we would describe as “hard to persuade” responded differently to people who supported more conservative political parties. People across the political spectrum care about poverty and can be helped to think more productively about poverty and welfare as a solution.

→ **Explain how benefits have been cut in real terms and ask for them to be restored.**

The underinvestment in families message led people in all attitude groups to become more opposed to benefit cuts. However, no message we tested helped consistently increase support across the different audience groups



for raising benefit rates. One way to apply this finding is to consider the evidence showing that, in real terms, benefits have been cut, as the analysis included in the WEAG report shows. In the context of the erosion of benefits in real terms, we would suggest that arguing to restore (rather than increase) benefits is likely to be the more productive approach.

Here are two examples of how communicators can do this. The first leads with a positive vision and child poverty as the problem. The second leads with compassion and justice values and poverty as the problem.

### Positive vision and child poverty

**||** We all want children in New Zealand to experience a thriving, happy childhood. But too often that doesn't happen, despite parents' best efforts.

In 1991, politicians cut the income people on benefits received. Since those cuts, politicians of all governments have chosen not to link the level of income support to wage increases. This means there has been a huge decline in the real value of benefits to families with children as wages and cost of living have increased. Income support has decreased in real terms every year since 1991. Lowering benefits in this way has locked many children and families into poverty.

Politicians in government can release the pressures on families and children by restoring benefits, which can unlock opportunities for those doing it hardest. **||**

### Compassion and justice, and poverty

**||** As New Zealanders, we believe in justice and compassion. Despite our differences, we share a responsibility to make sure everyone in our country has a decent standard of living and the same chances in life.

Right now, hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders are constrained by poverty because their incomes have been cut while living costs have risen. For many years, politicians of all governments have chosen not to link benefit levels to wage increases, all while taking a hands-off approach to increasing housing costs.

In all the ways that matter in people's lives, benefits have been decreased by politicians every year from 1991. Lowering benefits in this way has locked many children and families into poverty.

The stress that comes with poverty can erode people's mental and physical health. Showing compassion as a society means making sure no-one has to endure the harms of this poverty.

People in government need to restore income support and help people escape the constraints of poverty. **||**

# Method: how did we develop and test the messages?

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The FrameWorks Institute completed an extensive study in the UK in 2018,<sup>2</sup> testing a large number of values, metaphors and explanatory chains (key components of evidence-led communication) with the public. They found a set of reframing strategies were effective at improving people's understanding of poverty, what causes it, their belief in the ability to do something about poverty, their support for welfare and benefit policies and their willingness to act.

The Workshop adapted four of their more successful strategies and constructed them into four messages less than 150 words long. A fifth message was developed by members of the collaboration following a similar structure to the first four.

## The five messages were labelled as follows:

- ➔ **Message 1:** Underinvestment in families (child-focused poverty as problem + welfare as solution)
- ➔ **Message 2:** Compassion and justice (intrinsic values of compassion and justice + welfare as solution)
- ➔ **Message 3:** Self-determination (self-determination value + restrictions and constraints metaphor)
- ➔ **Message 4:** Economy (economy is problem + restrictions and constraints metaphor)
- ➔ **Message 5:** Success and care (helpfulness/looking out for each other + collective success as values)

We developed an outcome measurement scale of attitudes to poverty and welfare reform and willingness to act. We drew questions from existing questionnaires such as the European Social Survey (ESS) and the New Zealand Election Study (NZES).

We tested the messages to see which made the most difference to 16 outcome statements, compared to the control. In response to each statement, respondents were asked if they strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, agree or strongly agree.

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<sup>2</sup> FrameWorks Institute. (2018). *How to talk about poverty in the United Kingdom*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. [http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF\\_Poverty/JRFUKPovertyMessageMemo2018Final.pdf](http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_Poverty/JRFUKPovertyMessageMemo2018Final.pdf)

Before the message testing, we asked participants to answer three questions about understanding of and attitudes to poverty. After the message testing, we used a statistical process called latent class analysis to separate the participants into three groups based on these attitudes:

1. **Base/persuaded** – people who showed an understanding of the structural and systemic causes of poverty and believed the government had a role in poverty reduction (29% of the sample).
2. **Persuadables** – people whose attitudes sat somewhere between the base and the hard to persuade. In other words, they didn't hold attitudes of poverty we would describe as clear or fixed (59% of the sample).
3. **Hard to persuade** – people who tended to think of poverty in basic needs terms and that poverty was caused by moral failings (12% of the sample).

We analysed the effects of the messages for each of these groups to establish what worked for those in the persuadable group. These are the people most likely to be moved by effective public messaging.

The results associated with each of the five messages were compared to a control group who received no messages but answered the same outcome questions. This design allowed us to pinpoint how hearing a message affected people's understanding of and attitudes towards poverty and their support for relevant policies. We also controlled for a wide range of demographic variables by conducting a multiple regression statistical analysis. This was to ensure that any effects we found were driven by the message and not differences in the people themselves. This is also why we used a control group.

### An experimental design for determining effectiveness of messaging strategies:



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