Why We Need to Change the Way We Talk about Homelessness

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> **Abstract_** *This paper discusses findings from the first ever large-scale study on public attitudes to homelessness in the UK. While experts believe that 'homelessness' encompasses a wide range of insecure housing situations and some groups are at higher risk of homelessness than others, public attitudes and action towards the issue do not appear to follow suit. The research used four sources of data – 15 expert interviews; 20 in-depth cultural models interviews and 30 on-the-street interviews; and media content analysis of a sample of 333 organisational and media materials about homelessness – to examine how we can communicate in a way that deepens public understanding, attracts new supporters and builds demand for change. Findings reveal that public opinion tends to overlook the relationship between homelessness and poverty or other structural causes in favour of a more fatalistic view that blames individual circumstances and poor choices. Implications for communications are discussed and what the sector needs to do to convince people that homelessness is an issue that can be tackled. The paper's overall conclusion is that organisations or campaigners need to adopt a more strategic approach to communications – too often we concentrate on raising awareness without translating that awareness into action.*

> **Keywords_** *Homelessness, rough sleeping, strategic communications, reframing, poverty, UK*

Introduction

In 2017, homelessness has finally returned to the political agenda in the UK, and with 160 000 households still experiencing the most acute forms of homelessness across Great Britain (Bramley, 2017), it's not a moment too soon. But the British public generally views homelessness as almost impossible to solve – it is seen as a pernicious problem that money, government policies or charity can mitigate but not cure. This year, Crisis turns 50 and we want to make sure we are not here in another 50 years. Part of this work involves correcting this fundamental misconception, as it is preventing our work from progressing.[1] If we are to end homelessness for good, we need the public's belief and support that this can be achieved. We know that people are more likely to engage and take action if they understand that not everyone is at equal risk of homelessness and policy choices make all the difference (see Fitzpatrick, 2017).

In response, Crisis, in collaborations with other organisations in the sector, set about trying to change how we talk about homelessness, to convince people that it is an issue that can be solved. To help inform our communications strategy we commissioned the FrameWorks Institute to examine public attitudes towards homelessness, to map what the landscape looks like and to give Crisis and others working in this space ways to make their communications more effective.

At Crisis, we believe evidence-based reframing is a tool for positive impact. Conversations can be designed; language can be productively repurposed to further our mission. But we know that changing the way we communicate about homelessness won't be easy. For those working to end homelessness, the first instinct is often to make sure that as many people as possible are aware of the problem. The success of coming efforts will depend upon two factors: first, shifting perceptions of the impact that policy and practice have on homelessness levels, and second, the development of a coalition of influential organisations and individuals, which begin to frame the issue in a new way.

This article reports findings from the first phase of a larger, multi-stage, project (O'Neill *et al.,* 2017). We asked ourselves – how might we talk about homelessness in a way that deepens public understanding and builds demand for change? How might we positively guide media reporting so that it encourages people to support systems-level change?

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[1]   For more information about the plan to end homelessness that Crisis is developing this year and is due to be published in Spring 2018, see https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/a-plan-to-end-homelessness/

The FrameWorks Institute started by identifying the core (evidence-informed) ideas that people working in the sector should communicate about homelessness. They then set out to examine the patterns in public thinking, media and third-sector agencies' discourse that present challenges and the harmful effects it can have. The research concludes by putting forward a set of recommendations, which can be used to craft smarter campaigns and communications to create long-lasting change. In the next phase of the project, evidence-informed tools will be developed and tested, to help us identify the most effective ways to increase public understanding and drive support for the policies and changes needed to tackle and prevent homelessness.

Even though the UK is the focus of this research, we believe that its findings and recommendations are likely to be relevant to organisations and individuals in other European countries and beyond.

Methods

This paper presents results from the initial phase of the project. Its findings and recommendations are based on four sources of data:

- *Expert Interviews:* To explore and distil key messages on homelessness – the ideas that the third sector want to communicate to those outside the sector – 15 phone interviews were conducted with individuals who work on and study homelessness in each UK nation. The list of interviewees was designed to reflect the diversity of disciplines and perspectives involved in efforts to address homelessness.

- *Cultural Models Interviews:* 20 in-depth cognitive interviews with members of the public in London, Manchester, Glasgow, Belfast and Aberystwyth. Cultural model's interviews are one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with members of the public, to capture discourse that reveals shared patterns of reasoning, assumptions and implicit understandings (or 'cultural models') used to make sense of an issue.

- *On-the-Street Interviews:* Thirty 'on-the-street' interviews were conducted to supplement the cultural models interview data. These took place in London and Glasgow. Efforts were made to recruit a broad range of participants. Interviews included a series of open-ended questions to gather information about people's spontaneous thinking about homelessness, its causes and what should be done about it.

- *Media Content and Sector Frame Analysis:* analyses of a sample of 333 organisational and media materials about homelessness that appeared between October 2014 and October 2016, conducted using a statistical technique called Latent Class Analysis (LCA), a statistical method that identifies mutually exclusive subgroups or 'classes' within a large set of data.

The time to do it is now

Now that homelessness is near the top of the political agenda across the UK, we need to hold politicians to their promises and make sure they are carried through – and this work must include better public engagement to galvanise support. We still have a long way to go to end homelessness and the public's energy and support will be vital.

When you work on a cause you passionately care about, such as ending homelessness, the first instinct is often to make sure that as many people as possible are aware of the issue. If you care about the cause, it's natural to want others to care as much as we do. Because, we reason, surely if people knew that homelessness causes real suffering (Thomas, 2012), that it sets back the life chances of those affected, then they would be more likely to support policies that protect people from homelessness.

In communication theory, that instinct is described as the Information Deficit Model (Irwin and Wynne, 1996). The term was introduced in the 1980s to describe a widely held belief about science communication—that the public's scepticism about science was primarily rooted in a lack of knowledge. If only the public knew more, they would be more likely to embrace scientific information. That perspective persists, not just in the scientific community, but also in third sector marketing.

But to truly drive change, especially at a time when homelessness levels remains stubbornly high and are set to rise (Bramley, 2017), is it enough for people to simply know more about homelessness? Our research suggests that not only do campaigns fall short and waste resources when they focus solely on raising awareness, but they can actually end up doing more harm than good.

Because people who are simply given more information are unlikely to change their beliefs or behaviour, it is time for the homelessness sector to move beyond just raising awareness. Instead, we need to use evidence to craft campaigns and communications that use messaging and concrete solutions-focused calls to action that get the public to change how they think or act, and as a result create long-lasting change.

Speaking different languages

After 50 years of campaigning, services, and research, at Crisis we know that as important as it is to end homelessness one person or family at a time, unless we address the wider causes – such as a lack of affordable homes, welfare reforms, low wages and irregular work, and an inadequate safety net for people in poverty – new homelessness will continue to happen (Fitzpatrick, 2017).

Despite this, our study revealed that the public still incorrectly believe that individual factors such as a person's character and personal choices are largely to blame. It shows how the public sees the 'typical' homeless person as an outsider or victim – someone whose circumstances place them in a separate category of society. When asked about their expectations for the future, most see homelessness as an impossible problem that personal actions can do very little to solve. And this fundamental misconception may be preventing our work from progressing.

There is now a sense in which experts and the public are often speaking different languages. Experts bristle at arguments from people saying that 'anyone can become homeless', saying that anti-intellectualism and ignorance are to blame. Even if that is true, that way of thinking only serves to deepen the divide between the two camps.

We often make the mistake of assuming people's minds are empty vessels. Instead, our research suggests that we need to think about someone's mind as a busy city during rush hour. It is crowded with people everywhere trying to get home from work and school. There are already a lot of beliefs and ideas in there. Before exploring the most effective ways to talk about homelessness, it's important to understand what we are up against and the harmful effects that creating awareness can have.

Results

The study identified four specific challenges: There is a narrow definition of homelessness; people see homelessness through the lens of individualism; prevention is poorly understood; and fatalism limits solutions support and reduces issue engagement. We will examine each of these challenges in turn.

Challenge 1: There is a narrow definition of what homelessness is and who it affects

The public has a limited view of what homelessness is and who it affects. For experts, homelessness covers a range of insecure situations – e.g. people being shuttled between emergency hostels, expensive temporary accommodation, and bed and breakfasts, or overcrowded shared housing – and some groups at greater risk than others (see for example, Fitzpatrick, 2017).

Yet the public tends to equate homelessness with rough sleeping; when asked about it participants said things like '*People sleeping on the street',* or '*Not having anywhere to sleep. Being outside',* and '*Without a house, without shelter, living on the streets'.* And in the public mind, a street homeless person is a man, aged between 40 and 60, who has been living rough for a prolonged period of time and is thought to be homeless due to severe mental illness or addiction(s).

Participant: Some people cannot interact well. Some people might have mental health problems and never be able to have what is normal to society. They will always be at the fringe or they are at the fringe and nobody is looking out for them and then they end up homeless.

Researcher: Why do you think that homelessness is more prevalent amongst the older age group?

Participant: I think it's maybe alcohol, addictions, gambling. They've lost their job. They went bankrupt. They've just lost everything.

In our research, we call this the *Middle-Aged Man* prototype, and the fact that the public see the 'typical' homeless person in this way has deep implications about how those affected are perceived: as either outsiders or victims, as individuals who belong in a separate category of society. As a result, the public naturally struggles to understand his experiences and how they might be helped. And it also prevents them from seeing the issue in relation to broader socio-economic trends, so that links with poverty are by and large lost.

So how are we contributing to this as a sector? The research provides some uncomfortable home truths. It tells us that rough sleeping is by far the most frequently discussed type of homelessness in sector and media materials. Thirty-five per cent of the third-sector agencies' materials reviewed discussed rough sleeping, 14 per cent discussed sofa surfing and 6 per cent discussed squatting. The media is even more likely to discuss rough sleeping: almost half (48 per cent) the news stories analysed discussed rough sleeping, while only 11 per cent discussed sofa surfing and less than 5 per cent discussed squatting. Also, as this passage illustrates, media and sector materials present the *Middle-Aged Man* in ways that mirror and reinforce the prototype in the public mind.

From a very young age I was in and out of care, and this was really difficult for me, as I was bullied badly there. From the age of nine I slept rough, mostly in shop doorways and sometimes in a lift in a car park until I got caught. Whilst sleeping rough I met two men who were homeless, and they became my friends. Unfortunately, this is when I started to drink and then later take drugs, glue and solvents mainly. This went on throughout most of my life. I had to shoplift to support my habit and to be able to eat, and I quickly became very streetwise, because this was my only way to survive. I got support from family housing after being told I had schizophrenia; after this my life started to change for the better. I met my partner who I adore, she makes my life complete.

Challenge 2: People see homelessness through the lens of individualism

Public thinking about homelessness is trapped by the idea that a person's circumstances are determined by their willpower, character and choices. And this view shapes how people make sense of homelessness – its causes, what should be done about it and who is responsible for taking action. This way of thinking goes largely unchallenged and existing stories often (likely inadvertently) reinforce it.

Our analysis identified four types of narrative in media and third-sector materials – the Figure below shows their prevalence.

Narrative Types in Media and Third-Sector Organisations' Materials
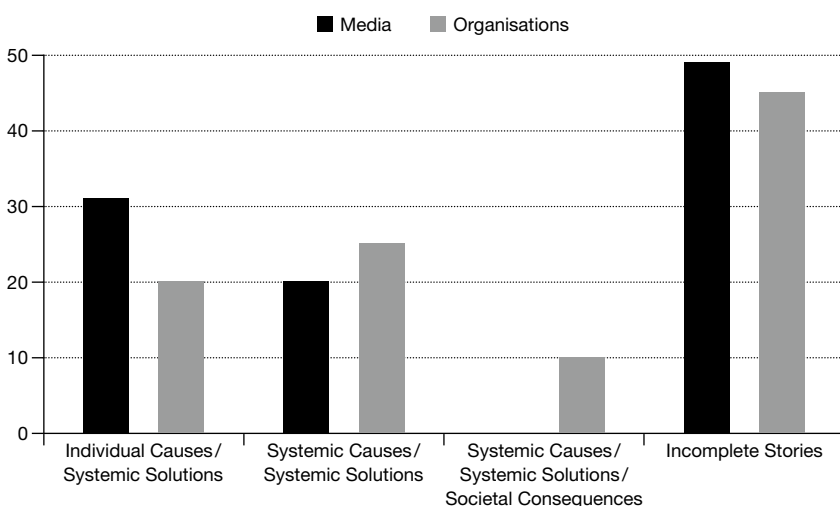
The *Incomplete Story* narrative was the most common type in both media and third-sector materials, appearing in nearly half of all materials (45 per cent and 49 per cent respectively). Messages falling into this category fail to answer essential questions like: what causes homelessness? What are its consequences? And what should we do about it? This piece is a typical example of this kind of story:

> *Forty cyclists will use pedal power to fight homelessness in a fundraiser for a large homelessness organisation this weekend. It's the third year of the Borders cycle challenge, which will set off from Kelso racecourse at 7 am on Sunday morning. The hardiest of the riders will take on a gruelling 100-mile tour, which includes an ascent of almost 2 000 metres. For less experienced riders, a shorter race cuts out some of the hardest climbs, and everyone will get to enjoy some of Scotland and northern England's best scenery as they cycle through Border towns including Duns, Eyemouth and Coldstream. Both routes will finish back at the racecourse. The organisation's director said: 'I am in awe of the cyclists*

who are taking on this challenge to help us ensure no one battles bad housing or homelessness alone. I'd like to wish them all the best for the event and give them my heart-felt thanks'.

We may not think of event announcements like this one as framing opportunities, but our research suggests otherwise.

The second most common was the *Individual Cause/Systemic Solutions* narrative. Thirty-one per cent of media materials and 20 per cent of third-sector materials tell this story. First, these stories zoom in on a person who is homeless and describe his or her living conditions. Then, they describe the individual-level circumstances (e.g. substance misuse) that led to the person's loss of housing. And the narrative concludes by advocating for more direct services or policy change to help the individual find stable housing. This passage exemplifies this narrative type:

Paul previously lived and worked legally in the UK for many years, but for the past 14 years he has been a visa overstayer. He has had 1 application and 2 appeals to stay in the UK on human rights grounds turned down. Paul does not want to return to his country because there is nothing for him there – his family are all in the UK. He has not accepted the offer of being returned voluntarily… Paul is 70 and destitute. He has deteriorating chronic health problems that have led him to be in hospital 4 times in the last 2 years. After one ITU (Intensive Therapy Unit) stay (for ketoacidosis), he was turned down by 4 GP practices, as he lacked a residential address, or adequate ID. Fortunately a mainstream practice well known for supporting homeless clients did eventually register him. […] At the conference, we will be discussing how we can best help Paul. Should the Home Office take responsibility for people like Paul who have multiple health needs? What is the role of health care professionals? Where is the safety net?

The aim of this article and others like it is to build public support for solutions to homelessness, but our research shows that when we tell individual stories like Paul's, the public are likely to get stuck on the details of Paul's story: why did he make the poor decision to overstay his visa? Are his health problems a result of bad personal choices? In other words, we prompt the public to question whether the individuals profiled deserve support.

However, our research also identified two other story types, that align more closely with expert understandings of homelessness.

The *System Causes/Systems Solutions* narrative was present in both the media and third-sector materials (20 and 25 per cent respectively). These passages exemplify this story type:

Christmas is a mere one week away, so what timely gift should you panic-buy the politics and economics enthusiasts (yes, they exist) in your life? Fret no more: I've come up with the ideal present – a Build Your Own Housing Crisis kit. In the box provided, you'll find a city with rapidly growing research and medical industries; a large student population; a scarcity of unoccupied land to build on; a desperate homelessness problem; massive central government cuts to scupper planned housebuilding; and a green-belt encircling the city, strangling any hopes of expansion. Once you've followed the instructions, you may be surprised to learn you've built your very own Oxford, rather than London. The city is now the most unaffordable in the UK, with rents and house prices relative to earnings higher than even the overheating markets of the capital. The average house price in the city is 16 times the average wage, compared with London's 15.7. Even in the cheaper parts of the city, ignoring the north where it's common for houses to change hands for £1.2m, you're still unable to nab a house for less than seven times the average salary.

Whenever our staff support or visit families living in these conditions we witness the terrible toll it is having on their children – damaging their ability to learn and longer term life chances as they witness things they shouldn't, struggle to sleep, maintain their self-esteem, and lack the space to study and play.

What is missing from stories like this is a discussion of the societal consequences of homelessness. This matters because if the impacts of homelessness are only felt by individual people, then the public is less likely to engage in debates around the policy changes needed to prevent homelessness. They are also likely to fall back on punitive approaches to tackling homelessness if the potential recipient of support is deemed as undeserving of help.

Finally, 10 per cent of third-sector materials include a *Systemic Causes/Systemic Solutions/Societal Consequences* narrative (and is completely absent from the media). These stories explained how societal conditions and structural forces create homelessness, and how societal-level interventions can prevent and reduce the numbers of people affected. These stories also include discussion of impacts that go beyond the individuals affected and their immediate families. This excerpt exemplifies this type of story:

With cuts to public services, restrictions on welfare, rising housing costs and a lack of housing supply, there are real fears that homelessness will rise further. Women are likely to be particularly affected by the impact of welfare changes as they are more likely to be dependent on benefit income, including housing benefit. The concern is that we now face a 'timebomb' of women's homelessness. As homelessness rises, funding for support services is being cut. Overall, homelessness services reported a 17 per cent reduction in funding in 2013, with

the proportion targeted at women falling from 12 per cent to only 8 per cent in the last two years. This is very concerning considering women make up a quarter of people using homelessness services. The costs of women's homelessness can be devastating for women and their families. These high costs are also felt by the wide range of support services which women come into contact with during their experiences of homelessness.

This report and others like it focus on conditions that structure the prevalence of homelessness and highlight how societal changes have disparate impacts on different groups of people. Unlike the *Individual Causes/Systemic Solutions* narrative, this one does not link homelessness to an individual's choices. To achieve real change, we need to tell more stories that are solutions-focused and make a powerful case for the societal consequences of inaction. Homelessness affects all of us, not just those with lived experiences.

Challenge 3: Prevention is poorly understood by the public

Experts agree that steps can be taken to prevent homelessness, and call for bold action in this area. But the public struggle to see how steps that intervene in this context can prevent homelessness, because very little information is available about how prevention works. As a result, the steps to prevent homelessness that those in the sector recommend are simply off the public's radar and therefore hard for them to support.

Analysis of the media and third-sector frames helps explain the public's difficulty in engaging with the idea of prevention. Only 7.6 per cent of media articles and 24.2 per cent of third-sector documents dealt with the idea of homelessness prevention. Of the third-sector materials that did many highlighted its importance but very few explained how preventative approaches would work to address homelessness.

Third-sector agencies adopted one of two approaches in their prevention-focused materials. The first was to simply include the word 'prevention' without defining its meaning:

Preventing Homelessness

We support thousands of people at risk, who we know from our street work are at risk for rough sleeping. Our 2014 statistics of health reveal that:

27 per cent of our clients report physical and mental health problems and substance use issues

52 per cent of our clients use alcohol and/or drugs problematically 65 per cent of our clients report a mental health problem

70 per cent of our clients report a physical health need.

In this piece and others like it, the word 'prevention' is included but is thought to speak for itself. There is no discussion of what that means and who is at greatest risk.

The second tendency in third-sector prevention messages is to describe prevention by stating determinants ('if we do X') and outcomes ('we will prevent Y from happening'), but omit the processes or mechanisms that connect determinants and outcomes. The frequent use of 'return on investment' data was one way that third-sector agencies described prevention without explaining it:

> *I was particularly pleased by the announcement this week that that every £1 spent on services in Northern Ireland saves £1.90 for the public purse. This news holds powerful significance for the similar programmes in Wales – particularly when we ask ourselves how we can continue to campaign for the continued ringfencing – (and increased protection) – of this vital funding stream... [T]he report demonstrates that significant savings are delivered through the programme's focus on prevention and reducing the need for statutory services such as health, social care and the criminal justice system.*

Challenge 4: Fatalism limits solutions support and reduces issue engagement

Experts in the sector emphasise that problems related to homelessness are complex, severe and large in scale. They are clear, however, that society can take actions to address homelessness and drastically reduce the number of people experiencing it. Despite this, there is a strong sense among the public – supported by media and sector stories – that homelessness is an intractable problem and an inevitable part of modern life in the United Kingdom.

The patterns of media and third-sector materials substantiate and contribute to fatalistic thinking. We saw earlier that structural *solutions* appear infrequently, especially in the media. In fact, many materials did not put forward any solutions: one-third of those produced by the media, and 17 per cent of sector materials.

Another way in which the sector likely increases the public's sense of fatalism about homelessness is through crisis messaging. In the following example, note how most of the story focuses on the problem rather than solutions:

> *The fact that there will be 626 more homeless children in ... this Christmas than last year – a 15 per cent increase – is simply not good enough and a badge of shame for such a relatively wealthy country. Our winter appeal aims to raise awareness of the plight of homeless children who will spend this Christmas living in temporary accommodation. The increased number of homeless children indicates a growing bottleneck of families stuck in temporary accommodation due to the major shortage of affordable housing across .... We are calling on all of ...'s*

political parties to include ambitious targets for new affordable housing in their manifestos for next year's election campaigns and bring hope to the 150 000 families and individuals stuck on council waiting lists across the country.

When organisations and the media discuss the prevalence of homelessness or emphasise its urgency without offering solutions, they substantiate the public's fatalism about the issue. They inadvertently send out the message that homelessness is an unavoidable problem.

Conclusions

Finding common ground

Now we know what we are up against and how it affects the outcomes of our communications. The good news is that we have the power to change this by telling different kinds of stories. We need to become deep experts on public thinking and use this expertise to be strategic and proactive in how we frame messages.

Crisis hosted a series of workshops with other homelessness organisations over the past year. We brought together dozens of different organisations to agree on a core definition of homelessness to help create a common language that would allow us to work out how to move forward and implement the recommendations in the report.

The study suggests that we can collectively improve how we communicate about homelessness by following these simple rules:

1. Challenge the public's image of a 'typical' homeless person. We need strategies to disrupt the public's archetypal image of the homeless person: the middle age man who sleeps rough. This includes avoiding images that reinforce the public's stereotypes of homelessness;

2. Discuss the social and economic conditions that shape people's experiences, and avoid talking about personal choices and motivation (it may seem like a good idea but the study shows this strategy backfires);

3. Talk about the societal impact of homelessness as well as the individual. Highlighting collective solutions will help combat fatalism and encourage the belief that collective action can drive change;

4. Explain prevention and build a story that people outside of the sector can take up. The homelessness sector cannot end homelessness on its own – better collaboration with people in other related fields will help improve outcomes.

5. Talk about how systems are designed – and can be redesigned. The public should understand that the current situation is largely due to policy decisions and that we can change it by making different choices.

If we follow these guidelines and make sure we tell stories that are *concrete, collective, causal, conceivable, and credible*, then our communications will be fuller, more systems-oriented, and a lot more likely to build public support, both for direct services and social and policy change. Just as importantly, it will ensure that we are not reinforcing unhelpful attitudes and stereotypes.

This research was just a vital first step towards that goal. This is a long-term project and the next stage, which is already underway, involves developing and testing communications tools to help redirect public thinking so that it's more in line with expert views. These are being co-created with other sector organisations, and together we want to start introducing these evidence-informed communications tools into our working practices. Reframing homelessness will take effort, attention, and practice, but it will allow us to see the challenge ahead in a new light.

Moving forward together

We are in a place where we have to think about new evidence-informed ways of communicating, because the ones we have now just fail us. Currently, only one-third of the sector's communications applies a systems perspective on homelessness, suggesting that we are missing valuable opportunities to illustrate consequences and solutions, and to show how wider society benefits from collective action. Similarly, media stories tend to focus on the individual impact of homelessness to the detriment of its wider consequences.

The challenge, then, is how we change this while continuing to tell stories that people can relate to. We shouldn't omit individual circumstances, but we also need to show that homelessness has wider social causes and consequences that can be tackled. In short, we need to widen the lens, to challenge the 'typical' images and discuss the social conditions that shape people's experiences, as well as the collective solutions that deliver wider societal benefits. This isn't an easy task, but if we want to convince people that homelessness can be ended, we cannot afford to ignore these lessons.

This study and abundant research from other fields highlights that alarmist or fear-based communication is likely to undermine efforts to engage the public with homelessness and motivate individuals to change their behaviour. Fear can induce apathy or paralysis if not presented with an action strategy (and assumed self-efficacy) to reduce the risk (see Spence *et al*., 2008; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole,

2009). Not in the scope of this study, but also worth thinking about, is whether there may also be a need for more deliberative public engagement techniques in order to break down entrenched camps and seek common societal goals (Escobar, 2013).

Continuing to focus on raising awareness is the worst we can hope for. It is the least likely way that we are ever going to see change. Not only do our efforts fall short and waste resources when they focus solely on raising awareness, but they do more harm than good. The gulf between evidence that could help us avoid harm or increase the effectiveness of our efforts and practice is wide. To move the needle our research and experience both show that we must define actionable and achievable calls to action that will lead the public to do something they haven't done before.

Simply suggesting that somehow communications is 'the answer' to ending homelessness is of course wrong. Real lasting change won't happen until the welfare safety net, including access to genuinely affordable housing, starts to be restored. It is also time to use science to improve people's lives (though our services make a difference, their impact hasn't improved in 50 years).[2] But strategic communications—when approached thoughtfully, informed by data, and delivered with precision—is an important part of the solution.

2   See Teixeira, L. (2017) 'The Next Big Thing in Preventing and Tackling Homelessness?' Crisis Blog: https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/the-crisis-blog/the-next-big-thing-in-preventing-and-tackling-homelessness/; and Teixeira, L. (2017) *Ending Homelessness Faster by Focusing on What Works*. Crisis and GHN: https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237356/ending_homelessness_faster_by_focusing_on_what_works_2017.pdf

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