



The Workshop

Talking about Poverty and Welfare Reform: A Guide to
Strategies that Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

About The Workshop

The Workshop is a charitable trust for public good. We undertake research to find ways of communicating that will build support for the solutions that work to solve complex social and environmental problems. Our research, training and consulting work provides a foundation for other people and organisations to do more effective research, communication, community engagement and advocacy.

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Summary

As part of a collaboration to improve the uptake of recommendations from the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG),¹ 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.

¹ 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>

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.

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.

- **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 – ‘restricts 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”.

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

The messages we tested didn’t increase people’s support for lifting benefits but they did shift people’s thinking about lowering benefits. They were more likely to see lowering benefits as unhelpful. Given that benefits have been eroded in real terms since 1991 (as shown by data in the WEAG report), we recommend drawing people’s attention to this, e.g. “Every year since 1991, people in politics have overseen a lowering of benefits in real terms, while housing and other costs have increased. These reduced benefits have locked many families in poverty. Restoring benefits would help people escape the constraints of poverty.”

- **Target attitudes about poverty, and 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.

The results showed that different messages can be more effective depending on the outcome being measured. These results are presented in detail below.

How did we develop and test the messages?

The FrameWorks Institute completed an extensive study in the UK in 2018,² 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)

² 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

Message 3: Self-determination (self-determination value + restricts and constraints metaphor)

Message 4: Economy (economy is problem + restricts and constraints metaphor)

Message 5: Success and care (helpfulness/looking out for each other + collective success as values)

The full messages are included in the appendix.

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.

Examples of the outcome statements are included in the table below.

| Outcome scale | Outcome statement |
|--|---|
| Existence of poverty in New Zealand | There is very little real poverty in New Zealand. |
| Poverty caused by personal or moral failing | People in poverty in New Zealand are poor because of laziness or lack of willpower. |
| Understanding of the structures and systemic causes of poverty | People in poverty in New Zealand are poor because of bad luck/low wages/cost and availability of housing. |
| Collective responsibility for poverty | It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes. |
| Efficacy of benefits in overcoming poverty | Benefits can prevent widespread poverty. |
| Efficacy of benefits in economic wellbeing | Benefits can place too much strain on the economy. |
| Attitudes to the benefit system | With lower amounts paid to those receiving a benefit, people would learn to stand on their own two feet. |
| Support for benefit reform | The government should increase the amount of money paid to those who receive a benefit. |
| Support for lowering benefits | The government should decrease the amount of money paid to those who receive a benefit. |
| Political and civic participation to reduce poverty | There are various forms of political action that people take to express their views about something the government should or should not do. Would you ever consider specifically taking part in a lawful protest out of concern for people in poverty in New Zealand? |

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

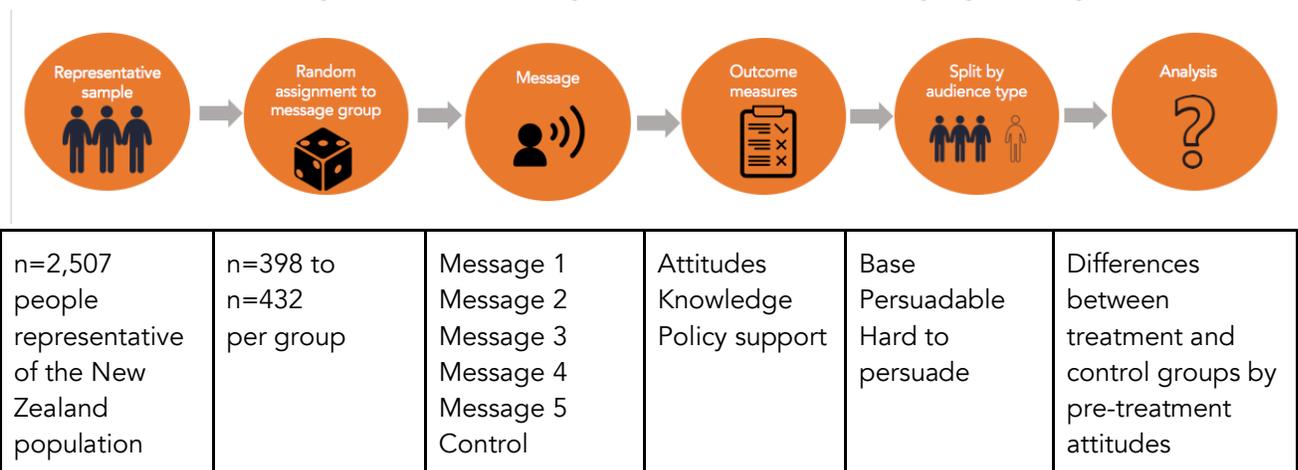
process called latent class analysis to separate the participants into three groups based on these attitudes:

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



How to read the graphs

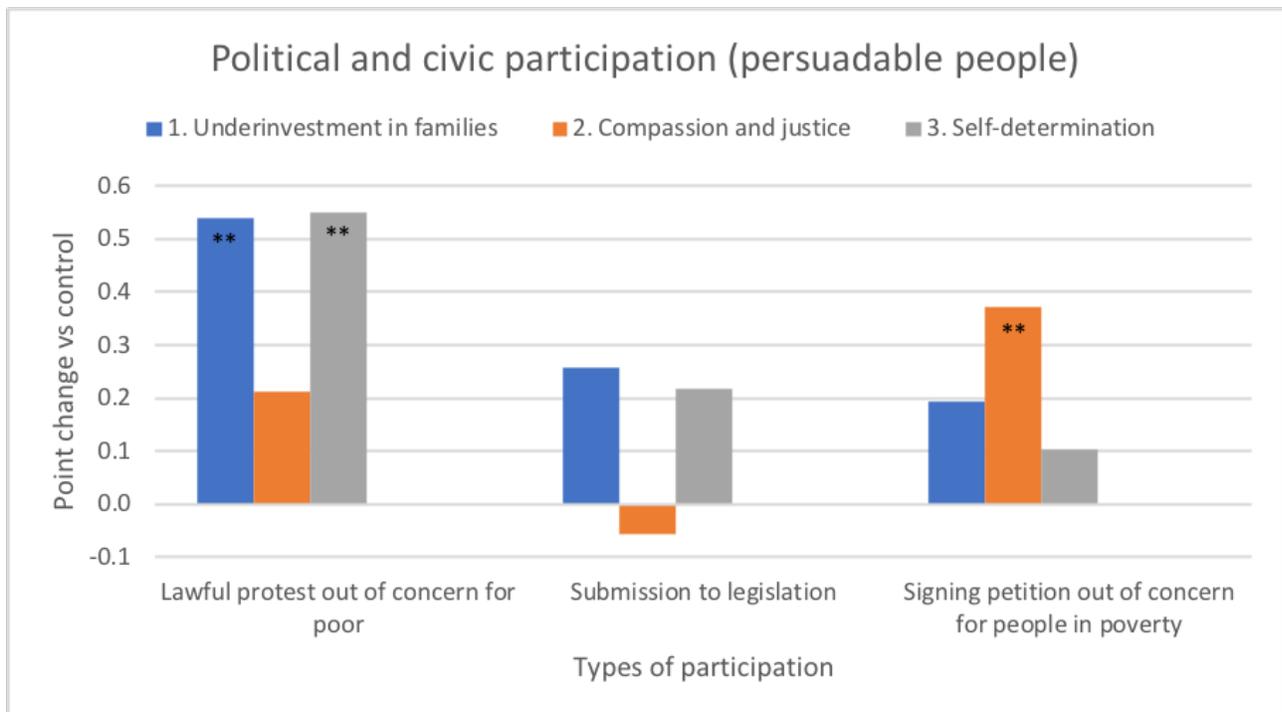
The scale on the left-hand side of the figure shows the level of agreement people expressed to a statement about poverty after hearing our messages compared to people who had no message (a control). A negative number means people showed less agreement with the statement after hearing a message compared to people who had no message. A positive number means people showed more agreement with the statement after hearing a message compared to people who had no message.

Recommendations

Start with a shared positive vision about childhood.

The most effective message (the one that moved people most consistently on both attitudes and willingness to act) led with a positive vision about childhood in Aotearoa New Zealand (see Figure 1).

The positive vision we used was: “We all want children in New Zealand to experience a thriving, happy childhood.” A hopeful vision is not sufficient and other effective strategies need to be included, but it is a critical component of evidence-led communication.



** p>0.05, * p>0.1

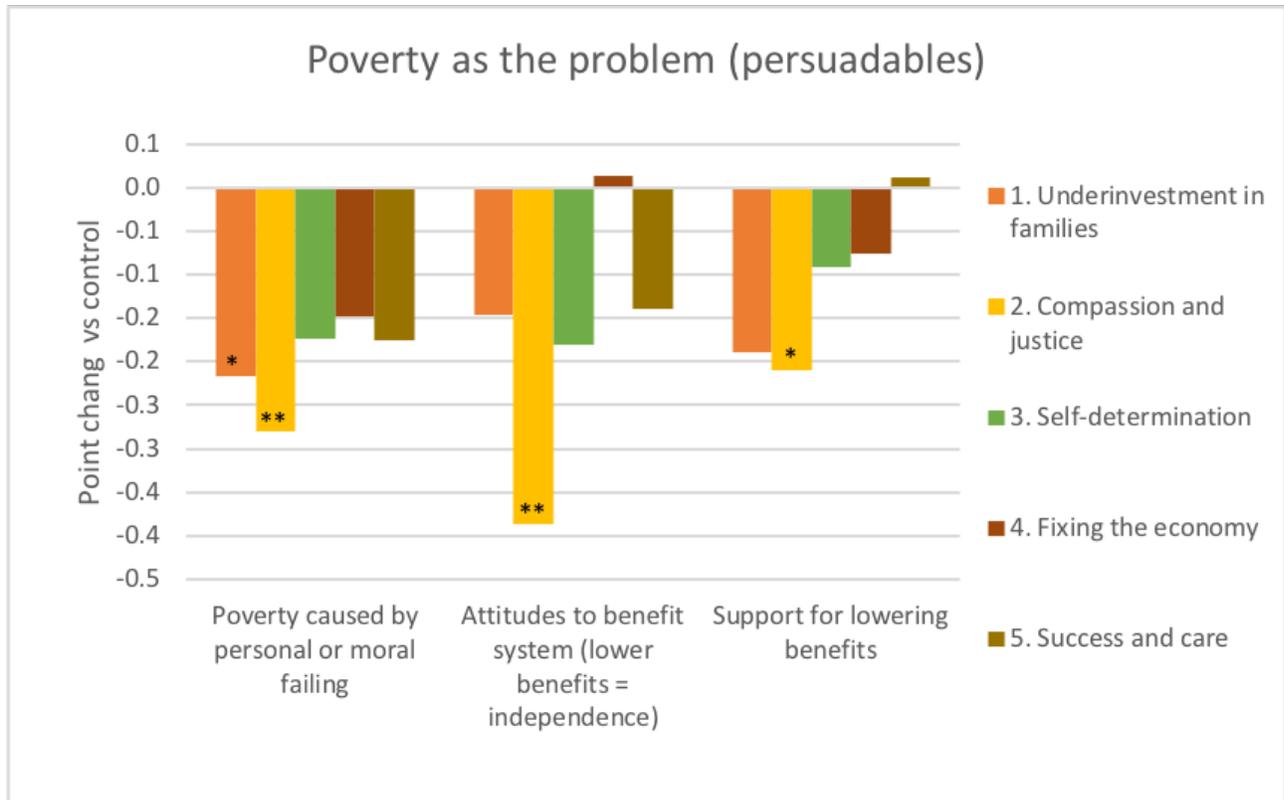
Figure 1. Political and civic participation.

Describe the barrier or problem as one of poverty, not a broken welfare system. The solution is better welfare.

Rather than starting your message by highlighting the problems with the welfare system (e.g. "Our welfare system is broken"), these findings show it is critical to describe the real problem welfare is trying to solve – poverty. By defining poverty as the problem and improving our welfare system as the solution, we centre the discussion on a problem many people in New Zealand care about but may be unclear on how to fix.

Strong but shallow cultural narratives exist in which people think/believe that welfare causes dependency. If we start our communication with a broken welfare system, our message is reinforcing this "broken welfare" narrative. It may point people to less effective solutions, like individual behaviour change. We want to help people think more productively about how the welfare system can be used to solve the problem of poverty.

Our messages showed that leading with poverty as the problem helps people to understand that lowering benefits doesn't improve people's independence (see Figure 2).



** p>0.05, * p>0.1

Figure 2. Poverty as the problem.

Avoid describing the problem as a broken welfare system, e.g. “Our welfare net is frayed. Too many New Zealanders are being let down by a poorly maintained and broken income support system.”

Replace with poverty as the problem (and welfare as the solution), e.g. “Right now, hundreds of thousands of people in our country are living in poverty. 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.”

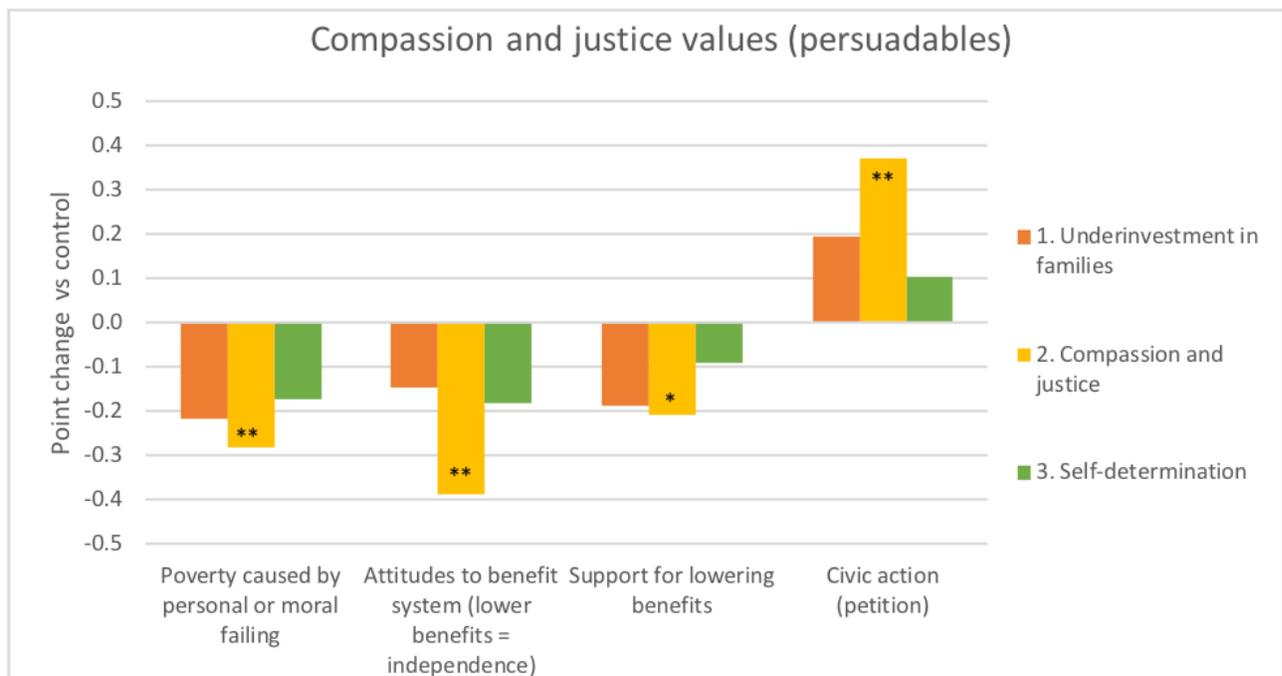
Top tip: Don't forget to lead with a vision before you describe the poverty problem.

Use intrinsic values to lead conversations. Avoid extrinsic values.

Values are what matters most to us in life. They are at the heart of human motivations. Values are why we come to believe certain things about what causes poverty and support (or don't support) specific actions to address it.

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. Examples of intrinsic values include taking care of each other and the environment, and setting and reaching our own goals. Loving our family, pursuing peace, protecting the environment or pursuing our creative gifts are inherently rewarding. We do not value them for any external reward or benefit we will receive for doing so.

When testing these messages, we found that leading with the intrinsic values of compassion and justice increased the persuadable groups understanding about the causes of poverty, their attitudes to the benefit system and one aspect of their willingness to take civic action (see Figure 3).



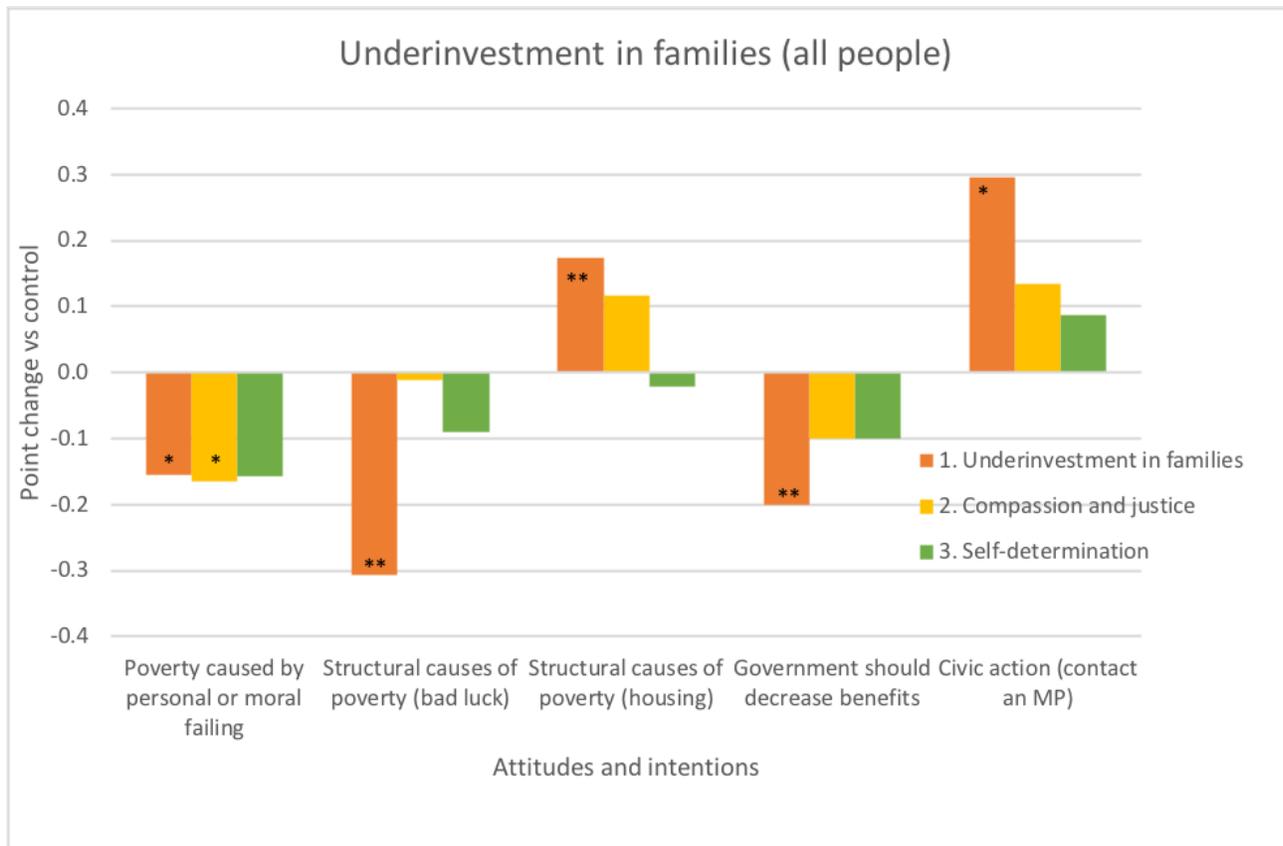
** p>0.05, * p>0.1

Figure 3. Compassion and justice values.

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

People need better explanations for how poverty happens, what the impacts are and what changes government needs to make to reduce poverty. It is important that these explanations (sometimes called explanatory chains) take people through cause and effect and lead them to your solution. This is very different from leading with a fact about poverty or welfare.

Our research shows that providing people with a better explanation for how poverty happens and one or two facts about the causes and impacts in relation to people's everyday lives and pointing them to the welfare system as the solution works to shift people's attitudes about poverty and people's attitudes to the benefit system (see Figure 4).



** p>0.05, * p>0.1

Figure 4. Underinvestment in families.

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

Always name agents. It is critical that people can see and understand that people are responsible for what happens in our world, both in creating the conditions of poverty and choosing to do something about it.

Without a clear understanding that people in power have made choices that created the problems we face, it's hard for people to understand or imagine that those same problems could also be solved by people making different choices. This is especially critical when we are communicating about big, complex problems where the causes are not immediately clear to many people.

Our two most effective messages clearly named people in the government as agents for both cause and change, for example:

“By providing good income support that gives real options in life the government can make it possible for everyone to do well.

Instead, governments have prioritised policies that help the already well-off, including property speculators.

The government can release the pressures on families and children by providing good public services to all families with children.”

Naming these people in power as agents in creating poverty also helps lift people’s view away from the default frame of holding people in poverty responsible for their own hardship and calling for individual behaviour change. It helps people see the bigger picture and focus on the structures and systems that research shows have the greatest impact on poverty and wellbeing (for example, the welfare system).

A causal chain that names agents tested well with all groups of people.

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

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. (Explain the external causes)

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. (Name agents and explain the impacts)

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. (Use two facts carefully to progress the system’s story)

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.” (Explain the solution)

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

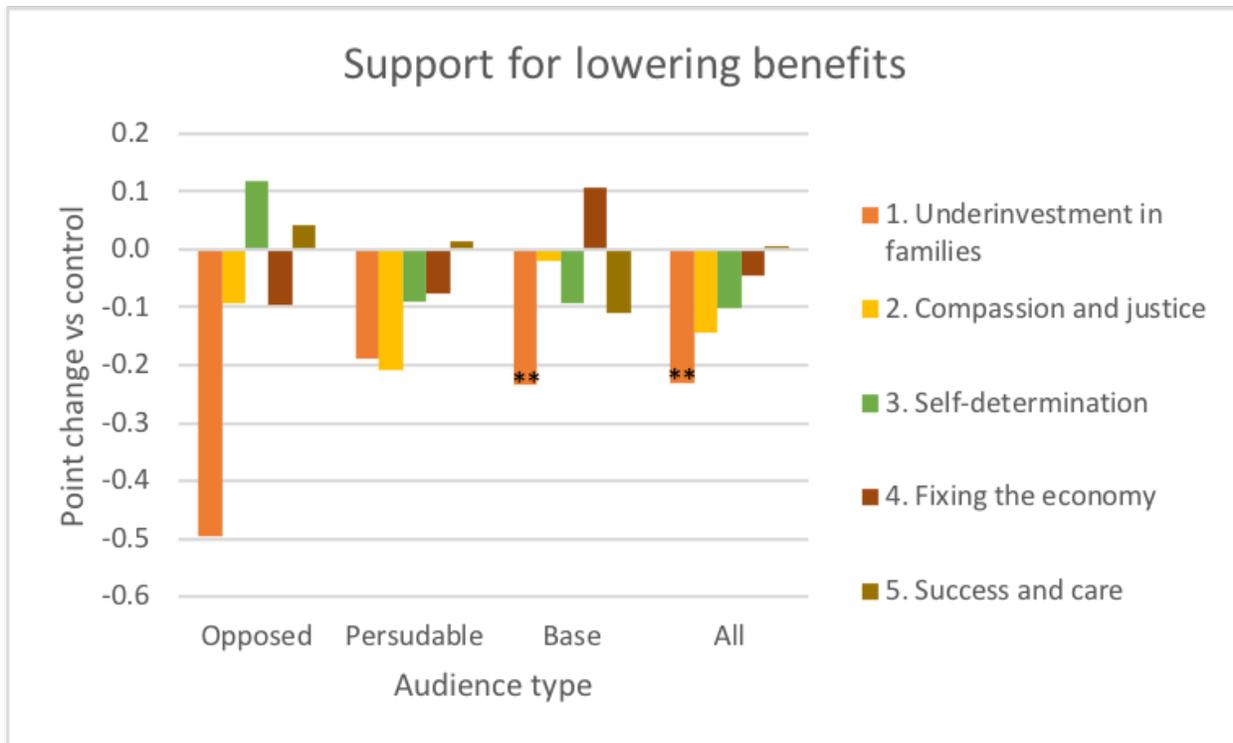
Our brain takes many shortcuts to grasp ideas quickly. Where there are dominant beliefs about an issue like poverty that are too shallow, shortcuts can mean people bypass deeper thinking about complex issues. By using an effective metaphor, we can work with our brain's inclination to take shortcuts to better explain a complex idea like poverty. A metaphor takes something we understand on a practical everyday level and connects it to the abstract or complex to make sense.

We used two metaphors in our messages that had been shown to work well with the UK public. They also appeared in our two most effective messages. These metaphors compare poverty to a constraint and talk about people being locked in by the constraints of it. The solutions (e.g. benefits) work by unlocking those constraints.

- **Restricts 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."

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

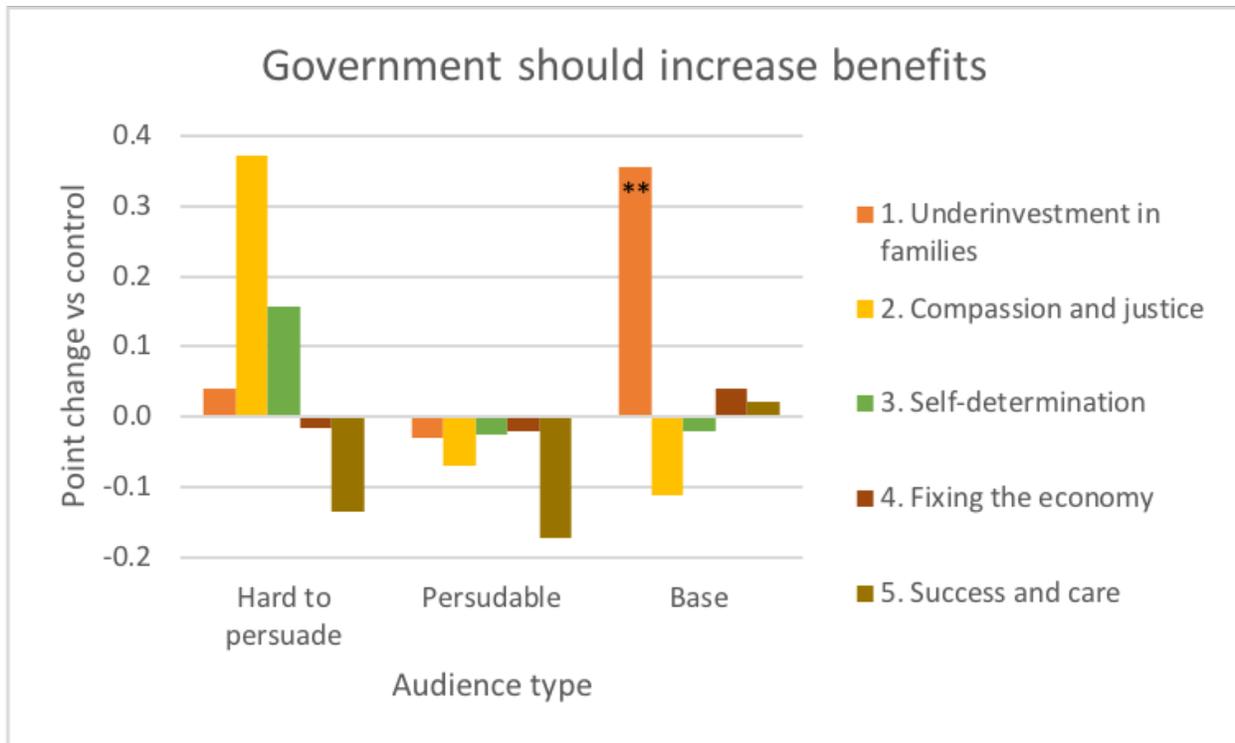
The underinvestment in families message led people in all attitude groups to become **more opposed** to benefit cuts (see Figure 6).



** p>0.05, * p>0.1

Figure 6. Support for lowering benefits.

However, no message we tested helped consistently increase support across the different audience groups for raising benefit rates (Figure 7).



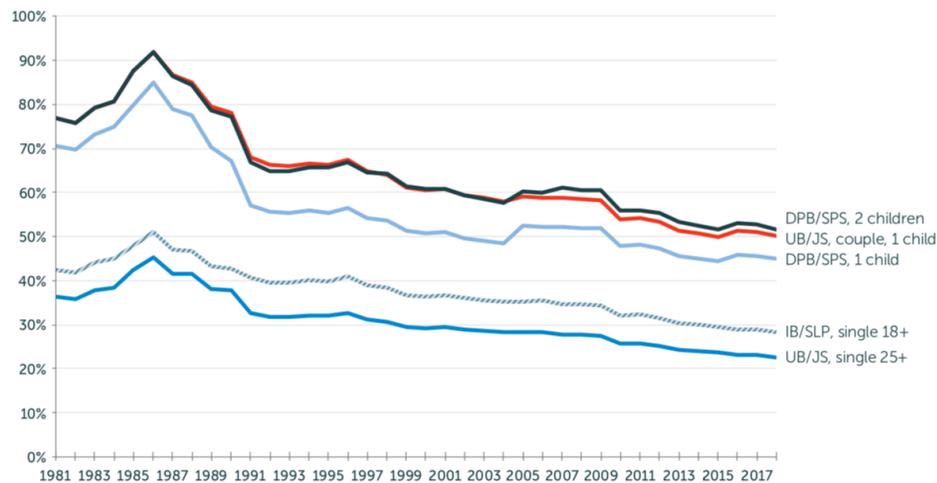
** p>0.05, * p>0.1

Figure 7. Government should increase benefits.

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.

Figure 3: Comparison of benefit rates to average wages, 1981–2018

SELECTED NET BENEFIT RATES (INCLUDING FAMILY ASSISTANCE) AS A PERCENTAGE OF NET AVERAGE WAGE RATES



Source: Fletcher 2018a.

Notes: DPB = Domestic Purposes Benefit; IB = Invalid's Benefit; JS = Jobseeker Support; SLP = Supported Living Payment; SPS = Sole Parent Support; UB = Unemployment Benefit.

Source: WEAG, 2019, p. 37.

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. This is most likely to be effective when it is preceded by a message that has been shown by this research to move people to understand that benefit decreases are not acceptable. This message:

- leads with a positive vision,
- describes child poverty as the problem (as opposed to a broken welfare system),
- gives a good explanation of how poverty has occurred
- ends with welfare as a solution.

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.

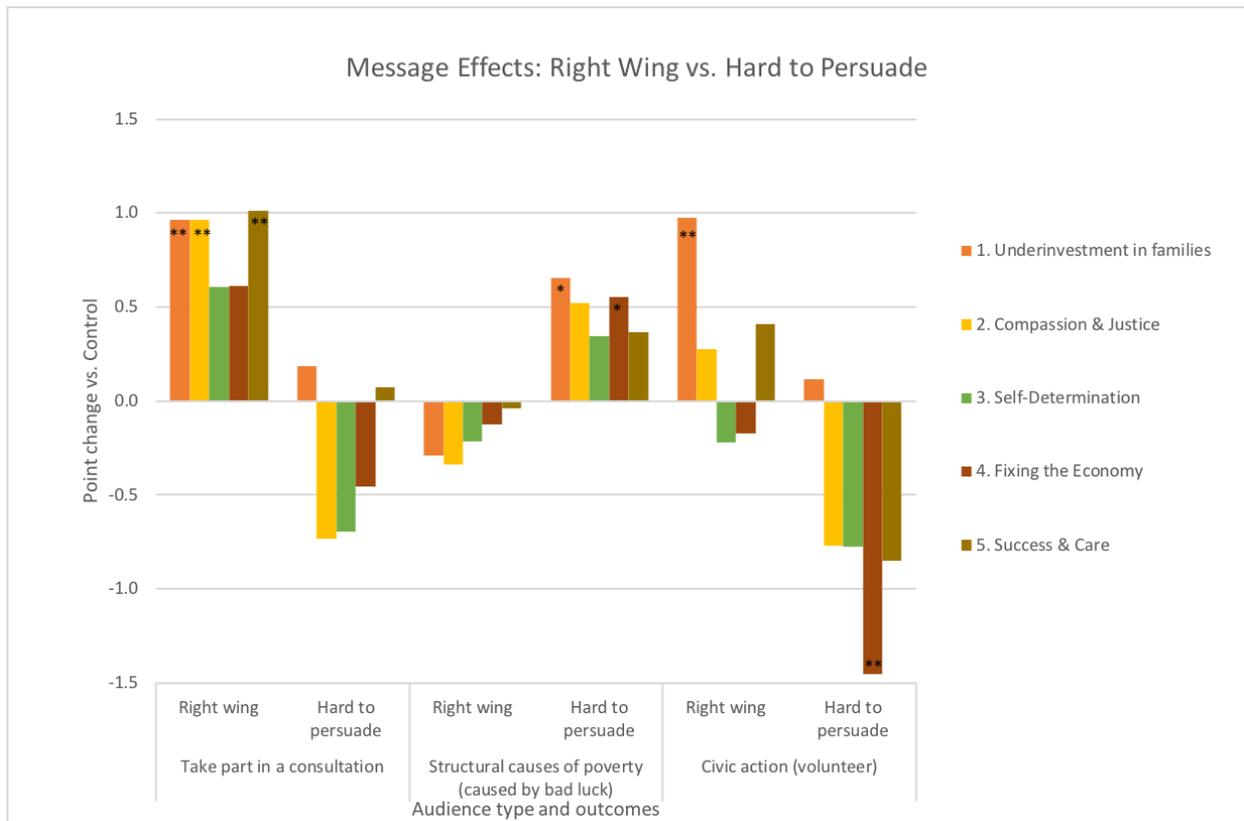
People in government need to restore income support and help people escape the constraints of poverty.”

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

Values, beliefs and political support are related and intertwined concepts, but political support isn’t a good measure of people’s values and beliefs about specific issues. People hold a wide range of values and may support political parties that reflect some but not all these values.

For example, we found that people whose attitudes about poverty suggested they would be hard to persuade were harder to move on attitudes and intention to act with messages

than those who supported right wing political parties (see Figure 8). This shows that people from across the political spectrum are persuadable about poverty and welfare.



** p>0.05, * p>0.1

Figure 8. Message effects: right wing vs hard to persuade.

People who prioritise conformity and tradition values (the lower left part of the universal values map below) may think productively about poverty as an issue and vote for traditional conservative parties. There are helpful intrinsic values that are 'statistically close' to these conformity and tradition values. Statistically close means people who prioritise conformity and tradition values are more likely to also prioritise values close to them on the values map (e.g. benevolence values). Therefore, messages that are led by such helpful values close to conformity values (of which compassion and justice are examples) can be used to frame messages about poverty for people who may support right wing parties.



The Common Cause universal values map is based on research by Shalom Schwartz and Tim Kassner (Creative Commons).

Who are the persuadables (and the base and hard to persuade?)

The table below has some basic demographic information about our audience groups. Persuadable people (those who held average attitudes about poverty prior to testing) were not obviously distinguishable demographically from the base and hard to persuade groups.

People who were persuadable about poverty were:

- equally split by women and men (numbers were too small to identify other gender groups)
- more likely to identify as New Zealand European, although 17% identified as being of Asian ethnicity
- evenly split between Labour and National voters.

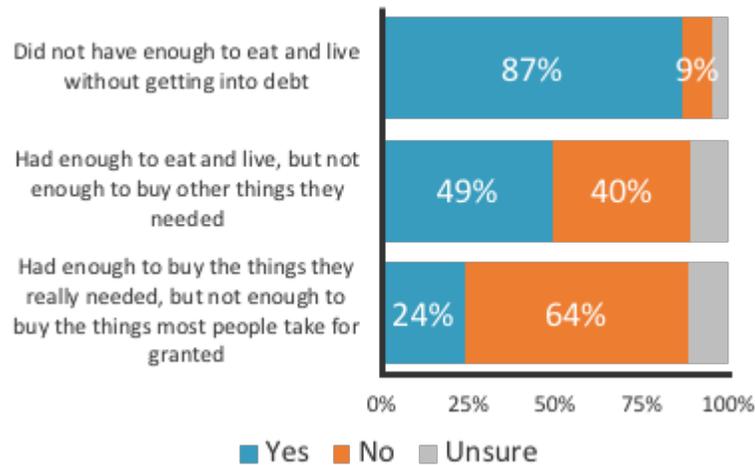
Who are the persuadables?

| | Base (n=725) | Persuadables (n=1.492) | Hard to persuade (n=290) |
|---|---|--|--|
| Gender (M/W) | ↓42% / ↑58% | 49% / 51% | ↑57% / ↓43% |
| Region | Auckland ↓ (27%) Canterbury ↑ (17%) | | Auckland ↑ (41%) |
| Average household income | ↓ \$62K | \$73K | ↑ \$89K |
| Ethnicity | NZ European ↑ (77%) Māori ↑ (16%) Pasifika (7%) Asian ↓ (6%) | NZ European ↓ (64%) Māori (10%) Pasifika (5%) Asian ↑ (17%) | NZ European ↓ (57%) Māori ↓ (5%) Pasifika (2%) Asian ↑ (29%) |
| Favoured parties | Labour ↑ (74%) Green ↑ (50%) NZ First ↑ (30%) National ↓ (16%) ACT ↓ (6%) | Labour (42%) Green (26%) NZ First (25%) National ↑ (37%) ACT (12%) | Labour ↓ (24%) Green ↓ (16%) NZ First ↓ (12%) National ↑ (56%) ACT ↑ (25%) |
| Tertiary educated | 38% | 38% | ↑ 48% |
| Financial assistance | ↑59% | 47% | ↓ 30% |
| Very likely to face hardship in next year | ↑32% | ↓ 16% | ↓ 9% |

Other useful findings

New Zealanders are aware that poverty exists in Aotearoa New Zealand, but not many people have a deeper understanding of the definition of poverty.

Would you say that someone in New Zealand was in real poverty if they...



Many New Zealanders were in agreement that the cost of housing and low wages are major causes of poverty.

Some New Zealanders are living in poverty because...

(Agreement on a 1–7 scale, mean point and standard deviation bars)



The cost and availability of housing (5.6) and low wages and job security (5.3) scored the highest levels of agreement on average. Just over half (53%) mostly or strongly (6–7) agreed with the cost of housing and slightly under (45%) with low wages.

There is a gender difference in understanding the structural causes of poverty.

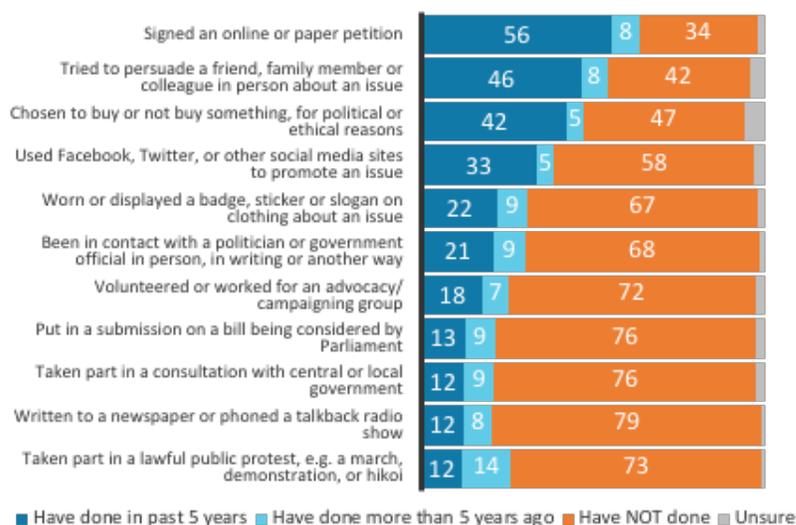
Males were less likely than females to agree that poverty is caused by housing (5.4 vs 5.8) and more likely to consider it is because of laziness (4.4 vs 3.9).

Few people take (or are willing to take) the type of civic and political action people in governments formally rely on for decision making.

Few people had experience of engaging in the type of civic and political action that most governments formally rely on to inform them of public views (for example, submitting on a Bill or talking to an MP), although many had and are willing to take more informal action, including signing petitions.

There are various forms of political action that people take to express their views about something the government should or should not do.

Have you done any of the following? (%)



The most common action taken by respondents was signing a petition, done by 56% in the past 5 years. This was followed by persuading someone about an issue (46%) and using social media to promote an issue (33%).

The least common actions was putting in a submission on a Bill, consultation with government and taken part in a protest.

People would consider more civic and political action out of concern for people in poverty.

Out of concern for people living in poverty in New Zealand, 57% of respondents said they would consider signing a petition and 43% would consider trying to persuade someone about an issue.

The least common actions respondents would consider taking were contacting a politician, taking part in protests, putting in a submission on a Bill, consultation with government or writing to a newspaper or phoning a talkback radio show (18–23%).

People are familiar with how to act as consumers.

42% of people had chosen to buy (or not buy) something as a political action while 42% would consider buying (or not buying) something for political or ethical reasons out of concern for people in poverty.

Appendix: Methods

Study design

We used a randomised control trial to test the effect of five messages on a set of attitudes and behavioural intentions compared to a control (no message). Power calculations were completed to identify the number of participants needed to detect any significant differences between the message and control groups.

Message development

The Workshop adapted four messages from an extensive study completed in the UK in 2018 on framing poverty and welfare.³ These messages were adapted to be relevant to New Zealand and to not exceed 150 words. A fifth and entirely new message was also developed. All messages followed a standardised structure.

The five messages were as follows

Message 1: Underinvestment in families (child-focused poverty as problem + welfare as solution)

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.

³ FrameWorks Institute, 2016.

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.

Message 2: Compassion and justice (intrinsic values of compassion and justice + welfare as solution)

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.

Message 3: Self-determination (self-determination value + restricts and constraints metaphor)

New Zealanders are known for our creativity and independence. We find new ways to solve old problems and stand up for the things that matter to us, even if it means standing alone.

But, right now, too many people in our country are trapped by poverty, trying to manage the stress of insecure or unpaid work, low wages and high housing costs.

The constraints of poverty lock people out of opportunities and make it impossible for them to create a different future.

Successive governments have chosen housing, tax, employment and welfare policies that trap people in bad situations. It doesn't have to be this way.

The government can break the constraints these policies have put on too many New Zealanders.

We need to make sure we all have the resources we need to unlock our potential and pursue opportunities. Strengthening welfare benefits would release constraints on many New Zealanders' lives.

Message 4: Economy (economy is problem + restricts and constraints metaphor)

Our economy is locking people in poverty. Low-paid unstable jobs and high housing costs are forcing more and more families into impossible choices – to heat their homes or pay their rent. It doesn't have to be like this.

Governments control the settings of our economy with the tax, employment and welfare policies they choose. For too long, people in government have chosen policies that lead to high housing costs, insecure work and a patchy welfare system. This is holding people down.

Many people are locked in a daily struggle to make ends meet, unable to think about or plan for a different future.

To remove the constraints our current economy places on us, we need to repair our welfare system. By providing good benefits that give everyone real options in life, we can make it possible for everyone to do well and for the least well-off among us to break out of poverty.

Message 5: Success and care (helpfulness/looking out for each other + collective success as values)

As New Zealanders, we look out for each other so we can all succeed. Whether it's taking part in our kids' schooling, helping our neighbours out or taking time to check our mates are OK, we know we all do better when we support each other.

We support each other as a country too. It's why we built up our public health, free education, state housing and a decent welfare system.

But that welfare system has been broken. It used to make sure people got an opportunity to make a better life for them and their kids, but successive governments have turned it into a system that doesn't trust the people it is supposed to look after.

The government needs to change our welfare system back to what it's meant to be – a way to support each other to do well. That's who we are in our hearts as Kiwis and it's how we succeed.

Attitude and outcome measures

Respondents had their attitudes and beliefs about poverty and welfare measured in the experiment along with their intention to take action. Nearly all questions were sourced and modified from existing surveys with publicly available datasets. Validation included examination of descriptives and existing reports using time-series and cluster analysis where original variables were binary (BSA) and exploratory factor analysis where original variables have a continuous Likert scale.

The survey questionnaires used to develop the questions were the European Social Survey (ESS), British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), World Values Survey – New Zealand questionnaire (WVS-NZ), New Zealand Election Study (NZES) and International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).

Six pre-test variables and 16 outcome variables were constructed from the questionnaires (refer to the main report for examples of the questions used to develop the outcome variables).

The pre-test questions covered people’s beliefs about the causes of poverty, their beliefs about whether poverty exists in New Zealand and their attitudes to benefits. The post-test questions covered people’s attitudes and beliefs about poverty and the benefit system as well as their history of and intention to take political or civic action in response to issues of poverty.

For analysis purposes, where possible, a 7-point Likert scale was used to measure responses. This ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In most questions a ‘don’t know’ or ‘refused’ option was not provided.

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Strongly disagree | Disagree | Somewhat disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Somewhat agree | Agree | Strongly agree |

Procedure

We recruited a representative sample from an existing online panel between the 2–8 August 2019. Quotas (based on the 2013 Census) on age, gender and region were set. The final sample consisted of 2,507 people. They were randomly assigned to one of six conditions (five messages and one control). Sample sizes for each group ranged from n=398 to n=432.

Weighting was applied to each wave individually to account for random variation between waves. The variables used for weighting were age (three groupings), region, gender and ethnicity.

Respondents first responded to the pre-test questions. They then read the message they were randomly assigned or had a forced delay if they were in the control condition.

All respondents completed the post-test questions and some demographic questions. Time delays were used on messages and longer questions to ensure that respondents spent enough time reading them.

Statistical analysis

Latent class analysis was performed on the pre-test questions to create three distinct segments. The neutral segment was considered to be a key audience (the persuadables) for their attitudes are less strong one way or the other.

- Base (29%) – tended to think poverty is due to external factors in society, that it is a problem in New Zealand and that benefits should increase.
- Persuadable (59%) – closer to the middle on these issues.
- Hard to persuade (12%) – tended to agree more that poverty is self-inflicted, that it is not a major problem in New Zealand and that the government should not increase benefits.

A linear regression model was performed on each statement to test whether the different messages had an impact on the level of agreement on each one. These models were weighted and comprise of:

- waves – for each message where the control (no message) is the intercept
- age – as a numeric variable accurate to individual years
- household income – converted to a numeric variable taking the mid-points of each category as the value
- political attitudes – favourability ratings of National, Labour, Green, NZ First and ACT
- pre-existing poverty attitudes – the factor scores from the principal component created from the six statements that were asked before the messages.

The same model was also used on the persuadables group, who were identified as a key audience.