

# Measuring the Impacts of Poverty Narrative Change:

A Practitioner Guide to Survey Questions

Jennifer Green, *Modern Measurement*

Milan de Vries

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We've designed this document for practitioners and researchers seeking to change the narrative on poverty in America. If you're planning to measure the early impacts of your program, we've developed and tested survey questions that may be helpful to you in measuring progress at changing minds. You can find a detailed writeup of our purpose and methodology in [\*Measuring the Impacts of Poverty Narrative Change: Research Framework & Survey Questions\*](#).

## **MEASURING PROGRAM IMPACT**

When measuring the impact of your program, surveys will inevitably be used to measure whether attitudes or reported behaviors have changed. Deceptively simple, writing a great survey requires fully specifying your program goals and knowing a bit about survey science.

We collected questions and observations generated from academic research, public polling, and practitioners on how people think about poverty and why. There are many pathways to changing minds, and we use past work to map out the different theories. Then, we use randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to identify which measured attitudes were easy to move and which were not.

We recommend questions based on program goals and provide suggestions for how to adapt them to your specific situation. We hope that these questions are a useful resource to you in polling, qualitative research, or impact assessment studies like randomized controlled trials.

## CONSTRUCT YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE

We observed that past research questions on public opinions on poverty could be understood as three separate dimensions: Attitudes, Attribution, or Agency (the “3 A’s”). We developed testable hypotheses for each, with an intervention, x (the idea you’d like to implement) and the outcome, y (what you hope to change).

See table below.

**TABLE 1: Dimensions of Hypotheses, with Their Dominant Subcategories**

<b>DIMENSION 1: ATTITUDES</b> Views of what poverty is and the people experiencing it	<b>DIMENSION 2: ATTRIBUTION</b> Views about why poverty happens	<b>DIMENSION 3: AGENCY</b> Views about who should address poverty and how we should address it
<p><b>Understanding what poverty is and who is poor</b></p> <p>Example: “Broadening scope of poverty beyond the narrow lens of homelessness (x) will increase prioritization of poverty among other policy issues (y)”</p>	<p><b>View of individual fault and responsibility</b></p> <p>Example: “Decreasing belief that it’s an individual’s fault (x) may increase their belief that society and government should intervene (y)”</p>	<p><b>Stewardship: Does society have a responsibility to fix poverty, regardless of blame?</b></p> <p>Example: “Showing information on systemic causes of poverty (x) will increase support for government stewardship of the problem (y)”</p>
<p><b>Belief that poverty is permanent trait or temporary state</b></p> <p>Example: “Showing poverty as a state rather than trait (x) could lead to an increase in belief that policy solutions can work (y)”</p>	<p><b>Acknowledgement of structural barriers</b></p> <p>Example: “Discussion of surprising statistics on the systemic causes of poverty (x) could improve negative feelings towards people experiencing poverty (y)”</p>	<p><b>Efficacy: Can we imagine solutions that would work?</b></p> <p>Example: “Presenting facts about how the child tax credit helps child nutrition (x) could increase belief that it is an effective policy (y)”</p>
<p><b>Feeling towards those experiencing poverty</b></p> <p>Example: “First person accounts from working people experiencing poverty (x) could increase positive attitudes towards people experiencing poverty (y)”</p>	<p><b>Role of bad luck</b></p> <p>Example: “Covid presents an opportunity to discuss poverty as fate/bad luck experience (x), and open up support for policy solutions (y)”</p>	<p><b>Personal Agency: Can I do something to help?</b></p> <p>Example: “Showing community-led efforts to improve poverty (x) can increase a person’s reported interest in doing more to help (y)”</p>

Your program may seek to change views on poverty through programs that touch on any combination of the above categories. We found it useful to think about these hypotheses when understanding our goals for our own randomized controlled trials. For example, we tested interventions that showed poverty as a temporary state, not a personal trait, and then measured its impact on that belief, and on support for policy solutions.

## **SURVEY QUESTIONS WE RECOMMEND**

The next step is to construct survey questions that measure the outcomes we wish to achieve. We used randomized controlled trials where participants were randomly assigned to see materials corresponding to the three categories above. The details can be found in the [Research Frameworks report](#).

We recommend questions that fit the following criteria: (1) consistently measures impact across a range of interventions, (2) measures impact among right- as well as left-leaning respondents, and (3) has a large impact that can be detected when a study's statistical power is less than ideal.

See recommended questions in table below.

**TABLE 2: Recommended Questions**

<b>ATTITUDES</b> Views of what poverty is and people experiencing it	Agree or disagree: Welfare makes people lazy
	Agree or disagree: People who are struggling don't want a handout, they just want a level playing field
	I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me
<b>ATTRIBUTION</b> Views about why poverty happens	Which do you believe best describes why people are poor? a) Poor people have only their bad decisions to blame b) People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control
<b>AGENCY</b> <i>Stewardship:</i> Does society have a responsibility to fix poverty, regardless of blame?	Agree or disagree: We need to do more as a society to help those in poverty
	Would you be supportive of increased spending on policies to reduce poverty in America, or do you want less spending? [Slider: Less spending — No Change — More spending]
	Which items should Congress focus their work on this year? a) Fixing aging infrastructure b) Rural Broadband c) Child poverty d) Immigration e) None of these *Lower bar is a multiselect option, higher bar is forcing a single choice. Adjust response options to your program goals and current events, balancing across right- and left-leaning issues du jour.
<b>AGENCY</b> <i>Efficacy:</i> Can we imagine solutions that would work?	Agree or Disagree: If we put our mind to it, there is a lot more that my community could do to help people in poverty over the next five years
	Do you think that the child tax credit, which paid most families \$3,000 this year, has been an effective governmental solution to reduce poverty? *Should be made specific to the policy you promote.
<b>AGENCY</b> <i>Personal Agency:</i> Can I do something to help?	Would you be willing to be contacted to be kept informed about legislation on improving poverty in America? Or Would you be willing to post an image or video similar to the one you just saw to your social media? We can send it to you. *Personalize to your call to action.

Unless noted otherwise, we recommend using a standard 5-point scale for measurement: Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neutral, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree.

## ADAPTATION

We chose questions that fit different theories of change from past work, but you may have new hypotheses from your own experience. We encourage you to adapt questions to fit. If you do adapt, we recommend the following principles:

- Keep the language simple and nonpartisan to avoid biasing response selection.
- If you must use partisan language in a question, ask it at the end of the survey. Alternatively, ask it twice, representing the opposing viewpoint on the second version.
- If your messages recommend support of a specific policy, absolutely ask a respondent's support of it (in a neutral way).
- If you have a call to action, measure directly if you can (petition, patch-through calls, etc.). If you cannot, construct a survey measure that asks if they'll commit to that action.
- Allow for at least one open-ended question. While difficult to analyze, we always learn a lot when reading the responses.

## EARLY FINDINGS

In the process of developing the theories and writing the survey questions, we tested a [variety of materials](#) and came away with some early learnings. They are by no means definitive, merely suggestive. We present these so that future research can build on or challenge them.

### **There is tremendous capacity for change – and appetite for political change**

We measured consistent and tremendous capacity for change across most of the questions we tested, especially in attitudes towards people experiencing poverty, and belief in greater societal and government stewardship. In open-ended responses, we heard a desire for big change in how we approach poverty and inequality as a society. We were surprised at the magnitude of the findings and especially surprised to see desire for more government spending and Congressional work on poverty even among right-leaning subgroups.

### **This change was measured across the ideological spectrum**

There is often more room for growth among the people who disagree with us. Baseline support on most of our questions was low among right-leaning groups, confirming earlier work. And yet, these groups showed the most movement in the RCTs. While it is discouraging to see polling that shows resistance to policy interventions in right-leaning groups, we find repeated consistent evidence that these attitudes are by no means fixed.

### **Increase empathy and all else follows**

We found that where we increased empathy (measured as strong agreement to “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me”), we increased support on all other measures. You may find it useful to measure empathy in your own tests. In our tests, messages that increased empathy were emotional, moving, and first-person.

### **First-person storytelling is powerful**

Consistent with findings from other sectors, and recommendations by many who work in this sector, first-person storytelling videos were the most powerful. Direct discussion of the policy by a third party and individuals presenting logical fallacies and facts had mixed results.

### **Change can be created working within partisan frameworks**

We observed less capacity for movement on an idea that is often cited as a major barrier to attitude change: Attribution of poverty to the individual. Attribution is strongly associated with political ideology, and as such, is difficult to change. That’s okay; we still moved people across the ideological spectrum on their attitudes towards people experiencing poverty and on solutions.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Despite the fact that the prevailing narratives on poverty are often inaccurate and rooted in negative stereotypes, we were encouraged to see just how moveable attitudes are once experimentally tested — this is definitely not always our experience! Our purpose here was to construct survey measures that measure whether we are successful in our early efforts to change the minds of people across the ideological spectrum. It is our belief that working across a shared set of metrics can facilitate learning across organizations and help develop a cohesive narrative change strategy. If you have questions about this work, our measures, or how you might conduct your own measurement, please be in touch with the authors.

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About the authors:

[Jennifer Green](#) is a long-time advocate for transparency and open science, leading innovation in statistical methodologies in academia, government, and politics: [jennifer@modernmeasurement.co](mailto:jennifer@modernmeasurement.co).

[Milan de Vries](#) has spent the last decade applying innovative data science and technology to political and civic organizing: [milan@milandevries.org](mailto:milan@milandevries.org).