

# Measuring the Impacts of Poverty Narrative Change: Research Framework & Survey Questions

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LIZ MANNE  
STRATEGY

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## INTRODUCTION

Poverty has been a prevalent feature of American life for decades. Since the Great Depression, tens of millions of Americans have experienced poverty every year, and this year alone some 40 million will. Despite its seeming near-universality in the American experience, most of us misunderstand what poverty is, harbor negative attitudes about those who are experiencing it, and are suspicious of policies that seek to address it.

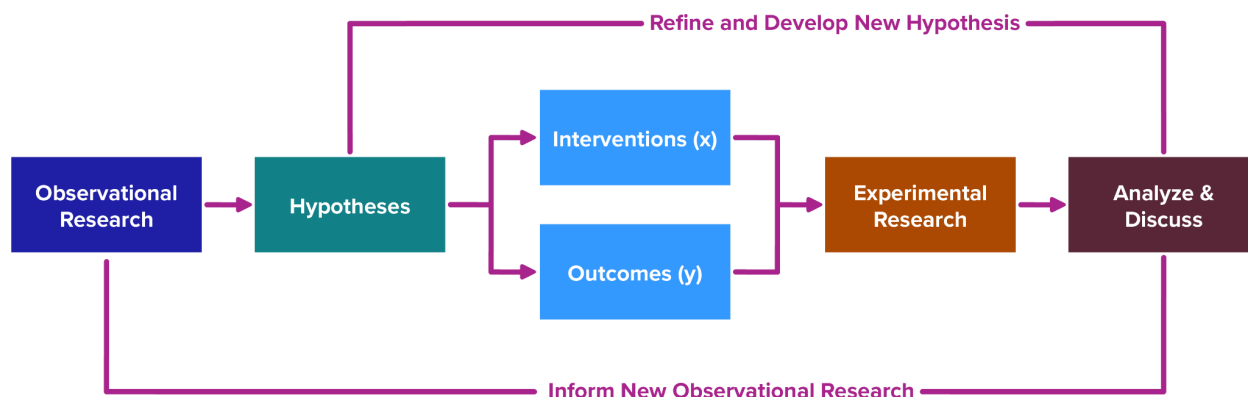
These inaccurate attitudes about poverty are a barrier to making progress on policy and advocacy efforts that address its causes and consequences. For those working on closing economic gaps through policy and advocacy, it is a difficult challenge to change stereotypes rooted in well-established myths perpetuated through news stories, social media, and political conversations.

FrameWorks Institute describes narratives as common ideas or arcs that can be thought of both as emerging from a set of stories and as providing templates for specific stories. Pervasive to our culture, narratives drive both our understanding of issues and how we talk about them. As such, narratives around economic mobility, security, and opportunity have a profound impact on the collective decisions we make as a society and the policies we enact. The aspiration of narrative change efforts is to shift the underlying pattern of meaning around an issue and, in doing so, change the way we talk about an issue in our society.

Seeing the manifestation of narrative change efforts will take time and coordinated effort, but to be successful, we'll need to assess and measure our early efforts. We will need to know that our efforts are working in a generally favorable direction even before we see long-term shifts. The purpose of this project was to construct survey measures that can be used to assess whether we are successful in the near-term. Our work is to develop meaningful metrics that can detect whether our efforts to change the narrative are changing 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 the development of a cohesive narrative change strategy. It is our wish to outfit the field with the best tools to measure efforts to shift attitudes about poverty in the near-term, so that we can learn and adapt now, and be ready for real-time events when they inevitably come in the future.

## RESEARCH FRAMEWORK



To approach the measurement of narrative change, we used a version of the scientific method, a useful approach for breaking down complex ideas into components that we can examine more closely. It is also our training as researchers. We began by constructing hypotheses from observations made in prior research. Each of these observations becomes expressed as a hypothesis, where we state that an intervention (x) creates a change in outcome (y).

We gathered a wide variety of [videos](#) and chose a few that closely match the interventions (x), and generated survey questions that measured the outcomes (y). We then tested the hypotheses using randomized controlled trials (RCTs).

Our purpose was to identify the survey questions that will track the impact of narrative change efforts now, and over time. In doing so, we also gained knowledge about how well some of the hypotheses worked, or did not, especially among people who do not agree with us. Here we also report early findings on effectiveness of various interventions and make some preliminary recommendations.

We believe in shared learning and working in public. This is a collaborative effort, and we invite you to use and adapt these measures in your own measurement work. Please be in touch with the authors with any questions about how to do measurement, feedback on our approach, and learnings from your own efforts in measuring narrative change.

## HYPOTHESES

The development of hypotheses to change minds on poverty was supported by a rich body of observational research. This style of research — whether in-depth qualitative interviews or polling surveys — helps us understand the public’s current view of what poverty is, who experiences it, how it happened, and how we might address it. Developing a deep understanding of existing views is the first step towards progress. The next step is to formalize our observations into hypotheses about how we might intervene to change those attitudes.



We catalogued these observations from many sources, including academic papers, practitioner research, our own experiences, and the experiences of others. Each of these observations becomes expressed as a hypothesis, where we state that an intervention (x) creates a change in outcome (y). In the early stages, observations range from descriptive and unactionable “people scoring high on the protestant work ethic scale (x) believe that an individual is to blame for being poor (y)” to tactical, yet somewhat vague “First-person stories (x) are a powerful way to change minds on issues (y).” Our work was to turn them into testable hypotheses. For example, a testable hypothesis could look like this: “First-person stories from those experiencing poverty (the intervention, x) can increase support for policies to address poverty (the outcome, y).”

We began by grouping these observations until three broad categories — or dimensions — emerged, a framework we call the “3 A’s”:

1. **ATTITUDES:** views about what poverty is, and the people experiencing it
2. **ATTRIBUTION:** views about why poverty happens
3. **AGENCY:** views about who should address poverty and how we should address it

**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>

For the first two dimensions, Attitudes and Attribution, we borrow this distinction from the social psychology literature on this issue (e.g. Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Attitudes about those experiencing poverty are more likely to be affective (emotional) in nature, whereas Attribution is more systems thinking, and is strongly associated with psychographic traits such as right-wing authoritarianism. Attitudes and Attribution are found to be independent, but moderately related (2001).

It seems sensible and rational that the causality goes from Attribution → Attitudes, which is the dominant theory in the literature. Such a causation suggests we should focus our efforts on changing a person's philosophical belief that systemic forces play more of a role in creating poverty. However, this causation is untested and unknown, and we turned it into a hypothesis for testing. (Spoiler: we had more success with the reverse causality: Attitudes → Attribution.)

The third dimension, Agency, has been far less studied in the academic literature, which focuses on understanding psychological and philosophical constructs. For our purposes, however, this dimension is the ultimate destination for those of us working on changing the narrative. We borrowed heavily from our own experience conducting thousands of RCTS on attitude change and action-taking for a variety of campaigns and causes. We divide this dimension into three subcategories: beliefs of stewardship, efficacy, and personal agency to serve as a starting point for future research.

In order to test these hypotheses, we developed (1) interventions that match them and (2) outcomes to measure them (in our case, survey questions). The next two sections discuss each of these steps.

## METHODOLOGY

### DEVELOPING THE INTERVENTIONS

The first step before testing was to identify the materials to test. We had the choice of testing written language, still images, and videos. We selected videos because they are most similar to what an organization might ultimately produce, and we've observed they are more impactful in near-term measurement than the other mediums. We collected a wide variety of videos found from news and charity websites, social media, and YouTube. We tagged each video according to hypothesis and emotional tone (moving, positive, dry, angry), which we have found in prior research to matter a great deal when it comes to changing minds. We then edited selected videos to one minute to remove running-time as a variable, and subtitled them for greater accessibility.

The videos we tested have these criteria:

- Reflect the style and length of material that an advocacy program might use, which also works best for testing.
- Content addresses just one or two hypotheses.
- Our belief that it could be effective across right- and left-leaning audiences, based on our past experience in testing.
- Variation in tone across the body of videos we tested, particularly emotional vs. factual.

It was surprisingly difficult to find materials that reflect the suggestions from recent research on what might change minds about poverty and its solutions. There is a clear disconnect between what the research suggests is needed to counter society's harmful, dominant narratives and what we see in communications developed to engender support for those experiencing poverty and its remedies. This is an important finding in and of itself — we think there is tremendous opportunity to be thoughtful about developing new materials that match the theories of change, particularly when it comes to the third dimension, Agency. There is also a need for materials that discuss or even just show race and poverty, without reinforcing negative stereotypes. We found little material (except for longer-form, documentary-style materials) that was not entrenched in harmful narratives around race.

We detail these limitations more extensively in the section on [results](#), and in Appendices [2](#) & [3](#), where you can find links to and descriptions of the videos as well as the RCT findings for each of them. But our big takeaway after a review of what's out there: there is an absence of material that is clear about what the viewer can do and what their community can do to address poverty. Furthermore, the vast majority of materials that talk about government stewardship or the efficacy of policies are dry, academic, left-brained think pieces. They lack emotionality. Personal agency, government stewardship, and policy efficacy represent our Agency category of hypotheses, and increasing Agency is our true end goal. We think there is a large opportunity to develop more materials, with a greater variety of tones, with that end goal in mind.

## DEVELOPING THE OUTCOMES

The second aspect of testing hypotheses is developing the outcomes to measure impact. In some cases, this can be behavioral measures, like a donation or a petition signature. In this case, we're focusing on changing attitudes, and so the methodology is a survey.

Surveys that measure impact are different from polling surveys, which are a snapshot of where people stand on an issue. We're optimizing for ability to *measure change*, not static positions, so we need different criteria.

The goals are to identify questions that:

1. Measure changeable attitudes in the near term. Some polling questions measure traits, like openness to experience, or broader philosophical constructs, like belief that the US is a meritocracy. Those types of questions should certainly be in the toolkit of tracking long-term narrative change, but here we focus on measurement in the near-term.
2. Discover larger impacts (effect sizes) that can be more readily measured in small sample size / low statistical power situations, which is a typical field condition.
3. Are capable of movement across right-leaning and left-leaning subgroups. Many practitioners work with specific populations, and we wanted a set of questions that could be successful regardless of who is being targeted.

To generate the questions, we started with academic and practitioner sources. We relied on work by GOOD (2019) and Harmony Labs (2021), which used factor analysis to reduce survey scales to the most useful questions. We didn't find many questions on Agency, so we used questions developed in our own prior work studying adjacent policy areas.

Questions were then pre-tested for intelligibility using an online panel. The purpose of this step is to make sure the language was readily understandable and sufficiently contemporary as many academic sources of survey questions are several decades old (e.g., there are many questions on standard survey scales about “welfare queens,” a 1980s trope that’s both less familiar to young people today and advances a racist narrative our research has no wish to reinforce). We used open-ended questions to confirm intelligibility for people of all ages, income, and race.

We then sought to identify and reduce bias caused by survey question language. We used split testing to see if different phrasing impacted response choices. This step is critical because researchers can inadvertently use phrases that create hidden bias, particularly when they’re trying to understand people they disagree with. We also looked for bias caused by dropoff, where people of a particular demographic drop out of the survey because they are turned off by a question. And we additionally explored open-ended responses to check for partisan backlash.

## TESTING USING RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIALS

We used two rounds of randomized controlled trials to fully test our questions for field applications. Participants were recruited to participate in a survey, through online ads, apps, and survey panels. They were asked demographic questions before being randomized to watch an intervention video or a control video. We then asked them the outcome questions we were testing.<sup>1</sup>

We compared the difference between the intervention group (who watched a video) and the control group (who watched a placebo). The difference in attitudes that we measured between intervention and control gives us the impact of the video. This method provides an objective measure of the impact of the video, rather than less reliable measures, such as asking people whether a video would change their mind.

It’s an unusual choice to use a RCT to develop survey measures, but since our goal is to measure impact, it was necessary to truly identify what kinds of attitudes we might be capable of changing.

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<sup>1</sup> Recruitment, survey design, and analysis conducted by Modern Measurement. Pairwise sample size for each treatment group + control is 900, and our total sample size is 3056 for six conditions. We use publication standards for reporting, which is 95% confidence intervals and two-tailed hypothesis tests. MM has a rigorous data quality process that removes bots, click farms, and speeders to address fraud that is common in online survey samples.

## RESULTS

### QUESTIONS WE RECOMMEND

After testing, analyzing, and testing again, we came away with the following recommendations for survey questions, which correspond to each of our hypotheses. You can see a summary of our recommendations to practitioners [here](#).

**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.

A question made the above list if it : (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.

Two notes: First, we were not able to measure increased Agency, which we suspect has a lot to do with the material we tested. We found few that had a call to action in the policy space. However, we have found the questions recommended above to be successful in other sectors, and we continue to recommend them.

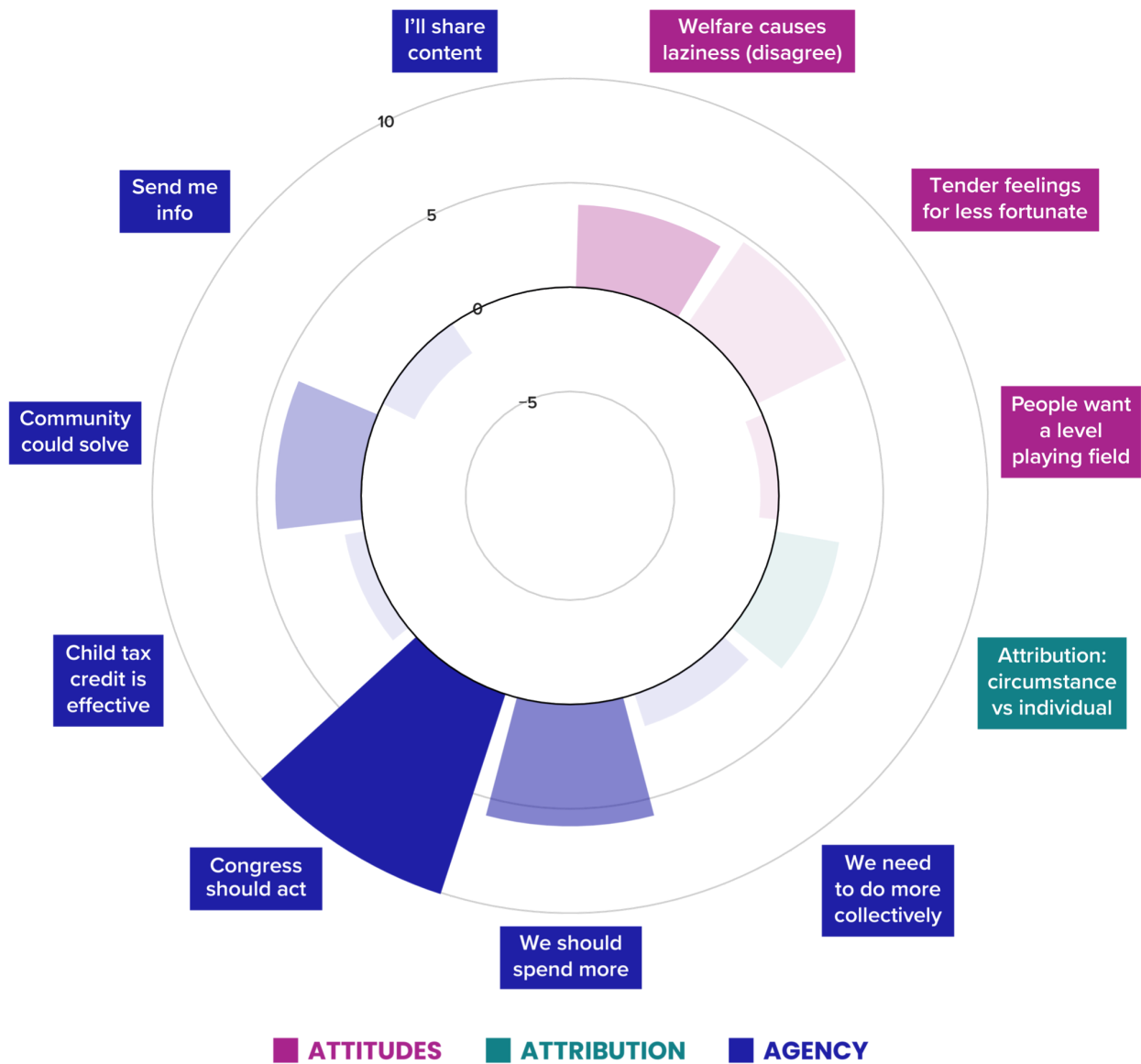
Second, we tested multiple questions to get at Attribution, and the question we recommend above came the closest to measuring impact. Despite observing only modest effects here, we still recommend this question (or a better one that future research uncovers) because we suspect that while it is difficult to move in the short-term, Attribution is important for long-term narrative change.

You can see the overall magnitude of question performance in the radial plot below, which combines all treatment groups across the two studies. In this radial plot, the different colors indicate the three A's: Attitudes, Attribution, and Agency. Darker shading indicates statistically significant findings, and the circles indicate effect size.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We intentionally do not highlight effect sizes in this report. Our RCTs were conducted on a captive audience, which is ideal for hypothesis testing but not an accurate reflection of the magnitude of effect sizes we expect to see when measuring a real program in a real field setting that takes audience engagement into account. We do believe this style of RCT correlates strongly with in-field testing based on prior studies we've seen or conducted in practitioner research, but those are unfortunately not available to the public.

**FIGURE 1: Radial Plot Performance of Questions**



As this plot suggests, increasing empathy (“I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me”) and increasing issue priority (“Which items should Congress focus their work on this year: child poverty”) were most impacted by the material we selected.

To view the breakdown of responses to these questions, both overall and by right/left-leaning subgroups, see [APPENDIX 1: Baseline Question Performance](#).



## RESEARCH 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. We cover video-specific findings in [APPENDIX 2](#). These are by no means definitive, merely suggestive. We present these so that future research can build on and expand our understanding of 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 consistent evidence that these attitudes are by no means fixed.

Where baseline support was already higher (left-leaning women, people of color, and to some extent, young people) we had less impact. Of those subgroups, the generally null findings on young people is of interest. Though they only have slightly higher baseline support on our questions, the materials we used did not improve their scores. This is a pattern we've seen in other issue domains, such as healthcare. Either these issues are not salient to them because they haven't yet experienced them, or the interventions simply are not resonating with them in the ways we would hope.

Of note, by far the most successful video among the right-leaning group worked within existing narratives identified by Harmony Labs (2021). It had a religious undertone, and a bit of heroism of people working on behalf of those experiencing homelessness.

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

Recent research by FrameWorks, GOOD, Harmony Labs, and Olson Zaltman considers the relationships between psychological profiles and attitudes on poverty. While the strategies to change attitudes are different for different audiences, one of the (hidden) elements that seems to unite the strategies is a belief that inducing greater empathy will lead to more support for solutions. One paper in the literature finds that reducing empathy by inducing anxiety leads to less support for welfare (Arceneaux, 2017). But what if we increase empathy? We looked for

materials that we thought might do so and used questions to measure empathy from the academic literature.

We find that where the materials we used increase empathy — measured as strong support for “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me” — we measure large impacts on attitudes towards people experiencing poverty and increased support for societal and government stewardship.

What increased empathy? In our small tests, messages that increase empathy were pieces we would characterize as emotional — either uplifting or heart-tugging. These ranged from an uplifting piece showing the positive impact of a program to first-person narratives of people who recovered from poverty or were in the midst of it. Messages from experts or regular people saying we should be more empathetic and using facts about poverty were not as successful.

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

Many who work in the field suggested first-person stories as an avenue to changing minds, and our findings agree. This was true even with low production quality work. We found videos on TikTok, rough interview shots on YouTube, and slicker, high-quality production, and the effects were the same. The most impactful were delivered by individuals who had experienced or were experiencing poverty, as well as a first-person narration from a founder of a program that helps those experiencing homelessness.

What wasn't as successful was first-person discussion of the issue of poverty and potential policy solutions by an expert. What also wasn't successful was a popular TikTok post of a woman explaining the logical disconnect between believing in generational wealth but not generational poverty, with statistics about the scale of poverty. Most materials in social media are of this nature, and while more testing is needed, it wasn't successful here.

### **Attribution is not the easiest path to changing minds**

Attributing poverty to an individual's choices has been cited as a fallacy that holds us back from making meaningful progress on poverty solutions. Research has shown that attribution of poverty to individuals rather than structural factors is correlated with negative attitudes towards the poor and less support for welfare (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Bullock, 1999; Zucker & Weiner, 1993 are just a few). The dominant theory from survey-based research is that Attribution → (causes) Attitudes, and it would stand to reason that changing minds on Attribution should be a major focus.

We didn't have much success moving people on Attribution. One reason may be that academic research and the audience work by GOOD and Harmony Labs suggest who a person blames is highly correlated with scoring high on the psychographic scales of Meritocracy, Right-wing Authoritarianism, and the Protestant Work Ethic. This suggests that it may be deeply entrenched

within an individual's larger philosophical construct that will take concerted effort over time to change.

The bad news is that much of the public discourse on poverty concentrates on blame and the disagreement between liberal audiences who primarily blame systemic causes and conservative audiences who primarily blame individual causes. We identify this as an area for long-term work because as a society, we need to acknowledge structural and historical barriers based on race, gender, disability, and geography so that we can create successful and equitable solutions.

But the good news is that we don't need to change an individual's overall philosophy on attribution to create positive movement towards better views of people experiencing poverty, and support for policy solutions. In fact, we find that, if anything, the direction of the causal arrow may actually be Attitudes → (causes) Attribution. One alternative explanation of belief systems which we've more often encountered outside of the academic literature on poverty and attitudes, is that people rationalize their feelings and prejudices, rather than start from a rational belief and develop thoughtful attitudes that follow from it.

### **Experimental research is a necessary addition to the body of work**

When reviewing the past work, much of it relied on surveys and polling. Hypotheses for what would change minds on poverty have largely been developed for observing correlations, such as the major one above, between Attribution and Attitudes. From those, one creates a theory about which way the causation happens. And from there, a practitioner may believe that they should design a program that focuses on changing a person's Attribution.

Experimental research is the only way to rigorously isolate causation, which is an understanding of whether one thing causes another, or, if they are both caused by a third thing. It's also the only way to determine which attitudes are easy to move and what we should chip away at. Much more experimental research is needed to augment what we know about attitudes on poverty, and delve into particularly difficult aspects like race and poverty in our country.

### **Public discourse on poverty does not reflect what research suggests will work**

This is more an observation than an experimental finding. We make this point above, but many of the hypotheses for changing the narrative generated by others are not reflected in the discussions we found about poverty. In particular, materials that are thoughtful in how they portray race and poverty — without reinforcing negative stereotypes — are in short supply.

Additionally, when it comes to political action or public policy, the materials we found were typically dry and facts-driven, without a call to action. In contrast, in the charity space, we found emotional appeals, beautiful stories, and a clear action to take (donate). We suggest testing this messaging approach in future tests on political action and public policy.

### **A note on what we didn't test**

We did not test the most common materials out there because they largely continue to support misperceptions and stereotypes about what poverty is and who is experiencing it, especially in regards to race. Better understanding (through experimental studies) the intersection of race, poverty, and attitudes is an absolutely critical next step.

We did not test the wide variety of materials from charities asking for donations. We chose to not test materials evoking anger in any form or involving political figures or news stories. Our experience is that this material has a place in increasing engagement among people who already support it but creates backlash on attitudes for people who do not. We found a lot of uplifting, long-form pieces about inspiring people or programs, but those formats were not suitable for testing. And we found plenty of material on feeding the hungry and mental illness among the unhoused, but based on guidance from the thoughtful work of others, decided not to test it.

### **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.

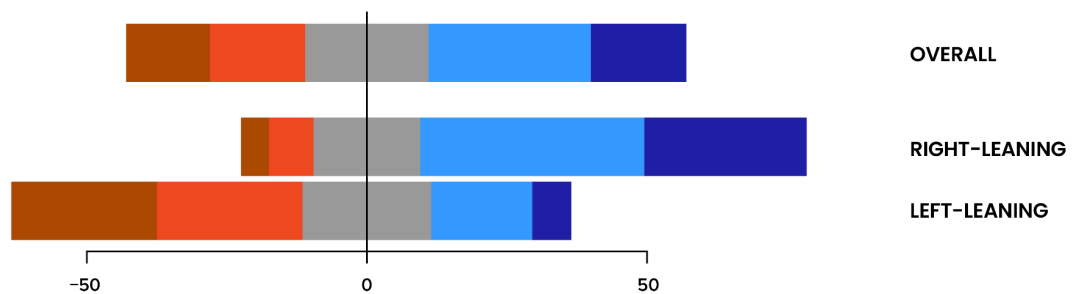
## APPENDIX 1: BASELINE QUESTION PERFORMANCE

Baselines for survey questions are useful in general, but also specifically when interpreting the findings of any impact measurement (such as an RCT). We frequently find small movement among people who already score high on the dimension we seek to change. It's not that the treatment is ineffective; they were already so strongly with us, there was no room to move. Often, larger movement is seen among those people who score low on the dimension we wish to change.

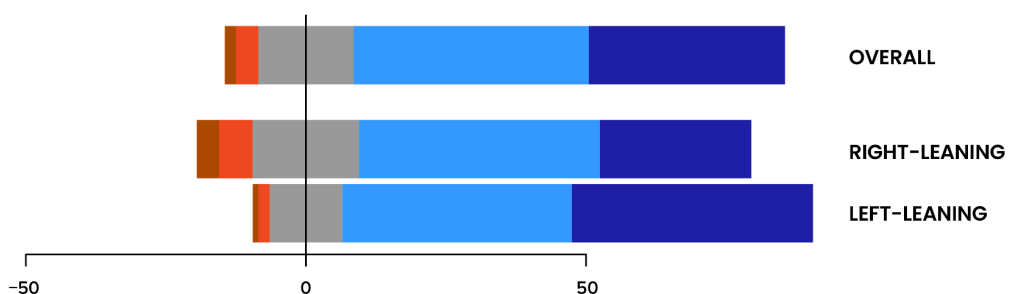
In the RCTs, all interventions are measured against a pure control group and a placebo video group. Limiting the analysis just to these two groups, the graphs below show the pattern of responses both overall and between right-leaning and left-leaning subgroups. This allows us to see where there is the most and least divergence on attitudes between the right and left.

■ STRONGLY DISAGREE 
 ■ SOMEWHAT DISAGREE 
 ■ NEUTRAL 
 ■ SOMEWHAT AGREE 
 ■ STRONGLY AGREE

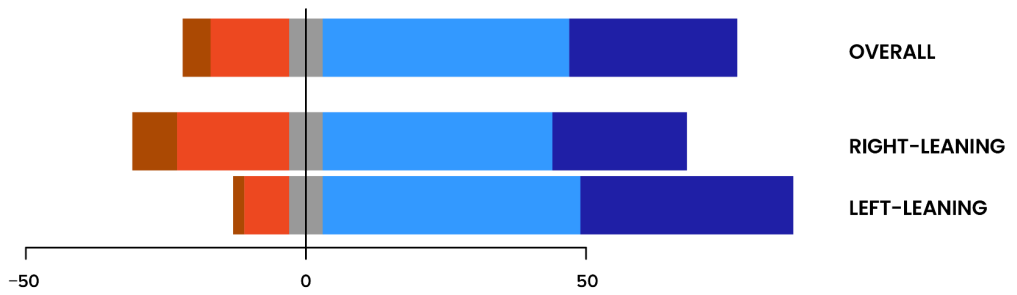
### Welfare makes people lazy.



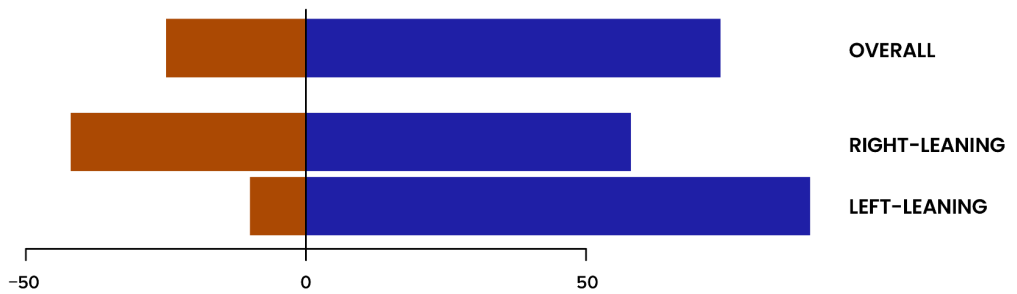
### I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.



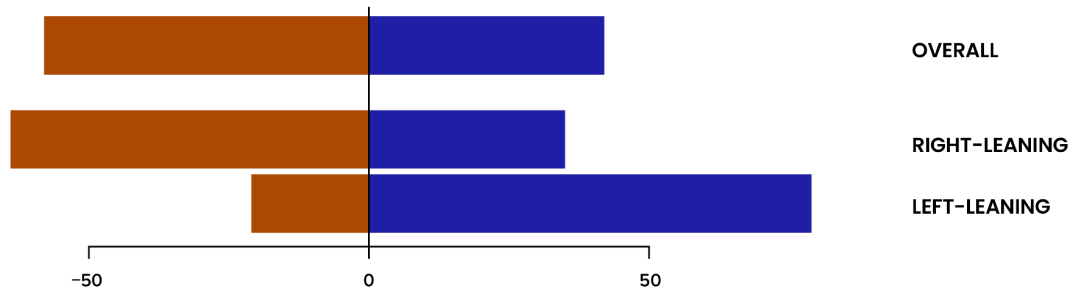
**People who are struggling don't want a handout, they just want a level playing field.**



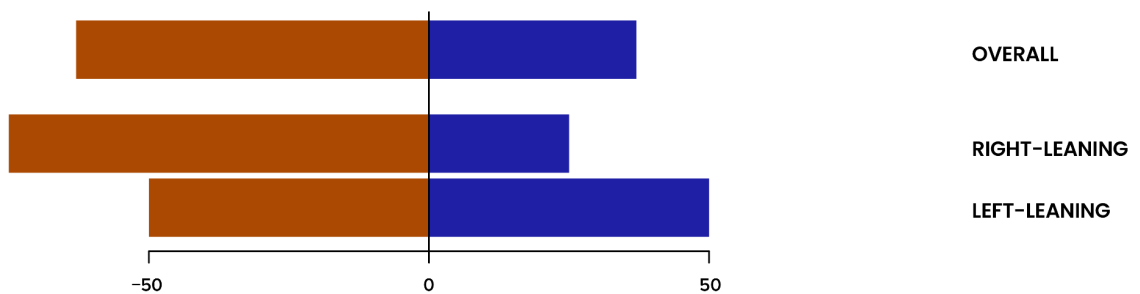
**People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.**



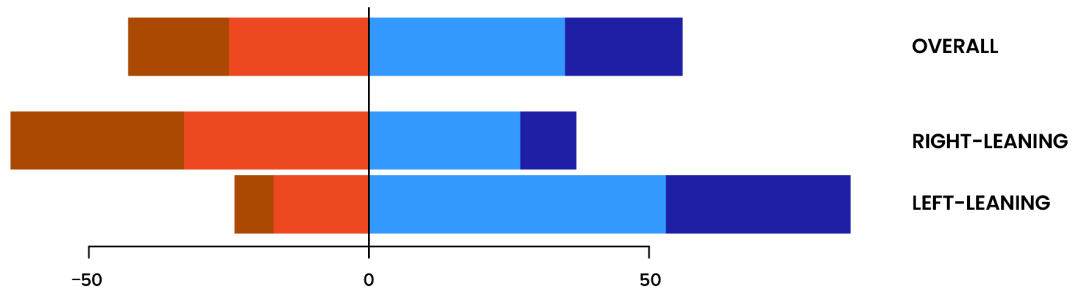
**Would you be supportive of increase spending on policies to reduce poverty in America?**



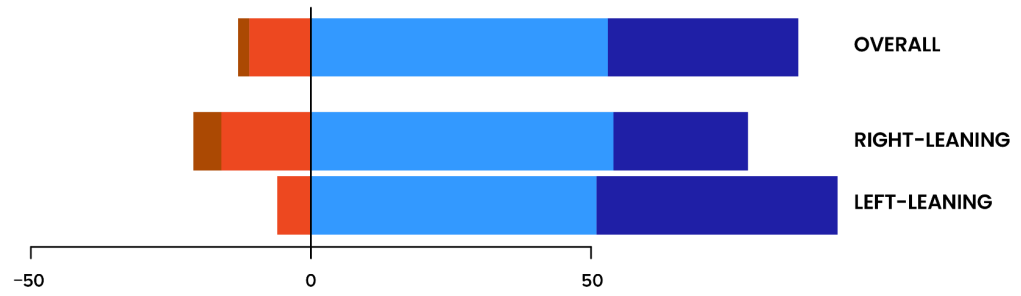
**What should Congress most work on fixing this year (child poverty)?**



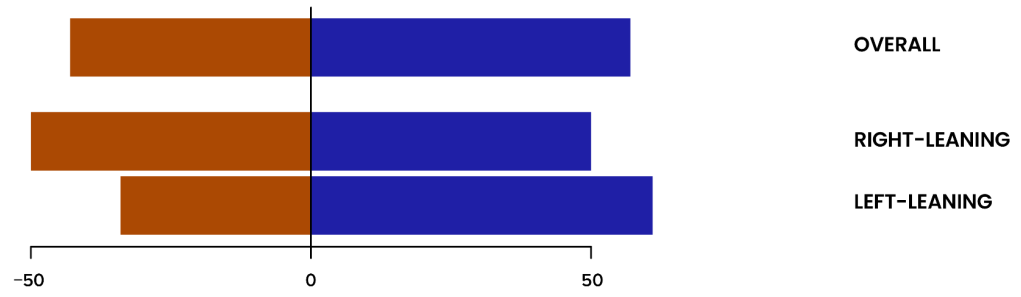
**Do you think that the child tax credit, which paid most families \$3,000 this year, has been an effective government solution to reduce poverty?**



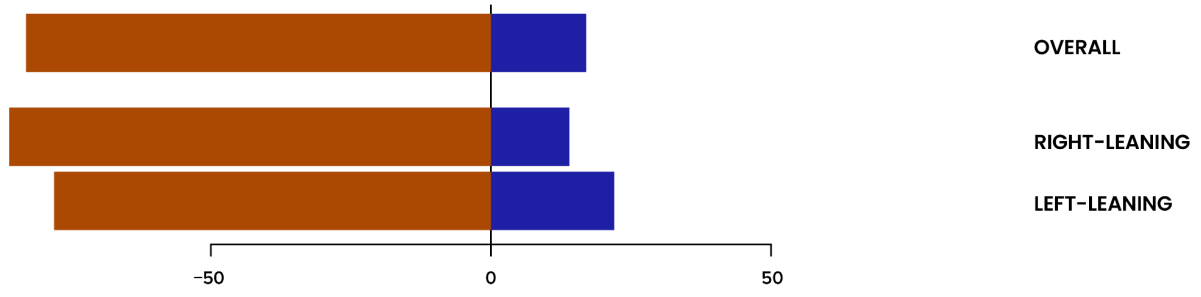
**If we put our mind to it, there is a lot more my community could do to help people in poverty the next five years.**



**Would you be willing to be contacted to stay informed on legislation on improving poverty in America?**



**Would you be willing to post an image or video similar to the one you just saw to your social media?**



## APPENDIX 2: INTERVENTIONS AND THEIR PERFORMANCE

In order to create and validate a set of measures for near-term narrative measurement, we tested specific materials. Though measuring their performance was the byproduct and not the purpose of this project, we report the overall results and notable subgroups performance below. Future testing should include a larger selection of materials! Our findings support the need for audience work to match your message to your audience, and suggest that in order to persuade someone, you need to find materials that are persuadable to them.

### HOUSING FOR THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS



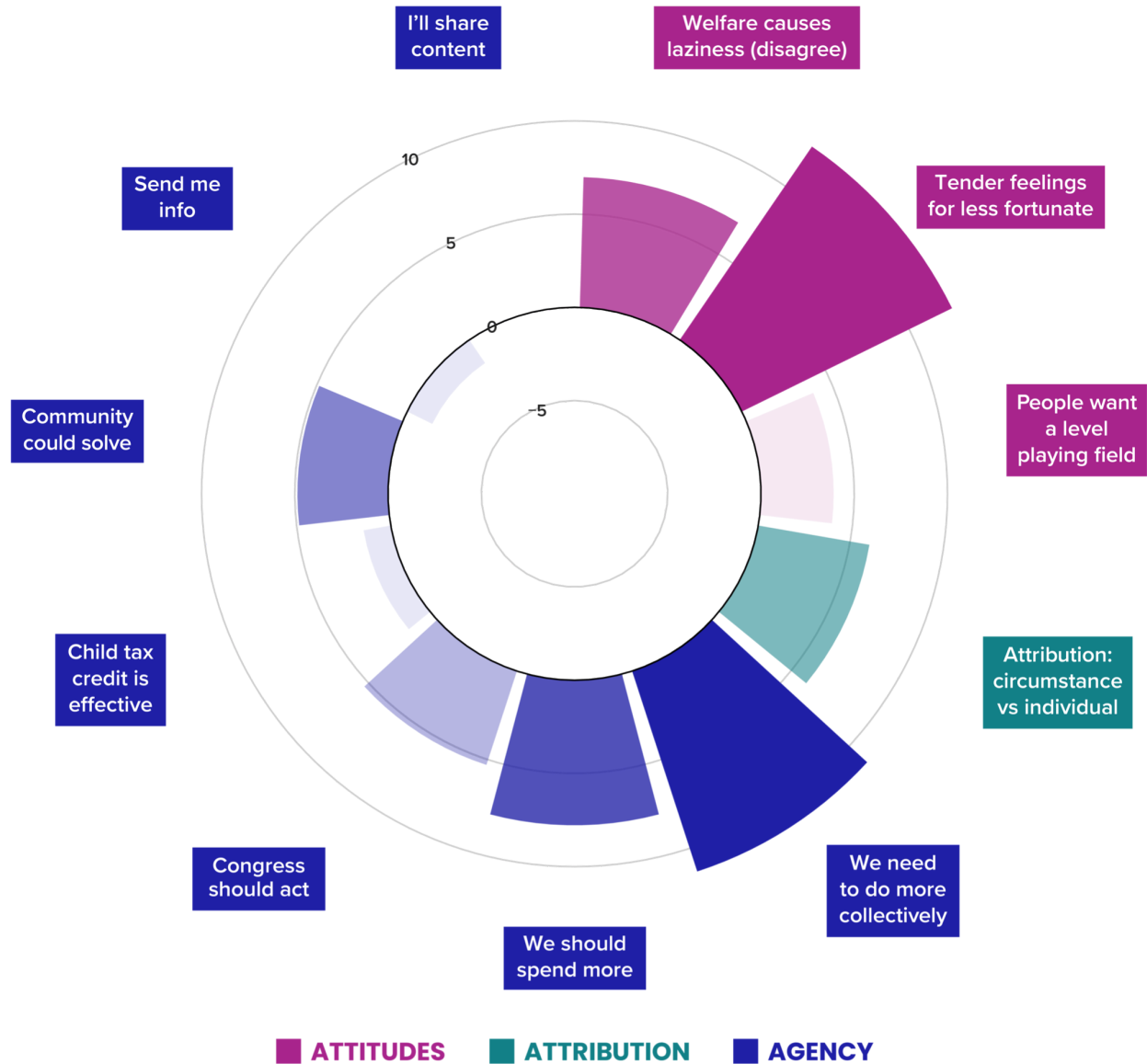
Community First! Village — A New Movement.mp4

© [Mobile Loaves & Fishes](#) | [EXCERPT](#) for testing; [FULL VERSION](#)

This video had many hallmarks of narratives that we often see in conservative audiences: heroism of those who work on poverty, with a religious undertone. We chose it because it also evoked empathy for those experiencing homelessness and showed their agency once they received a helping hand. This video explored our “permanent state or temporary trait?” hypothesis, and felt like it might appeal to a conservative audience.



## ANALYSIS



Extremely successful, by far the most successful among conservatives at increasing empathy, and all three A's. It was not as successful among left-leaning audiences, which supports the view that we need to tailor materials to the audience.

## HOMELESSNESS ISN'T JUST ADDICTION

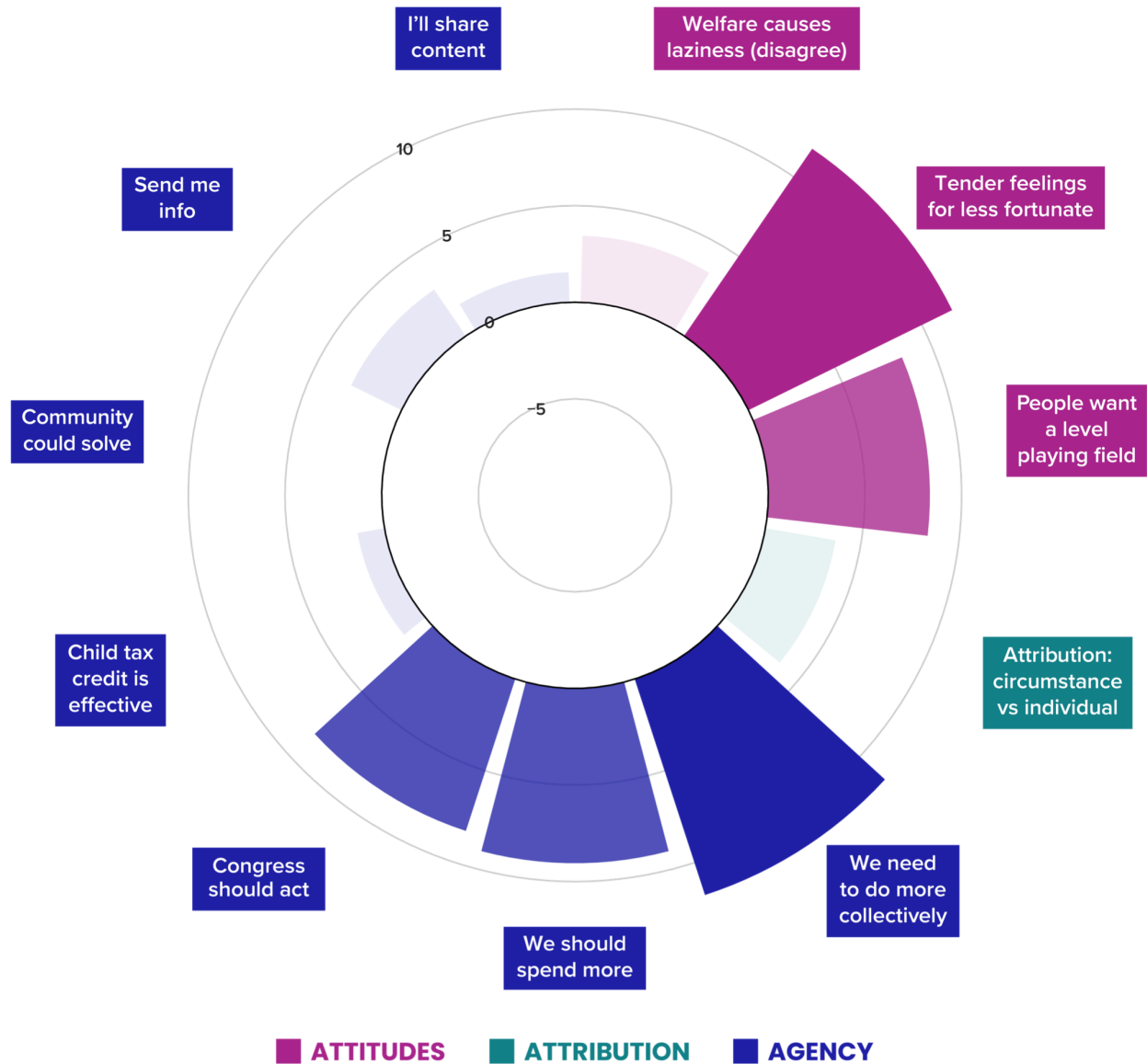


**Working Actor Now Homeless in Los Angeles**

© [Invisible People](#) | [EXCERPT](#) for testing; [FULL VERSION](#)

The long version of this video covers a lot of the hypotheses, but we tested a small cut to test empathy by itself. No facts, no explanations, no solutions, just someone who is suffering with homelessness talking about how it feels to be misunderstood. It was chosen to test whether pure empathy without reference to any of our hypotheses could invoke a change in broader attitudes.

## ANALYSIS



Extremely successful among all subgroups, and across all the A's. Especially successful among men. It suggests that empathy is potent on its own. Remarkable open-ends "I feel like I'm a couple of bad calls away from being that guy. My heart breaks for him."

## POVERTY IS TEMPORARY — MY PAST ON WIC

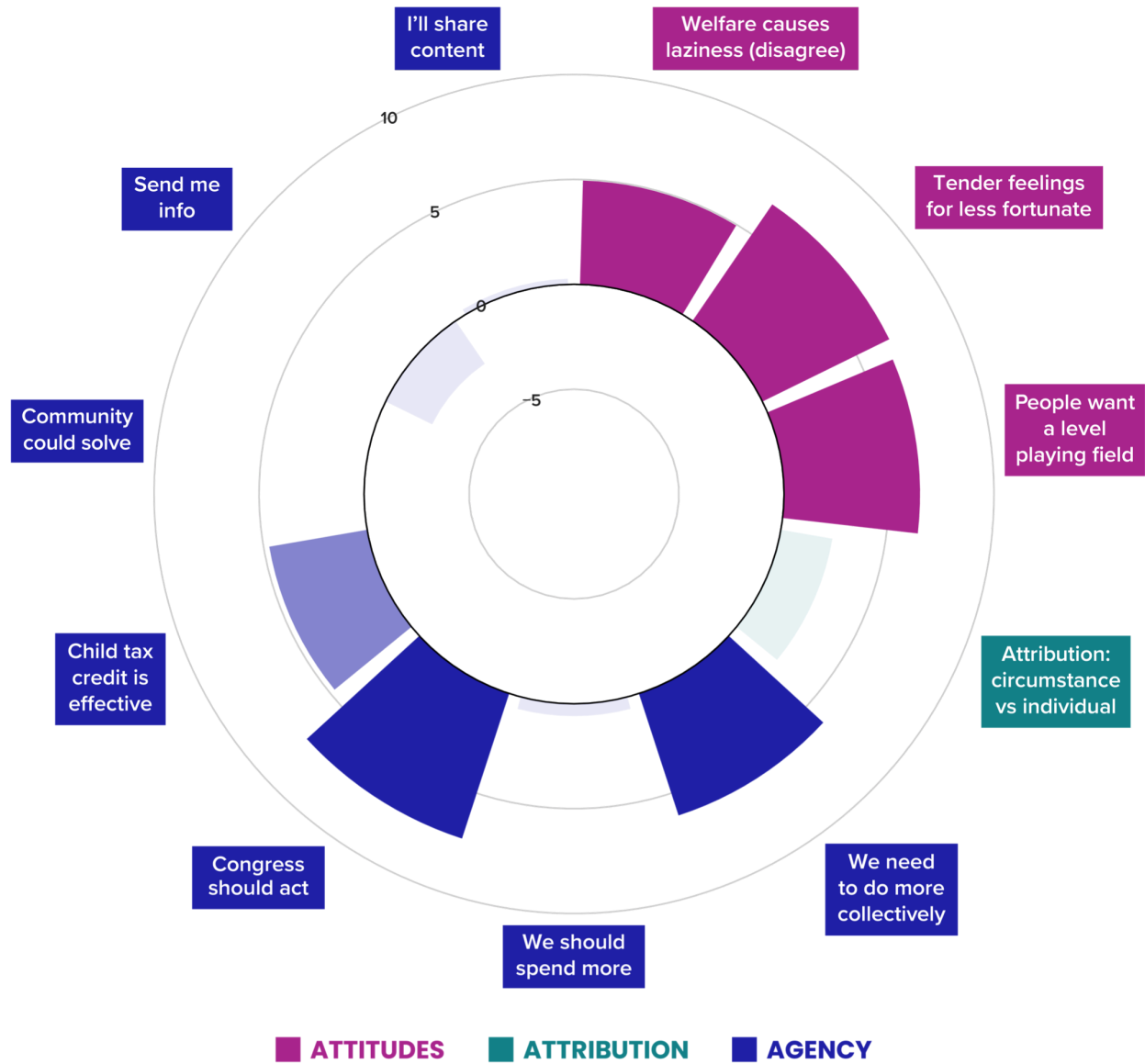


**Daniel Seong — Committed #supporteachother #win #fyp #tiktok #supermom #spouse #welfare #welfarecheck #hungry**

© [Daniel Seong](#) | [FULL VERSION](#)

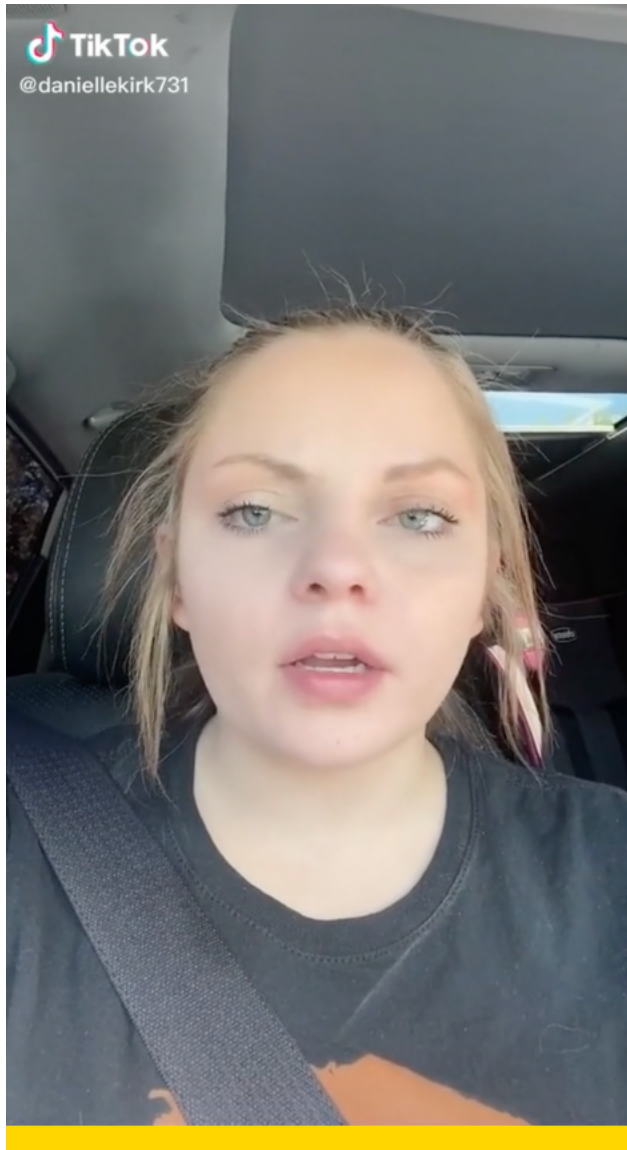
A hopeful TikTok video from a financially successful, Asian-American father talking about how he felt when his family relied on WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, a federal program) for food in the past. He speaks of shame and his wife helping him by saying “this is just something we’re going through right now.” He encourages others to reframe their struggles as a temporary place on a journey, rather than a trait.

## ANALYSIS



Increased empathy, as well as great results across all three of the A's. Increasing the positive perceptions of those experiencing poverty are particularly striking, among both right-leaning and left-leaning audiences.

## ATTRIBUTION: GENERATIONAL WEALTH V GENERATIONAL POVERTY

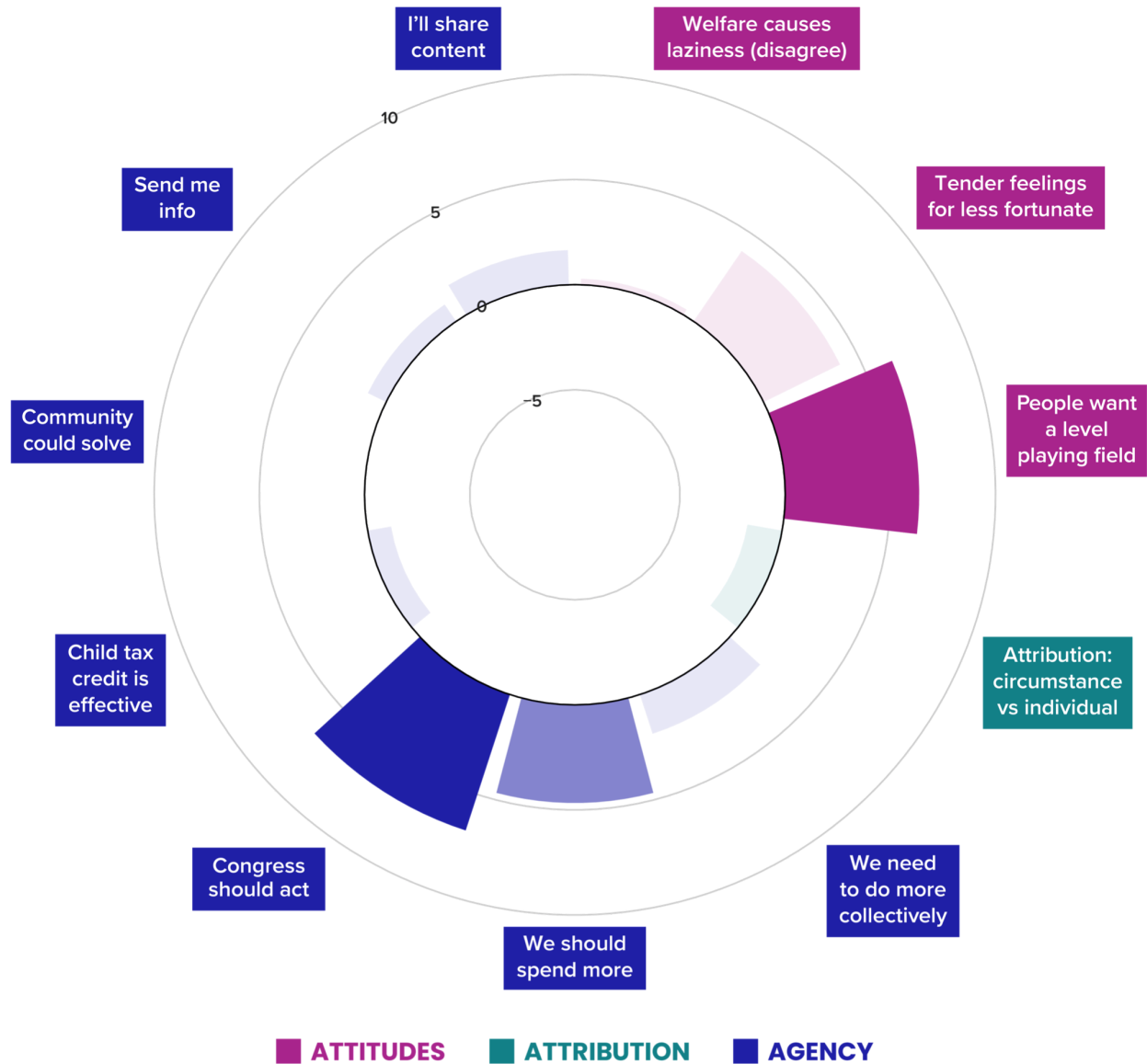


**Danielle Kirk — We have to quit denying these issues, and come up with solutions to change it  
#ChildhoodPoverty (sic) #GenerationalPoverty #PovertyInTheUS**

© [Danielle Kirk](#) | [FULL VERSION](#)

A popular TikTok video of a young, white, southern woman pointing out the logical fallacy of understanding generational wealth but denying the existence of generational poverty. Supports her case with facts about child poverty. This is a pretty typical style of TikTok videos of people discussing how they feel about poverty in our country.

## ANALYSIS



Generally the findings move in the right direction, but are small and not statistically significant. Notably, there's a positive bump on believing Congress should take action on child poverty, which she specifically calls for.



## TYPICAL POLICY PIECE



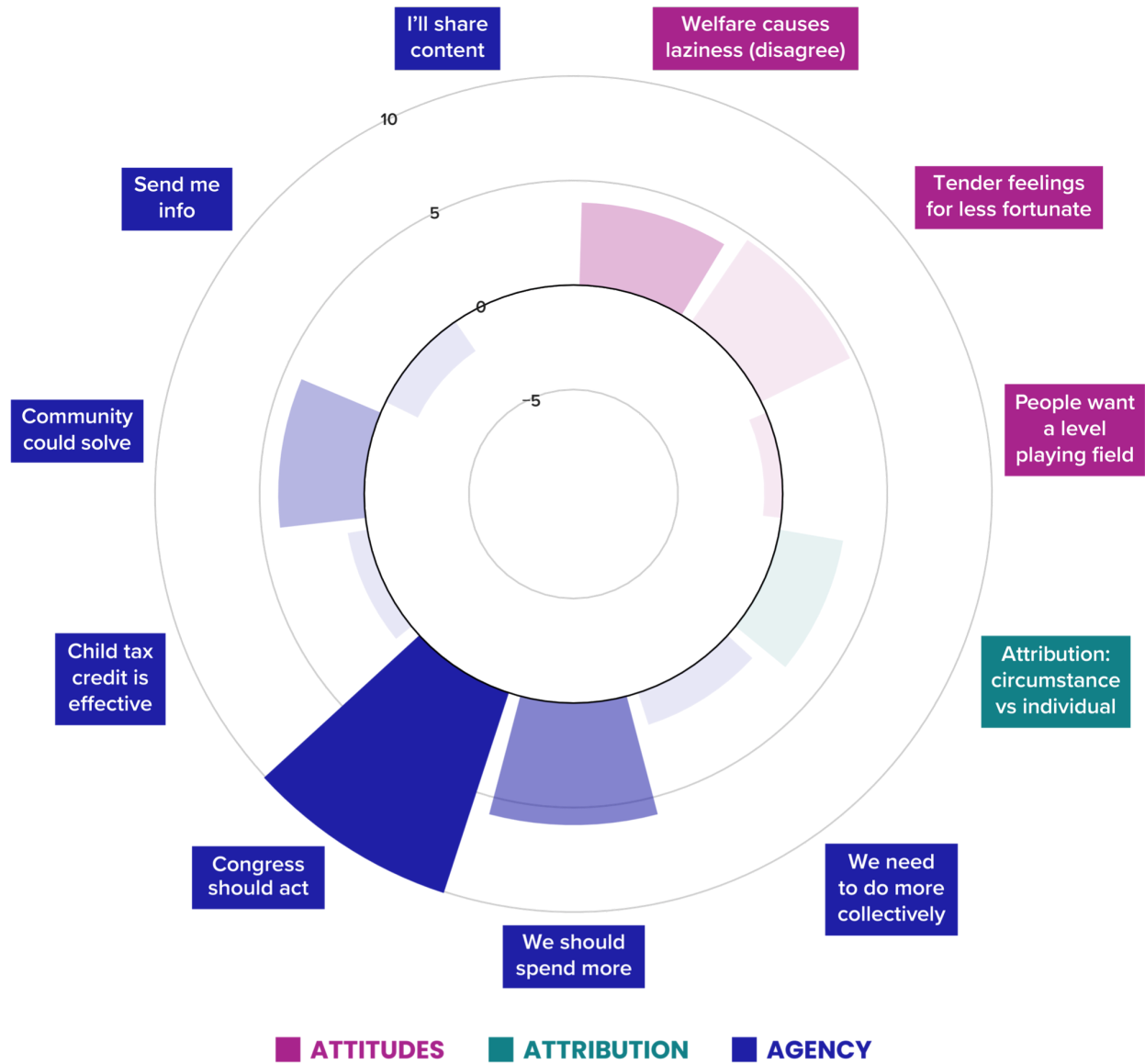
A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty\_Trim.mp4

© [The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) | [FULL VERSION](#)

We chose this video because it's a nice version of the main genre of pieces that support government stewardship and efficacy. These pieces are almost universally academic in tone, sometimes with an expert, sometimes with a politician. This one has an expert, with facts, and facts about solutions, with some imagery of people experiencing poverty and melancholy music.



## ANALYSIS



Mixed but mostly null results. We see some backlash on policy solutions. It was, however, successful among older white people.

## WHAT'S NEEDED: MORE QUALITY CONTENT

What's missing: quality work that represents the hypotheses generated by prior research on narratives, materials about policy that are emotional and hopeful instead of factually outlining the issue, and solutions that focus on societal or governmental stewardship, efficacy of certain policies, and calls for personal agency. We found the latter type of materials dominate in the charity space, where they ask for donations (and where it's easier to test impact). But we did not find this in the policy or advocacy space. We found very little short-form materials that showed or discussed race and diversity but also did not reinforce negative stereotypes. And we also found a shortage of first-person discussion of recovery from poverty or positive experiences with government programs.

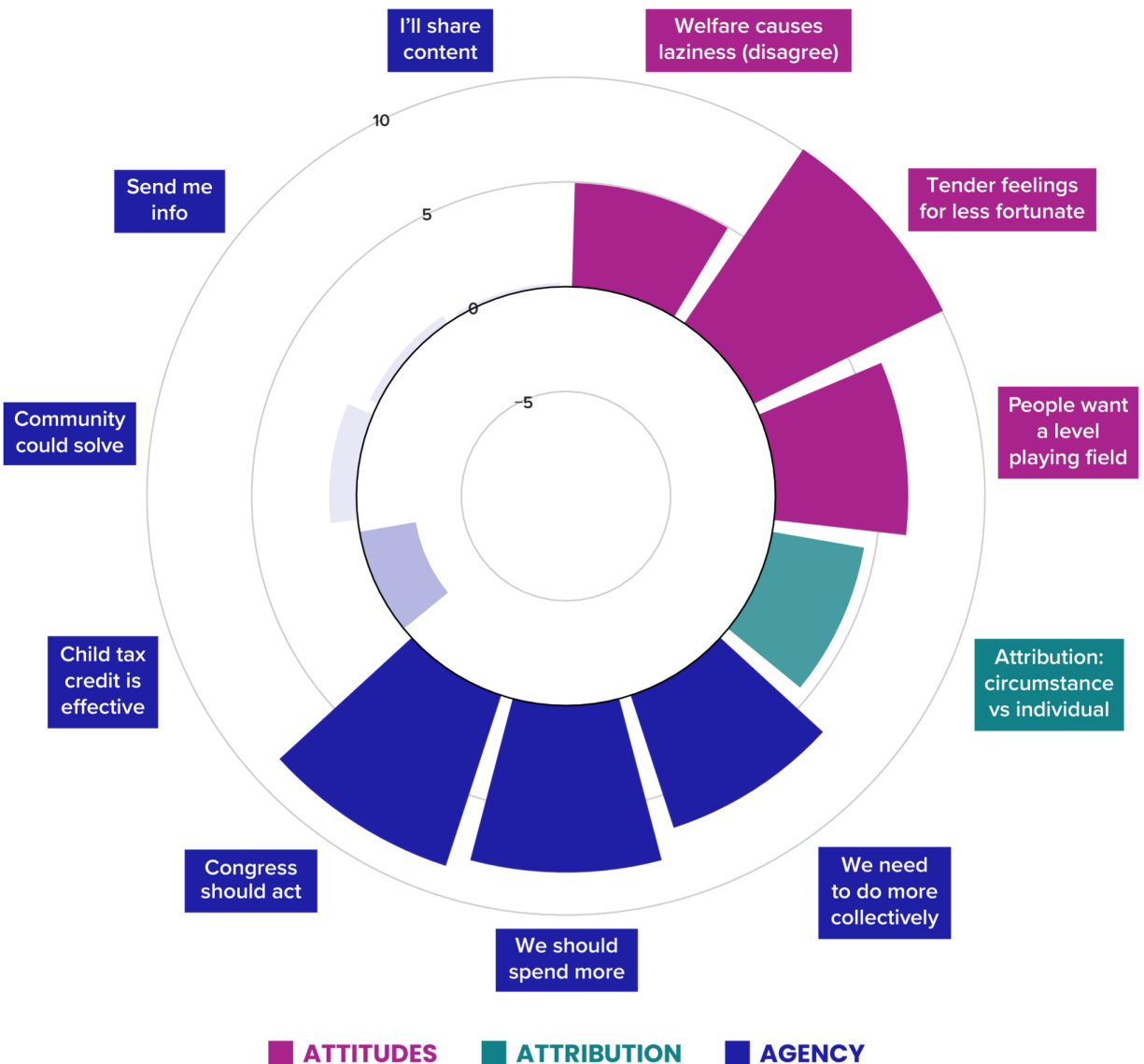
## APPENDIX 3: SELECTED SUBGROUP FINDINGS

Overall performance based on demographic groups varied quite a lot, both overall, and by intervention. We note subgroup differences in [APPENDIX 2](#), but we show a few overall subgroup findings below.

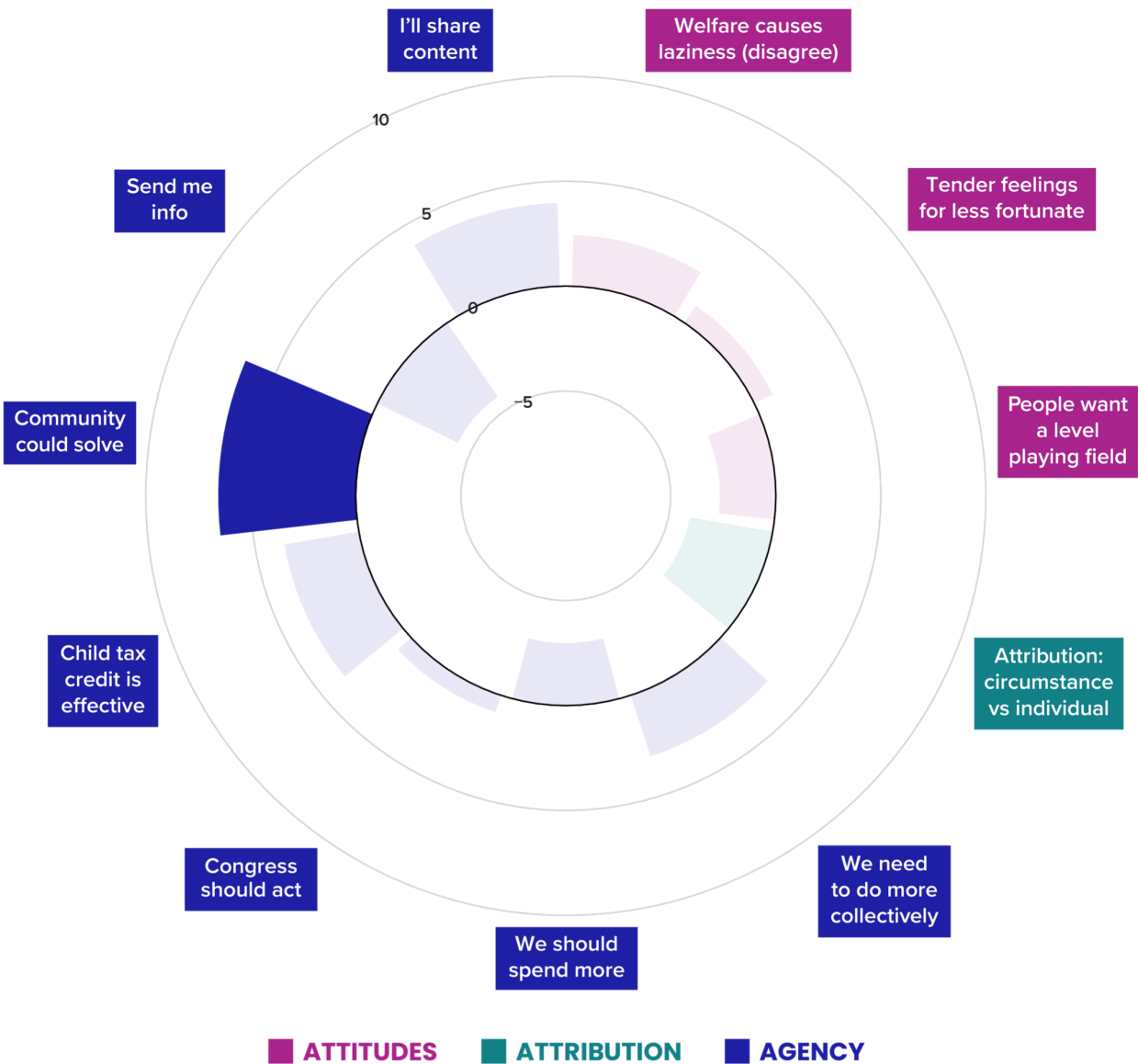
### YOUTH

We've seen this pattern before: while young people have moderately better attitudes towards people experiencing poverty and show more support for government stewardship, they are remarkably not responsive to interventions — at least not interventions that we are testing. Below we show the radial plots that show the impact of all the treatment interventions together on people above and below 40:

#### People above 40



## People below 40

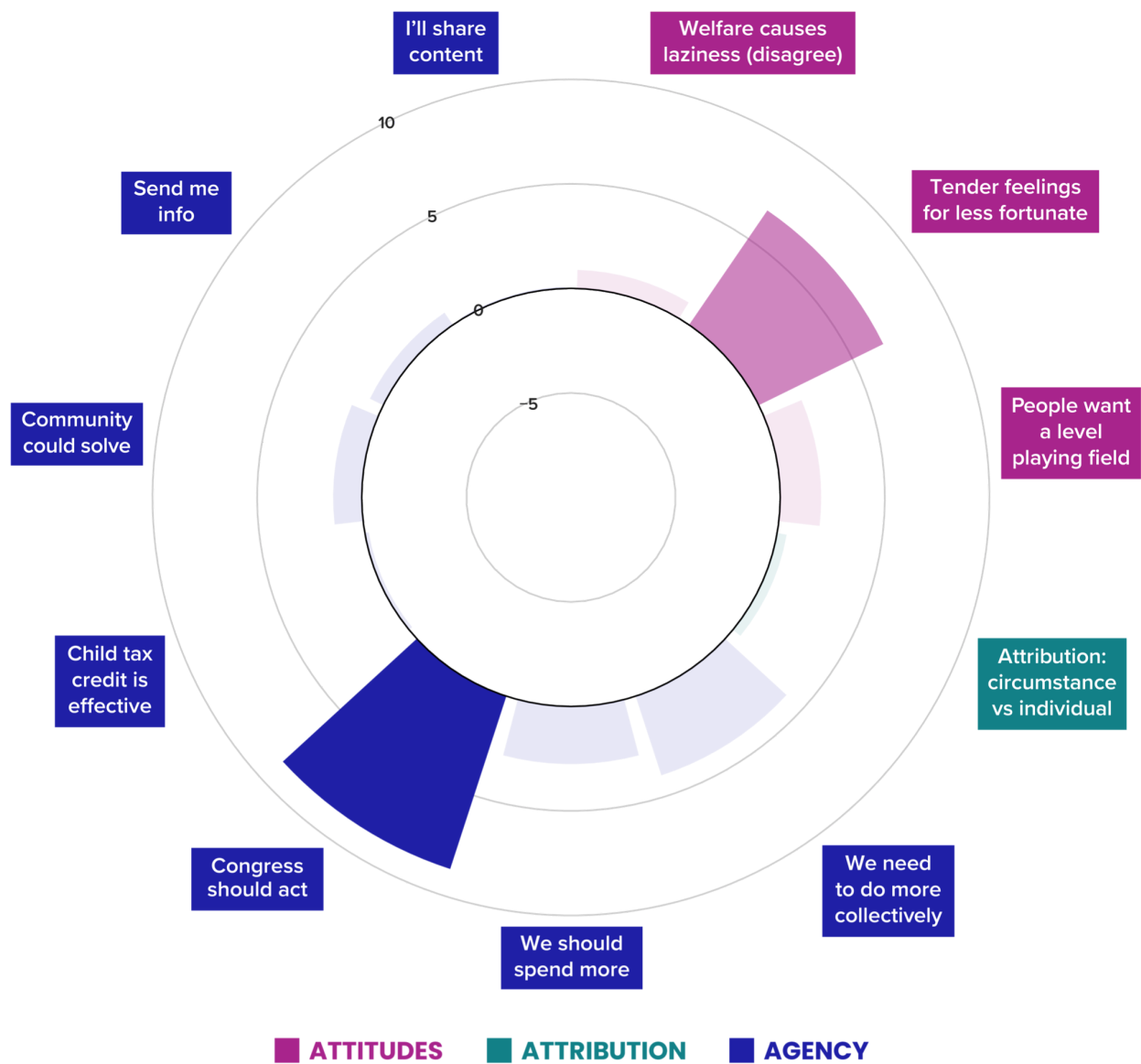


We measured more agency among young people, but that's about it. None of the interventions were successful individually, and we measured some backlash (moving them in the opposite direction we want). We note this here because it's a pattern we're seeing across a variety of issues, and something we need to explore further.

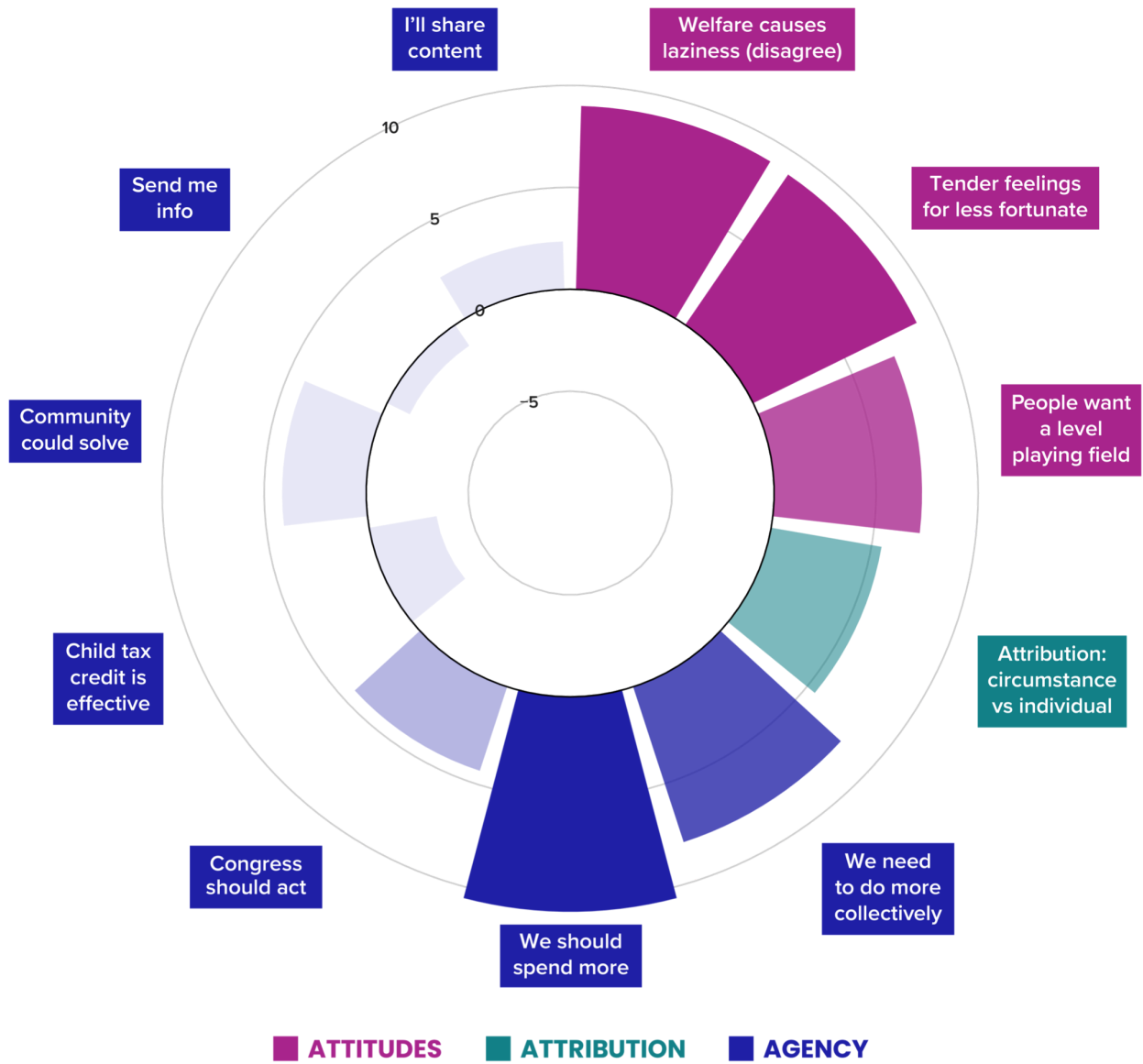
## LEFT- AND RIGHT-LEANING SUBGROUPS

We see much larger impacts among people in the right-leaning subgroup, which has lower baseline support for the three A's. This result is partially because we selected some materials we believed would be convincing to right-leaning audiences, and those materials were really successful. And it is partly because there is more low-hanging fruit to be picked among people who disagree with you, people who may not be in the same media and social environment, and find this perspective novel. Notably, though, we increase issue salience (Congress must act this year) among the left-leaning subgroup. However, we need to identify materials that increase Agency.

### Left-leaning subgroup



## Right-leaning subgroup



## GENDER

We observed large impacts among both men and women, but very little differences between them. (We did not look at other gender identities due to small sample size.) We do see somewhat more Agency resulting among women. Women are more likely to be supportive on the three A's, so it's interesting that we were able to move them still further in the right direction.

## RACE

A major challenge for us was finding materials that did not reinforce negative stereotypes about race and poverty, even when they were purportedly well-meaning. We did multiple rounds of content hunting and found excellent long-form pieces that tackle this issue, but long videos are not suitable for testing. So as expected, the materials we tested were broadly effective among white audiences, but not effective among Black people or a combined group (for statistical power reasons) of people of color.

We believe that ultimately, we need to address negative stereotypes of race and poverty head on with both left- and right-leaning audiences, and there is a need for material that is more thoughtful. Future work should tackle this, and include questions in the survey that specifically measure racial attitudes, and the intersection of race and poverty. If interested in tackling this in your own work, we have created a battery of questions we had intended to use before we found the intervention materials lacking — just reach out to us.

## CONSULTED MATERIALS

### FROM THE PRACTITIONER LITERATURE

The following reports and tools were supported by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's US Program on [Economic Mobility and Opportunity](#).

#### **FrameWorks Institute:**

- [Talking About Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories](#) (2021)
- [How Do Other Fields Think About Narrative? Lessons for Narrative Change Practitioners](#) (2021)
- [The Features of Narratives: A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts](#) (2021)

#### **GOOD:**

- [Public Perceptions & Narratives of Poverty in the U.S.: Executive Summary](#) (2019)

#### **Harmony Labs:**

- [About the Narrative Observatory](#)
- [Narrative Observatory](#), a tool to understand audiences relative to their place in culture; to identify, measure, and track narratives; and to surface key story opportunities and threats.
- [Audiences for Poverty Narratives in the U.S. Media](#) (2021)

#### **The Norman Lear Center:**

- [I'm Rare as Affordable Health Care...Or Going to Wealth from Welfare: Poverty and Wealth Narratives in Popular Culture — Interim Summary Report](#) (2020)
- [Poverty Narratives in Popular Culture — Final Report](#) (2021)
- [All reports](#)

#### **Olson Zaltman:**

- [Understanding perceptions of poverty and people experiencing poverty](#) (2020)

#### **The Opportunity Agenda:**

- [Shifting the Narrative: Six Case Studies](#) (2021)



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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. An early adopter of randomized controlled trials in international development and politics, she trained with the pioneers (and now Nobel laureates) for the methodology at Yale, Harvard, and MIT. She's passionate about using rigorous research to inform decision-making and as the Executive Director of Analyst Institute, she oversaw its growth and transformation to become the clearinghouse for evidence-based research in politics. She has authored and open-sourced widely-used data science techniques and research solutions. As founder of Modern Measurement, she works on applying research to a diverse set of problems including combating the rise of authoritarian preferences among the public in European democracies, increasing public support for solutions to poverty and climate, and increasing the political participation of the marginalized in Europe, Asia, and the US.

**MILAN DE VRIES** has spent the last decade applying innovative data science and technology to political and civic organizing. He is originally a molecular biologist with a PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Since 2010, he has been involved in grassroots campaigns in support of immigration, civil rights, diplomacy, and economic fairness, as well as in support of progressive candidates for election. As Director of Analytics at MoveOn.org Milan led a team of data scientists in developing innovative approaches to measuring the spread of content on social media, increasing civic participation, influencing legislators, and engaging and persuading voters. Since leaving MoveOn, Milan has worked on independent projects and currently holds an appointment as an Associate Research Scholar at Johns Hopkins University where he studies the civic landscapes that shape American democracy.