

JAN 2024

The Boogie Down for Change Crawl

Shifting harmful poverty narratives through a behaviorally informed celebration of the Bronx

To address harmful poverty narratives around fatalism and meritocracy in NYC's Bronx borough, we created a tour of local businesses and innovation hubs, dubbed "The Boogie Down for Change Crawl." Through exposure to examples of innovation and success, Bronx residents shifted their attitudes about opportunity in the Bronx and the importance of community in overcoming poverty. We are building on the promising results of this work to continue supporting narrative change efforts in New York and beyond.

Why poverty narratives?

Humans are meaning-making creatures. Through narratives—collections of stories that share a common set of values and inform a course of action—we are able to process information and make sense of the world around us.

Some of the most deeply held narratives are about poverty: why it exists, why it persists, and what should be done about it. Many of these narratives are based on demonstrably false and outdated tropes and harmful stereotypes, reflecting misconceptions about how people make decisions. These narratives make their way into the public imagination and directly influence how we vote, and in turn how policies are designed and implemented. They also influence how we treat others and how we think about ourselves. When policies and programs are based on false narratives, they're less effective at addressing poverty, and in some cases, can [perpetuate or exacerbate it](#).

In 2021, ideas42 began applying our understanding of human behavior and decision-making to help shift these false and harmful narratives. Working with partners who bring expertise in narrative change, the nuances of communities' contexts, and crucial lived experience with the impacts of poverty, our goal is to increase support for social policies and programs that reflect and address poverty's true root causes. Our collaborations with communities and organizations across the U.S. will allow us to reimagine and rewrite narratives about poverty in order to make more effective public programs possible, and ultimately build a society that truly gives everyone a fair shot at a fulfilled life of their own definition.

Dismantling Harmful Narratives in The Bronx, New York

In New York City, ideas42 is supporting an existing landscape of narrative change work in the Bronx. The Bronx has the [highest poverty rate](#) of New York City's five boroughs, at 26.0% as of 2019. Long-held stigma surrounding the borough has not dissipated, even as significant gains have been made. Narratives around the Bronx, its residents, and poverty in the borough persist, as do the harmful consequences of these stories.

We partnered with a team of Bronxites and Bronx business leaders already engaged in trying to change perceptions of their community in order to offer a new lens to amplify their work through applied behavioral science and evidence-based research. The group of organizations and community members with lived experience of poverty is the core of the work, and together with members of our team, they formed a “Local Narrative Team” (LNT). The Bronx LNT for the 2023 Crawl was composed of Majora Carter of [Bronxlandia](#), the [Boogie Down Grind](#), and the [Majora Carter Group](#), Amaury Grullon of [Bronx Native](#), Michael Partis of the [Red Hook Initiative](#), David Lee of [KD New York](#), and ten Bronx residents, dubbed the “Bronx Ideators” on the team. The first cohort of Bronx Ideators included Amanda Raikes-Williams, Andre Noble, Chevon Cooper, Elliezer Villanueva, Greg Gadsden, Greg Williams, Gilberto Velez, Kristina Arnold, Precious Valerio, and Suly Gadsden.¹ We were also joined for a co-design session by a group of Youth Ideators, which included Ashley Mcgeary, Jeremiah Douglas, Jermaine Cousins, Leyasia Townsend, Maria Urena, Markeys Gould, Nevaeh Fields, and Tyler Dowe.

We began by conducting in-depth interviews, focus groups, community meetings, and surveys of over 400 New Yorkers to better understand the nuances of how harmful narratives about poverty manifest themselves in the Bronx. Two primary narratives emerged as particularly salient among Bronxites: that poverty is an inevitable and intractable part of life and no opportunities exist in the Bronx (**fatalism**) and that the American Dream is available to anyone willing to work hard enough for it (**meritocracy**). These false narratives are rooted in stereotypes and stigmas, and with repetition and reinforcement, they can become internalized by the very people they depict, however inaccurate or incomplete they may be.

Identifying two common false narrative themes allowed the LNT to move forward with creating and elevating counternarratives in their place. Instead of narratives about fatalism, we hoped to promote the idea that Bronx residents are using their talent and innovation to create economic mobility for themselves and others. Instead of narratives about meritocracy and individualism, we hoped to convey that hard work on its own is not enough to achieve success due to the structural barriers that many Americans face and, as a result, poverty is not a reflection of someone’s lack of merit or productivity. Instead, we hoped to highlight the power of collective action by Black, brown, and immigrant communities. Within the context of the Bronx in particular, we identified an additional narrative related to fatalism, where Bronxites may believe that every Bronxite who succeeds or wants to succeed must leave their community. We hoped to instead elevate pride in the Bronx and demonstrate that people do not need to leave the Bronx to succeed.

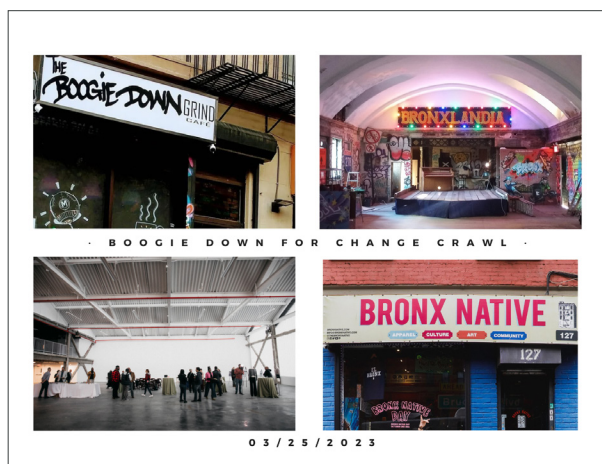
Co-creating a Narrative Change Campaign

Through a series of co-design sessions, we worked with the Bronx Ideators to develop ideas about how to counter our identified harmful narratives and promote counternarratives. Ideators shared what they loved most about the Bronx— its cultural impact through hip hop music, the beauty of its green spaces, and the resilience and “hustle” of Bronxites—and we explored a number of tactics and channels to share the narratives, ranging from social media campaigns, virtual simulations, public art, performance art, and a blog series to showcase what makes the Bronx special. From this process, the top idea that emerged was a community “crawl”: a full-day tour of the Bronx guiding participants to experience local businesses and unique Bronx spaces.

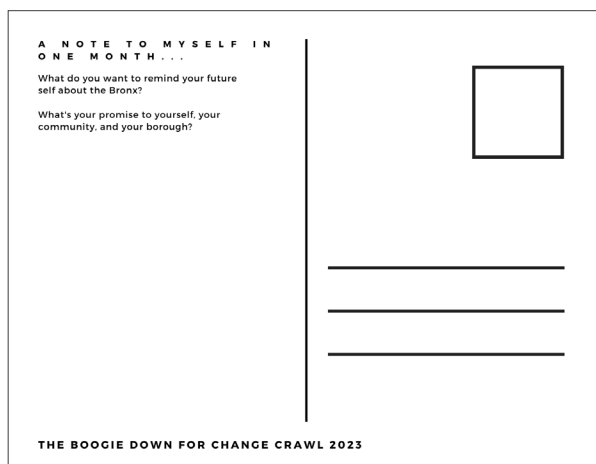
¹ The second cohort of Bronx Ideators includes Amanda Raikes-Williams, Chevon Cooper, Elliezer Villanueva, Gregory Gadsden, Jermaine Cousins, Monique Rease, Ninoska Alvarez, Samuel Pacheco, Suly Gadsden, and Tyler Dowe.

The Boogie Down for Change Crawl took place on March 25th, 2023, and featured six local businesses in the neighborhoods of Hunt’s Point and Mott Haven: [Bronx Native](#), [KD New York](#), the [Boogie Down Grind](#), [Bronxlandia](#), [Sankofa Haus](#), and [Raze Up](#). The 10 Bronx Ideators, as well as several younger “Youth Ideators,” were each invited and asked to pass along the invitation to 5-10 individuals in their networks. At each stop, the fifty participants heard from the owners of these businesses about how their work challenges harmful narratives about the Bronx and instead supports a more positive and realistic view of the community. The crawl culminated in a celebratory gathering of music, food, and spoken word centered on pride in the borough, hosted at [Bronxlandia](#). Participants were also prompted to reflect on their connection to the Bronx through activities, including writing postcards to their future selves, a storytelling booth, and reflection guides.

FRONT OF POSTCARD



BACK OF POSTCARD



PERFORMERS AT BROXLANDIA



Leveraging Behavioral Science

We embedded behavioral principles into every element of the crawl:

Design Element	Behavioral Science Concept or Tool	Change Strategy
Personal interactions with Bronx-based business owners and other interested Bronxites	Change comparison group	Bronxites may not personally know anyone who has been successful without leaving the Bronx. Meeting other Bronxites who have succeeded in and because of the Bronx provides a change comparison group , or an alternative social group to model behavior after.
Bronx pride “swag” (including hats from the Bronx Native & books about the Bronx) and tours of innovative Bronx businesses	Counter-stereotypes and identity cues	The media portrays the Bronx negatively, creating a stereotype , or oversimplified view. We activated Bronx pride by highlighting how the Bronx is community-driven, thriving, and exciting. We also provided an identity cue , or a reminder of a positive aspect of one’s identity, through swag centering on Bronx pride. The entrepreneurs that participants meet are a counter-stereotype example , or an idea that goes against a stereotype.
Public commitments in the form of story booth videos	Social accountability	Negative stories or experiences about the Bronx are more salient than the good, as these have a greater impact on our worldview than equally intense positive experiences, a phenomenon known as the negativity bias . Having participants share their Bronx pride out loud in a recorded “story telling booth” and reflect on the value of the Bronx through postcard writing and reflection prompts, publicly committing to their community in front of their peers and interviewers, creating a sense of social accountability .
Postcards to the future	Reminders and prospection prompts	At the crawl, participants reflected on what they promise the Bronx and themselves in a postcard to their future self, answering prospection prompts , or prompts that ask an individual to think about the future. These were mailed back to them two months later as a reminder of their intentions.
Motivational talks given by local business leaders	Vivid examples/ narrative frames	Seeing examples of community members leaving the Bronx when they become wealthy reinforces the idea that one must leave the Bronx to succeed, and that success is possible only through individual productivity. When individuals are presented with a vivid example or narrative frame , or a message shared through stories, photos, and unique details about specific individuals, they are more likely to remember the message and the relevant examples. When participants interact through the unique context of the crawl with business owners who have chosen to stay in the Bronx and endorse the power of collective action and community, they can more readily call up and internalize these messages.

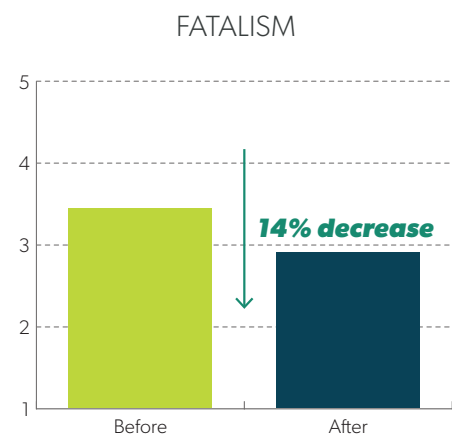
Results: What Did We Learn from The Bronx Campaign?

We used a mixed method approach to evaluate the impact of the crawl on participants' endorsement of both narratives and counternarratives. Participants were invited to complete a short survey before and after the crawl, where they indicated how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements designed to probe at our narratives of interest. We then ran a pre-post analysis with a sample size of 40. We also collected and analyzed qualitative data through a variety of sources, including the postcards, story booth videos, and interactive participant guides, which featured reflection questions for each crawl stop. We found:

The crawl decreased fatalism and increased optimism

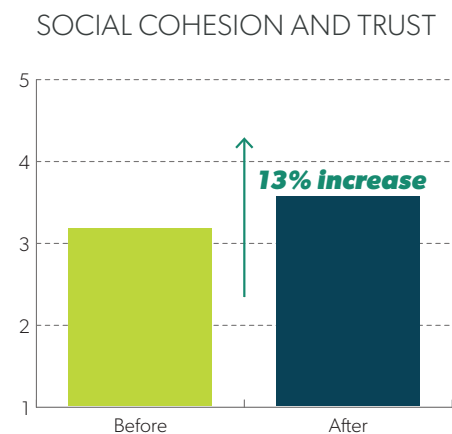
The event decreased endorsement of fatalistic narratives by 14%. Notably, this also included a 13% increase in endorsement of narratives around hope and efficacy of collective action, and specifically an increase of 16% in belief in the following statement: "I feel hopeful and optimistic about the future of the Bronx community." We also saw a 15% increase in belief that justice is an achievable goal in the Bronx.

Participants expressed hope and a recognition of the active efforts in the Bronx to change the status quo, a clear shift away from fatalistic narratives. Our qualitative analysis suggests that the main pathways by which this shift happened was through the provision of **counterexamples** to negative stereotypes held about the Bronx, readily available examples of collective action and innovation in the Bronx to counter **availability bias**, or the tendency to estimate probability of something happening based on how easily examples of that phenomenon come to mind, and a **call to action** to actively support the community.



There were mixed results on meritocracy

Quantitative results showed an increase in the endorsement of the meritocracy narrative by 14%, but the qualitative data offer a more complex story. Our goal in countering meritocracy was not to dismiss the value of hard work as a foundation block for success, but rather to shed light on the fact that hard work *alone* is often not enough in a world where opportunity is inequitably distributed. After listening to inspiring stories of success and innovation from speakers at each of the crawl stops, attendees felt inspired and motivated to take action because they focused on the messages about the role of talent and hope in the speakers' success, which came across in our qualitative sources. As one participant put it, "[The speakers are] showing that if



you just try and if you really apply yourself, you'll get what you want, and loving where you're from really can help you get there, because the people who are there will help you change them.”

To some degree, the quantitative results are unsurprising, because crawl stop speakers emphasized these inspirational messages more than the struggles or the barriers they faced. In addition, participants were never prompted to consider whether hard work alone was the difference between success and failure. This nuance is especially important in a community such as the Bronx where hustle and hard work are celebrated. Despite the increased endorsement of meritocracy shown in the survey, we also saw evidence of increased endorsement of our counter-narrative—that collective action by Black, brown, and immigrant communities is central to the success of the Bronx. We also saw an increase in sentiments of trust and cohesion within the community, endorsement of the importance of community action, and perceived responsibility of businesses to reduce poverty.

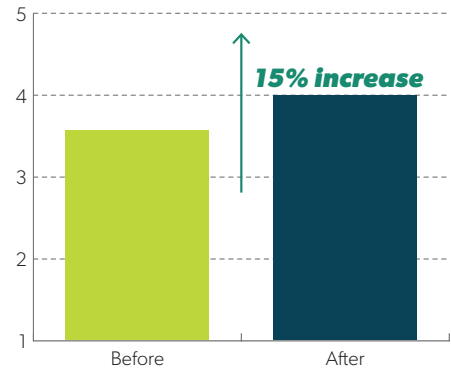
Results persisted over time

Two months after the crawl, attendees were invited to take the survey a final time to measure lingering effects of the crawl. 26 participants completed the survey. Our results decreased with time but persisted enough to suggest the power of the crawl experience on shifting harmful narratives.

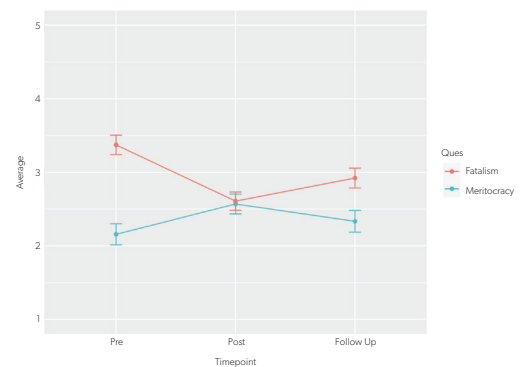
Overall, the crawl was positively received

Our findings also showed that the event was not only impactful but personally enjoyable and valuable. 90% of attendees who took the post-event survey strongly agreed that they would recommend a future event like the crawl to their friends. Participants followed the businesses they visited on social media and shared hopes to return. Attendees left the crawl energized and invigorated about the event, the Bronx, and the future of the Bronx.

COMMUNITY LEADERS WITHIN THE BRONX HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE SUCCESS OF THE BRONX



PRE-POST-FOLLOW UP



Where We Go from Here

Building on the Boogie Down for Change Crawl, we are continuing our work with the Bronx ideators to develop and launch new designs that highlight talent innovation in the borough while actively countering harmful narratives. Across our Narrative Change portfolio, ideas42 continues work to change the narratives about poverty in partnership with local organizations and communities. Additionally, our teams are working to innovate how we measure narrative change, including introducing natural language processing methods, sentiment analysis, and psychographic audience segmentation. Our experience in the Bronx yields several recommendations for those approaching similar work. The complicated nature of the findings on meritocracy suggests that narrative change practitioners stand to benefit from a mixed methods approach to measuring narrative change, given the complexity of accurately interpreting narrative endorsement through quantitative measures alone.

Similarly, meritocracy stands out as a narrative requiring particular attention to the nuances of what makes this narrative harmful and how success is measured when evaluating a counternarrative.

Our preliminary work in the Bronx suggests that a community-built and -driven celebratory event like the Boogie Down for Change crawl is an effective way to reduce endorsement of the fatalism narrative and increase community hope, motivation, and cohesion for a moderate amount of time. As our work continues, we hope to deepen and expand our existing relationships to find solutions that are even more durable and effective.

Interested in our work? If you'd like to work with us, please reach out to Eva Matos at ematos@ideas42.org.

Visit ideas.org/narrativechange for more on our narrative change work.