

APRIL 2025

The Stories We Tell: Shifting harmful narratives about poverty in Memphis, Tennessee

In partnership with local Memphis organizations and community members, ideas42 organized a storytelling celebration that leveraged behavioral science to transform harmful narratives about poverty and race in Memphis. The event, dubbed “The Stories We Tell,” celebrated the myriad experiences of Memphis residents through storytelling, art, and facilitated conversations. Our work in Memphis contributes to a multi-year, multi-city effort across the United States that is transforming harmful narratives about poverty and ultimately contributing to narratives that center agency, dignity, and collective well-being.

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 Many of these narratives are based on [demonstrably false and outdated tropes and harmful stereotypes](#), reflecting misconceptions about how people make decisions.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 2020, 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.

Highlights

- In partnership with local Memphis organizations and community members, ideas42 organized a storytelling event —“The Stories We Tell”—to transform harmful narratives about poverty and race.
- The event leveraged several design elements that draw from behavioral science research, including live, first-person storytelling, facilitated conversations, and visual cues in the form of murals and postcards.
- Attendees shared positive qualitative feedback on the event’s emotional resonance, citing themes of empowerment and resilience, community unity, and personal agency.

Uncovering harmful narratives in Memphis, Tennessee

With support from the Kresge Foundation and the Assisi Foundation of Memphis, ideas42 has partnered with local organizations to apply a behavioral lens to disrupt existing harmful narratives around poverty and uplift authentic community narratives of resilience and solidarity. Starting in 2020, we convened a team of five Memphis organizations, each with diverse missions and audiences, to co-create a research agenda, research tools, and ultimately, a narrative change campaign. This group, which we call the Local Narrative Team (LNT), is composed of the [Center for Transforming Communities](#), [Latino Memphis](#), [MICA](#)H, [SCORE CDC](#), and [Stand for Children](#).

Together, we conducted multimodal research through local surveys, open-ended questionnaires, and qualitative interviews to understand community members' perceptions around topics such as opportunity, merit, public benefits, community, and crime. Some prompts investigated the formation of attitudes and beliefs about poverty—like “*Welfare makes people lazy*”—while others touched on more systemic attributions—like “*Poor people experience prejudice and discrimination in hiring and promotion decisions at work.*” Our research revealed the following beliefs to be prominent across the city:

1. The idea that there is a deep, ingrained, intergenerational culture of crime and poverty in Black communities in Memphis.
2. The idea that Memphis will inevitably remain a poor and dangerous city, no matter what is done.
3. The idea that the only way out of poverty is through hard work and personal effort.

These beliefs reveal assumptions that poverty is the result of a lack of effort, suggesting that the solution to poverty is individual perseverance. These narratives also expose the assumption that crime and poverty are entrenched in Black communities, without acknowledging the relationship between the two or the greater historical and sociopolitical context. They assume that people's life outcomes are defined by personal characteristics and moral failings. Because these beliefs point to an understanding of poverty that emphasizes [individual fault and futility of action](#) while failing to recognize well-documented structural barriers to economic mobility, we call them **harmful narratives**.

Designing “The Stories We Tell”

After identifying these prevalent harmful narratives, we turned to the question, “What narratives do we want to uplift instead?” We collected input from the LNT on what they believed this **counternarrative** should articulate about 1) people experiencing poverty, 2) the reasons for which poverty exists, and 3) what can be done to solve it. Together, we developed the following counternarrative statement:

Memphians experiencing poverty are brilliant, resilient, creative, and resourceful in spite of brutal and historical systems of oppression. By coming together, Memphis communities have the transformative power to demand expansive and inclusive solutions that address systemic and institutional issues so they can thrive and co-exist in abundance and joy.

Our research additionally revealed a community desire for connection—especially through music, food, and story—as well as recognition of Memphis talent. Respondents across the interviews and open-ended questionnaire expressed that what they loved most about Memphians was all the ways that they are brilliant,

resilient, creative, and resourceful. We initiated a co-design process to answer the question: “How might we communicate this counternarrative statement through an engaging format that celebrates Memphis talent and creativity?” Drawing on our research, a series of co-design sessions with the LNT and community members, and evidence from behavioral science, we developed “The Stories We Tell.” To prepare for the event, we recruited 10 Memphis residents with lived experience of poverty, who then developed and refined a storytelling performance over the course of six workshops.

The resulting events took place in April and May of 2023, and featured singers, drummers, storytellers, facilitated conversations, and the unveiling of two murals that memorialized themes and motifs from the stories. Beyond the event, we created a [website](#) to document the stories. These elements worked in collaboration to showcase a more nuanced, empathetic, and accurate narrative about poverty in Memphis.

POSTCARD



EVENT



MURAL



Leveraging behavioral science

Behavioral science, the study of how people make decisions and take action in the real world, offers an innovative lens to understand and disrupt harmful narratives. “The Stories We Tell” used the following elements and principles drawn from behavioral science research:

TABLE 1: BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

Design Element	Psychology Theory or Tool	Change Strategy
Introduction and opening of the two events	<i>Social Identity Theory</i>	Self-efficacy, personal control, and confidence in ability are influenced by feeling part of a group. We leveraged this insight in the introduction of the event by weaving in language emphasizing unity and solidarity among Memphians, creating a larger ingroup beyond the lines of any one demographic identity. We included elements as part of the performance that drew on different ethnic and cultural traditions to promote cross-cultural and interracial solidarity. These included an indigenous blessing to open and close the space, African drumming and dancing, a land acknowledgment, and Christian prayer.
Live, first-person storytelling	<i>Perspective-giving and empathy-building</i>	Leveraging the practice of perspective-giving, first-person storytelling reduces the ability of others to insert their own biases and creates a more impactful and authentic narrative in the minds of participants (Kalla & Broockman, 2023 and Bruneau and Saxe, 2012). When the person a story belongs to is easily identifiable, we intend to create greater empathy and motivation for helping (Lee & Feeley, 2016).
Facilitated conversations following storytelling performances	<i>Perspective-taking and empathy-building; social support</i>	The practice of perspective-taking humanizes people considered to be in an outgroup and reduces stigma towards a group considered “other” (Tompkins et al., 2015). Through the facilitated conversations following the storytelling performances, participants put themselves into the shoes of the storytellers and were able to share moments from their own lives that connected or resonated with the storytellers’ stories. The conversations provided a means of connecting with others, sharing experiences, and breaking down barriers.
Mural and postcards	<i>Reminders and visual cues</i>	Well-timed visual reminders are a powerful way to remind participants of a commitment or intention they set at an earlier point in time. At the end of both events, we shared pre-stamped postcards with the depiction of the mural on one side and a prompt on the back (“What does ‘change the narrative’ mean to you? What’s one way you’ll continue to show up for your community?”) so participants could write themselves a postcard. We then collected them and mailed them back to everyone a few weeks later. The postcards served as a memento of what they experienced that day and a reminder of the intention they set.

Impact of “The Stories We Tell”

To assess the impact of two events, we used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitatively, we requested that participants fill out the same survey when they registered and again as they left the event. We compared these responses to those from people who registered but didn’t attend. On the qualitative side, we collected feedback from attendees through a short questionnaire at the end of the event. Additionally, storytellers were invited to share their reflections on participating in the storytelling workshops and performing their stories in front of an audience.

Our quantitative data were inconclusive due to a small sample size, making it challenging to assert definitively how the event might have changed people’s views on poverty. However, the qualitative feedback painted a richer picture of the event’s impact. Storytellers expressed a sense of closeness and bonding among the group, appreciating the connections that were developed during the workshops, while attendees shared positive feedback on the event’s emotional resonance, noting how it facilitated a deeper understanding and empathy towards others’ experiences. We traced the following four psychological themes through the feedback that storytellers and participants shared:

Emotional impact, empathy, and understanding

“Beautiful event.
Very moving and powerful.”

–Attendee

Empowerment and resilience

“I’m taking away that people
want to hear our stories.”

–Storyteller

Community unity and connection

“[This event] creates more
connections between different
people to show we are more
alike than different.”

–Attendee

Self-reflection and personal agency

“[This event] got me back to
community and away from
selfish in-my-own-bubble
ways of thinking.”

–Attendee

Where we go from here

Building on our initial research and partnerships, we continue to support the narrative change landscape in Memphis. In October 2024, we launched an inaugural cohort of the Memphis Narrative Change Curriculum, a series of workshops that employs narrative as a lens for analysis of issues in Memphis. Through the curriculum, participants gain the tools to advance strategic narratives and dismantle harmful beliefs about poverty at the self, interpersonal, organizational, and ecosystem levels.

Simultaneously, we’re enhancing our methods for measuring how narratives show up and shift over time. This includes the use of techniques like natural language processing to analyze narratives circulating in mainstream media, alongside audience segmentation based on psychological and sociological variables. Ultimately, our goal is to tell stories that change how poverty is portrayed—because the stories we tell become the world we create.

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

Appendix

In the research phase, we conducted three research activities:

1 Qualitative interviews

- ▶ Conducted in May 2022
- ▶ 10 interviews; 9 in person, 1 virtual
- ▶ Participants were compensated \$50 for their time
- ▶ All interviewees were Black or African American
- ▶ 8 women, 2 men
- ▶ All interviewees had experienced being short of money and applying to and/or using public benefits

Probed on themes of:

- Experience with poverty and public benefits programs
- Causes of and solutions to poverty
- Community values

2 An online survey

- ▶ Open from March 25–April 5, 2022
- ▶ 329 respondents
- ▶ Mean age: 43.8 years
- ▶ Mean income: \$55,878
- ▶ Racial and age breakdown proportional to that of Shelby County

Topics surveyed included:

- Endorsement of narrative statements, such as:
 - “People will always try to game the system, so we have to put restrictions in place so they don’t.”
 - “Certain neighborhoods like South Memphis and Frayser are just doomed to be poor.”
 - “If we give money to poor people, they won’t use it well.”
- Experience with crime, discrimination, and public benefits
- Worldview and ideologies

3 **An open-ended questionnaire**

- ▶ Open from June 3–9, 2022
- ▶ 418 total respondents

8 long-answer questions:

- What are three positive words you'd use to describe Memphis?
- What's your favorite story of Memphis?
- What brings people together in Memphis?
- What social issues are most discussed in Memphis?
- Who are the most respected leaders or messengers in your community?
- What changes have you noticed in Memphis recently (good or bad)?
- What will it take to change the perceptions that other people have of Memphis?
- What stories have you heard about people getting out of poverty in your neighborhood?