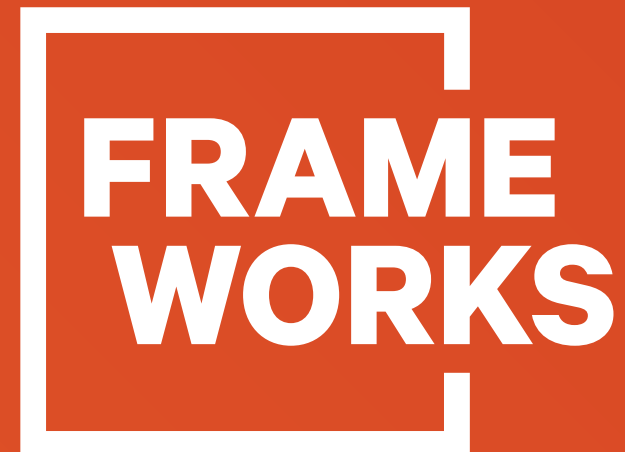


# Telling Public Health's Story (with data!)

Nico Connolly, *Principal Strategist*, FrameWorks Institute



June 17, 2026

NYSACHO

# Agenda

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Welcome

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Public Thinking on Health (Review)

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Why Tell a Story?

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Framing and Storytelling with Data

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Framing =

choices in how  
we present  
information



how people think/  
feel/act

# Examples of Framing Choices

Tone

Values

Numbers

Metaphors

Narrative

Messengers

Examples

Context

Visuals

Order

Explanatory Chains

Solutions

# You Say...They Think

We need to do a better job of supporting people's health. Everyone needs the right conditions in order to be healthy. What do you think shapes people's health?

**Culture**

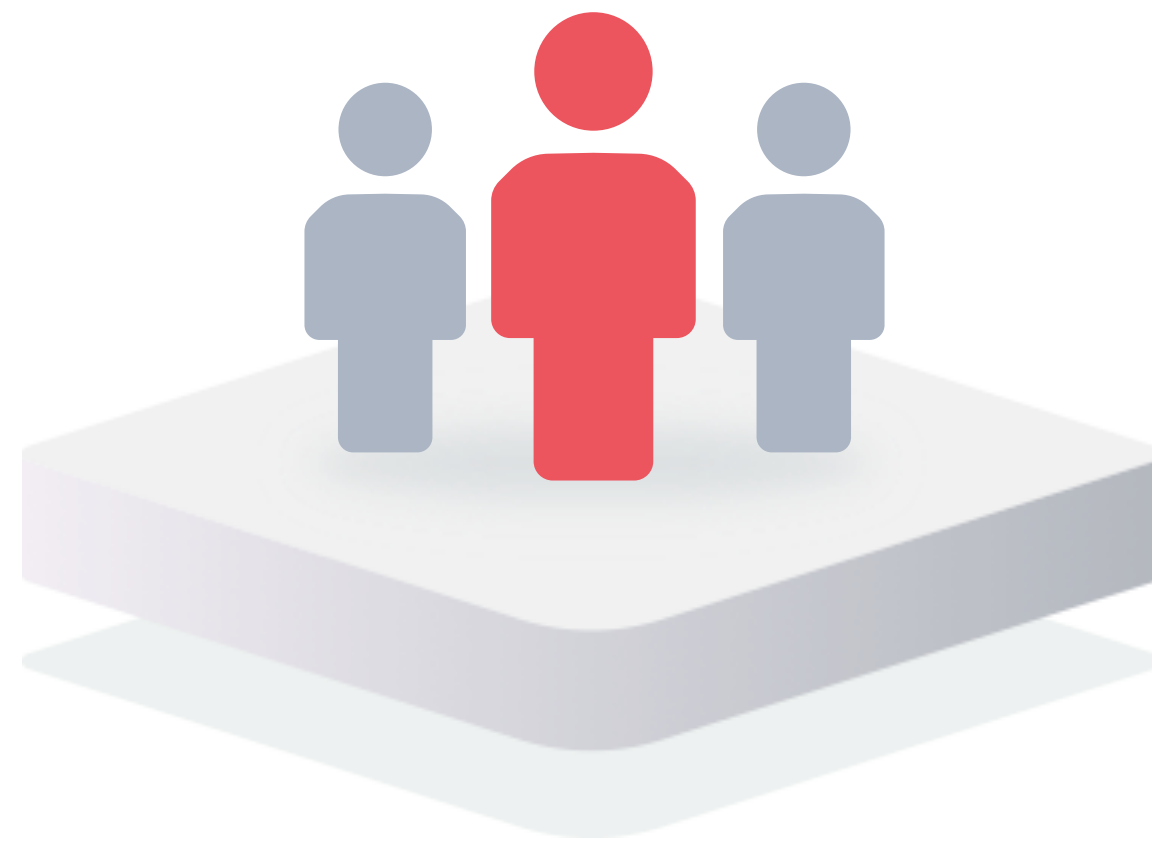


Field/Advocate/Practitioner

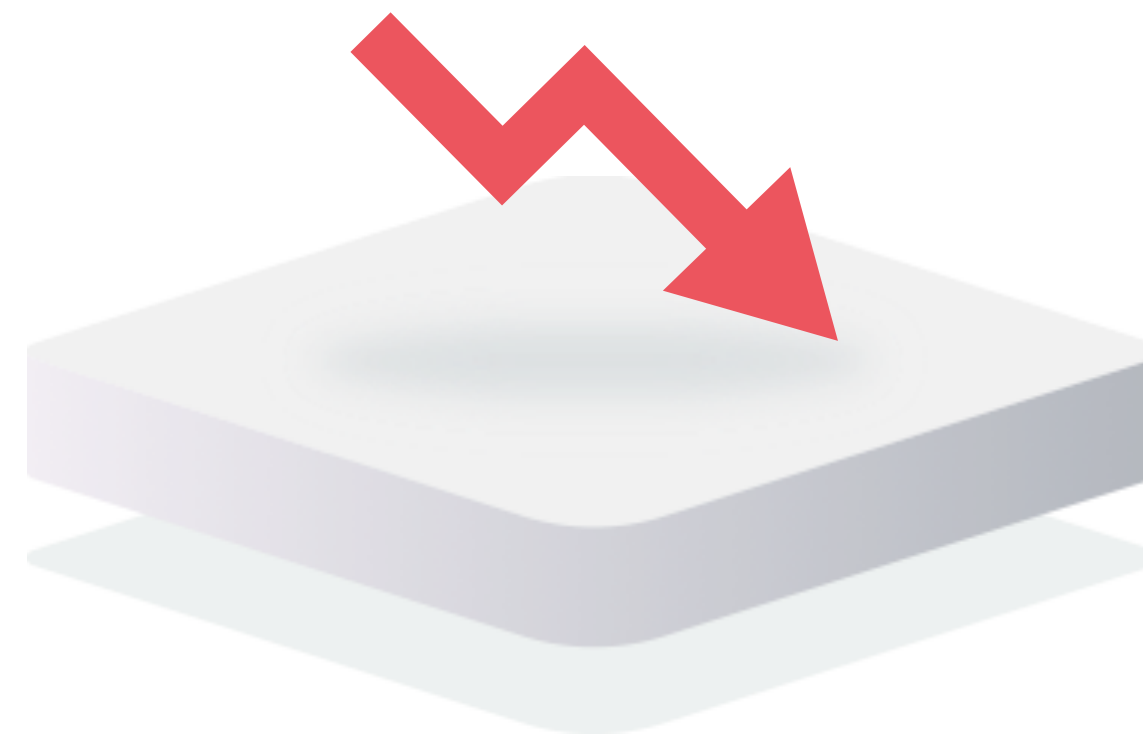


Public

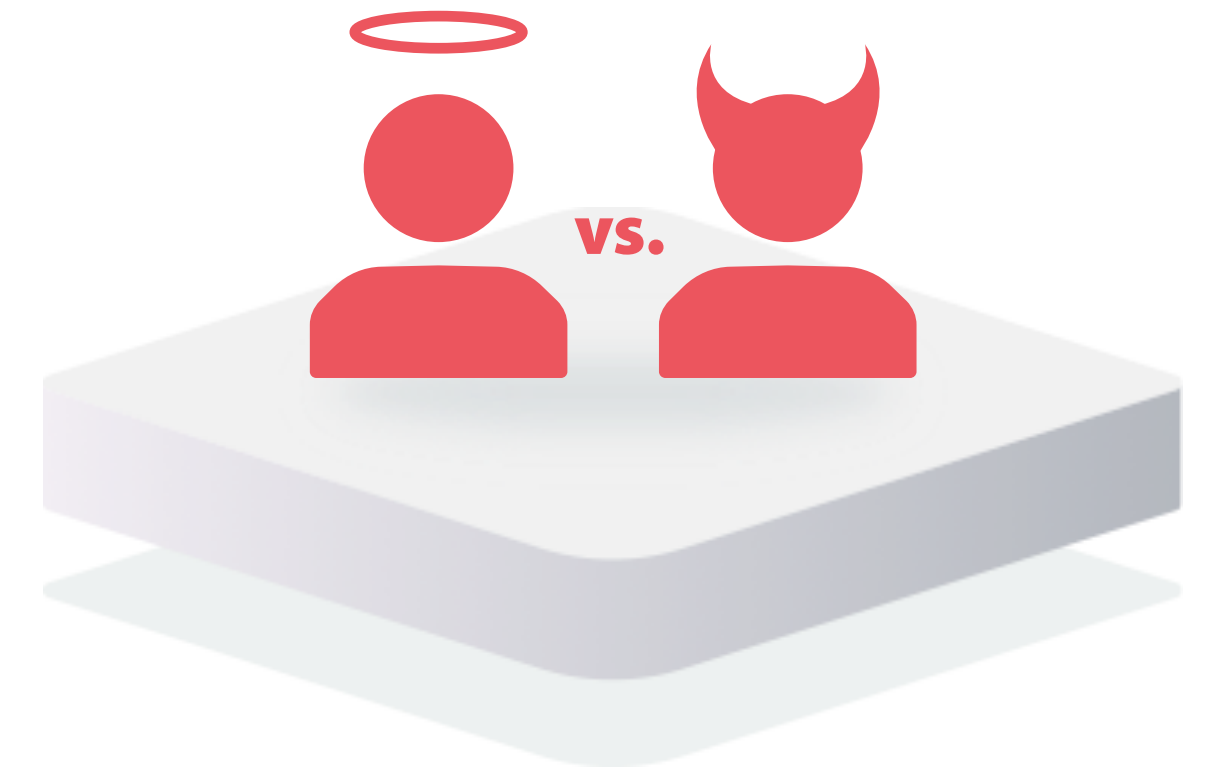
# Three dominant mindsets that get in the way



**Individualism**



**Fatalism**

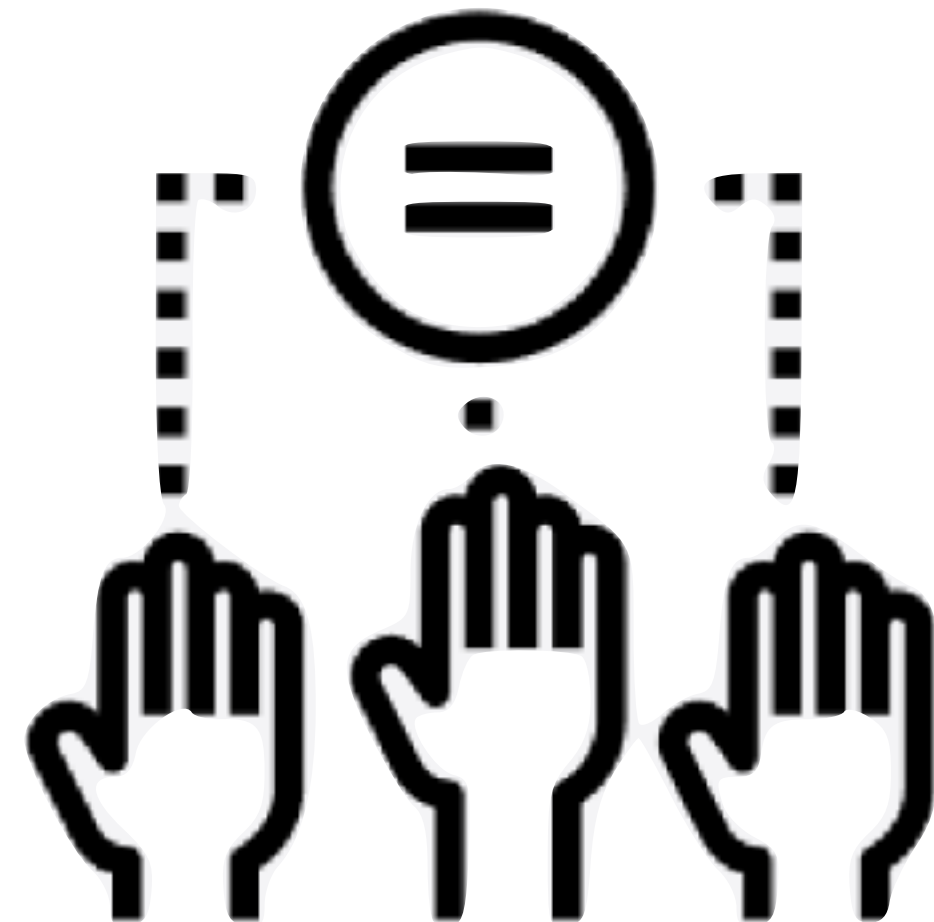


**Other-ism**

# Reframing reinforces alternative mindsets



**Context Matters**



**We're In This  
Together**



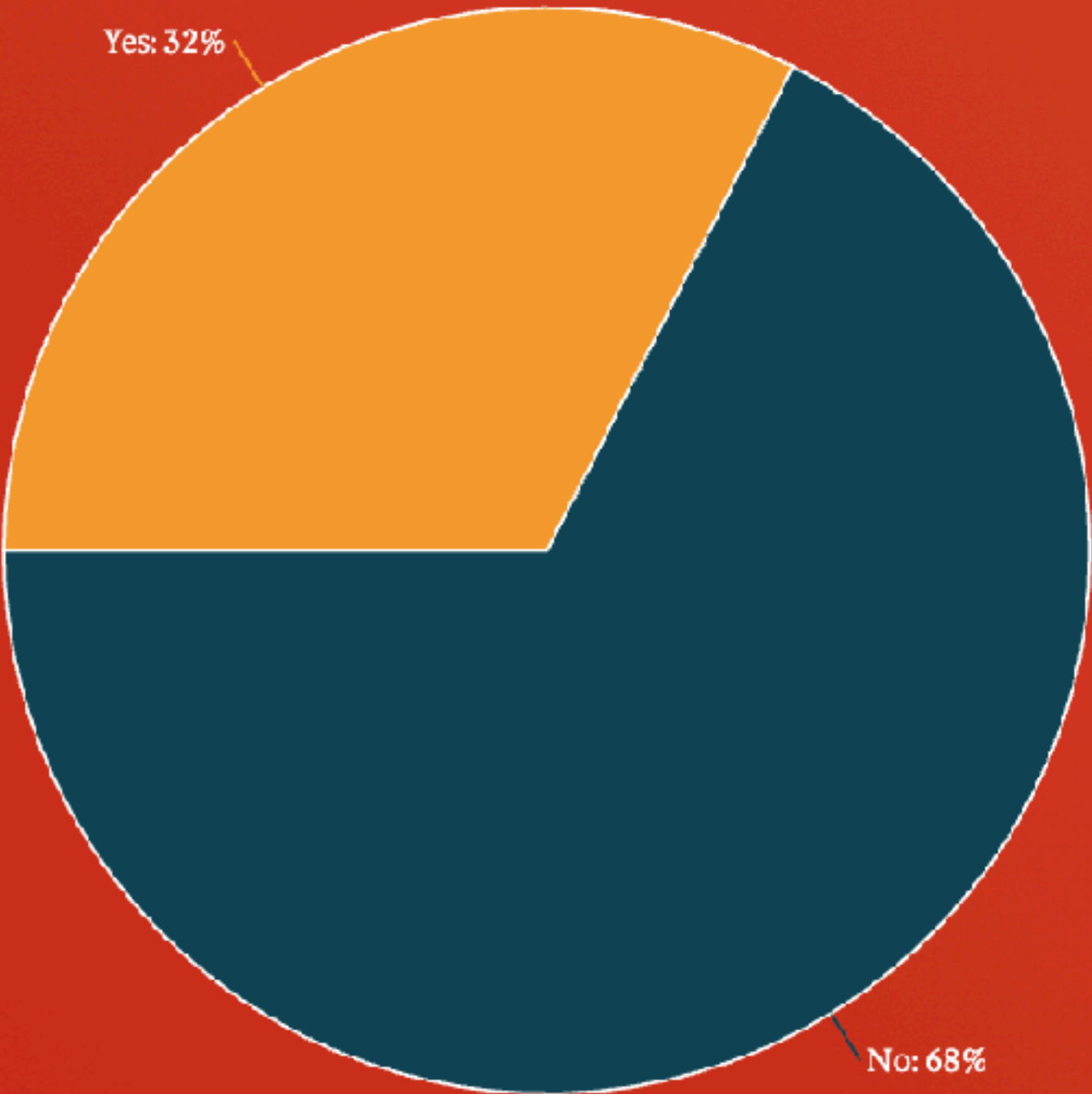
**We Can  
Redesign This**

# Why Tell a Story?

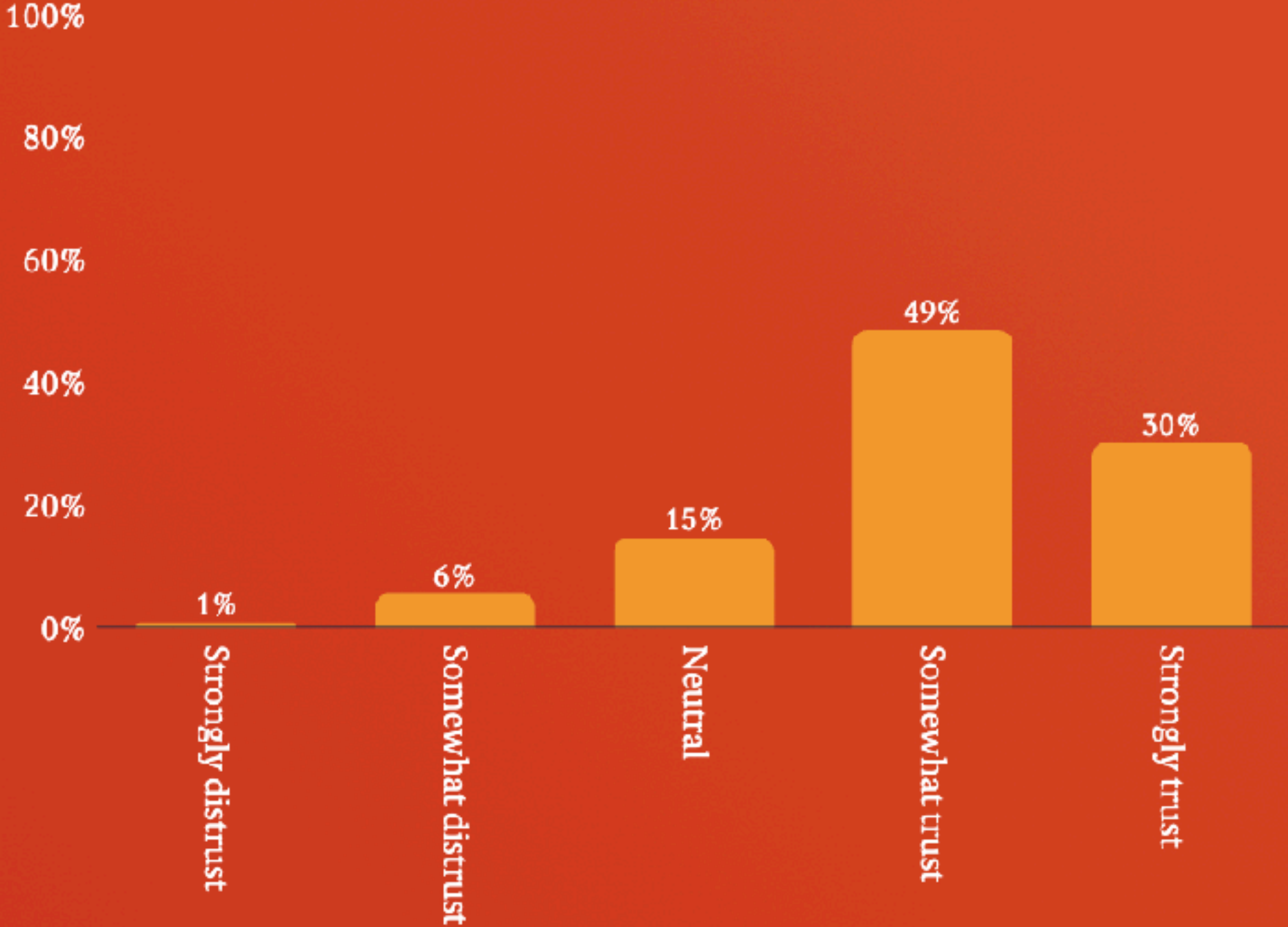
# Awareness and Trust in Local Health Departments

## General

Have you heard anything about your local health department and what it does?



Trust in Health Departments

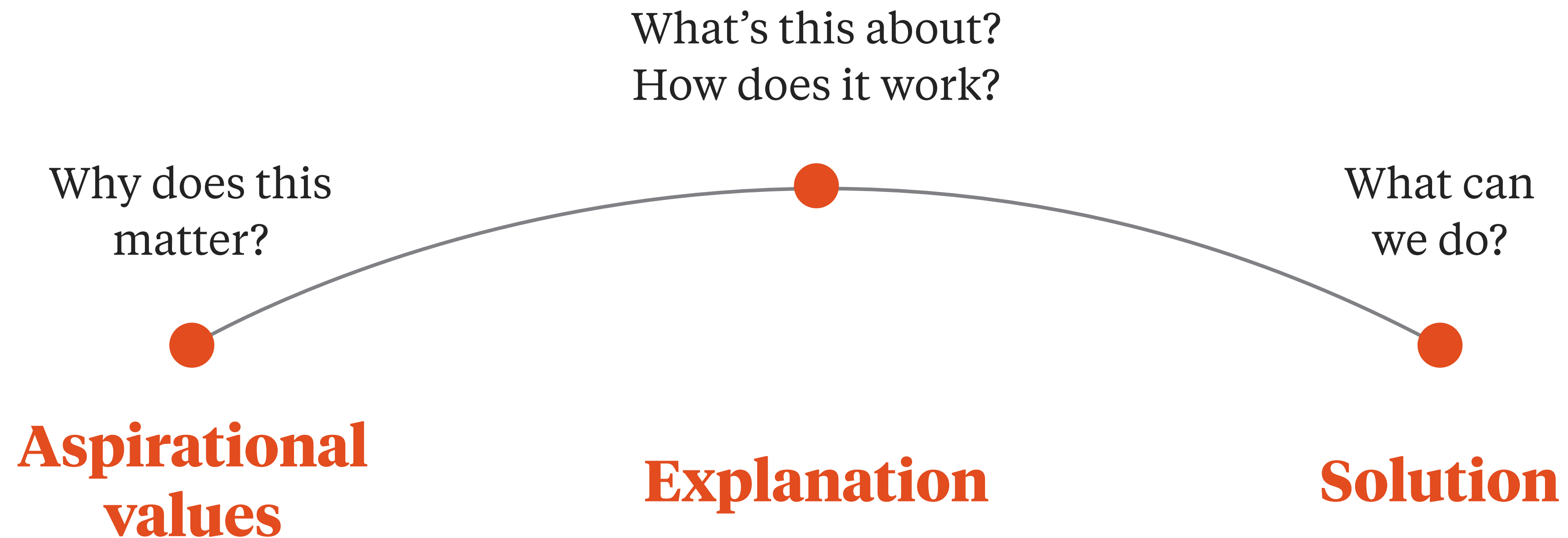


# Stories can help build awareness and trust

## Stories help people:

- see public health in action
- see and understand systems
- understand why public health matters in their own lives

# The strongest stories answer the “why” before the “what.”



# Different kinds of stories set up different solutions

## Personal

- Individuals
- Events
- Internal (psychological)
- Private
- Appeals to consumer
- Better information

**Fix the person**

## Thematic

- Issues
- Trends
- External (political/environmental)
- Public
- Appeals to collective
- Better policies

**Fix the conditions**

# Changing the story changed the outcome

## Tobacco Framed as “Vice”

**Bad behavior:** smokers

**Addiction:** regrettable personal failing

**Responsibility:** parents to instill values

**Solution:** protect yourself (‘just say no’)

**FIX THE PEOPLE**

## Tobacco Framed as “Defective Product”

**Bad behavior:** companies

**Addiction:** result of corporate manipulation

**Responsibility:** government to regulate

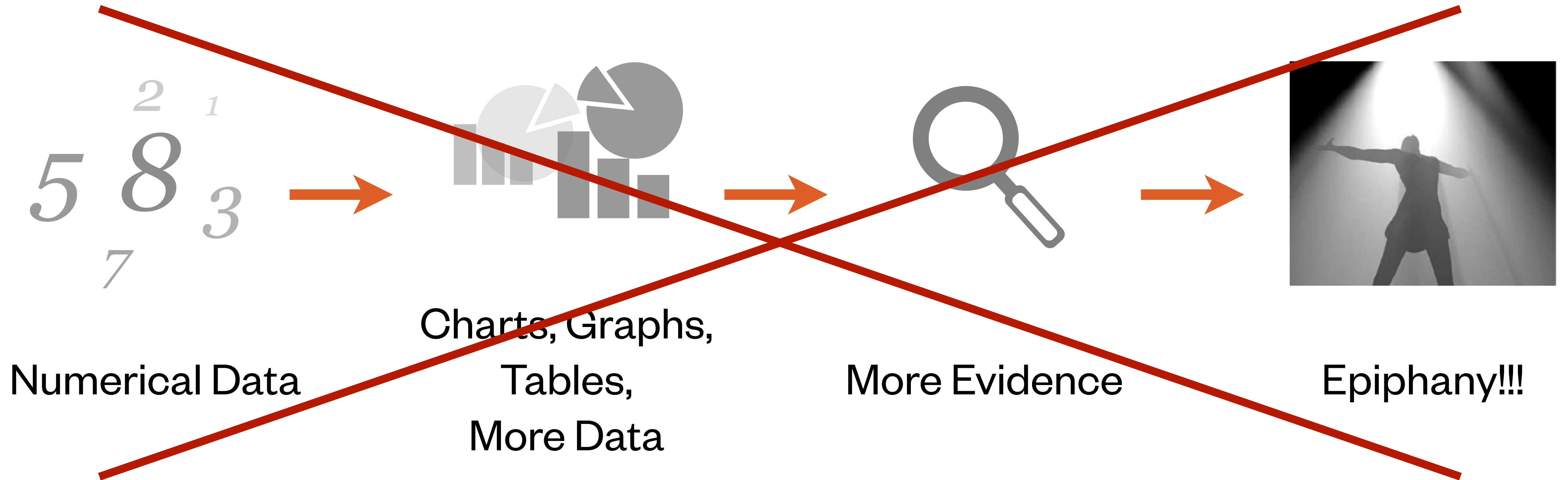
**Solution:** protective policies (limit advertising, etc.)

**FIX THE CONDITIONS**

# Framing and Storytelling with Data

**People Use Culture to Interpret Data**

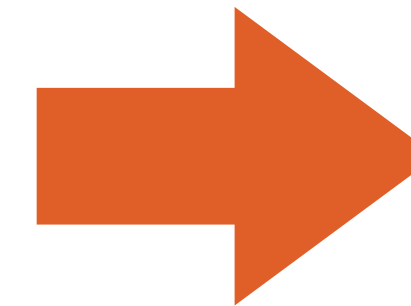
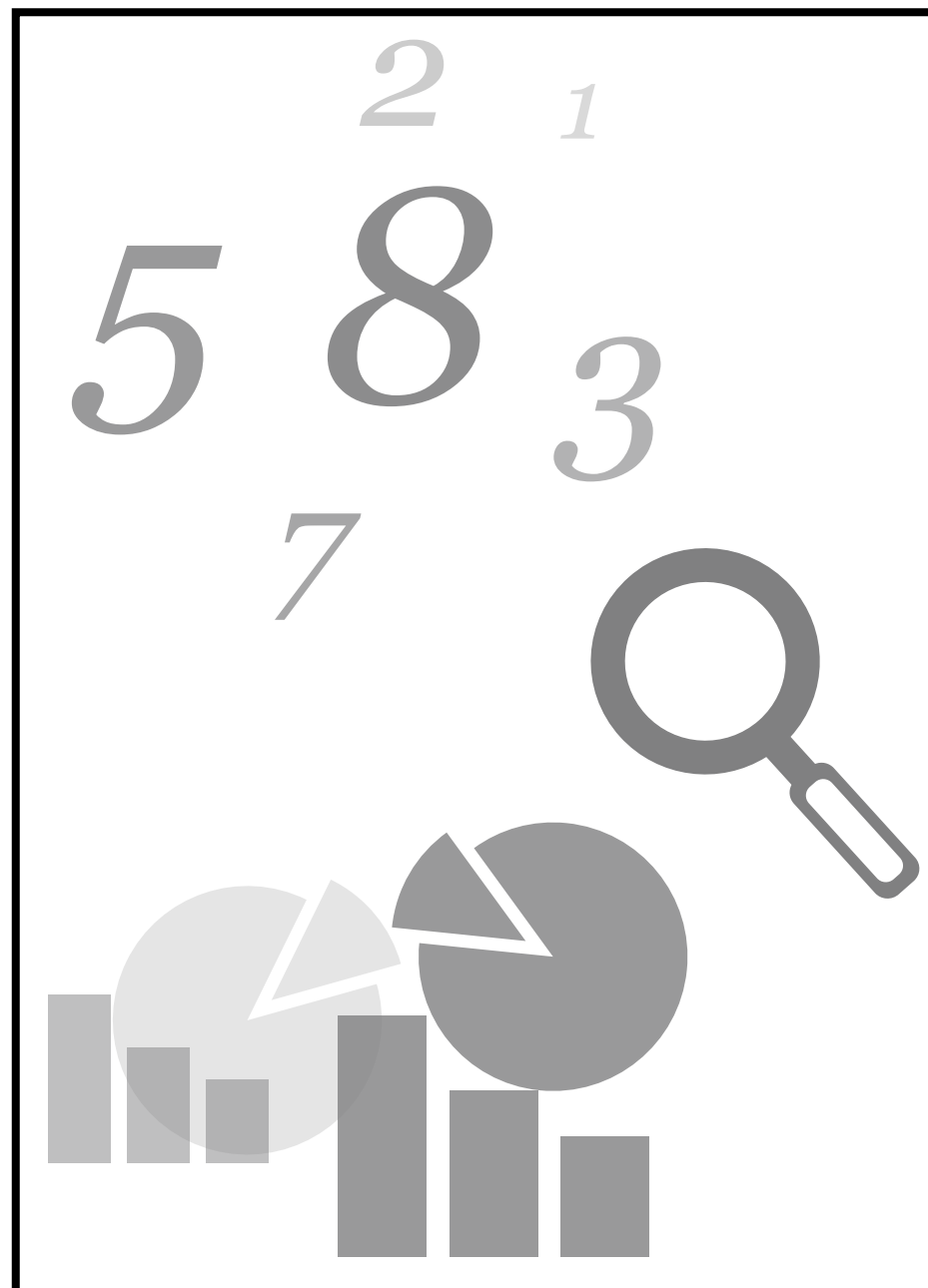
# Trap 1 - Providing More Data



# Trap 2 - Providing Unframed Data

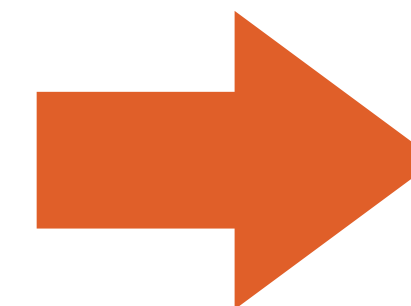
## Unframed data point:

COVID-19 is having more serious effects on Black Americans than whites. 33% of hospitalized patients are Black even though Black people only make up 18% of the population.



## Problematic research participant assumptions:

“They could be more smokers.”



“I’m part African American [but] I would say parents don’t sign up children for healthcare. They sign up for welfare but not healthcare.”

# Trap 3 - Framing Data as Crisis



**MORE PEOPLE DIE EVERY YEAR FROM SMOKING THAN FROM MURDER, AIDS, SUICIDE, CAR CRASHES, & ALCOHOL COMBINED**

[ALABAMAPUBLICHEALTH.GOV/TOBACCO](http://ALABAMAPUBLICHEALTH.GOV/TOBACCO)

The advertisement features a dark, moody background with a stone archway and a stack of money, emphasizing the health and financial consequences of smoking.

# Balancing Urgency with Optimism

**Low Optimism**

**High Optimism**

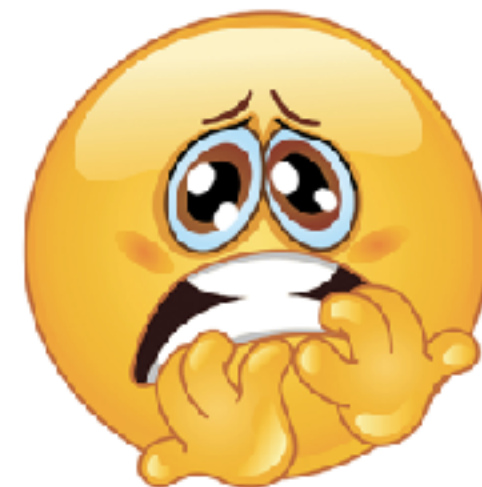
**Low Urgency**

*Baseline*



*Low Motivation*

**High Urgency**

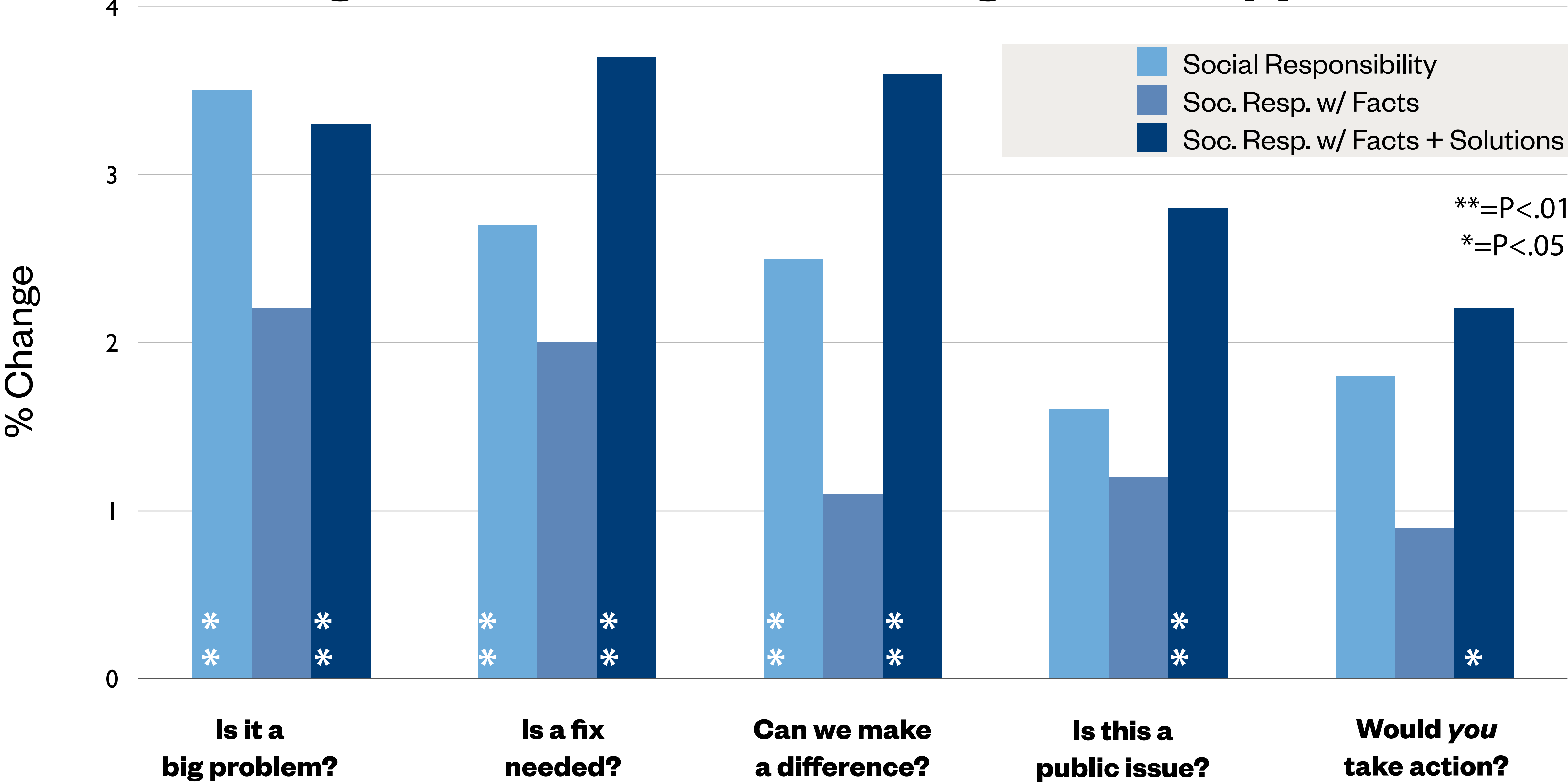


*Fatalism*



***Magic***

# Missing solutions? You're missing out on support.





What To Do Instead:

**Nest Numbers In Narrative**

# Use data to support your story but don't expect it to speak for itself.

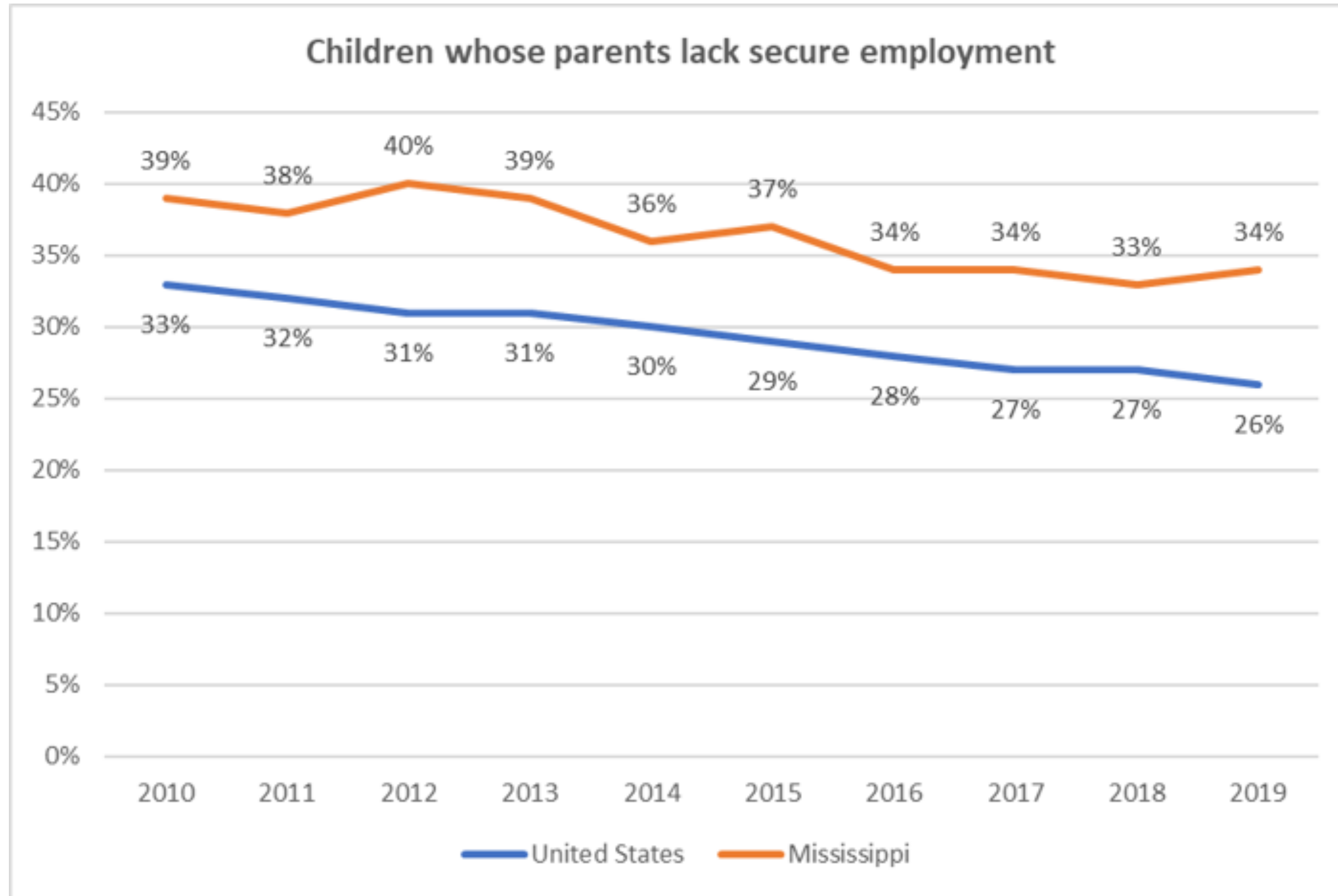
- Use data to help explain the problem, not just emphasize its urgency
- Use data to tell a structural story
- Provide interpretative cues (order matters!)
- Signpost cause-and-effect relationships





Understanding the prevalence of risk behaviors amongst our teens can help us understand where we need to strengthen our community...

# What's wrong with this title?



Not telling us why this matters

Risks blaming parents

Doesn't foreground who is responsible

Obscures solutions

**Mississippi can do better:** Inadequate access to childcare in our state means parents in Mississippi experience unstable work at a higher rate than parents nationwide.

# Economic Impact By Fiscal Year 2024

The elimination of county and state programs will provide

## \$479 Million

Total Property Tax Savings

The total savings add up to

## \$127

per household annually

The savings plus the dollars paid to health care providers are passed on to other businesses, generating

## \$ 1.06 Billion

in additional economic activity

This creates

## 16,000 Jobs

here in Idaho

**VS.**

# With Medicaid Redesign, **Idaho Can**

Focus *Our* Resources

*And save*

## \$479 Million

*in state and local budgets*

Build *Our* Prosperity

*By generating*

## \$ 1 Billion

*in new economic activity*

Expand *Our* Workforce

*By creating*

## 16,000 Jobs

*here in Idaho*

Save *Our* Lives

*By preventing*

## 590 Deaths

*per year*

# How can we frame these ROI talking points to champion public health?

- Every \$1 invested in flu vaccinations for older adults can return \$60 in avoided healthcare costs.
- Investing in lead hazard control supports children's development while generating \$17–\$221 in long-term savings for every dollar spent.
- Early Intervention helps young children thrive and can reduce the need for costly special education services later.

# To champion public health, talk about intrinsic value and return on investment

## When we invest in public health, we:

- **Protect Older Adults and Reduce Healthcare Costs**

Every \$1 invested in flu vaccinations for older adults can return \$60 in avoided healthcare costs.

- **Make Homes Safer for Children**

Investing in lead hazard control supports children's development while generating \$17–\$221 in long-term savings for every dollar spent.

- **Support Children Early and Strengthen Schools**

Early Intervention helps young children thrive and can reduce the need for costly special education services later.

**Social math** helps compare the size of two things



**“The tobacco industry spends \$12.5 billion a year promoting smoking.”**

**Compared to what?**

**What does this number mean?**

**What’s the story?**

# Data With **Social Math**



**“The tobacco industry spends more money promoting smoking in a week than the entire federal government spends on preventing smoking in a year.”**

**Social math** creates a relationship between  
familiar and unfamiliar concepts



*According to NOAA, 2012 was 1 degree higher than 1998, the previous warmest year on record.*

**How do we help the public interpret this data point as a scientist would?**



**With Social Math:** According to NOAA, 2012 was 1 degree higher than 1998, the previous warmest year on record. To put this difference in context, breaking the record for the hottest year by a full degree is like breaking the world record for the long jump not by an inch or two, but by nearly two feet.

**Social math** makes appropriate solutions visible

## **Social math points towards Solutions**

The positive effect of Head Start attendance on pre-reading skills is equal to the effect that homework has on school achievement for older children.



# Possible types of comparisons:

- **Budget items:** e.g., total state \$\$ spent annually on child mental health programs
- **Population sizes:** e.g., # of people affected compared to population of the state, counties, major cities, high school graduating class, average elementary school enrollment, sports team, etc.
- **Percentage-of-whole:** e.g., “like trying to play a pro-football game with only 8 players on the field.”
- **Container comparisons:** e.g., the number of school buses that could be filled by affected children
- **Purchase comparisons:** e.g., what a certain amount currently spent on X would buy if Y were similarly funded
- **What \$\$ buys:** e.g., what a funding cut equals in terms of real resources, such as the number of people who won't receive treatment

# **Framing Data to Deepen Impact**

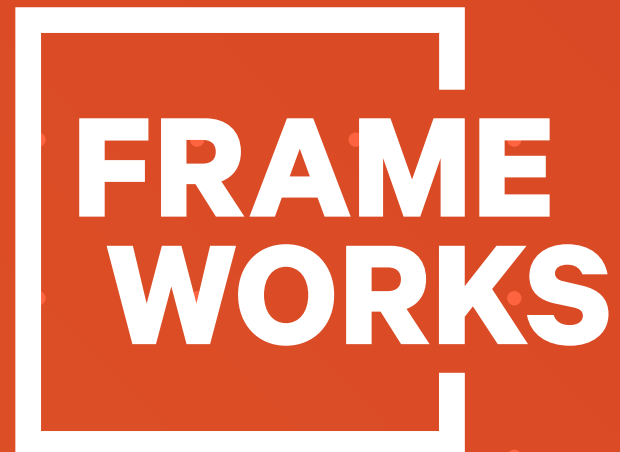
## **Brainstorming Checklist**

- **What exactly do I want people to understand about this data? Why is it important?**
- **Might this data cue up unproductive cultural mindsets?**
- **Am I framing effectively? Am I using this data to:**
  - Explain the problem (and not just emphasize its urgency)
  - Foreground who is responsible
  - Highlight a needed solution

**Thoughts? Reactions? Questions?**



# Thank You!



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# Closing Reflections

- Take a few minutes to jot down responses to the following
  - **Dream BIG:** "Framing goals I aspire to in the future are..."
  - **Start SMALL:** "One action I can commit to talking in the next month is..."

