

Shaping news narratives to support a just recovery from COVID

Media advocacy checklist

A truly equitable and just recovery from COVID-19 is possible, and engaging the media to shift the narrative about health can help us get there. Based on findings from a recent BMSG news analysis, Berkeley Media Studies Group has compiled recommendations to help public health practitioners and their partners shape recovery efforts in ways that center racial and health equity.

Key research findings

- COVID was portrayed as a catastrophe unconnected to existing health inequities.
 - Nearly half of articles (46%) framed the pandemic as an unexpected, isolated calamity and an economic disaster.
 - Only 18% of articles framed the pandemic as exacerbating pre-existing inequities.
- News coverage focused on economic recovery with only passing mentions of housing, education, food security, or public safety.
 - The news characterized the economy as if it acts with its own agency, rather than in connection to human-made decisions.
 - Though most articles (82%) named at least one solution, most were about the economy.
 - Only 17% of articles named public health, usually in a cursory way.
- Framing evoked scarcity and competition, often pitting one department or sector against another.
- Government speakers outside of public health departments dominated the coverage, appearing in 79% of articles.
 - Authentic voices (those who can speak from firsthand experience) were quoted in only 18% of stories.
 - Public health department representatives were quoted in only 3% of articles.
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Recommendations

Frame recovery in terms of people and public health, rather than using a strictly economic frame

- ✓ Avoid language that personifies markets, sectors, or industries.
- ✓ Instead, name the people who make up the industries, such as workers, executives, etc.
- ✓ Be specific about how policies benefit executives over workers.
- ✓ Be precise in defining small businesses and why they matter: Explain what they are, how they serve the community, and what sustainable solutions look like.

Name specific public health solutions that focus on equity

- ✓ Develop concise talking points that pair root causes with solutions.
- ✓ Use clear, precise language that illustrates what we mean by “infrastructure.”
- ✓ Go beyond a “return to normal” and show how investments in public health would benefit entire communities, including those who are most harmed.
- ✓ Frame for abundance, not scarcity. In other words, avoid the idea that there aren’t enough resources to go around.

Prepare public health and community messengers

- ✓ Develop and support a robust and diverse range of messengers who can emphasize the importance of racial and health equity in our recovery from COVID:
 - Invest in trusted, authentic messengers who can use their lived experience to highlight data and trends.
 - Uplift Black, Indigenous, and People of Color as leaders and speakers.
- ✓ Use asset-based framing to show how BIPOC leaders and organizations are advocating for solutions.
- ✓ Prepare all speakers to lead with values like equity.

Generate media attention for a just recovery

- ✓ Build relationships with local reporters, and provide resources to support the communication capacity of organizations in smaller media markets, where news outlets are often an untapped resource.
- ✓ Plan for newsworthy moments, like policy milestones or budget announcements.
- ✓ Use social math to make your data more relatable.
- ✓ Explore opportunities to use opinion space:
 - Submit op-eds or letters to the editor.
 - Schedule a meeting with a local editorial board.

Learn more

Access the full report at bmsg.org/publications.

