

# 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](https://bmsg.org/publications).*

