Telling a New Story About Alcohol and Drugs

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Question for the Viewers

When you are called upon to communicate about alcohol, drugs and/or addiction, what perspective are you primarily addressing?

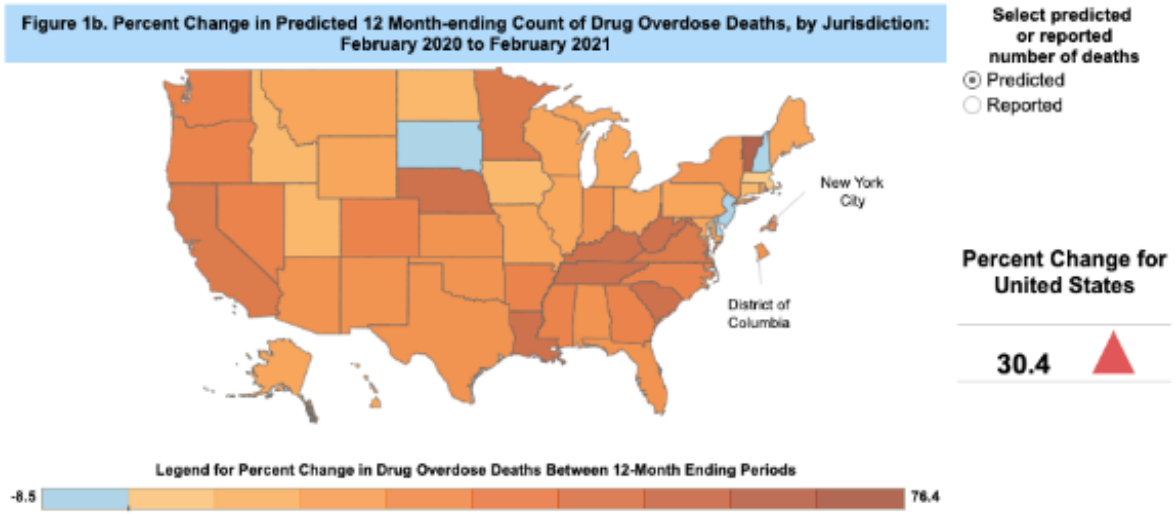
A. Treatment
B. Prevention programming
C. Overlap with other public health issues
D. Public policy
E. Not currently communicating on this topic
F. Other (please type in chat)

> *The only dependable things are **humility** and **looking**.*

— Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory: A Novel*. WW Norton & Company.

The Told Story

CDC: Record number of Americans suffered drug overdose deaths in 2020



Source: Ahmad FB, Rossen LM, Sutton P. Provisional drug overdose death counts. National Center for Health Statistics. 2021.

CDC: Deaths from Excessive Alcohol Use in the U.S.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/features/excessive-alcohol-deaths.html

What's the Overall Goal?

Investing in **equitable solutions** that increase **economic, educational, housing, and health opportunities for all,** so every community can thrive and **alcohol and drug problems and addiction** are reduced.

Prevention Institute

Addiction thrives when people and communities don't.

To address these underlying conditions of despair that drive substance misuse and addiction, **we must fire up the engines of educational and economic opportunity**.

Source: Prevention Institute. https://www.preventioninstitute.org/press/press-releases/address-opioids-we-need-think-upstream

First Do No Harm

- “One of the *most stigmatized* health conditions in the world” (Recovery Research Institute)
- Primary focus has been on the *problem* at an *individual* level (Solutions Journalism Network)
- *Racist stereotypes are prominent* and perpetuate harmful narratives, systems, and actions (Netherland and Hansen, 2016)

Racist Narratives

“Racially divergent narratives have led to racially divergent legal codes and policies.”

Source: Netherland, J., & Hansen, H. B. (2016).

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Cult Med Psychiatry. 2016 Dec; 40(4): 664–686.
PMID: 27272904
doi: 10.1007/s11013-016-9496-5

The War on Drugs That Wasn't: Wasted Whiteness, “Dirty Doctors,” and Race in Media Coverage of Prescription Opioid Misuse

Julie Netherland, PhD, Deputy State Director and Helena B. Hansen, MD PhD, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Anthropology

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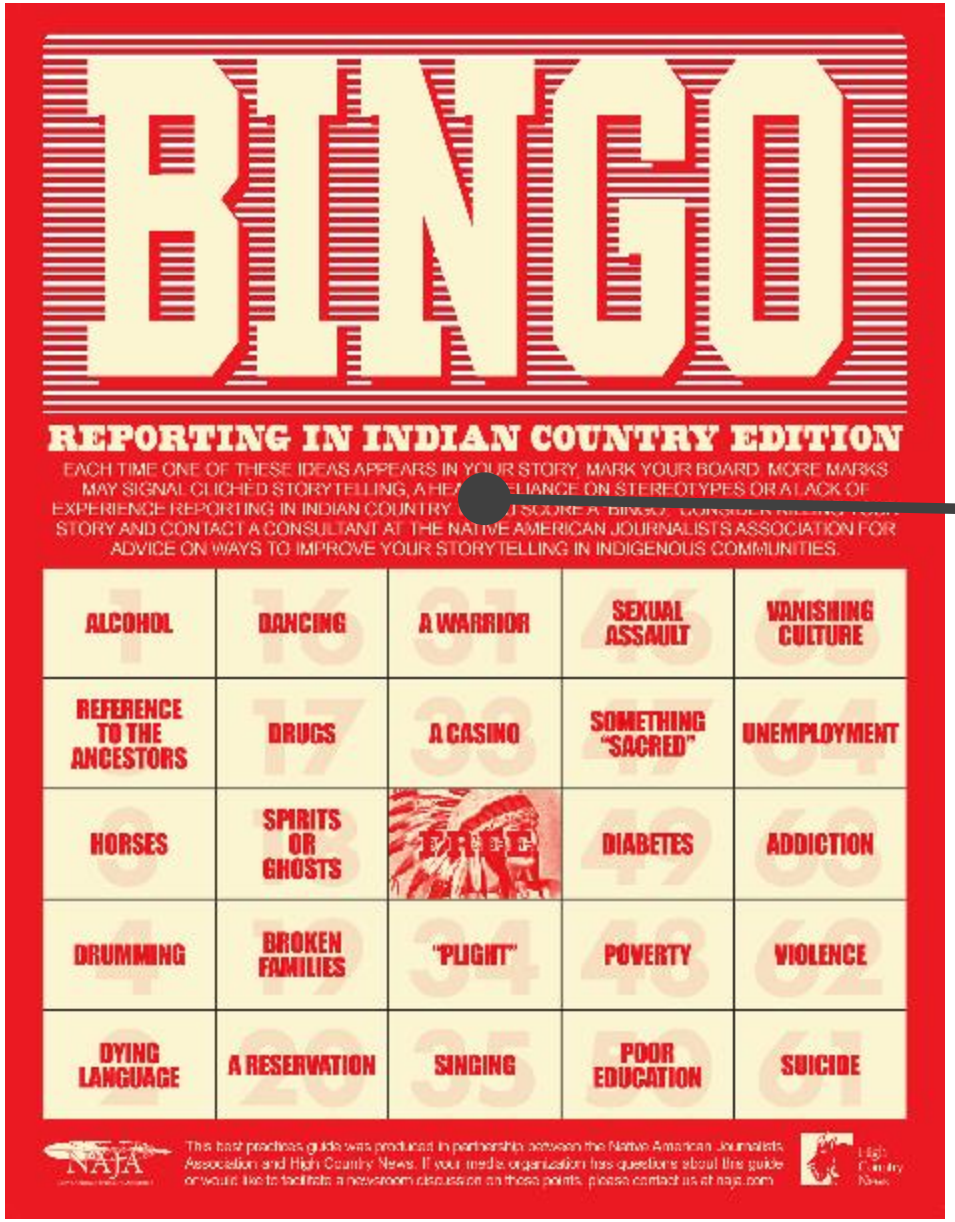
See other articles in PMC that cite the published article.

Native American Journalism Association's BINGO Card



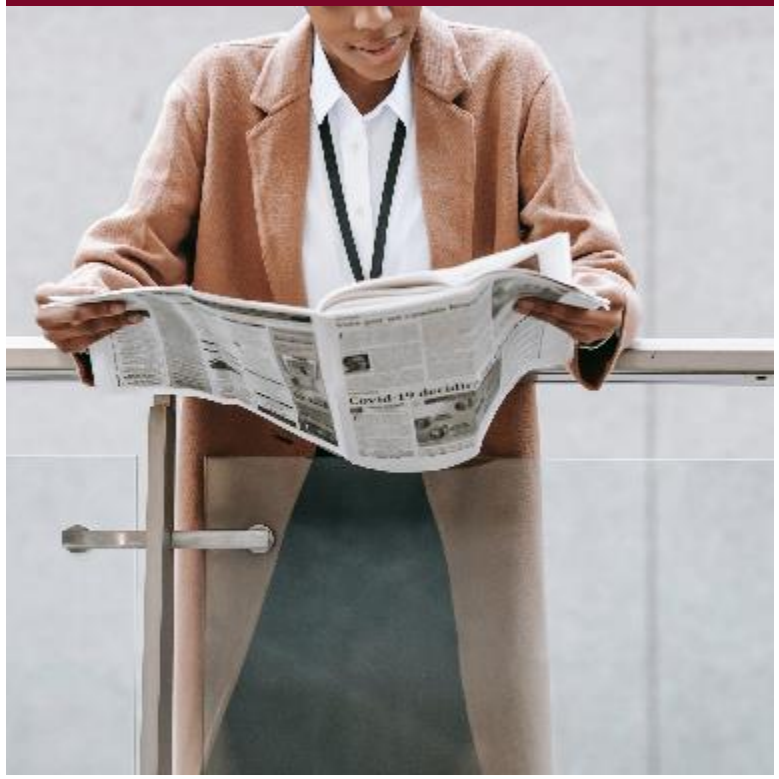
"More marks may signal clichéd storytelling, a heavy reliance on stereotypes…"

Source: Native American Journalism Association
https://najanewsroom.com/bingo-card/

Taken Together

Widespread stigma, racist narratives, and individual-level problem focus limit our ability to imagine investing in ***equitable solutions***.

The Importance of Message Framing



Can We Tell a Different Story?

Examples: Focusing On the Solution

The Importance of Message Framing

What is “Framing”?

- How an issue is “**defined, packaged, and presented**” (BMSG, *Framing 101*)
- Activated not only through words but **all cues our minds perceive**
- Tell us **what an issue is** and **why it matters (values)**
- Effects and processes happen **without our awareness**
- New frames are **processed through** existing conceptual frameworks and have **“staying power”**
- Frames both **bound our understanding** of an issue and **point to a range of potential solutions**

Many “Cues” to Consider

- Vocabulary
- Messages
- Narrative “arc”
- Images
- Examples/”actors”
- Sources
- Speakers
- Contexts
- Placement/Presentation
- Tone
- What is *missing*
- ….and so on

If our minds can perceive it, or its absence, it is a cue that **shapes our understanding of the issue**

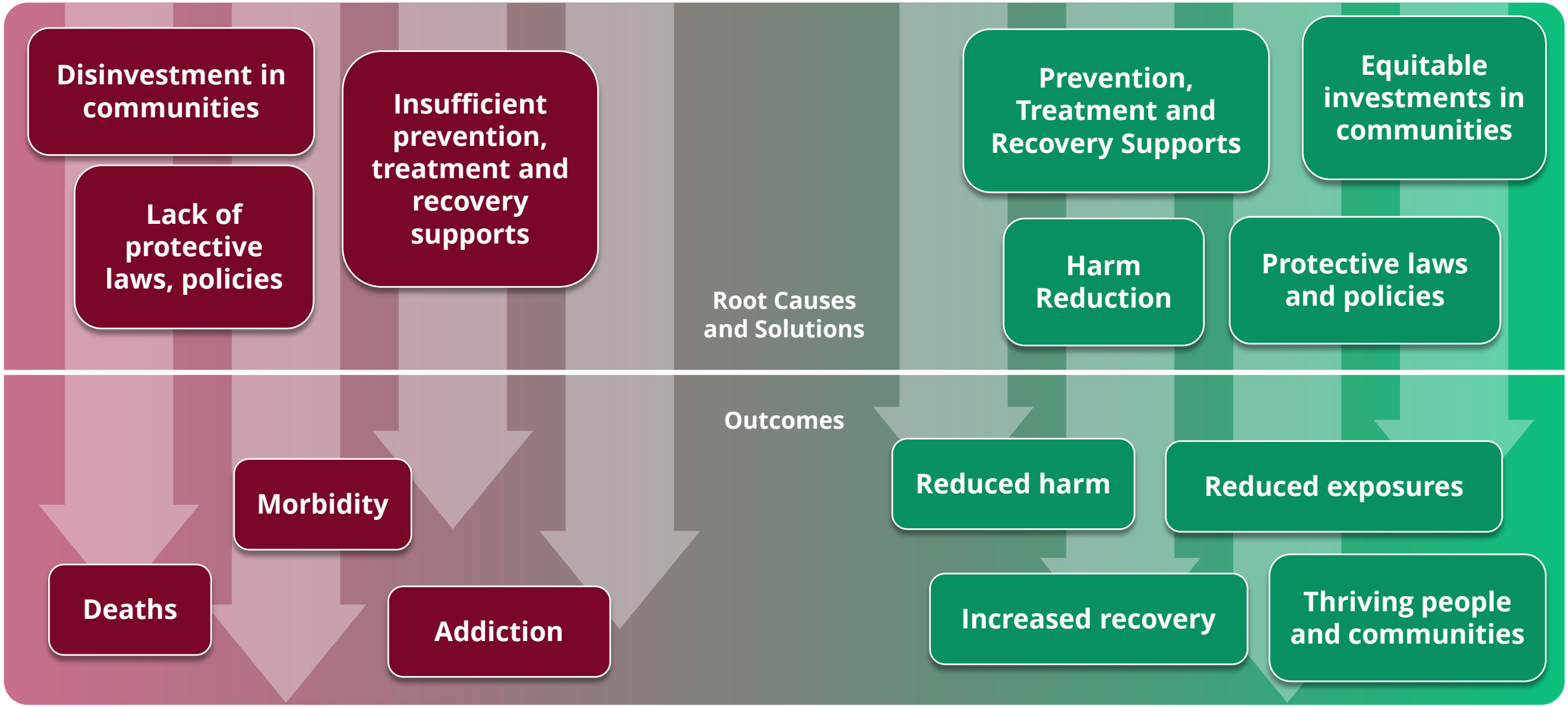
The Prime Directive

You cannot have a ***message strategy*** without an ***overall strategy.***

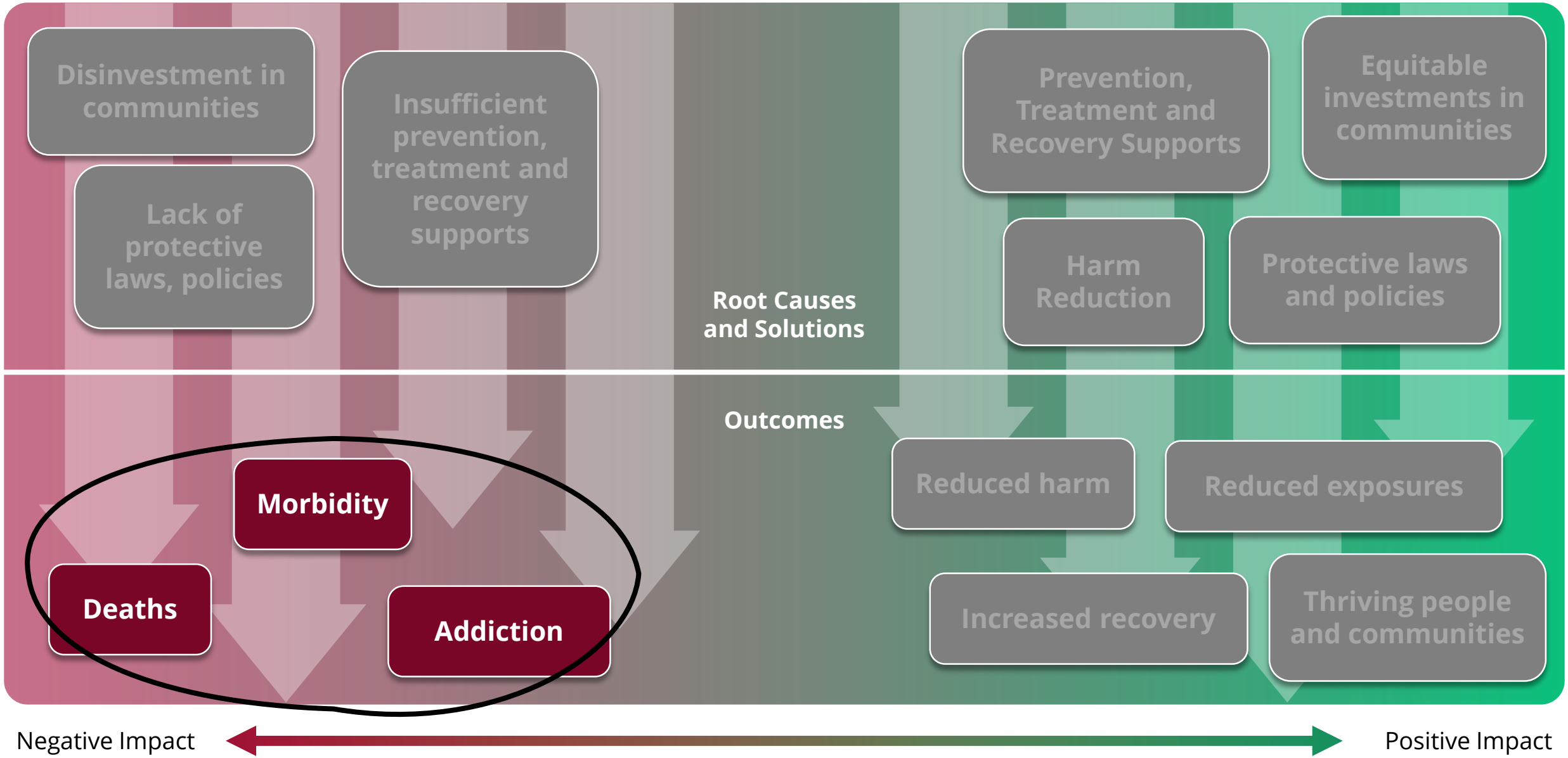
— Berkeley Media Studies Group

Can We Tell a Different Story?

Continuum of Causes, Solutions and Outcomes



Continuum of Causes, Solutions and Outcomes



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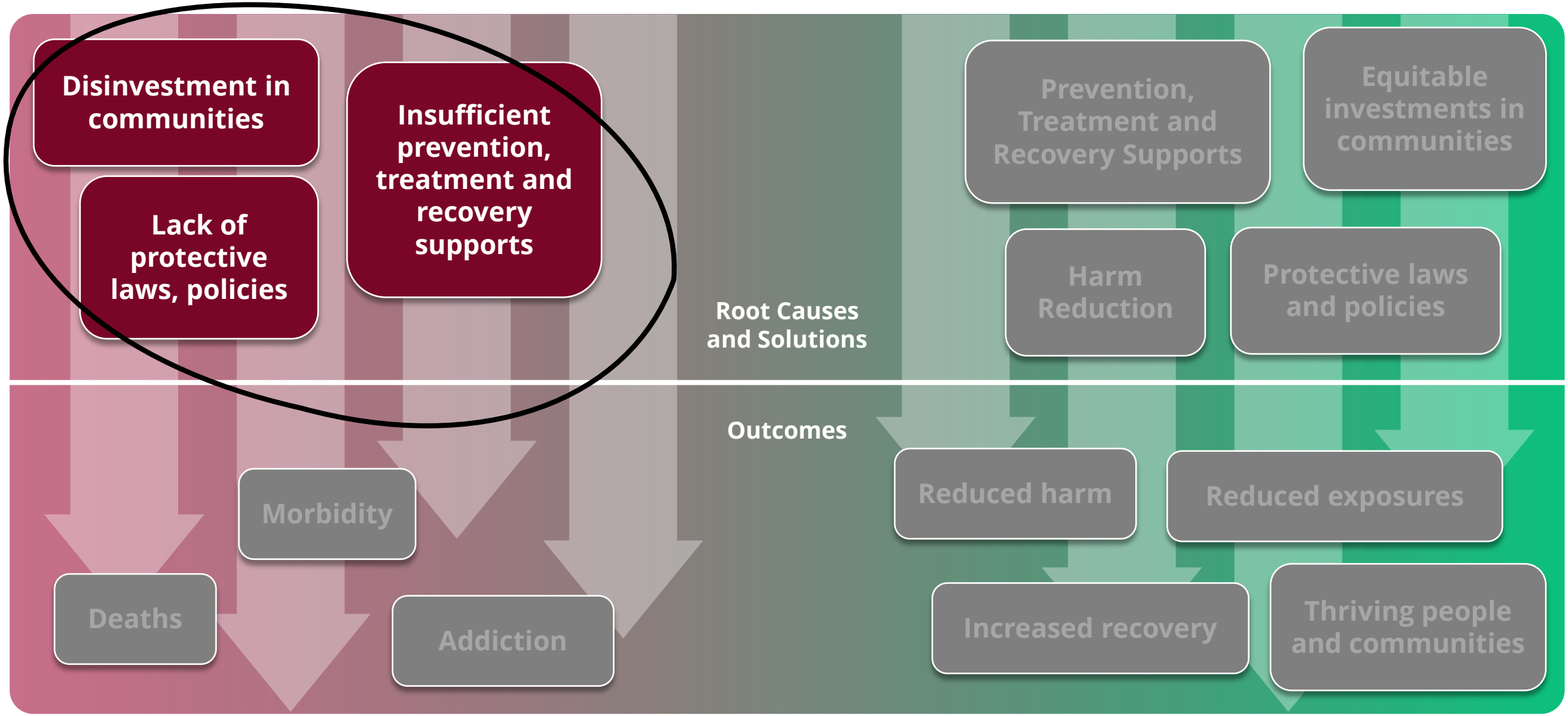

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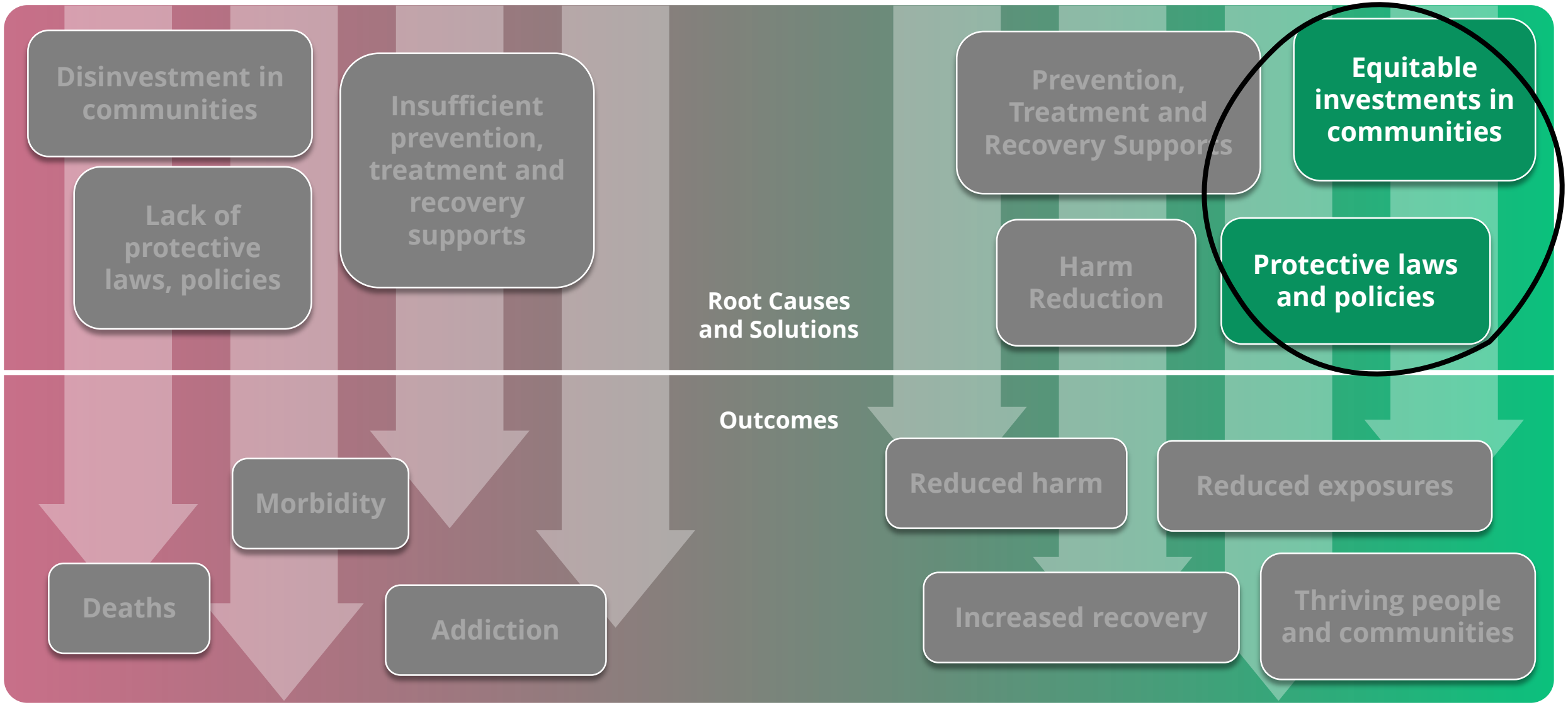

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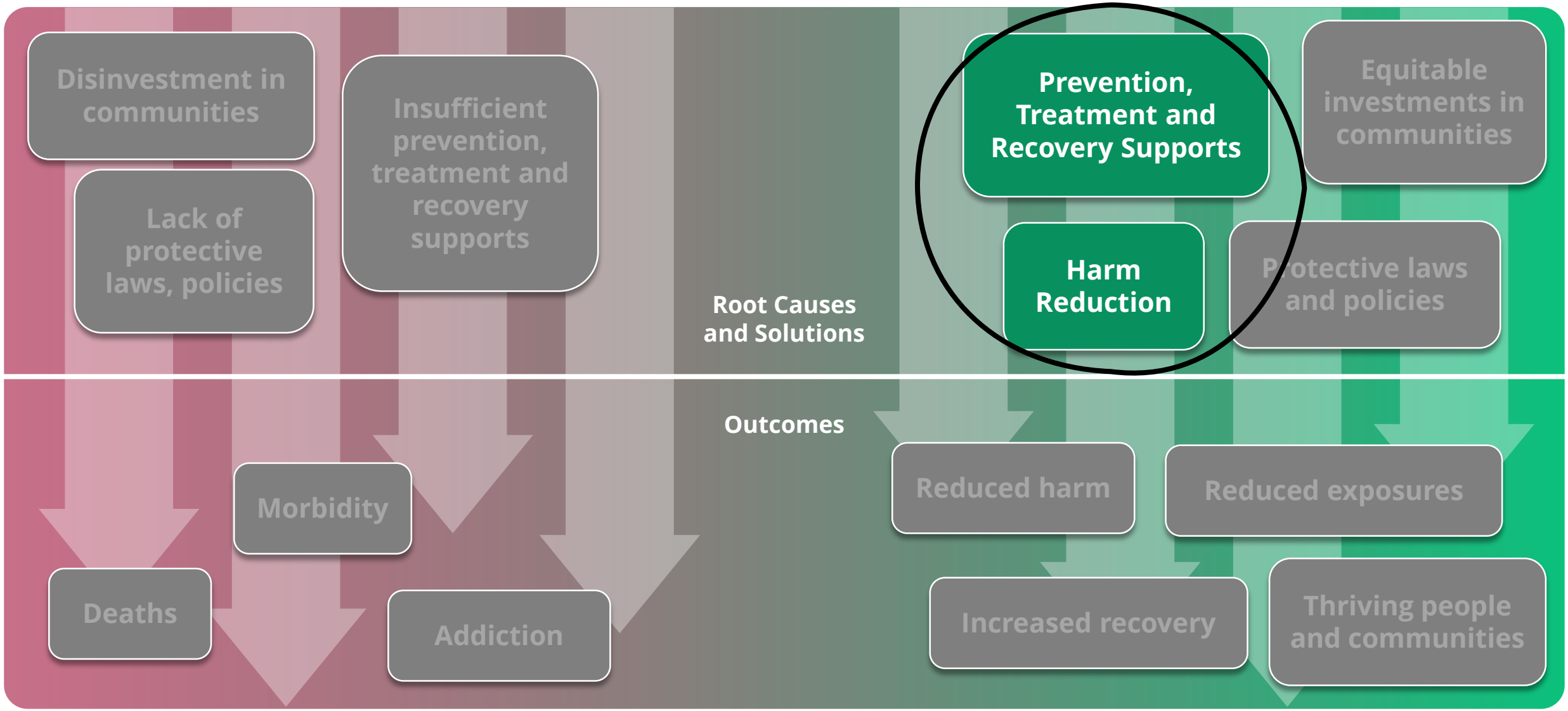

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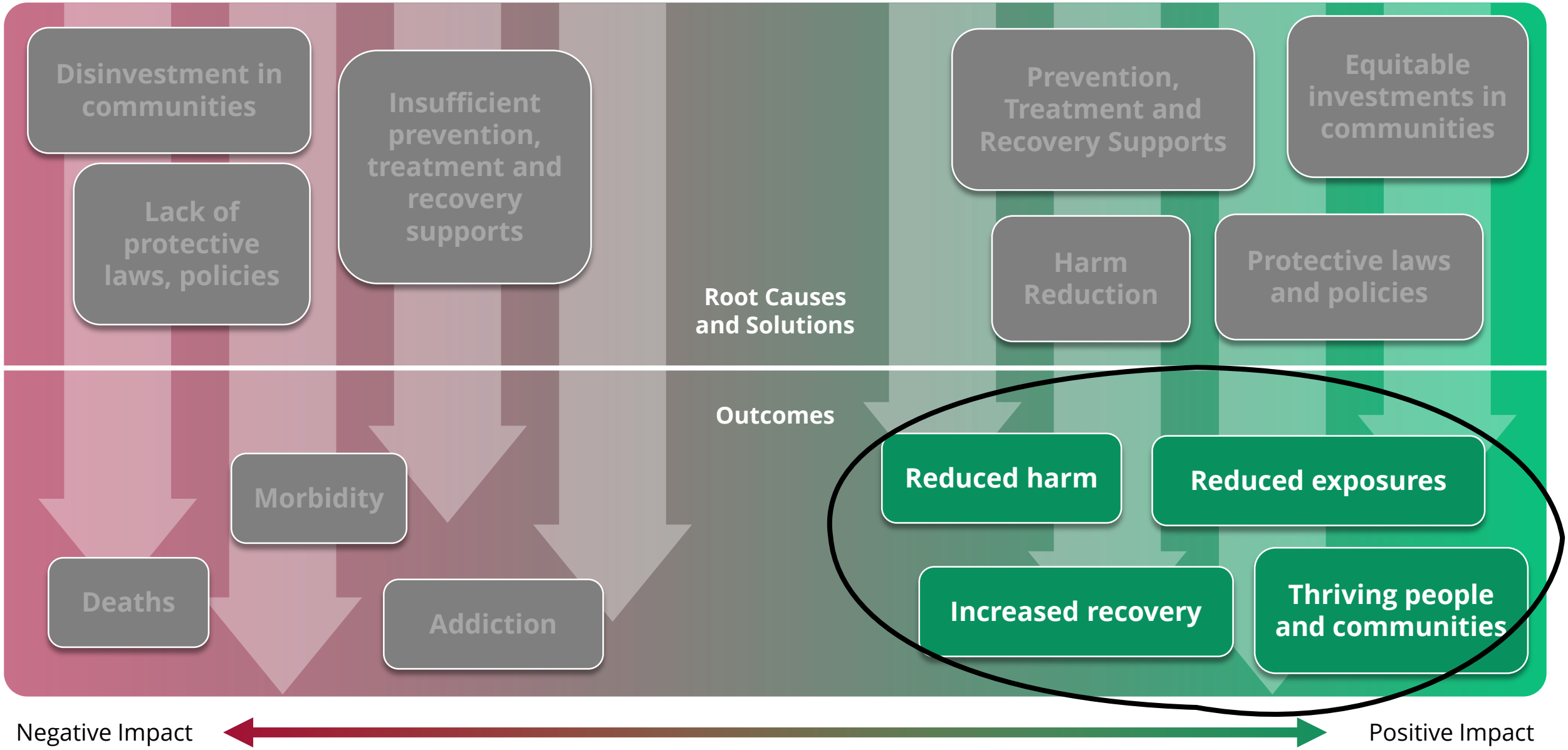


Telling the "Usual" Story

What: Problem-based stories, individual narratives of despair, often racially discriminatory

How:

- Sensationalized content
- Stigmatizing language and visuals
- Stereotypical narratives that often follow and reinforce racialized themes
- Common themes include criminality, community blight, moral failing, unsuspecting victim, hero (among others)
- Jargon and specialized terms; data-heavy
- Individualized story
- Primary focus on problem, lesser focus on solutions

Source: Clark, C. (2017): Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/07/05/how-sensationalism-compounds-the-opioid-crisis/

Telling a Different Story

What: Solutions-based stories: highlight full context, policies, prevention, treatment and recovery

How:

- Societal roles in cause and solution
- Public health approaches that illustrate paths forward
- Community-forward language
- Supportive visuals that reinforce *solution*
- Clear jargon-free vocabulary
- Contextualized data
- Perspectives often omitted
- Racially just stories

Source: Reporting on Addiction; Changing the Narrative, BMSG

How Do We Flip the Narrative?

Rather than **Beating the Odds**,

how do we convey the need to

Change the Odds?

Examples: Focusing On the Solution

Societal Cause and Solution

On January 13th, 2015, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously approved a measure that prohibits ads for alcohol on city-owned property, city–managed property, and buses.

“We see this as another step where you can really help us keep our children and community safe.

—Margot Bennett, executive director of Women Against Gun Violence, speaking in support of the ordinance

Source: Karlamangla, S. (2015): Los Angeles Times. https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-alcohol-ad-ban-20150120-story.html

Public Health Approaches: Reducing Harm

Source: Obbie, M. (2021). Solutions Journalism Network.
https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/the-power-of-asking-is-there-a-better-way-c8483ab4c9be

Public Health Approaches: Investing in Communities

Appalachian Regional Commission

ARC awarded funds for regional investment across ten states.

Sources: Moomey, L. (2021). 'So Appalachian communities can thrive.' $8.5M awarded for Eastern Kentucky projects. https://www.kentucky.com/news/state/kentucky/article254291693.html

Butler, J. (2017, August 17). Moving Upstream to Prevent Substance Misuse and Addictions: Primary Prevention in Action [Webinar]. ASTHO. https://www.astho.org/Programs/Prevention/2017-Presidents-Challenge/Session-3--Primary-Prevention-in-Action

SOAR Kentucky

Shaping Our Appalachian Region
"Blueprint for Appalachia" plan includes focus areas for progress:

- Regional food systems
- Regional tourism development
- Industrial development
- Healthy communities
- Small business in the digital economy
- Broadband infrastructure expansion
- A 21st century workforce

Community-forward Language

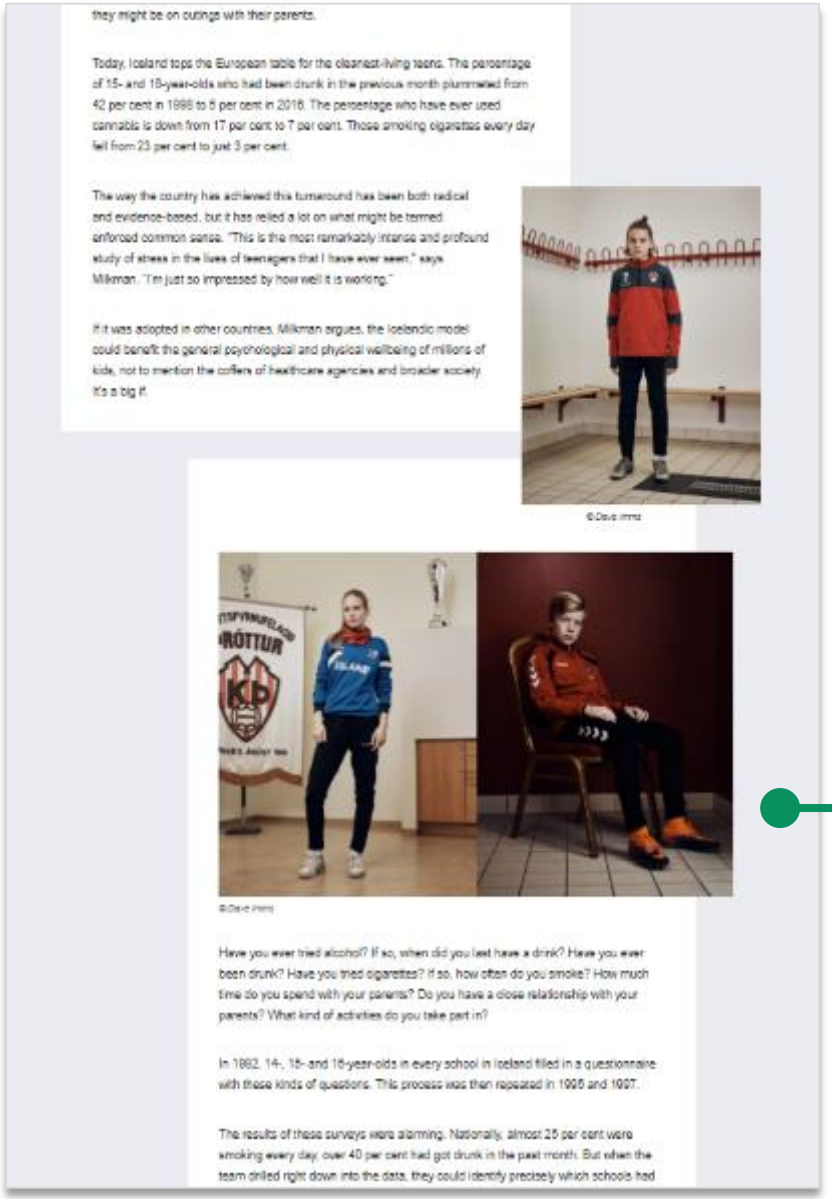
Good: Person living with a substance use disorder **less likely** to evoke **negative thoughts** (Kelly, Dow & Westerhoff et al, 2010)

Better: “Rooting cause [and solution] in a system we live in and a biology we share” (Dreyzehner and Kendall-Taylor, 2018)

Sources: Kelly, J. F., Dow, S. J., & Westerhoff, C. (2010). Does our choice of substance-related terms influence perceptions of treatment need? An empirical investigation with two commonly used terms. *Journal of Drug Issues*, *40*(4), 805-818.

Dreyzehner, J., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2018). Reframing America’s Opioid Epidemic to Find Solutions. Stanford Social Innovation Review. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/reframing_americas_opioid_epidemic_to_find_solutions#

Supportive Visuals That Reinforce Solution



they might be on outings with their parents.

Today, Iceland tops the European table for the cleanest-living teens. The percentage of 15- and 16-year-olds who had been drunk in the previous month plummeted from 42 per cent in 1998 to 5 per cent in 2016. The percentage who have ever used cannabis is down from 17 per cent to 7 per cent. Those smoking cigarettes every day fell from 23 per cent to just 3 per cent.

The way the country has achieved this turnaround has been both radical and evidence-based, but it has relied a lot on what might be termed enforced common sense. "This is the most remarkably intense and profound study of stress in the lives of teenagers that I have ever seen," says Milkman. "I'm just so impressed by how well it is working."

If it was adopted in other countries, Milkman argues, the Icelandic model could benefit the general psychological and physical wellbeing of millions of kids, not to mention the coffers of healthcare agencies and broader society. It's a big if.

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Have you ever tried alcohol? If so, when did you last have a drink? Have you ever been drunk? Have you tried cigarettes? If so, how often do you smoke? How much time do you spend with your parents? Do you have a close relationship with your parents? What kind of activities do you take part in?

In 1862, 14-, 15- and 16-year-olds in every school in Iceland filled in a questionnaire with these kinds of questions. This process was then repeated in 1995 and 1997.

The results of these surveys were alarming. Nationally, almost 25 per cent were smoking every day; over 40 per cent had got drunk in the past month. But when the team drilled right down into the data, they could identify precisely which schools had

> **We didn't say to them, you're coming in for treatment. We said, we'll teach you anything you want to learn: music, dance, hip hop, art, martial arts.**

Source: Young, E. Iceland knows how to stop teen substance abuse but the rest of the world isn't listening. Mosaic: https://mosaicscience.com/story/iceland-prevent-teen-substance-abuse/

Clear, Jargon-Free Vocabulary

Clear, Jargon-Free Vocabulary

***"Substance"* — What's the focus?**

- "Alcohol, prescription, and non-prescription drugs"
- "Prescription painkillers such as….."
- "Widely available, inexpensive, heavily marketed, extremely dangerous and addictive drugs such as….."

Clear, Jargon-Free Vocabulary

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- "Widely available, inexpensive, heavily marketed, extremely dangerous and addictive drugs such as….."

***"Substance use disorder"* — What's the problem?**

- "Alcohol, prescription and non-prescription drugs"
- "Disinvestment in communities, including…."
- "A range of problems related to drug and alcohol production, sales, marketing, and use that can culminate in addiction, injury, and/or death…"

Contextualize Data

> Each year 2,500 people die in Los Angeles County from alcohol-related causes, and approximately $10.8 billion — or $1,000 per resident — is spent annually on alcohol in the county, according to a 2011 report from the L.A. County Department of Public Health.

Source: Karlamangla, S. (2015): Los Angeles Times. https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-alcohol-ad-ban-20150120-story.html

Perspectives to Amplify

- Business persons and leaders
- Teachers/educators
- Community leaders
- Policymakers who work on issues “upstream” of SUD
- Agency representatives (including Public Health)
- Researchers
- Housing officials and landlords
- Economic development programs
- Religious leaders
- Community organizations working toward community investments
- People experiencing the issue speaking to root causes and opportunities
- Anyone with a solutions-based perspective generally not heard!

Ensure Racially Just Stories

Recommendations:

- Lift up local, racially-diverse voices who are describing conditions of racial inequity
- Collect better surveillance data – for instance, to track cases, deaths, and hospitalizations by race, gender, age, and geography
- Focus on solutions – for instance, getting support to those communities with the greatest need

Sources: Peñaloza, M. National Public Radio, September 10, 2021; Editorial Board, Georgetown Voice, June 2020.

Questions for New Stories

The “Usual” Questions

- Tell me about your experience with alcohol and drugs.
- How old were you when you started using drugs/alcohol?
- Did your family have a history of drug or alcohol use?

Community-Forward Questions

- What was it like growing up in your community?
- Tell me about what happened to jobs in your community over the last 20 years?
- How hard is it to rent or buy a house?
- How easy/hard is it to get treatment for drugs or alcohol?
- What kinds of things can kids do for fun? What should be available to them?
- What does your community need to fill these gaps?
- What investments can be made and what outcomes do you envision from them?

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Current framing of alcohol and drugs in the media and other narratives often tells a consistent story that is stigmatizing, reinforces harmful stereotypes, and is narrowly focused on individual-level behavior.
- ✓ Contextual, solutions-focused, community-forward framing can help the public imagine the needed systems-level/policy solutions for addressing alcohol and drug concerns in our communities.
- ✓ There are excellent resources available to help guide new, more productive narratives.

Developing a New Story?

*What are policy or programmatic solutions that have been attempted that could be the basis of stories and help people imagine the **full context and range of options** before us?*

The Solutions Journalism Network notes:

These solutions *need not have been successful*. They just need to advance understanding of societal causal and solutions contexts.

QUESTIONS?

To ask a question, please click the

icon in the Zoom toolbar to open your Q&A Pod.

A Chat with Marion Ceraso and Liana Winett

Allene Mares

Marion Ceraso

Liana Winett

Resources

Changing the Narrative, Health In Justice Action Lab, Northwestern University School of Law
https://www.changingthenarrative.news

FrameWorks Institute, Substance Use and Addiction
https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/issues/substance-use-and-addiction/
https://ssir.org/articles/entry/reframing_americas_opioid_epidemic_to_find_solutions#

Reporting on Addiction
https://www.reportingonaddiction.org

Solutions Journalism Network
https://solutionsu.solutionsjournalism.org/welcome

Berkeley Media Studies Group
5 steps public health can take to tell the health equity story of opioid use
http://www.bmsg.org/blog/5-steps-public-health-can-take-tell-health-equity-story-opioid-use/

Netherland, J., & Hansen, H. B. (2016). The war on drugs that wasn't: Wasted whiteness, "dirty doctors," and race in media coverage of prescription opioid misuse. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, *40*(4), 664-686:
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5501419/