# A NEW PARADIGM FOR SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE:

Five takeaways to win the safety narrative and counter the GOP's "tough-on-crime" playbook

February 2026

**Vera** ACTION

Crime is a kitchen table issue for American voters. Everyone wants to feel and be safe.

Under the guise of "crime control," the Trump administration is conducting mass ICE raids and running roughshod over due process and the Constitution—all while cutting the programs and services that prevent crime in the first place and break its cycle.

The American public wants elected leaders to offer real solutions that are serious about safety, not empty tough-on-crime scare tactics.

Democrats have a unique opportunity to go on offense and build credibility on an issue that has historically been a liability for the party.
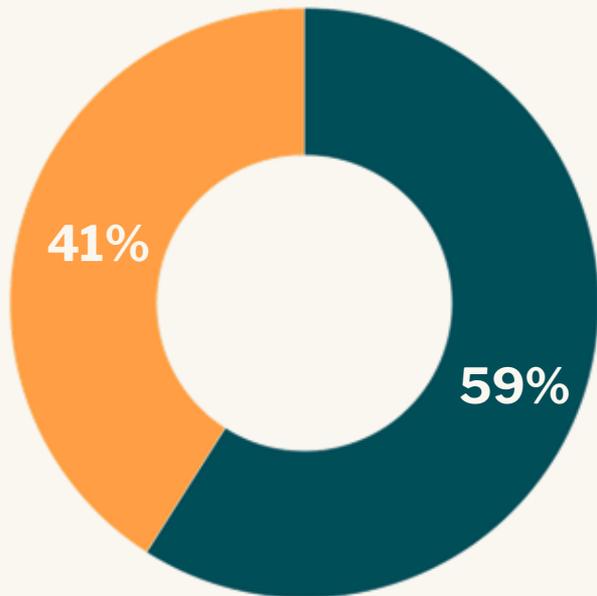
**Here are five takeaways on how to do it.**

## TAKEAWAY #1

The conventional political wisdom about crime is out of sync with what voters want—a majority, including Independents, favor a "serious about safety" approach over a "tough-on-crime" one.

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# When given a choice between being "tough on crime" or "serious about safety," voters heavily favor preventing crime and breaking its cycle

**Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?**



41%

59%

**[TOUGH]**: We should do more to get tough on crime—like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people in jail, and providing police with more support and resources.

**[SERIOUS]**: We should fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities—like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing—and help prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and by getting illegal guns off the street.

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Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

# Other than Republicans, almost every voting bloc—including white voters and Independents—favors a "serious about safety" approach

**Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?**

**[TOUGH]**: We should do more to get tough on crime—like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people in jail, and providing police with more support and resources.

**[SERIOUS]:** We should fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities—like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing—and help prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and by getting illegal guns off the street.
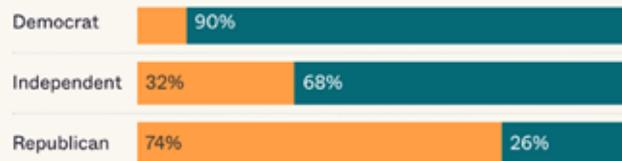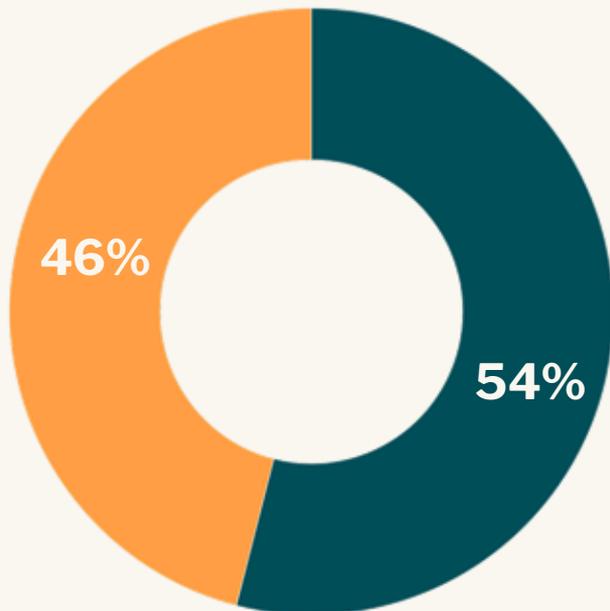
**Age**

| | TOUGH | SERIOUS |
|---|---|---|
| 18-44 | 24.5% | 75.5% |
| 44+ | 50% | 50% |

**Race**

| | TOUGH | SERIOUS |
|---|---|---|
| White | 46% | 54% |
| Black | 17% | 83% |
| Latino | 30% | 70% |
| Other | 43% | 57% |

**Party ID**

| | TOUGH | SERIOUS |
|---|---|---|
| Democrat | 10% | 90% |
| Independent | 32% | 68% |
| Republican | 74% | 26% |

Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

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# Being "serious" isn't soft on crime or dismissive of accountability— instead it emphasizes remorse, repair, and change over strict punishment

**Even if it isn't exactly right, which of the following come closest to your view?**

46%

54%

**[TOUGH]:** We need to make sure that people who break the law are held accountable by enforcing strict punishment. If you do the crime, you should do the time, and that means serving the full sentence. Offenders shouldn't be able to get out of jail or prison early simply because they complete programs or have a good track record behind bars.
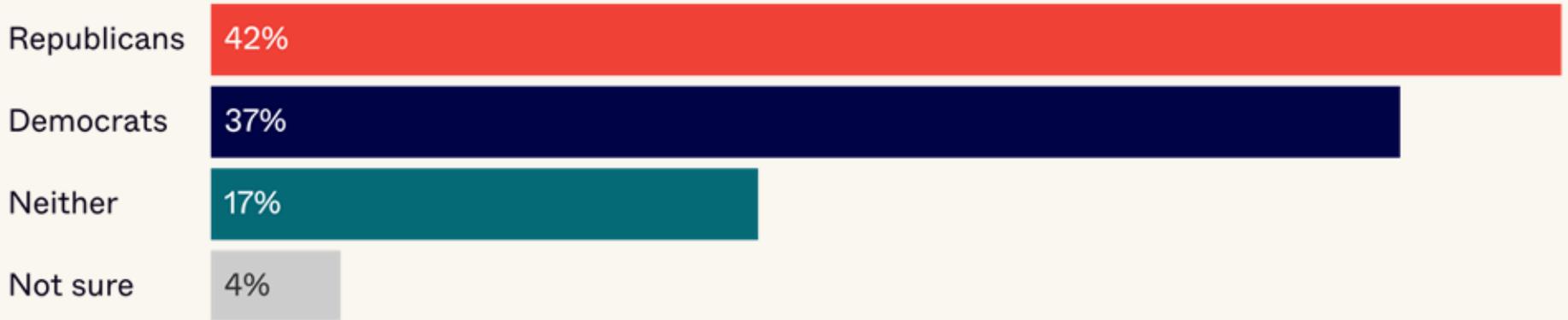
**[SERIOUS]:** To make communities safe, people who break the law must be held accountable. This means seeing the harm they've done, accepting the consequences, learning from mistakes, and changing their behavior. Harsh punishment and long sentences alone lead to more violence. We need to provide people with programs that work to turn their lives around and prevent future crime.

Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

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## TAKEAWAY #2

**Voters trust Trump and the GOP slightly more on crime—largely because they dominate the debate. Democrats, by contrast, stay relatively silent and get branded as "soft" and "weak."**

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# Even though the GOP leads by 5 points on crime, they remain underwater overall—and almost one in five voters say they trust neither party

**If you had to choose, which party would you say you trust more when it comes to the issue of crime?**

| Party | |
|---|---|
| Republicans | 42% |
| Democrats | 37% |
| Neither | 17% |
| Not sure | 4% |

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Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

# When Democrats adopt a "serious about safety" platform, they win voter trust by 13 points compared to a "tough-on-crime" approach
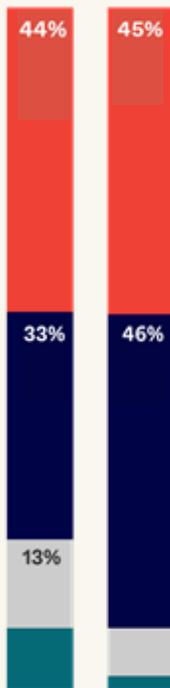
**Based on the following statements, which candidate for office would you trust more?**

🟥 **[TOUGH REP]:** "I'm a Republican who stands on the side of law and order. That means having longer sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people behind bars, and providing police with more support and resources."

🟦 **[TOUGH DEM]:** "I'm a Democrat who is tough on crime. That means more cops on the beat and tough action against hardened criminals and gang members. We should increase police funding and invest in new technologies like predictive policing, not defunding the police."

⬜ Not sure

🟦 Would not vote

🟥 **[TOUGH REP]:** "I'm a Republican who is tough on crime. That means having longer sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people behind bars, and providing police with more support and resources."

🟦 **[SERIOUS DEM]:** "I'm a Democrat who is serious about safety. That means fully funding things that are proven to create safe communities–like good schools, jobs and affordable housing–and preventing crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street."
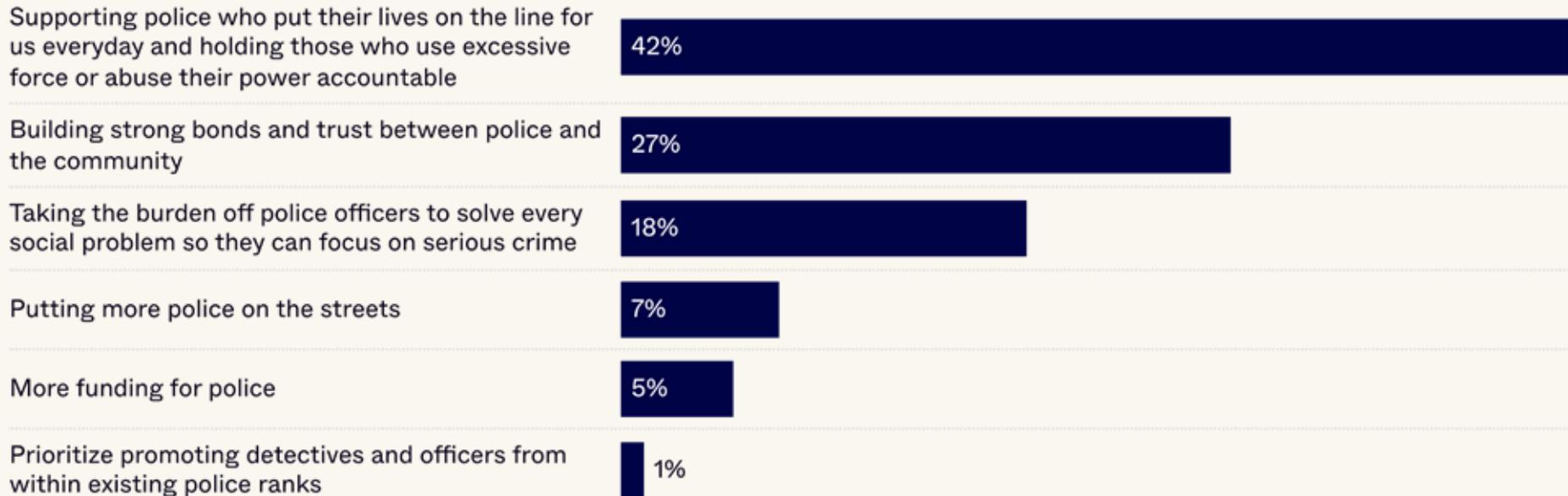
⬜ Not sure

🟦 Would not vote

**Chart (left bar):** 44% / 33% / 13%

**Chart (right bar):** 45% / 46%

## TAKEAWAY #3

**After seeing Trump advance authoritarianism under the guise of crime control, Americans are rejecting "tough on crime" tactics and increasingly calling for real solutions and accountability.**
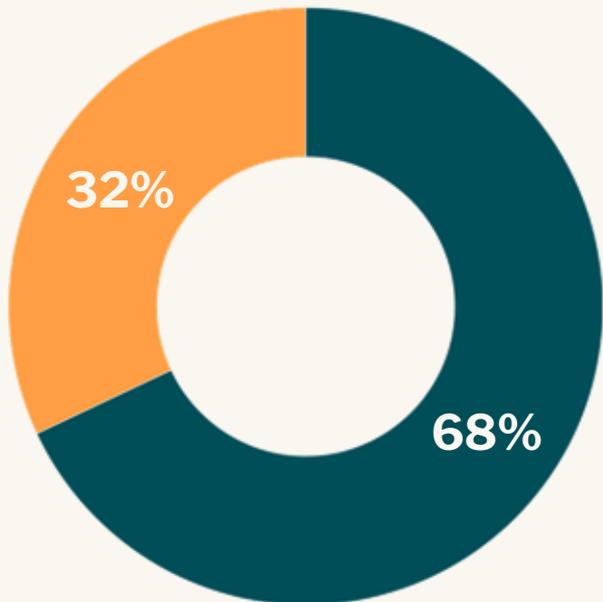
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# Instead of debating police budgets and department sizes, lead with "strong, accountable policing"—the message favored by most voters

**Which of the following statements do you most support, even if none is exactly right?**

| Statement | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Supporting police who put their lives on the line for us everyday and holding those who use excessive force or abuse their power accountable | 42% |
| Building strong bonds and trust between police and the community | 27% |
| Taking the burden off police officers to solve every social problem so they can focus on serious crime | 18% |
| Putting more police on the streets | 7% |
| More funding for police | 5% |
| Prioritize promoting detectives and officers from within existing police ranks | 1% |

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Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

# Even in a head-to-head forced choice question, a message of "strong, accountable policing" beats "unleash the police" by 36 points

**Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?**



32%

68%

**[TOUGH]:** Police officers put their lives on the line for us everyday. They work high-stress jobs and make split-second life-or-death decisions. We cannot handcuff them by second-guessing every move. The hostile climate for police has discouraged proactive police work. We can't expect the police to keep us safe if we aren't willing to keep them safe.

**[SERIOUS]:** Police officers are public servants who play an important role in public safety and deserve support to do their jobs well. But with that authority comes responsibility: officers must be held accountable when they abuse their power or break the law. Investing in higher case clearance rates, fast police response times, and tools to solve serious crimes—alongside strong accountability—builds trust and makes communities safer.

Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

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## As violence by federal agents unfolds in Minneapolis and elsewhere, we have a unique opportunity to reframe the debate about policing

**Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following is closer to your view?**

**43%**

**[TOUGH]:** We need an approach that is tough on crime and preserves law and order. But too many politicians are siding with illegal aliens, career criminals, and violent rioters over law enforcement officers. We should cut federal funding to "sanctuary cities" that release dangerous criminals onto our streets. While some radical politicians want to let unvetted illegals pour into our country, vilify brave ICE agents, and defund the police, it's up to responsible federal authorities to step in, stop the madness, and restore our safety and security.
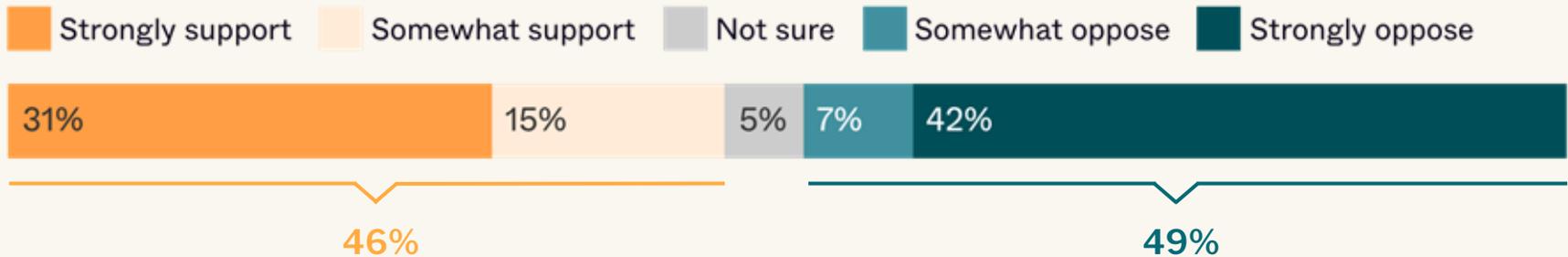
**57%**

**[SERIOUS]:** We urgently need a new approach to law enforcement in our country. We should support our officers to do the difficult jobs they're tasked to do and demand accountability when they abuse their power or break the law. From the murder of George Floyd five years ago to Renee Good and Alex Pretti today, police and ICE brutality are undermining trust between law enforcement and the communities they are supposed to serve. We cannot continue to spend billions on law enforcement agencies whose actions are making our neighborhoods and communities less safe. We must rein in abusive law enforcement practices and invest in a new approach that prevents crime and breaks its cycle.

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## TAKEAWAY #4

**The extreme actions by this administration in Minneapolis and elsewhere have shifted public opinion, opening the door to calling out Trump's actions as making us *less* safe and *less* secure.**
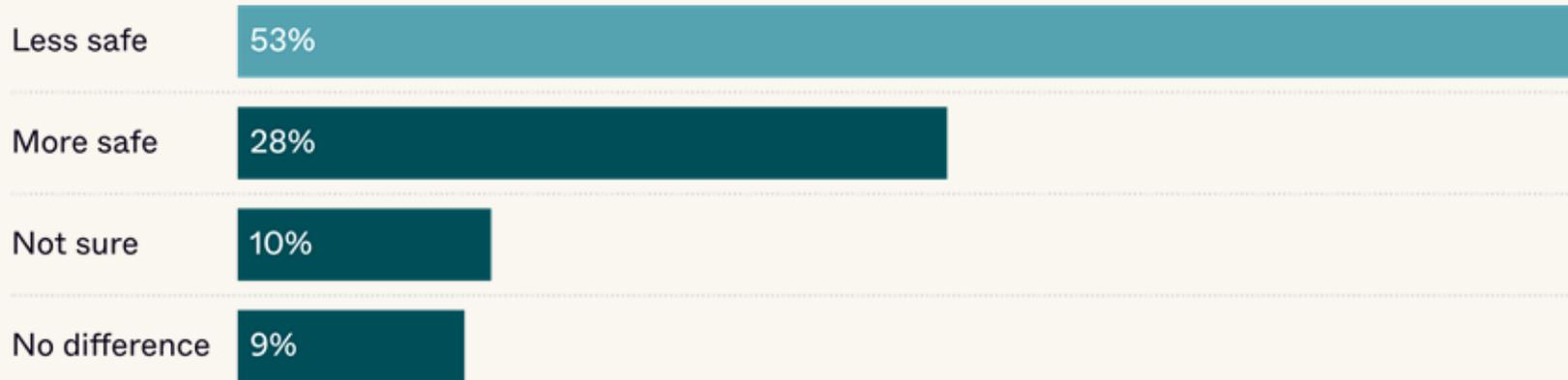
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# Support and opposition for federal agents being deployed to cities breaks down along partisan lines—but opposition is more intense than support

**Do you support or oppose federal agents, including ICE, the National Guard, and the military, being deployed to American cities?**

Legend: ■ Strongly support   ■ Somewhat support   ■ Not sure   ■ Somewhat oppose   ■ Strongly oppose

| 31% | 15% | 5% | 7% | 42% |

Strongly + Somewhat support: **46%**

Somewhat + Strongly oppose: **49%**

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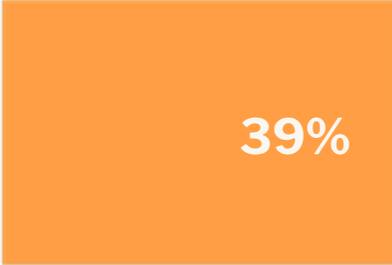Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

# A majority of voters believe that ICE in Minneapolis made people less safe—and only 55 percent of GOP voters said ICE made people more safe

The federal government has deployed armed immigration and border agents to Minnesota as part of Operation Metro Surge. **Do you believe actions by agents there generally made people:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Less safe | 53% |
| More safe | 28% |
| Not sure | 10% |
| No difference | 9% |

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Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

# A safety-focused immigration message that calls out the excesses of ICE enforcement beats a "tough-on-crime" attack by 20+ points

**When it comes to federal agencies like ICE, which of the following comes closest to your view, even if neither is exactly right?**

**39%**

**[TOUGH]:** Radical open border policies, soft-on-crime politicians, and dangerous sanctuary cities have made our country less safe. Law-abiding Americans have nothing to fear from agencies like ICE. The only people who should be afraid are illegal aliens, career criminals, and radicals who try to obstruct federal law enforcement officers. We should stand up for the silent majority of American citizens who obey the law and the officers who keep us safe and free.
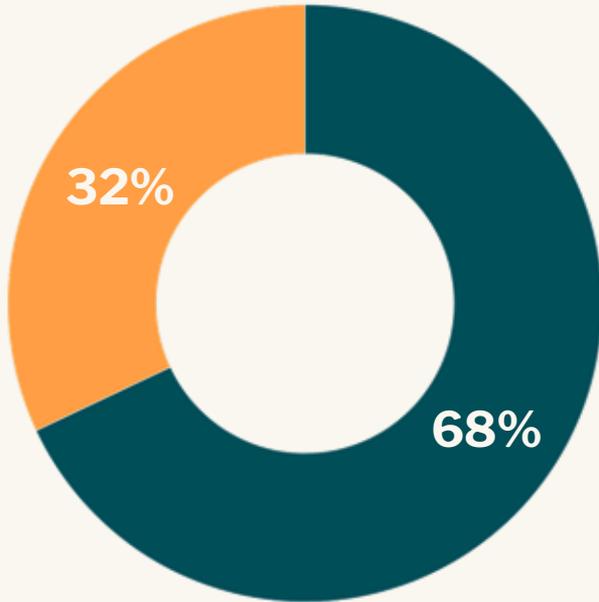
**61%**

**[SERIOUS]:** Public safety is built on a foundation of trust. It makes us less safe and erodes trust when ICE rounds up immigrants and even U.S. citizens in mass raids, intimidates protestors with tear gas and rubber bullets, and shoots and kills innocent people who they claim get in their way. It's time for ICE to stop terrorizing our cities and for Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform that reins in ICE funding, imposes accountability, and creates a secure border and a path to citizenship.

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Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

**TAKEAWAY #5**

**Even on the contentious issues of public disorder, addiction, homelessness, and drugs, a "serious about safety" approach beats a "tough-on-crime" message by 20+ points.**

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# Responding to fearmongering about public disorder, homelessness, and mental illness by turning the debate to safety solutions wins by 30+ points

**Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?**



32%

68%

**[TOUGH]:** All people who commit a crime—no matter how minor—should receive a strong police response, be arrested, and face punishment. We need to take back our streets from the mentally ill and the drug addicted. Allowing soft-on-crime responses weakens the rule of law, excuses criminal behavior, and erodes public order.

**[SERIOUS]:** When people are experiencing a mental health crisis or struggling with addiction, they should be met by trained mental health professionals—not police—who can connect them to treatment and services. Addressing the root causes of these crises helps prevent future crime, disorder, and repeat offenses.

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Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

# Even on drugs and addiction, turning the debate from "dangerous choices" to a "serious about safety" approach again beats the attack by 30+ points

**Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?**

**33%**

**[TOUGH]:** Taxpayers' money should not be used to purchase opioid reversal drugs like Narcan or drug test strips. Using taxpayer dollars this way normalizes illegal drug use and enables dangerous choices instead of discouraging them. That's not compassion, it's reckless and traps people in a cycle of destruction.

**67%**

**[SERIOUS]:** Public funding should be used to save lives during the opioid epidemic, including purchasing opioid reversal drugs like Narcan and test strips for first responders. These tools prevent overdoses, keep people alive, and give people a chance to get treatment and recover.

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Source: YouGov January 2026 national survey commissioned by Vera Action

# A "safety, accountability, and justice" policy agenda to ground messages in real solutions that appeal to American voters across the spectrum

1. **Strong, accountable policing**
   Increase case clearance rates, speed up 911 response times, and build community trust and accountability

2. **Ending the overdose epidemic**
   Increase access to treatment and prioritize evidence-backed solutions (e.g., easy access to Narcan)

3. **Supporting strong mental health and de-escalating crisis**
   Expand school- and community-based treatment options, mobile crisis response, and 911 mental health calls

4. **Tackling gun violence**
   Launch gun trafficking task forces, expand CVI, and build trauma recovery centers

5. **Safe streets and a good quality of life**
   Replicate housing command center model, invest in placemaking, and expand ambassador programs

6. **Fairer, more accountable justice system**
   Expand second chance programs, invest in alternatives to incarceration, and protect common-sense reforms

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# A "serious about safety" approach works for elected leaders from across the Democratic spectrum, diverse geographies, and different offices

**Congresswoman**

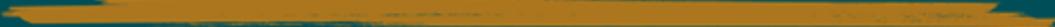**Summer Lee**

*PA-12*

**Senator**

**Tammy Baldwin**

*WI*

**Mayor**

**Brandon Scott**

*Baltimore*

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