

WINNING WISCONSIN'S VOTERS ON SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY & JUSTICE

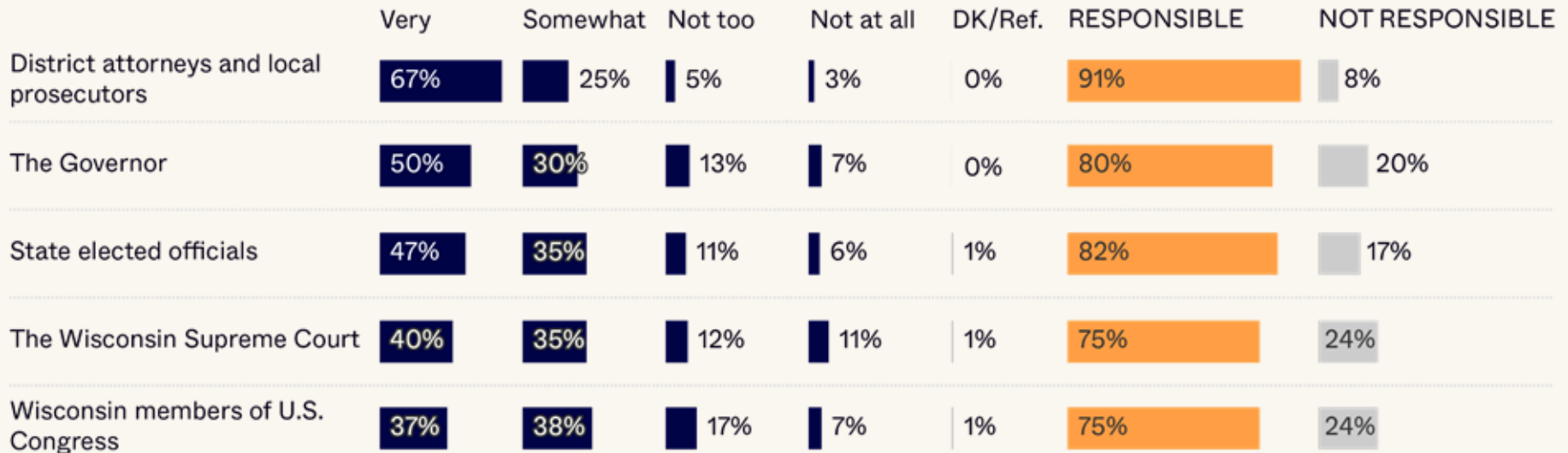
Messaging and policy takeaways from public opinion research
on what Wisconsin voters bring to the ballot box on crime and public safety

February 2026

Vera ACTION

Even though it's not a significant part of a SCOWIS judge's responsibility, WI voters think the Court is responsible for crime and public safety

How responsible do you think each position is for improving safety and reducing crime in Wisconsin?



The GOP knows this and spent heavily on crime in recent SCOWIS races

milwaukee journal sentinel

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ELECTIONS

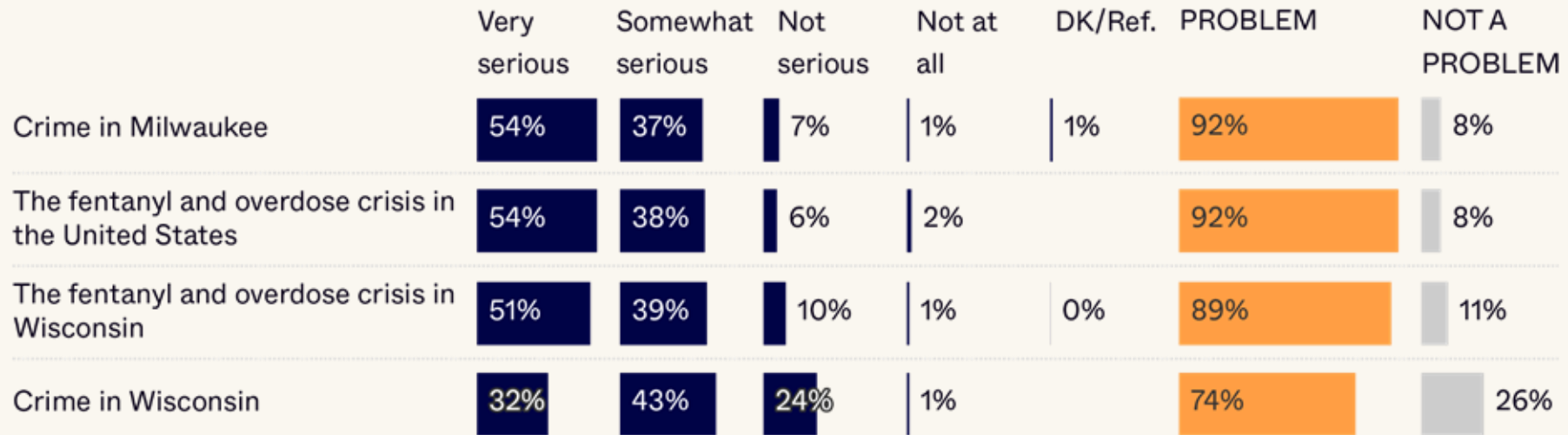
Crime-related TV ads consumed \$27 million of spending in the Wisconsin Supreme Court race

Daniel Bice and Alison Dirr Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Updated April 10, 2025, 8:15 a.m. CT

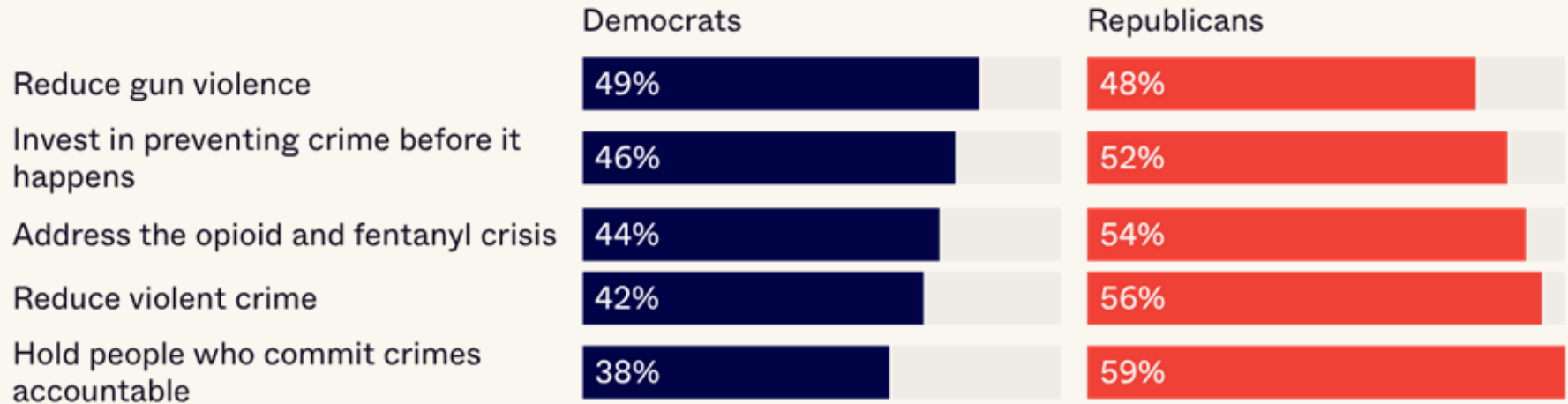
While crime is not the top issue, it lurks below the surface as one of the biggest vulnerabilities for Democrats and advantages for Republicans

How serious of a problem is each of the below?



The GOP's historic advantage is about brand perception—and Democrats can fill the trust gap by leaning into safety, accountability, and justice

Which political party do you trust more to handle each issue?



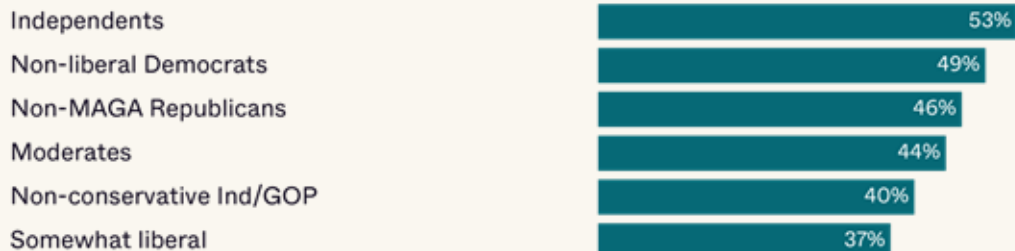
THE OPPORTUNITY:

“Safety” swing voters are 28% of the WI general electorate and are up for the taking—they don’t trust either Democrats or the GOP on crime.

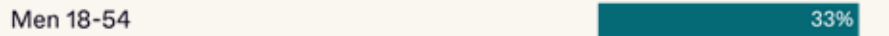
Profile of the Wisconsin “safety” swing voter

Of the following voting blocs, “safety” swing voters comprise:

Center-Left Voters



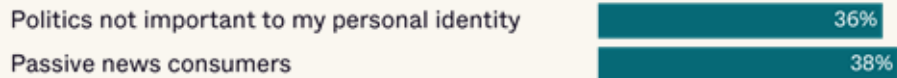
Voters 18-44



Milwaukee County



Low-Engagement Voters



TAKEAWAY #1

There is a clear trend in WI—Democratic and Independent voters favor a “serious about safety” approach over a “tough-on-crime” one.

Among the 2026 WI general electorate, Democratic and Independent voters favor a “serious about safety” approach over “tough on crime”

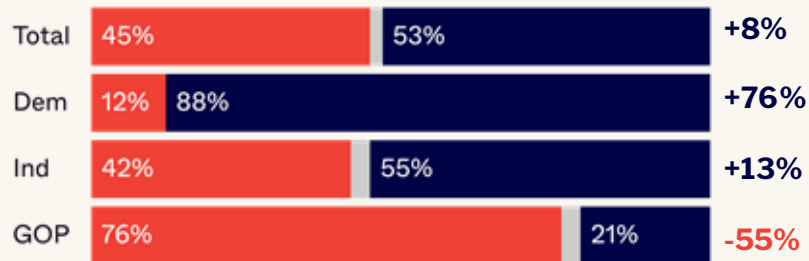
Which do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right in your opinion?

[TOUGH ON CRIME] 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.

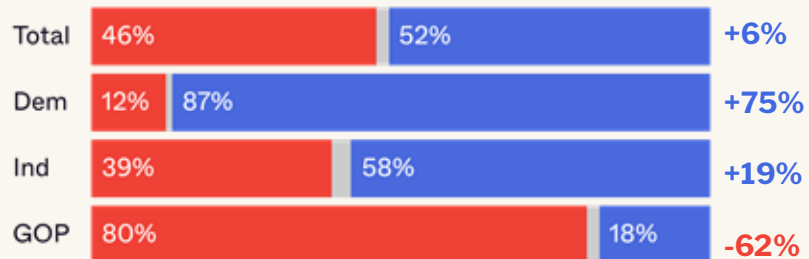
[SPLIT: SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY] We should fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities—like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing—and help prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and by getting illegal guns off the street.

[SPLIT: AFFORDABILITY] Safety and affordability go hand in hand. Preventing crime means fully investing in the things that create affordable, safe communities and increase everyone’s quality of life like good schools, living-wage jobs, affordable housing, and mental health and addiction treatment.

TOUGH VS. SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY



TOUGH VS. SAFETY & AFFORDABILITY



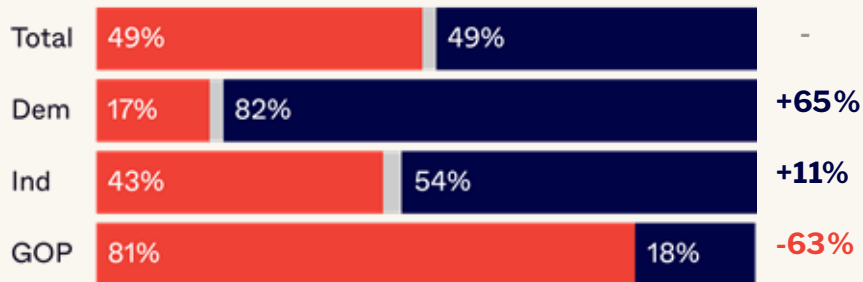
The lean towards a “serious” approach over a “tough” one has grown since Trump came into office—by 8 percentage points even among GOP voters

Which do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right in your opinion?

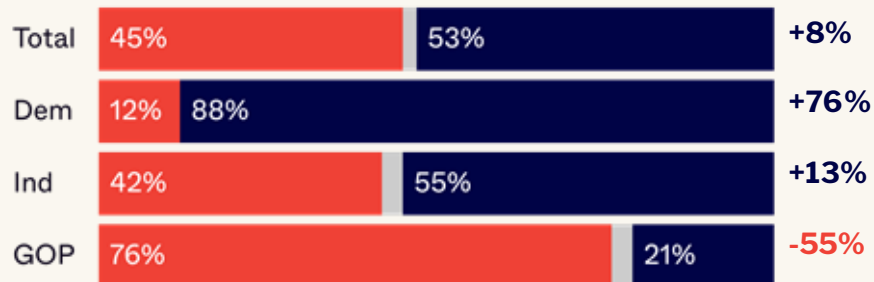
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July 2024



January 2026



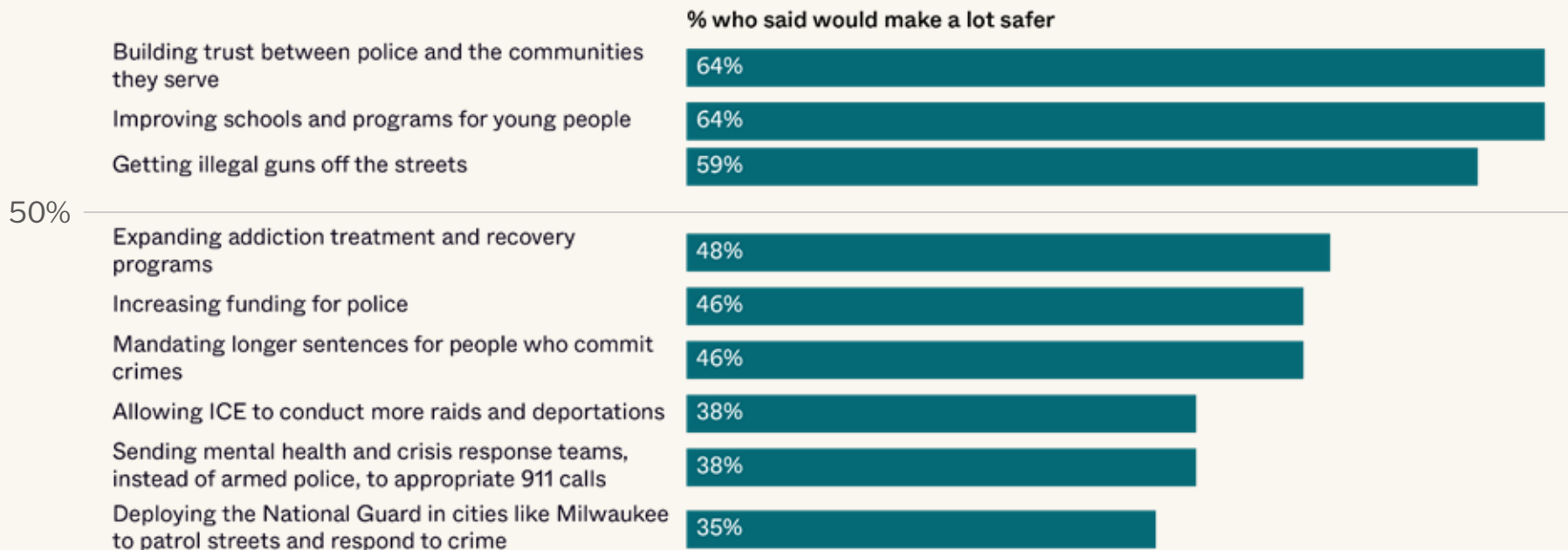
TAKEAWAY #2

Democrats shouldn't wait to be defined as soft—
in contrast to Trump's overreach under the
guise of crime control, Democrats can own the
debate with “safety, accountability, and justice.”

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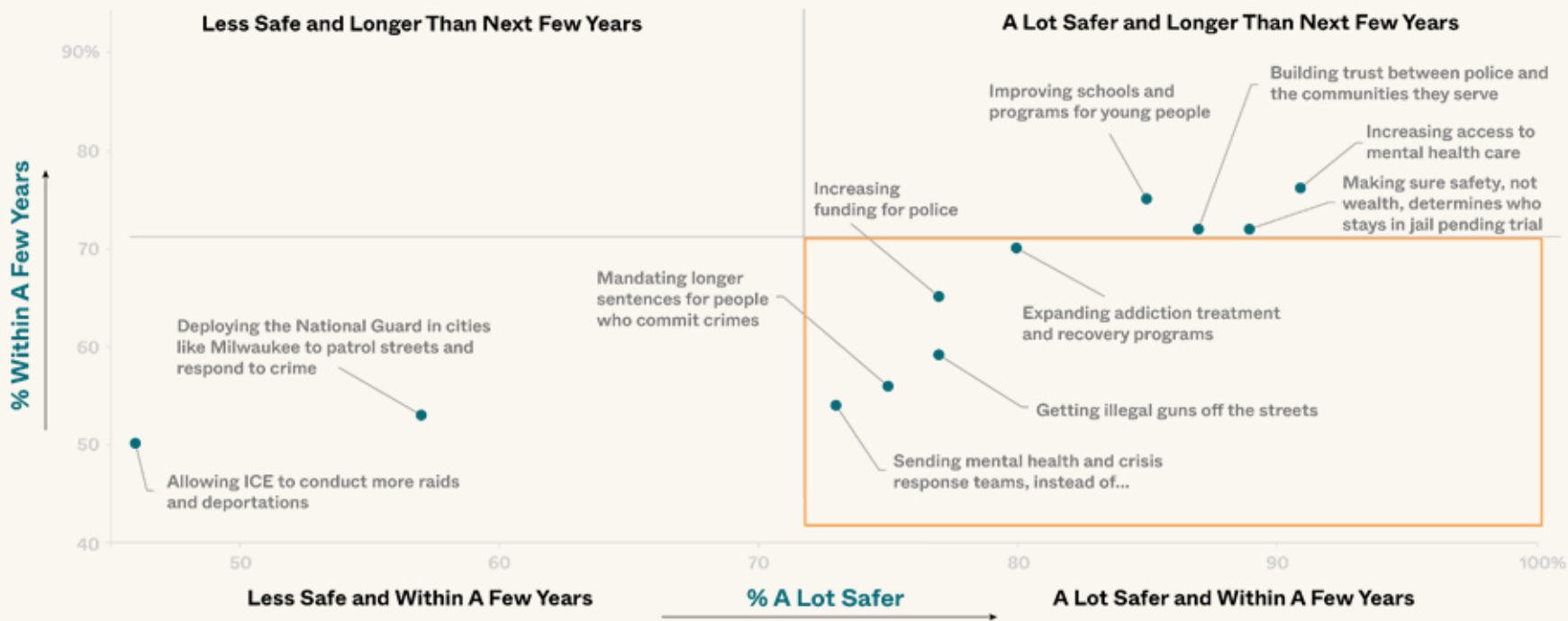
The authoritarian tactics that Trump and the GOP are relying on—ICE raids, deploying the National Guard—are under water with WI voters

Here is a list of things that some people say could improve safety in communities. What impact do you think each would have on safety in Wisconsin?



Voters see solutions such as treatment programs and crisis response as more immediately impactful than some traditional “tough” measures

How safe does the following measure make communities and how long will it take?



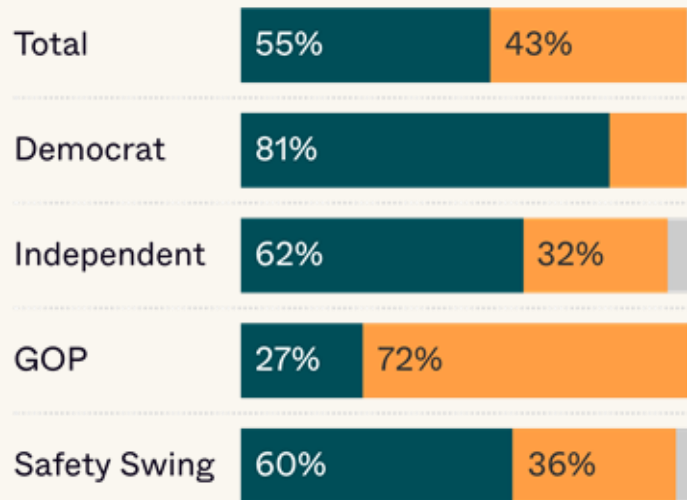
Owning “accountability” with a message of “repair and change” wins by 10+ percentage points over the “lock ‘em up” approach of the GOP

Which statement do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right in your opinion?

[REHABILITATION] To make communities safer, 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. We need to provide people with programs that work to turn their lives around and prevent future crime.

[DO THE CRIME, DO THE TIME] We need to enforce strict punishments to ensure people who break the law are held accountable. 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.

Don’t know/refused



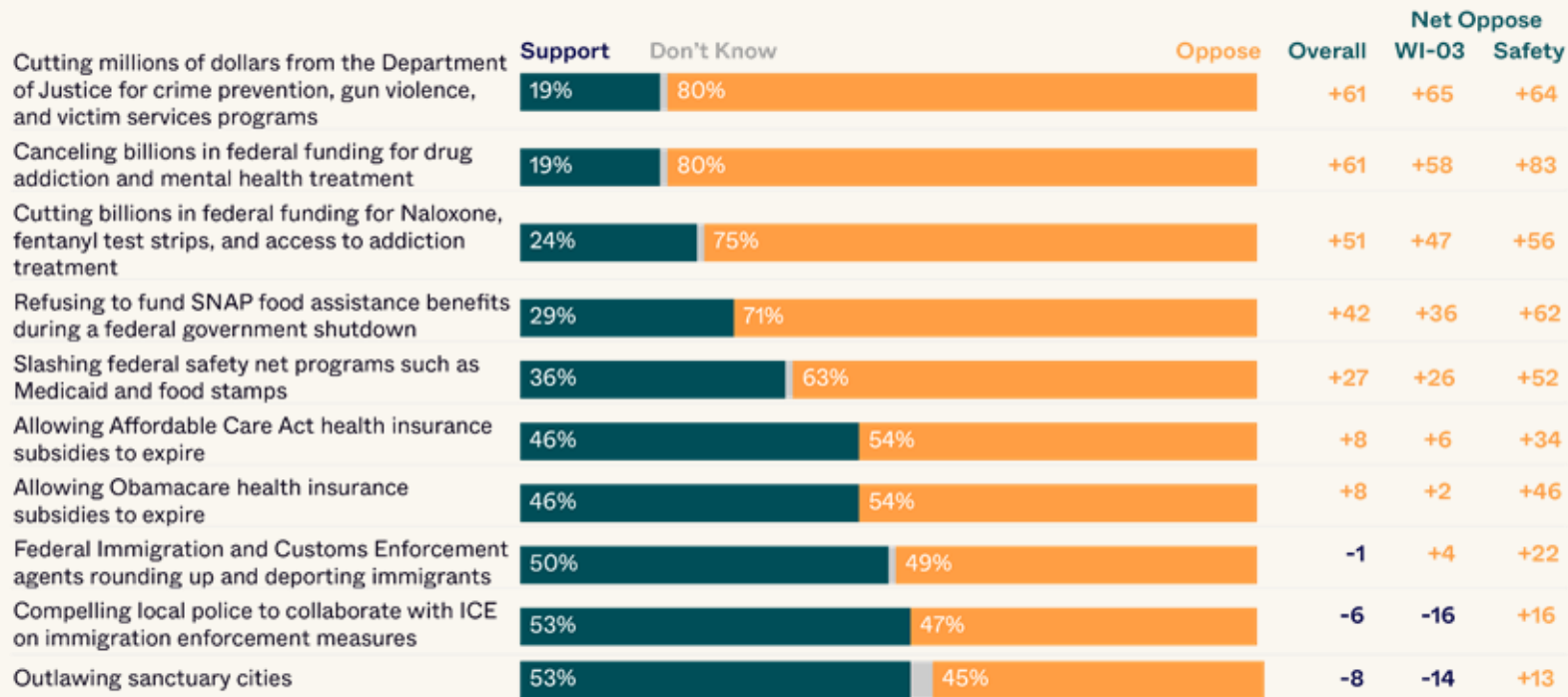
TAKEAWAY #3

Democrats should go on offense and attack Trump and the GOP's actions as making communities *less safe and less affordable*.

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A majority oppose Trump's funding cuts—and “safety” swing targets oppose funding cuts *and* anti-healthcare and anti-immigration policies

Which statement do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right in your opinion?



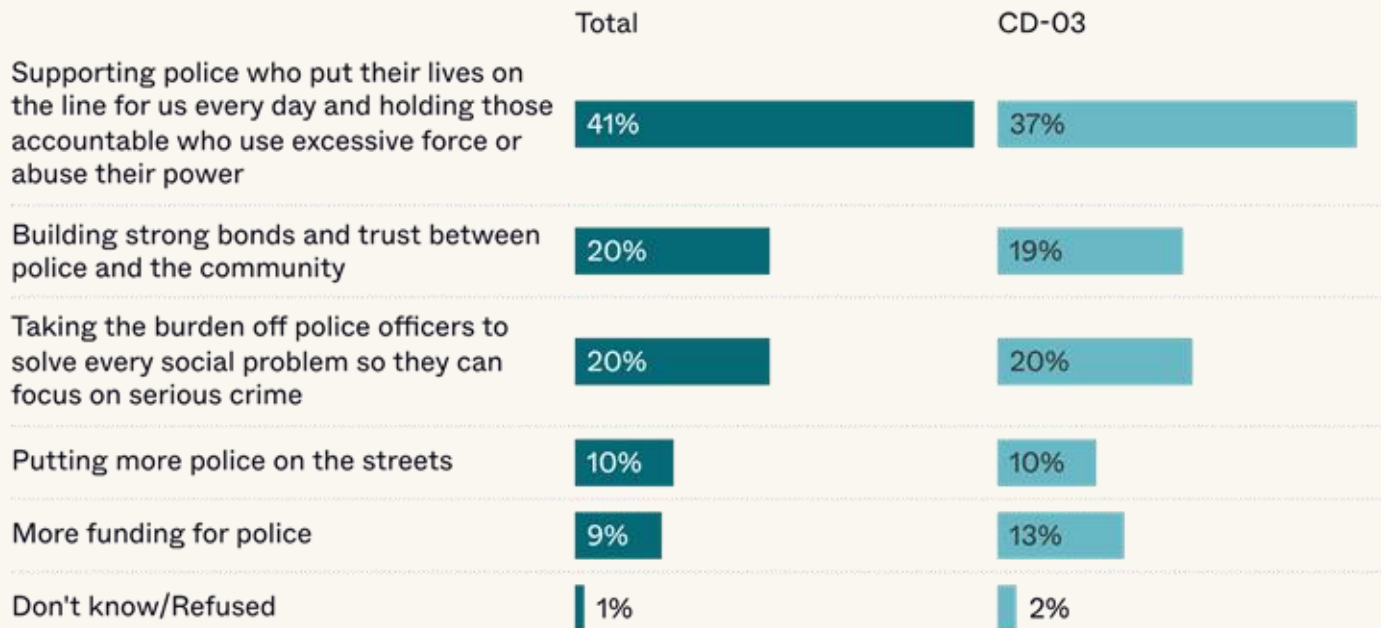
TAKEAWAY #4

Even on the thorniest of issues—policing, overdose crisis, etc.—Democrats need to call out the GOP’s politics of fear and lean into concrete solutions that prevent crime and break its cycle.

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When it comes to policing, voters favor “support and accountability” over more funding or more police—even in WI-03, which is highly contested

Which of these statements do you most support, even if none is exactly right?



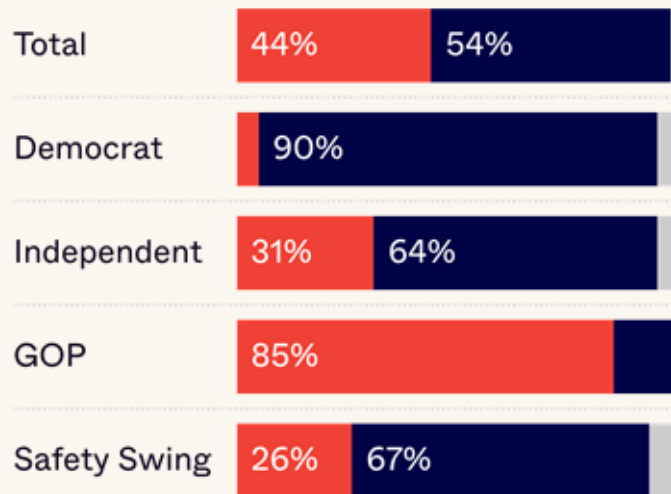
The GOP “defund” attack can be neutralized easily with Democratic and Independent voters with a message of “support and change, not blame”

Which of these statements do you most support, even if neither is exactly right?

[GOP ATTACK] The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions surrounding law enforcement. The Defund the Police movement is, without a doubt, one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation’s history, and Democrats are responsible for it. 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.

[DEMOCRAT] I’m not about scare tactics or slogans, and I’m not afraid to have an honest conversation. We keep expecting police to solve every social problem, from kids skipping school to mental illness to homelessness to gun violence. No one profession can do that. We’re spending \$115 billion a year and putting too much on police departments. It’s time to try out some promising new solutions to lift the burden. It’s time for support and change, not blame.

Don’t know/refused



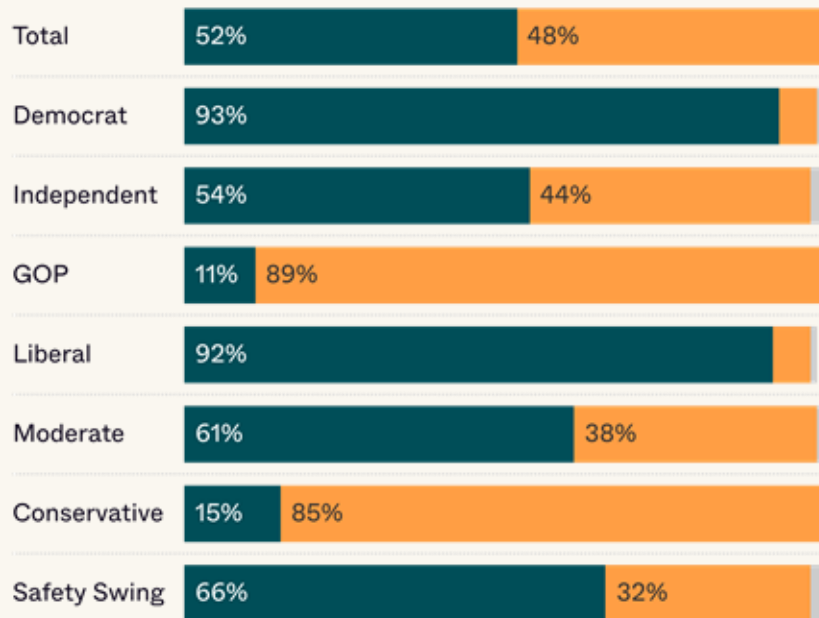
WI voters consistently say that the overdose crisis is one of the biggest crime issues in the state—and they favor a solutions-based approach

Which of these statements do you most support, even if neither is exactly right?

[CARE AND PREVENTION] The opioid and fentanyl crisis is devastating communities across Wisconsin, and for many families who have lost or experienced a loved one struggle with addiction, it's deeply personal. We need real solutions. Preventing overdoses and saving lives requires expanding access to treatment, Naloxone, fentanyl test strips, and proven services that help people recover and rebuild their lives.

[TOUGH] The opioid and fentanyl crisis is out of control. Deadly drugs are flooding our streets, and families are paying the price. We need to confront this crisis head-on by cracking down on drug dealers, shutting down trafficking networks, bombing drug boats before they reach our shores, and imposing tough prison sentences on criminals fueling Wisconsin's opioid epidemic.

Don't know/refused



TAKEAWAY #5

Sentiment on immigration is changing every day—and while it remains a highly-contested issue among WI voters, calling out ICE abuses and emphasizing safety for everyone works.

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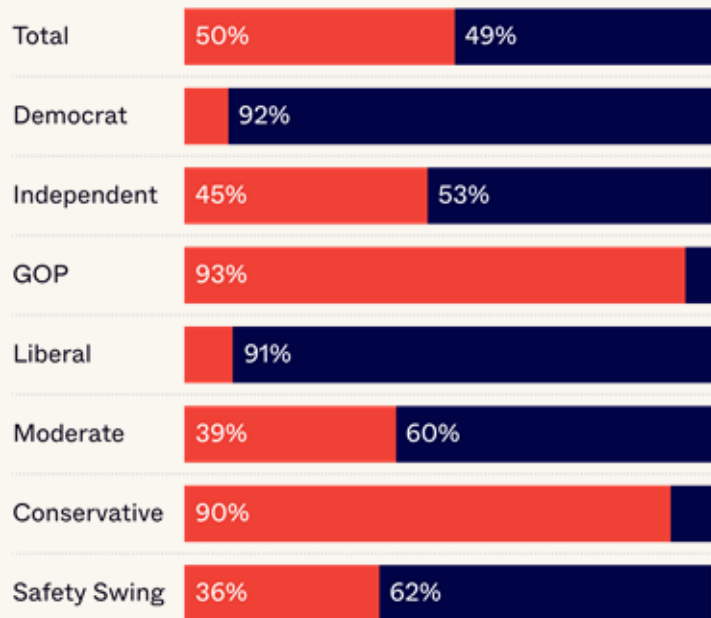
An immigration message that calls out ICE abuses and emphasizes safety for everyone draws even and wins Independent and moderate voters

Which statement do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right in your opinion?

[GOP] Democrats' reckless open border policies have allowed violent criminals and drug traffickers to pour into the country, while taxpayers already struggling to make ends meet are forced to house and feed them. It's time to put Wisconsin first by deploying ICE and the National Guard to cities like Milwaukee and Madison, closing the border, and outlawing sanctuary cities.

[DEMOCRAT] ICE raids on farms, and in schools, churches, and neighborhoods that tear apart families to detain and zip tie children don't make Wisconsin safer. Instead, it distracts from the debate on real immigration reform and proven solutions that make life safer for everyone, like removing illegal guns, expanding addiction treatment, and investing in housing and mental health care.

Don't know/refused



Key recommendations

What not to say

What to say

Nothing/silence



“Define or be defined” and set the terms of the debate instead of letting Democrats be painted as “soft”

Don’t reinforce tough on crime tropes



Emphasize comprehensive solutions like strong, accountable policing, fully funding good schools, affordable housing, and a living wage

(ONLY) Increased funding for police, more police



Highlight need for more accountable policing and increased funding for mental health and drug treatment, which voters believe can improve safety

Do the crime, do the time



immediately Spotlight accountability and own the issue through programs to turn around the lives of those who have committed crimes

Assume voters prefer Trump’s “tough” approach



Most voters prefer an approach that is **serious about safety** and don’t like Trump’s approach

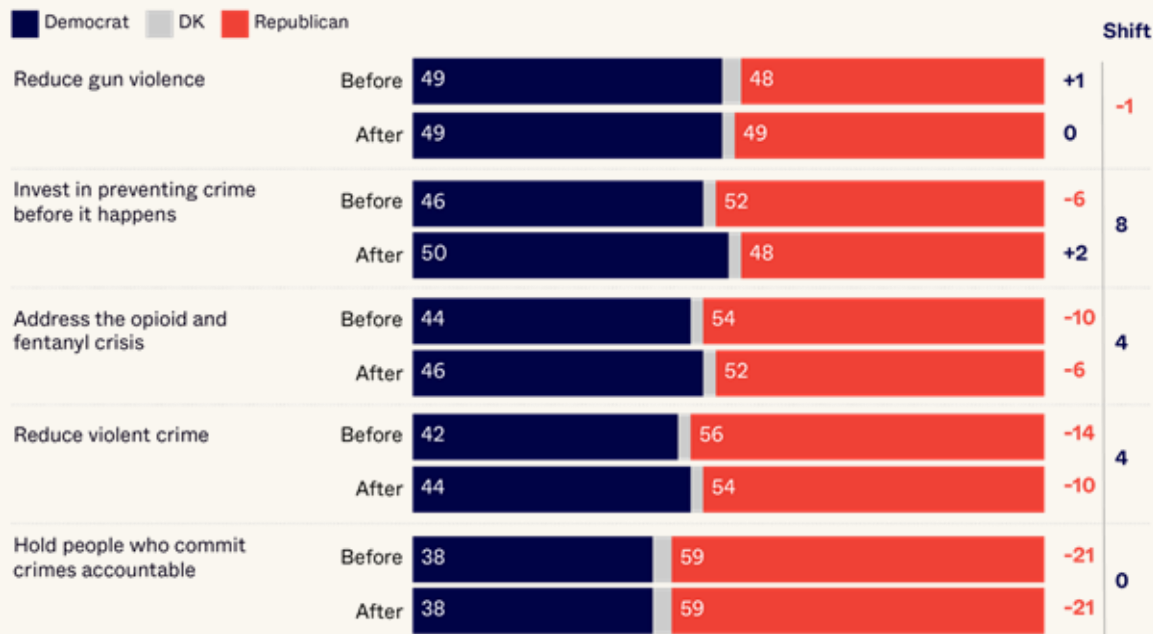
THE PROOF:

Democrats can close the trust gap on crime by engaging on the issue and leading with a clear, affirmative approach—“serious about safety.”

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When Democrats engage voters on safety, they improve trust on several crime issues—including by 8 percentage points on crime prevention

Which party do you trust more on the following crime issue?



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