

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

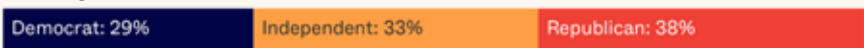
February 2026

Vera ACTION

WI voter demographics in the 2026 general electorate

We polled 800 2026 likely voters in Wisconsin with an oversample of 200 respondents from WI-03

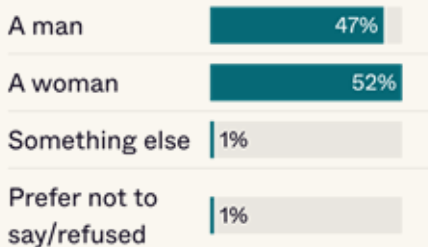
Party ID Overall



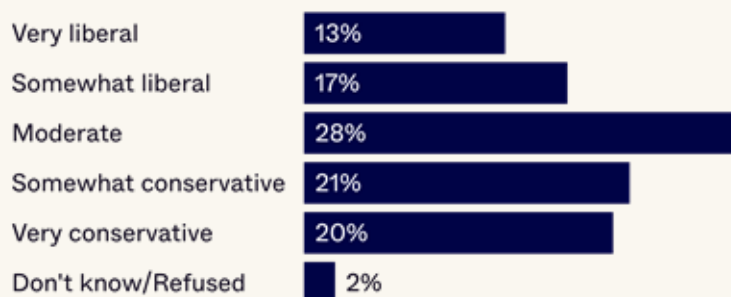
Party ID CD-3



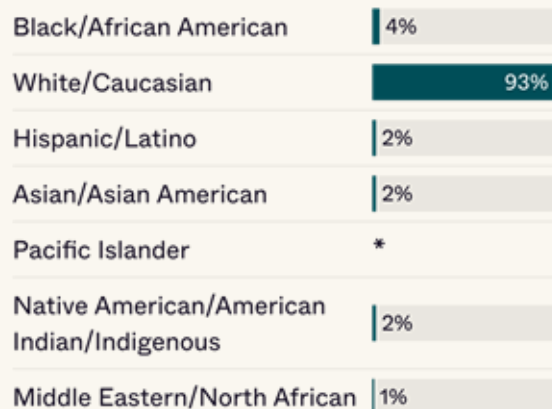
Gender



Ideology



Race



Fielded January 8 - 13, 2026

800 WI 2026 Likely Voters, Margin of Error: +/- 3.5%
200 CD-03 2026 Likely Voters, Margin of Error: +/- 6.9%

The WI GOP knows public safety is a vulnerability for Democrats—and for many cycles have spent heavily on crime attacks in statewide races



WISCONSIN
PUBLIC RADIO

The top spender was **Right Direction Wisconsin PAC**, which spent \$9.29 million as of Monday. Run by the Republican Governors Association, the PAC spent that money on broadcasting and digital ads focused on the race between Gov. Tony Evers and Republican businessman Tim Michels. The ads attacked Evers on tax and crime issues.

milwaukee journal sentinel

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

Daniel Bice and Alison Dirr
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

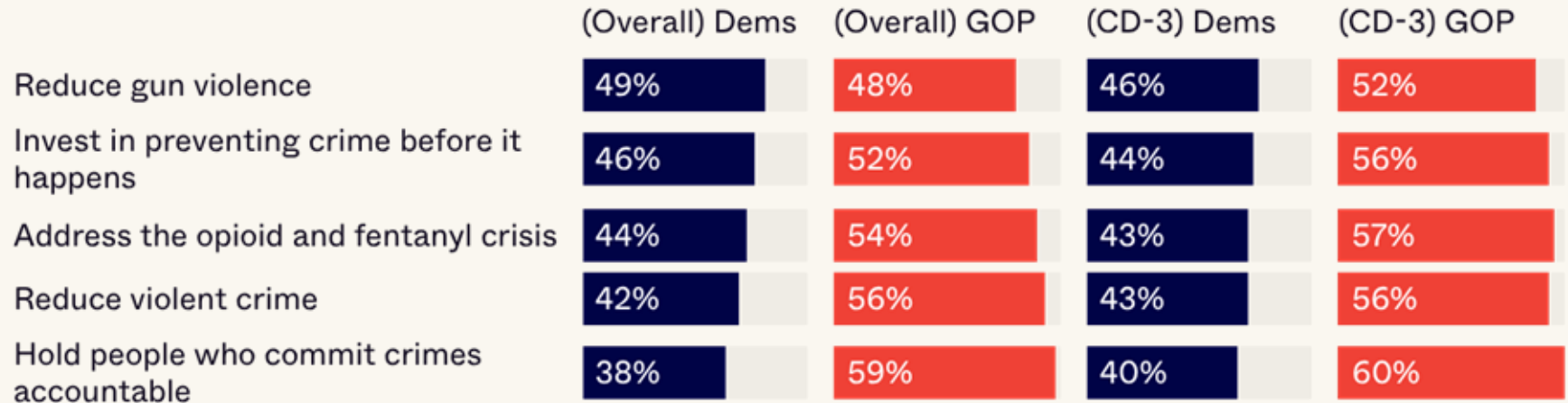
Updated April 10, 2025, 8:15 a.m.

The Guardian ^{US}

How Republicans' racist attack ads wiped out Democrat's lead in Wisconsin

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?



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. In CD-3, a winning message ties safety to affordability.

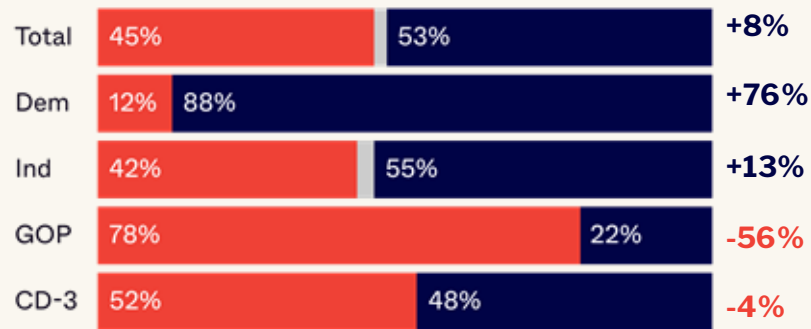
Among the 2026 WI general electorate, Democratic and Independent voters favor a “serious about safety” approach over “tough on crime”

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.

TOUGH VS. SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY



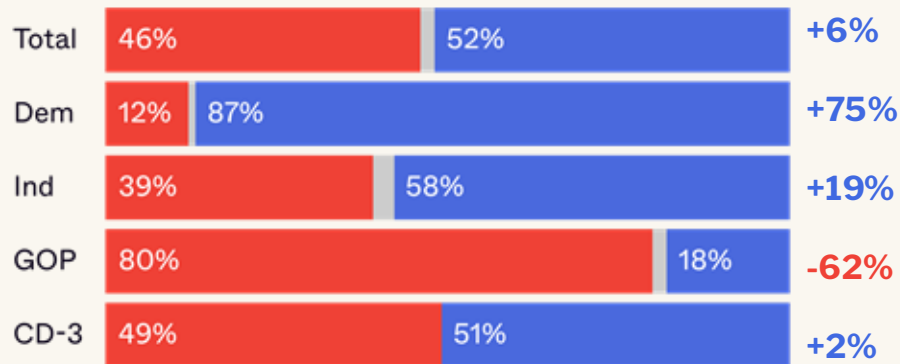
Among the 2026 WI general electorate, CD-3 voters favor a “safety and affordability” approach over “tough on crime”

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: 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. SAFETY & AFFORDABILITY



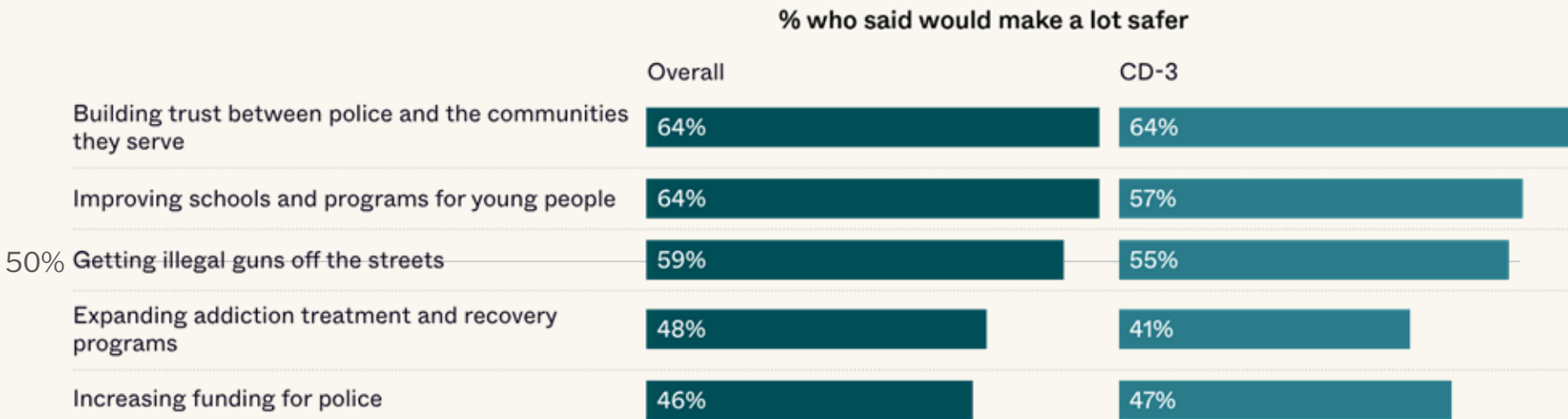
TAKEAWAY #2

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.”

Vera ACTION

Voters favor solutions like building trust with police and improving schools over increased funding for police

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?



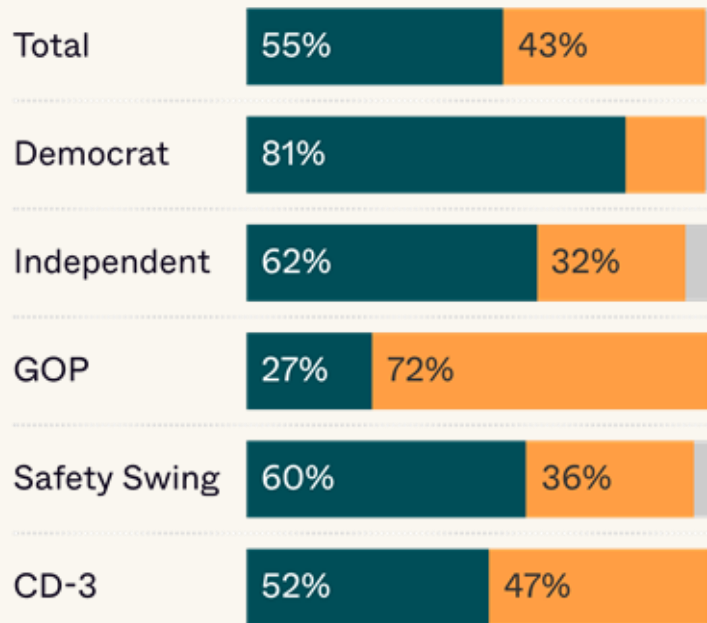
Owning “accountability” with a message of “repair and change” wins by over the “lock ‘em up” approach of the GOP, including in CD-3

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

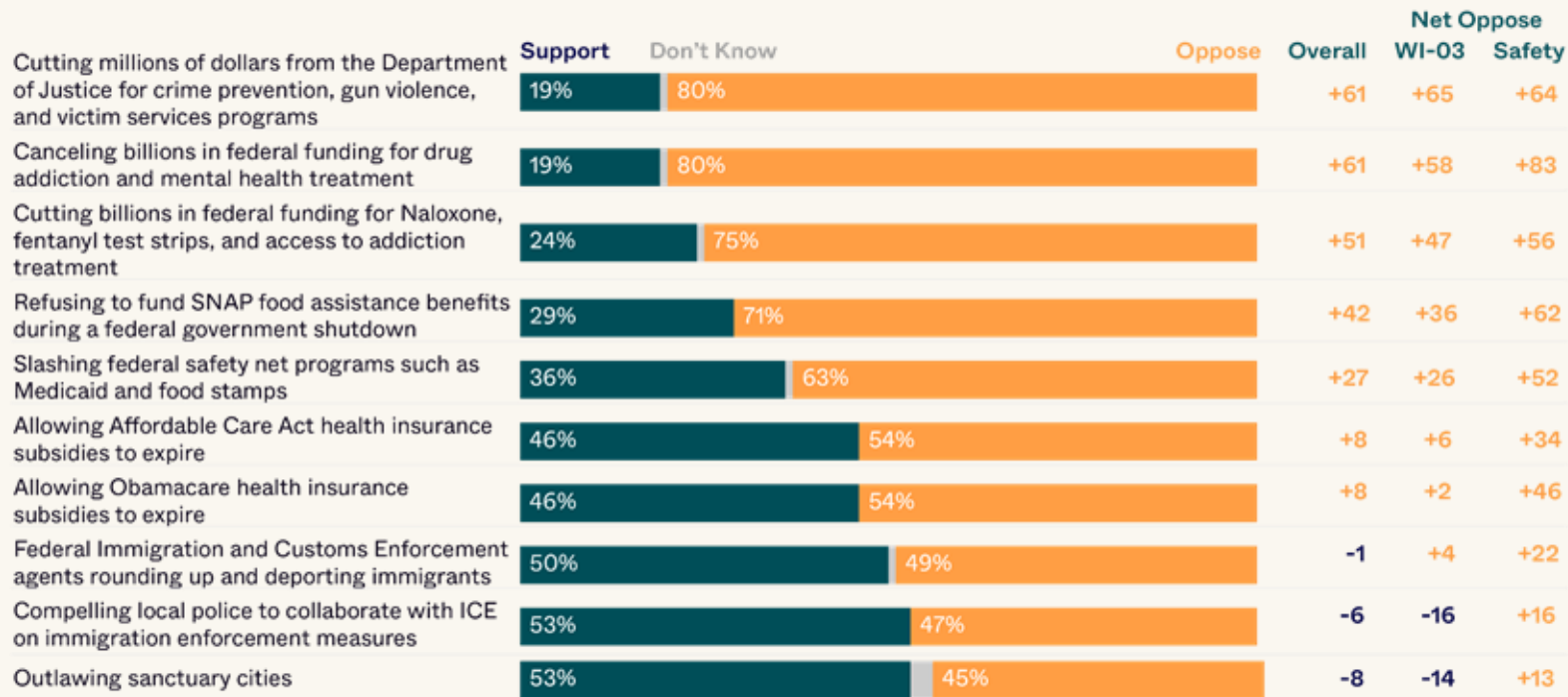


TAKEAWAY #3

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

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?



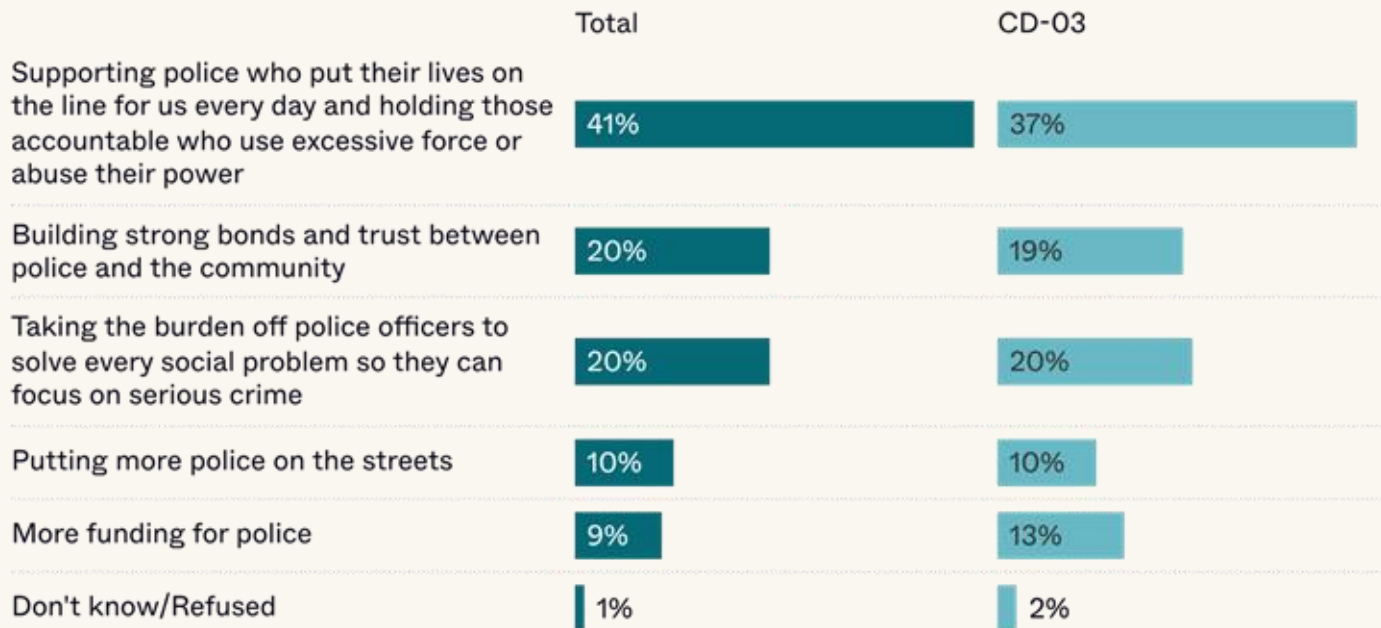
TAKEAWAY #4

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.

VeraACTION

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?



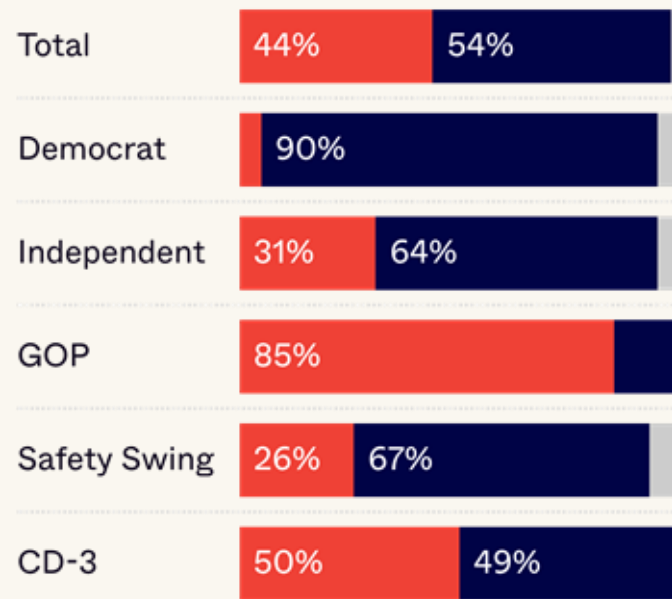
The GOP “defund” attack can be neutralized easily with Democratic and Independent voters with a message of “support and change, not blame”

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



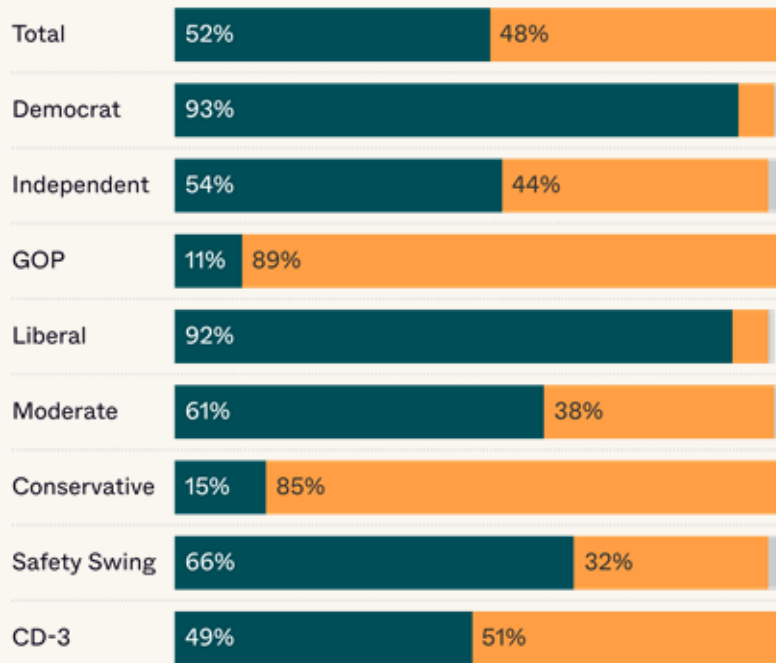
WI voters consistently say that the overdose crisis is one of the biggest crime issues in the state—and they favor a solutions-based approach

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



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 for safety and affordability: strong, accountable policing, health care, 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

Do the crime, do the time



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

For more information, please contact:

Insha Rahman

irahman@vera.org

Vera ACTION