Vera ACTION

Messaging Guide: Countering "Tough on Crime" Rhetoric with a "Serious about Safety" Frame

Over the past two years, Vera Action has conducted twenty rounds of national, statewide, and local messaging research (including in CA, MI, NY, PA, and VA) to understand what voters are bringing to the ballot box on issues of crime and safety, as well as how candidates can get out of the "tough" versus "soft on crime" debate and own a new narrative on safety, accountability, and justice. Across our research, a "serious about safety" messaging frame that emphasizes fully funding the programs and policies that prevent crime in the first place outperforms a "tough on crime" message, especially with key voting blocs like independent and swing voters, women, voters of color, and young voters.

Here are five key steps to constructing a "serious about safety" message:

1. **Lead with the value of safety and make it clear that communities don't have to choose between safety or justice—we can have both.** Preventing crime and delivering safety is a priority for everyone. Despite high levels of concern about crime, communities—especially those most affected by crime—favor comprehensive solutions over more "tough on crime" policies.

   Example: We all deserve to be safe, no matter the color of our skin, where we live, or how much money is in our pockets. Safety is my top priority, and I won't stop working until every community, every neighborhood, and every family is safe.

2. **Get out in front of "soft on crime" attacks by affirmatively owning the issue so that *you* define your vision for safe communities.** We're used to "tough on crime" rhetoric dominating debates about safety, but that narrow approach fails to meet what communities want. In our polling, the top factors that make people feel safe are jobs, quick response times from emergency services, housing, and schools.

   Example: It's time to fully fund the things that create safe communities, like good schools, a living wage, and affordable housing *and* to do more to prevent crime in the first place by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street.

3. **When attacked for not being "tough on crime," say you're here for "solutions, not scare tactics."** A "tough on crime" attack is only effective if it isn't challenged. Avoid staying silent or running to the right on the issue; instead, center the debate on solutions over scare tactics.

   Example (general): 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.

   Example (retail theft): My opponent wants to use scare tactics to rile people up to win votes. Here's what I can tell you. We all deserve to live in safe neighborhoods and shop at local businesses in peace. I will work with the police to take down organized theft so that our stores don't have to lock up basics like toothpaste and shampoo. Also, some people are stealing out of desperation and poverty because they're in survival mode. Throwing them in jail or charging them with huge fines will not change their behavior; it will just make them more desperate. My

focus is on holding people accountable in ways that actually stop the cycle of crime—and make all of us safer.

4. **Talk about the role of police, both the job we expect them to do and the need for accountability if they abuse their power and break the law.** Support for police is strong, but so is support for accountability. Voters favor a message of support along with a commitment to accountability for police officers and leadership who break the law over rhetoric pushing for more police funding or hiring more police officers.

   Example: I will support the police who put their lives on the line for us every day and hold those who use excessive force or abuse their power accountable.

5. **Center calls for personal accountability on repairing harm and changing behavior rather than more punishment.** While voters care deeply about personal accountability and want to know that there are consequences when someone breaks the law, that doesn't mean they always support punitive policies. Voters are supportive of accountability at all levels: for people who break the law, police officers who abuse their power, and government officials who spend billions on policies that do not work.

   Example (individual accountability): Some say crime is out of control, and that to make communities safe, people who break the law must be held accountable. This means people seeing the harm they've done, accepting the consequences, 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.

   Example (accountability for all): We need more accountability at all levels. The criminal justice system needs to be more accountable for delivering public safety and fairness. There needs to be accountability for people who break the law. Police should be held accountable for excessive force. Elected officials need to be accountable to voters when they spend billions on things that don't work.

How do we tie this together as a unified message that everyone can own?

Use the three Vs: *Values*, *Villain*, and *Vision*.

- **Lead with the shared value of safety.**
  Acknowledge the importance of safety for everyone and say that we deserve an honest conversation about solutions—not scare tactics—to make communities safe.

- **The villain is the "tough on crime" status quo.**
  Across the political spectrum, people do not believe the "tough on crime" approach to crime and safety is working. If it were, the United States would be the safest country in the world.

- **Pivot to your vision (solutions).**
  The public strongly supports more investment in community-based solutions for safety and many policy proposals for justice reform. Highlight these changes as part of a comprehensive approach to preventing crime, responding to crisis, and stopping violence.