

WINNING THE NARRATIVE ON SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE IN PENNSYLVANIA:

Lessons and takeaways from polling,
public opinion research and recent elections

March 2024

Vera ACTION

CRIME ATTACKS DOMINATED PENNSYLVANIA RACES IN 2022—WITH \$10M+ SPENT ON ADS

THE HILL

The Memo: Republicans find traction with ‘soft-on-crime’ attacks on Democrats

Niall Stange

October 7, 2022 · 5 min read



Vera ACTION

Fetterman’s clemency crusade draws soft-on-crime attacks from Oz in Pennsylvania Senate race

Mehmet Oz and his GOP allies have run with a series of ads and messaging that strips context from the cases Lt. Gov. John Fetterman has championed as head of the state pardons board.

AIPAC Echoes Republicans’ Crime Messaging in Pennsylvania

After failing to stop Democrat Summer Lee’s primary bid, the pro-Israel group is now helping Republicans put the seat into play.

BY AUSTIN AHLMAN NOVEMBER 1, 2022

AND CRIME ATTACKS ARE ALREADY HERE IN 2024

PENNSYLVANIA | News

First TV ad in PA-12 brings familiar attacks against U.S. Rep. Summer Lee

GOV & POLITICS | Feb 16, 2024 | 11:12 am ET | By John Cole

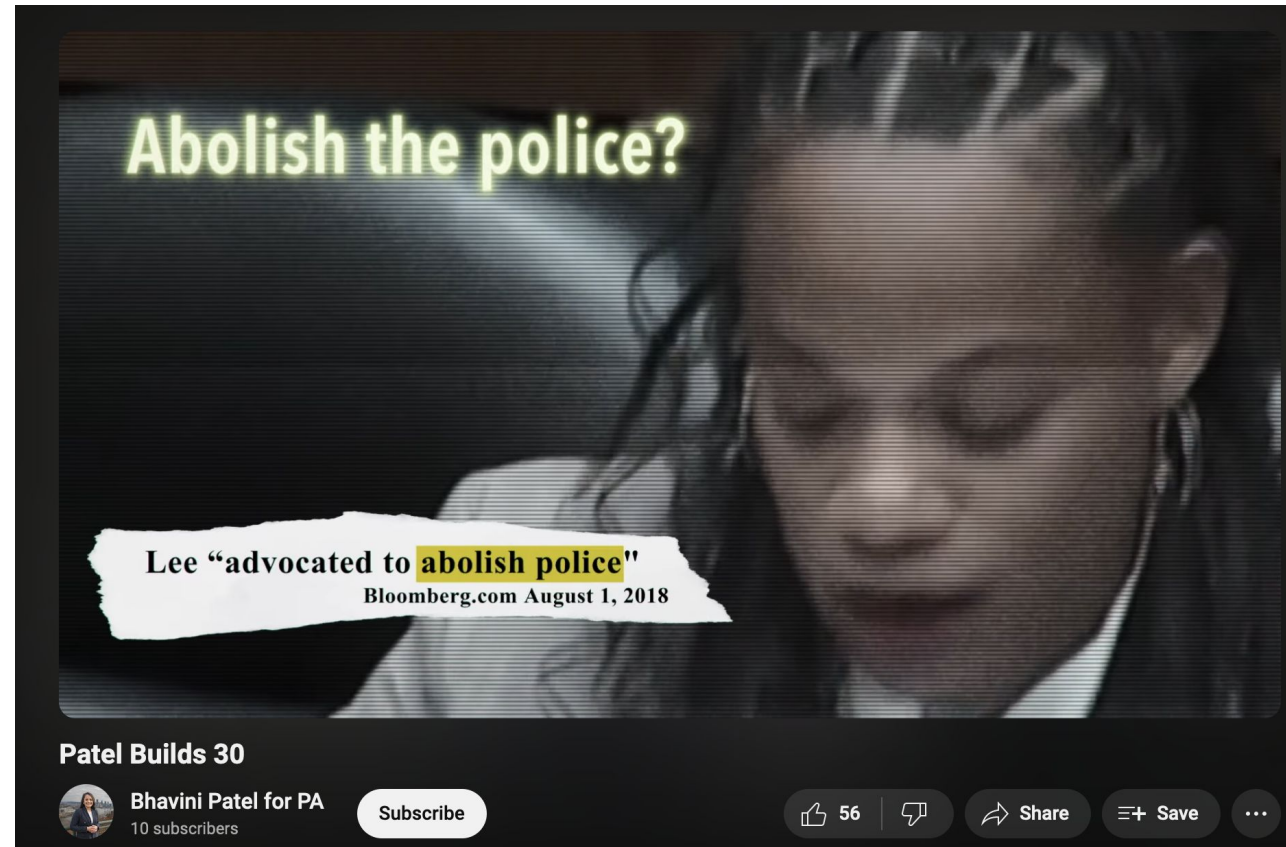
SHARE   

In the 30-second spot, candidate Laurie MacDonald, president and CEO of the Pittsburgh-based nonprofit Center for Victims, calls herself a “law and order Democrat.”

MacDonald told the Capital-Star in an email that her experience at the Center for Victims gave her insight into “trauma and tragedy that soft on crime policies bring to communities,” adding that she would “prioritize victims and survivors over criminals with every policy and every vote.”

“If you’re sick and tired of all the divisive rhetoric and the us versus them mentality, I’m with you,” MacDonald says in the ad.

When asked what “us versus them” referred to, MacDonald’s campaign said that Lee has aligned herself “with the most radical wing of the Democrat party” claiming “that’s not where most voters in our community stand.”



**THE BIG TAKEAWAY FROM
PENNSYLVANIA'S RESEARCH:**

**To protect momentum for justice reform
and counter tough-on-crime backsliding,
Pennsylvanians are looking for leaders
who are 'serious about safety.'**

'TOUGH ON CRIME' CAN BE A POTENT ATTACK, BUT NOT IF COUNTERED BY 'SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY'



IN THE 2022 MIDTERMS,

\$157M SPENT ON
CRIME ATTACK ADS

Democrats Worry as G.O.P. Attack Ads Take a Toll in Wisconsin

Mandela Barnes, the party's Senate candidate, is now wobbling in his race against Ron Johnson, the Republican incumbent. Democratic nominees in other states face similar challenges.

Share full article

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ELECTIONS
Midterm voters key in on crime
Crime and public safety are proving to be a potent mix of issues in the midterm election.



More than half of respondents blamed the spike in crime on "too many guns on our streets," 5 points more than the share of voters who said that "defunding of police departments" was a major reason. | Drew Angerer/Getty Images

The New York Times

Chicago Mayor's Race Could Be a Blueprint for Democratic Messaging on Crime

Brandon Johnson, a progressive Democrat, prevailed over his more moderate challenger after holding the position that officials must take a fundamentally different approach to public safety.



Democrat upsets DeSantis-backed Republican mayoral candidate in Jacksonville

MAY 18, 2023 · 7:19 AM ET

Deegan faced significant challenges during her campaign, with her participation in Black Lives Matter protests being targeted by her opponent and his allies. Local law enforcement warned of potential "radical policies" under Deegan's leadership.

Intelligencer

EARLY AND OFTEN | DEC. 18, 2022

The Data That Shows Progressives Can Win on Crime Prevention beats getting tough.

By Ross Barkan, a frequent contributor to New York



YET RECENT WINS SHOW
TOUGH ON CRIME
DOESN'T ALWAYS WORK

MARCH 2024 POLLING WITH GQR:

20-minute statewide poll of 700 PA

Registered Voters (600 weighted)

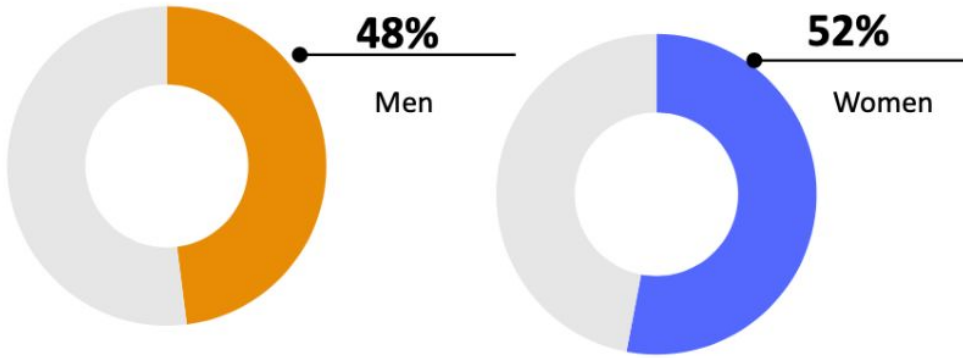
123 12th CD Voters (19 weighted)

+/- 3.7% margin of error at 95% confidence interval;

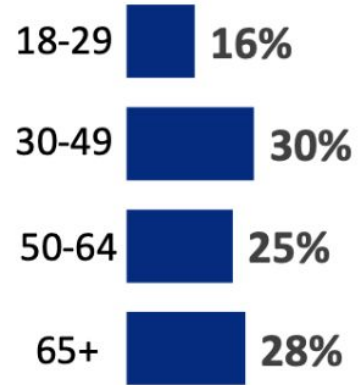
+/-9.8% margin of error for CD-12 respondents

Demographic Information

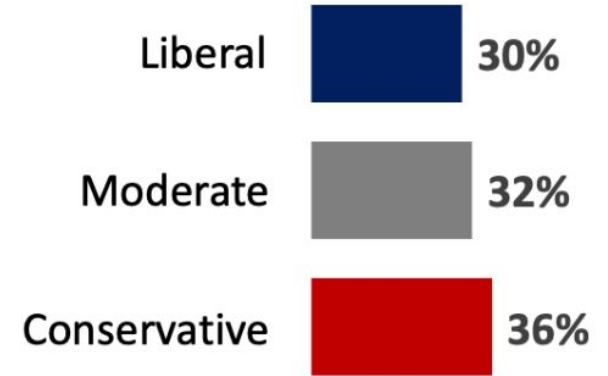
Gender



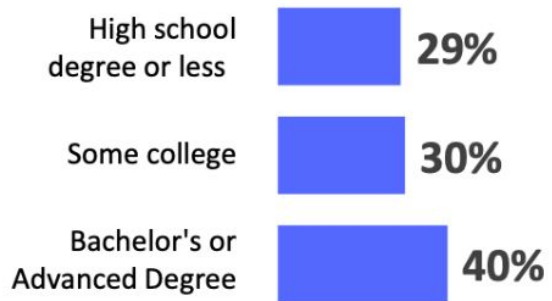
Age



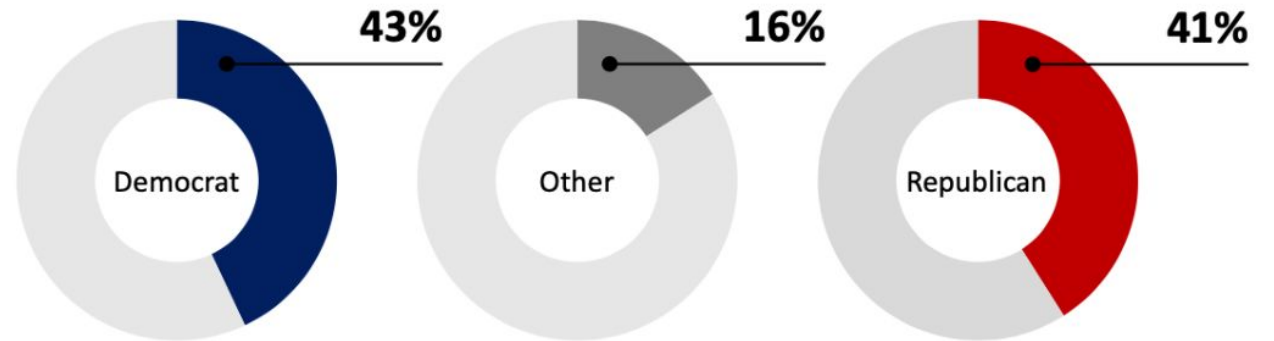
Ideology



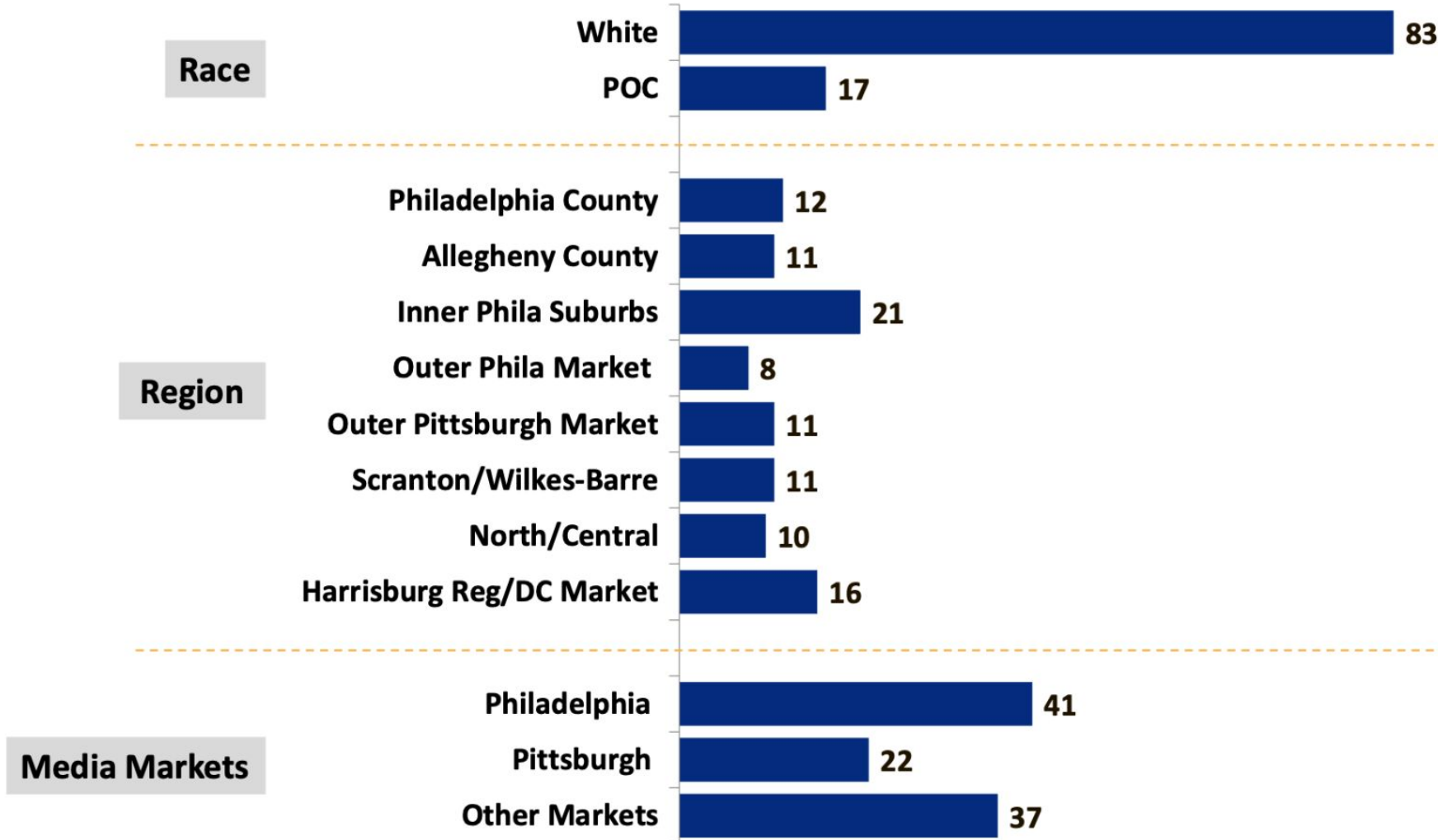
Education



Party Registration



Demographic information continued

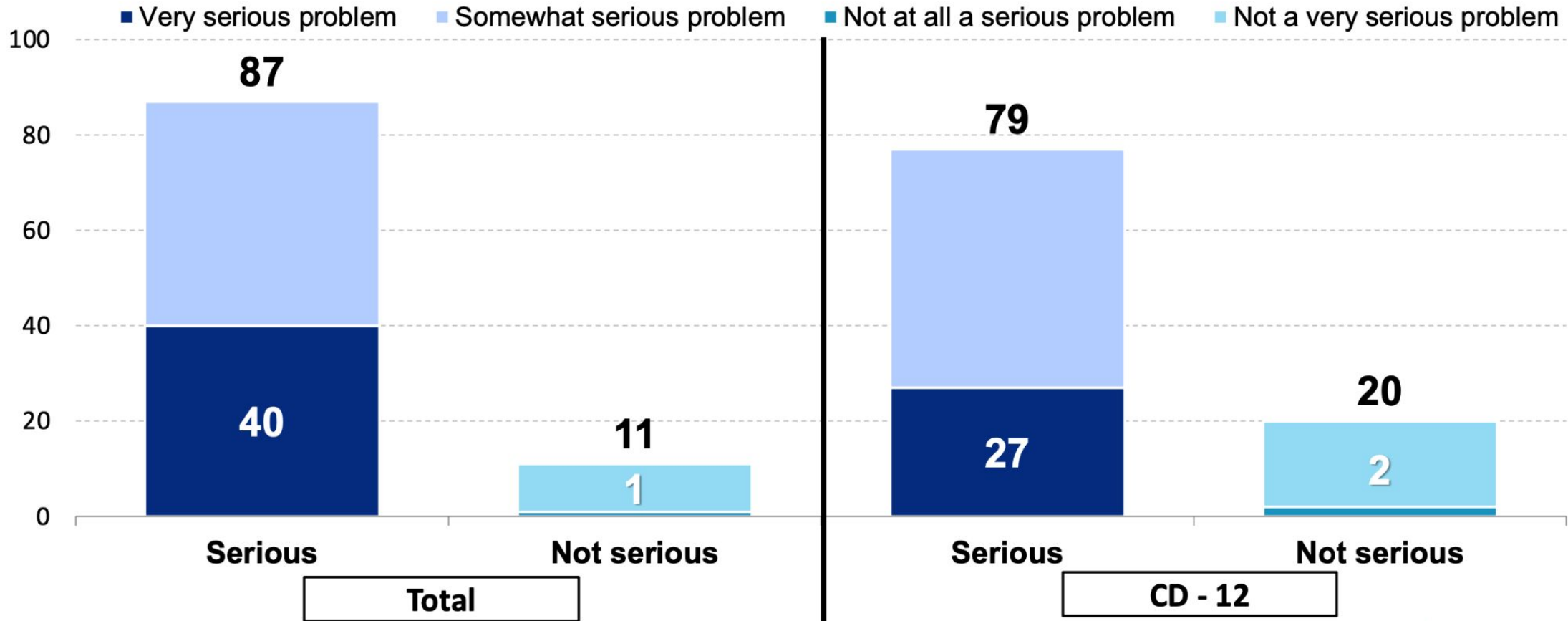


LESSON # 1.

Concerns about crime do NOT equal support for more 'tough-on-crime' policies.

CRIME IS A PERENNIAL CONCERN FOR PENNSYLVANIANS

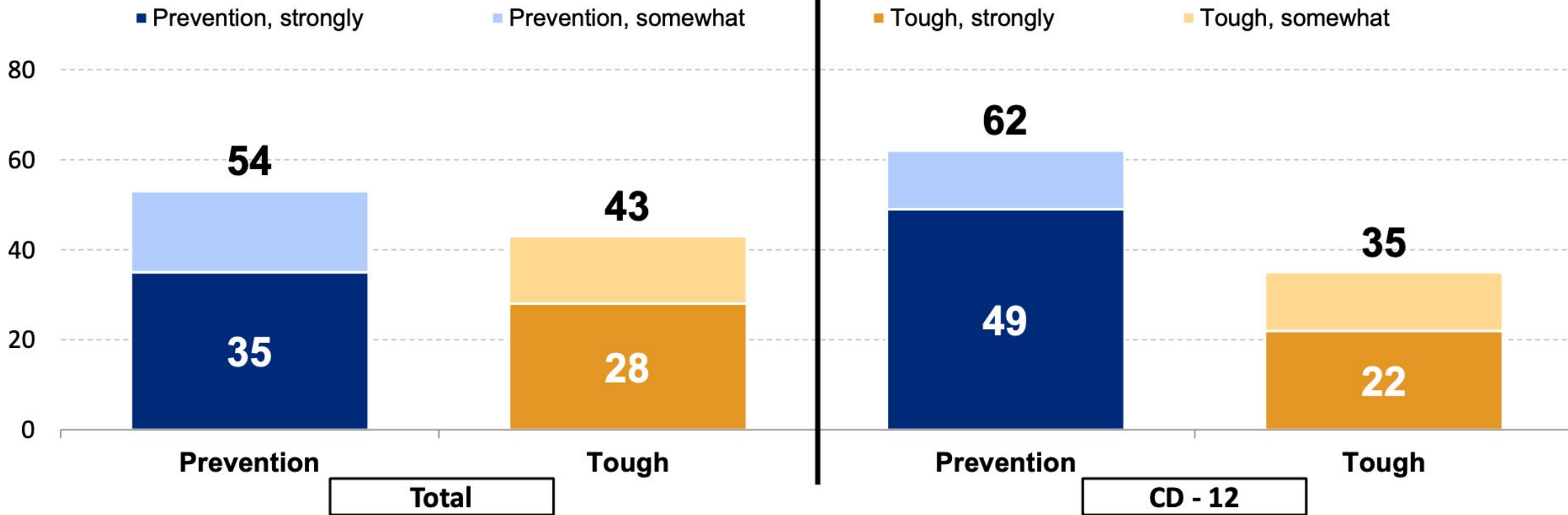
How serious of a problem is crime in Pennsylvania? Is it a very serious problem, somewhat serious problem, not very serious problem, or not at all serious problem?



YET CONCERNS ABOUT CRIME DO NOT TRANSLATE TO SUPPORT FOR 'TOUGH-ON-CRIME' POLICIES

SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY: Fully fund things to create safe communities and improve people's quality of life, like good schools, a living wage, affordable housing, and do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street.

TOUGH ON CRIME: Doing more to get tough on crime, like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep potentially dangerous people in jail, and providing police more support and resources.



INDEPENDENTS, WOMEN, AND VOTERS UNDER 50 STATEWIDE PREFER ‘SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY’

SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY

TOUGH ON CRIME

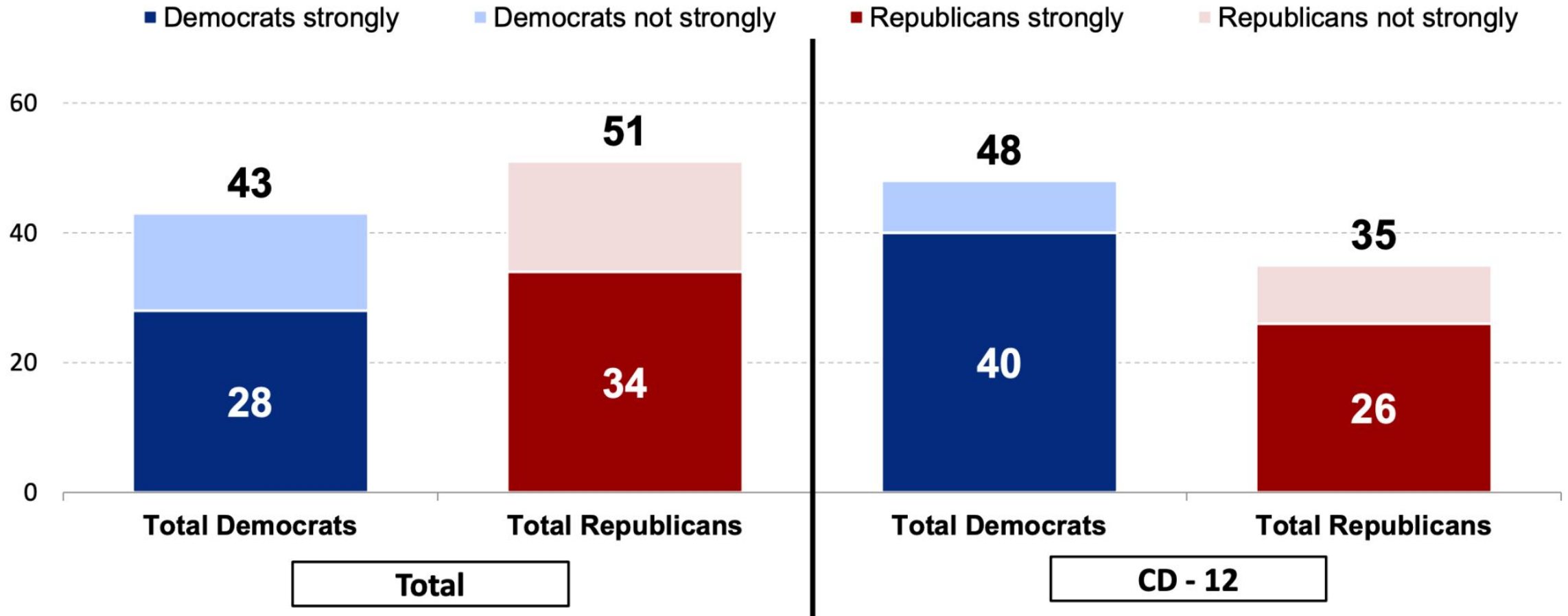
Total	54	43
Democrat	75	24
Independent	55	42
Republican	30	65
Independent men	43	53
Independent women	64	31
Under 50	63	35
Over 50	46	51
College men	56	42
Non college men	44	53
College women	63	36
Non college women	55	41

LESSON # 2.

Leaning into safety early and often builds upon existing advantages that both parties have with Pennsylvania voters. Silence is deadly.

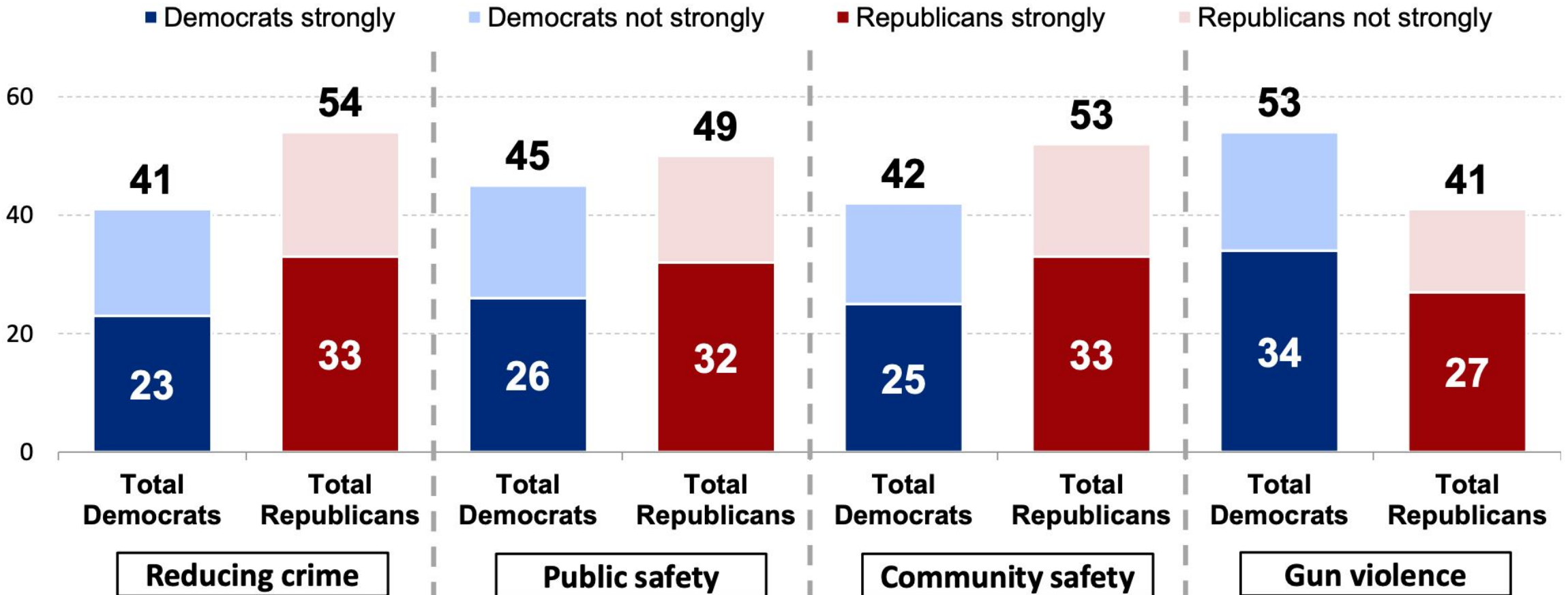
DISTINCT FROM STATEWIDE TRENDS, VOTERS IN CD-12 TRUST DEMOCRATS MORE ON CRIME AND SAFETY

Do you trust Democrats or Republicans more on reducing crime and making communities safer?



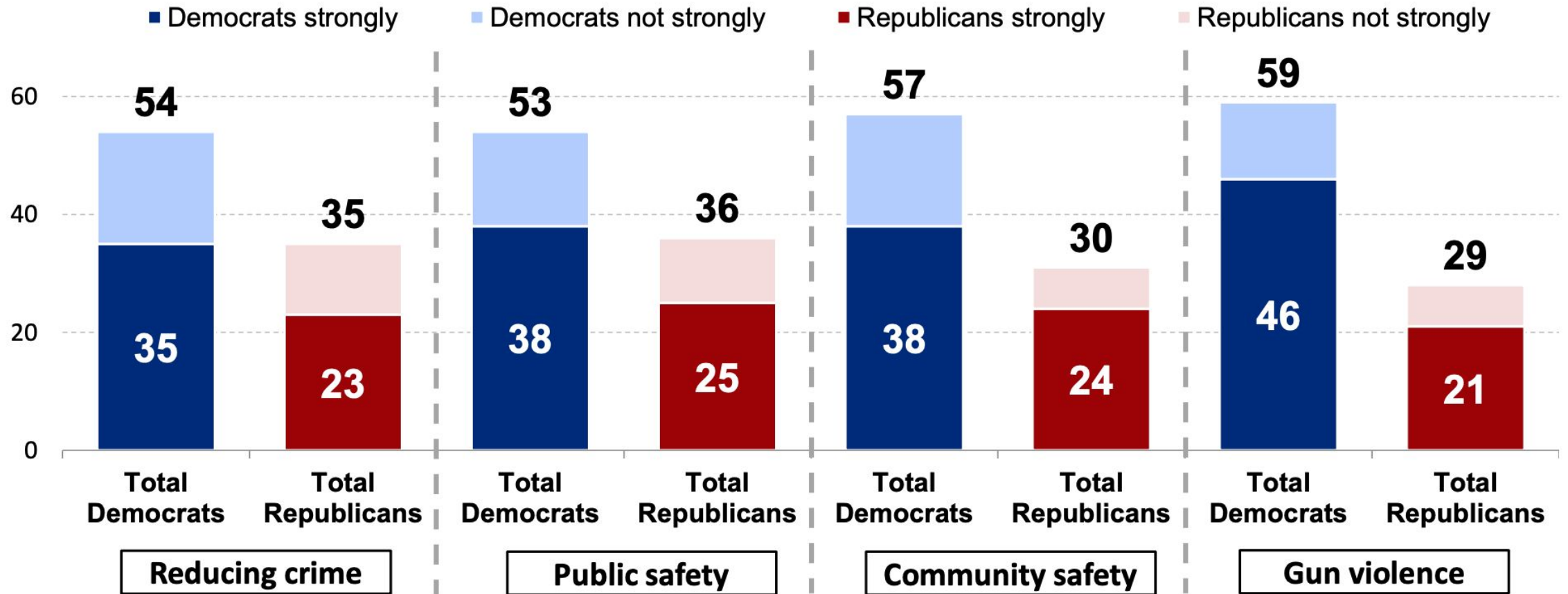
STATEWIDE, DEMOCRATS HAVE THE ADVANTAGE ON GUNS BUT NEED TO CLOSE THE GAP ON SAFETY

For each of the job aspects I read, please tell me if you believe Democrats do a better job or if you believe Republicans do a better job?



DISTINCT FROM STATEWIDE, IN CD-12 ACROSS THE BOARD DEMOCRATS ARE AHEAD ON CRIME/SAFETY

For each of the job aspects I read, please tell me if you believe Democrats do a better job or if you believe Republicans do a better job.



LESSON # 3.

Pennsylvanians prefer prevention and treatment solutions over more ‘tough on crime.’

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT TOPS THE LIST OF FAVORED POLICY SOLUTIONS TO DECREASE CRIME

What extent, if it all, do you believe the following proposals will decrease crime in Pennsylvania?

Percent say “help a lot”

Getting illegal guns off the streets.



(SPLIT) Increasing access to mental health care.



(SPLIT) Building trust between the police and the community.



Making sure public safety, not wealth, determines who stays in jail while awaiting trial.



FUNDING SERVICES RANKS HIGHER THAN POLICE OR LONGER SENTENCES TO DECREASE CRIME

What extent, if it all, do you believe the following proposals will decrease crime in Pennsylvania? Percent say “help a lot”

(SPLIT) Increasing funding for affordable housing, good schools, and living wages. 49

Fully funding programs and services that break the cycle of crime. 48

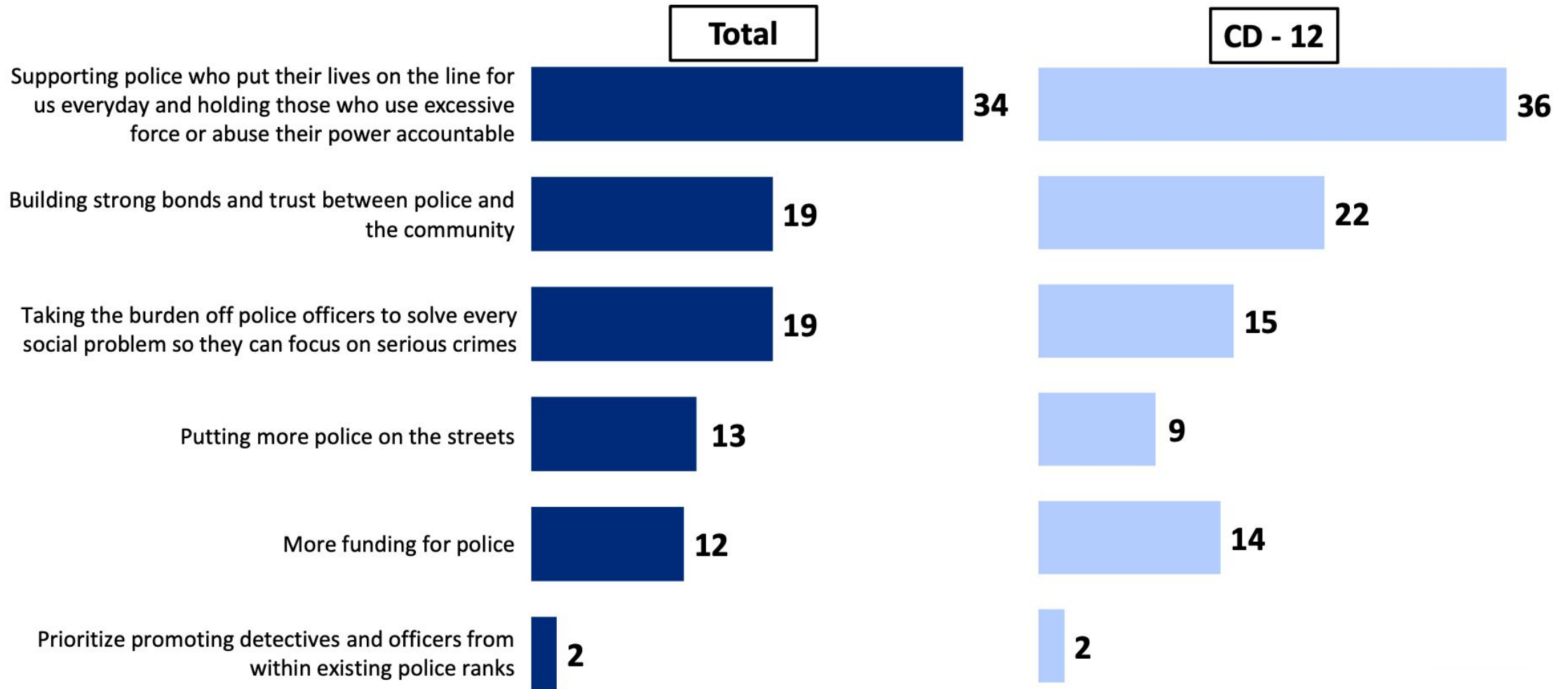
(SPLIT) Addressing poverty, economic despair, and lack of opportunities. . 47

(SPLIT) Having alternatives to 911 and police for people going through mental health crises. 45

(SPLIT) Putting 100,000 more police on the streets. 37

Having longer prison sentences for people who commit crimes. 34

EVEN ON THORNY TOPICS LIKE POLICING, A MESSAGE OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY WINS



LESSON # 4.

Even when facing attacks, leaning in with a 'serious about safety' message beats 'I too am tough on crime.'

ONE GOP ATTACK, TWO DIFFERENT DEM RESPONSES

GOP SOFT-ON-CRIME ATTACK:

I will prioritize keeping law-abiding Pennsylvanians safe and end the revolving door that releases violent criminals back onto the streets. I will make prosecutors do their jobs and enforce all the laws. I stand with the police and will provide resources to rebuild departments that have lost officers due to a lack of support and low morale. I will stand up to politicians who allow repeat criminals out of jail and who want to defund the police. I will restore law and order in Pennsylvania.

DEMOCRAT “I TOO AM TOUGH ON CRIME” RESPONSE:

I am committed to keeping communities safe and reducing crime. I support adding more police to our communities and giving them more funding. I want to give police and prosecutors the tools to solve and prosecute homicides and other violent crimes. I support tougher bail laws to make sure repeat offenders do not get early release from prison, and I support strict penalties for convicted drug dealers to stop the flow of drugs into our communities.

DEMOCRAT “I AM SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY” RESPONSE:

I am serious about safety. I will make communities safer with real solutions that prevent crime by investing in good schools, affordable housing, mental health and drug addiction treatment, and good jobs. We must hold people accountable when they break the law and build a system that treats everyone fairly. I will support the police, while also holding them accountable if they abuse their power. I will get illegal guns off the street and focus police resources on solving the most serious cases.

'SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY' AND 'ALSO TOUGH' LINES PERFORM THE SAME AGAINST A GOP ATTACK

Now, I am going to read you statements that Democrats and Republicans are making about addressing crime and public safety in Pennsylvania. Which of the following statements do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right?

	OVERALL	CD-12	DEMS	INDEP	BIDEN
GOP ATTACK	45	25	12	40	11
DEM "ALSO TOUGH"	51	58	83	57	88

	OVERALL	CD-12	DEMS	INDEP	BIDEN
GOP ATTACK	47	34	13	42	12
DEM "SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY"	53	64	86	58	86

EVEN ON DEFUND, DEMOCRATS CAN FLIP THE NARRATIVE TO WIN WITH A SAFETY MESSAGE

Next are two statements from two different candidates running for US House of Representatives. **Which do you agree with more, even if neither is quite right in your view?**

Candidate A: 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.

42%

Candidate B: 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.

58%

A LESSON FROM VIRGINIA:

A bellwether for the 2024 battlegrounds, crime dominated VA's 2023 state-level races with \$25 million spent in the state during the election cycle. Despite hearing virtually nonstop 'tough-on-crime' rhetoric, VA voters still favor a 'serious about safety' approach.

VIRGINIA 2023 AND CLOSE TO \$25M ON CRIME ADS: TESTING TWO 'TOUGH' ADS, ONE 'SAFETY' AD

#1

GOP candidate touting more funding for police and 'tough on crime' approach



**Republican Candidate
Juan Pablo Segura**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN6zlrXQszE>

#2

Dem candidate touting support for police, police endorsements, and gun control measures



**Democratic Candidate
Nadarius Clark**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqDu65zyvT0>

#3

Dem candidate touting comprehensive approach and being 'serious about safety'



**Mock ad for a Democratic
candidate**

<https://vimeo.com/912348236/4be896715d?share=copy>

‘SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY’ BEATS ‘TOUGH ON CRIME’ – AND WINS BLACK VOTERS, HOLDS INDEPENDENTS

Which ad is most aligned with your views?

AD # 1:
GOP
TOUGH



AD # 2:
DEM
TOUGH



AD # 3:
DEM
SAFETY



	AD # 1	AD # 2	AD # 3
OVERALL	23%	26%	34%
BLACK VOTERS	6%	36%	47%
LATINO VOTERS	17%	37%	37%
WHITE VOTERS	27%	23%	31%
GEN Z VOTERS	13%	34%	37%
BOOMERS	25%	23%	27%
DEMOCRATIC VOTERS	7%	33%	54%
REPUBLICAN VOTERS	40%	18%	15%
INDEPENDENT VOTERS	21%	28%	29%

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