

# MESSAGING GUIDE

## Winning the Narrative on Safety, Accountability, and Justice

*Last updated July 2024*

### Introduction

As organizers, we know what our communities want and deserve: safety, accountability, and justice. But too often, politicians and elected officials present us with a false choice between safety and justice in order to distract us from their failure to deliver either. Those of us who have worked on criminal legal reform know what works to prevent crime and stop violence in our communities, and we know that mass incarceration and detention only move us further away from true safety and justice.

Too many politicians lack the political will to fund solutions that challenge the status quo and deliver real safety for our communities. Our current political playbook is stuck in outdated “tough-on-crime” politics and rhetoric that do not reflect the will of our communities and criminalize communities of color. For those reasons, this rhetoric has failed [in recent election cycles](#). Politicians employing this rhetoric have failed to deliver the safety and solutions people need and demand. As a handful of politicians continue leaning hard into the “tough” playbook in 2024, advocates and organizers must be prepared to address attempts to divide and demonize our communities. To move the conversation to be rooted in both good policy *and* good politics, we must ask not who is “tougher on crime,” but who is truly “serious about safety.”

This message guidance has been compiled to help organizing groups tell a comprehensive, solutions-oriented story that rejects racialized “tough-on-crime” rhetoric and drives us forward to the vision of safety, accountability, and justice our families need. The messaging recommendations in this guide build upon Vera Action’s 20 rounds of messaging research and its ongoing 10-year campaign to change the way candidates talk about crime, working to neutralize politicians’ reliance on over-policing and mass incarceration as campaign messages. In this guide, We Make The Future Action has taken Vera’s findings and infused them with valuable lessons gained from supporting state partners.

The issues discussed in this guide are highly localized. Organizers will need to adapt these messages to meet the needs of our communities. Feel free to use the provided messaging verbatim or adapt it to speak more accurately to your audience and context.

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## Messaging Tips

**LEAD with the shared VALUES of safety, accountability, and justice.** Make it known at every turn that our solutions achieve all three – not one or the other.

**OWN the issue.** A majority of voters support reforms that prevent crime and invest in the things that make communities safe in the first place. Staying silent on crime and safety hurts. Owning the issue works.

**DEFINE our opposition** as those who use “tough-on-crime” fearmongering and racial scapegoating to advance their own political careers while pushing failed policies that keep us from real safety.

**DELIVER a positive VISION for the future we will create together.** We must describe our vision in relatable, human terms, helping people see beyond what we are fighting against to envision what we are fighting for: a strong, affirmative vision for safety, accountability, and justice.

**FOCUS on solutions.** Research by Vera Action shows that most people – and especially those most targeted by militarized policing and impacted by crime and violence – prefer comprehensive solutions over more “tough-on-crime,” police-only measures. People do not think the “tough” status quo approach to crime and safety is working. They are eager for new solutions, and they want to hear from you. Highlight how your programs work, who they serve, and their real impact.

**MOVE the conversation to where voters really are.** Too often, politicians and pundits assume communities still prefer the outdated “tough-on-crime” playbook. But that is not true. The public response to policies of mass incarceration and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless more Black and brown people by police revealed that communities are with us: prisons and policing cannot be the sole resources we turn to for public safety.

**AVOID the opposition frame** and **DO NOT REPEAT accusations**, even to refute. Instead, expose how certain politicians and other officials use scapegoating and scare tactics to maintain power and prevent us from getting what we need to be safe.

## Messaging Recommendations

Consider more of this...	...Instead of this	Because...
Talking about safety in real, human terms	Treating safety like an abstract concept	<p>Safety is a value AND a feeling. The opposition weaponizes crime and scare tactics to spread fear and maintain a status quo that doesn't keep us safe. We must share an optimistic, positive vision of safety that people can see and feel.</p> <p>Describe what safety looks and feels like in tangible human terms your audience can relate to: <i>"A safe walk home at night. A bus ride free of fear. A safer school for every child. Street lights on every block and after-school programs in every neighborhood."</i></p>
Hearing and addressing concerns about harm, crime and violence	Downplaying or ignoring concerns about crime and violence	<p>People want to know that their leaders hear them and are serious about addressing their concerns on crime and safety.</p> <p>We can acknowledge their concerns without playing into fear. A majority of people support a prevention-first, solutions-oriented approach.</p>
Empathizing with your audience	Trying to change minds by using fact-checking, crime statistics, and data	<p>Research shows that fact-checking is not an effective long-term strategy to change hearts and minds.</p> <p>Countering falsely-held beliefs with empathy is more persuasive than contradicting with data. For example, arguing about crime statistics with legislators or the public is often ineffective.</p> <p>However, setting the record straight with journalists and media on these statistics is important.</p>

Consider more of this...	...Instead of this	Because...
Using people-first language that centers our shared humanity	Labeling groups and putting people in boxes	When talking about crime and safety, it's easy to lump people into discrete categories with labels: <i>criminal, juvenile, suspect, violent person</i> , etc. This often mirrors the opposition's dog whistles and signals a "tough" posture that is less effective than a "serious about safety" approach.

## Responding to Opposition Messaging

1. **Shift to safety:** In the face of racialized “tough-on-crime” vs. “soft-on-crime” attacks, lead with the message that our side (and our solutions) are serious about safety.
  - a. Make it clear that communities don’t have to choose between safety or justice. We can and should have both — and people want both.
  - b. Rely on empathy, not simply data, to persuade. Acknowledge voters’ real concerns about crime while underscoring safety as a value: *“We all deserve to be safe, no matter what we look like, where we come from, or how much money is in our pockets.”*<sup>1</sup>
  
2. **Name how the status quo fails us:** Acknowledge that the status quo “tough-on-crime” tactics are not working and that communities are ready for new solutions.
  - a. *“To build communities where everyone feels safe, we need to focus on preventing crime in the first place by addressing the root causes, not just reacting to it after it happens.”*
  
3. **Point to solutions:** Repeatedly point to the solutions that are showing success in preventing crime, delivering safety, and promoting justice.
  - a. Lean into concrete, relevant examples of solutions that prevent crime, respond to crisis, and stop violence while affirming the need to expand the tools in our public safety toolbox.
    - i. Voters rank increasing mental health care, pre-trial/bail reform, and addressing underlying economic conditions as more effective solutions to preventing crime than harsher sentences or putting thousands more police on the ground.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ninety-four percent of voters agreed with this statement. See PerryUdem, “Responding to Republican Narratives on Crime,” 2022, pg. 11, <https://veraaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Responding-to-Tough-On-Crime.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Vera Action, “We Need to be ‘Serious about Safety,’ not ‘Tough on Crime,’” 2024, pg. 22, [https://veraaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vera-Action-Immigration-Hub-PerryUdem-Memo\\_Border-Crime.pdf](https://veraaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vera-Action-Immigration-Hub-PerryUdem-Memo_Border-Crime.pdf).

- ii. When it comes up, talk about the role of police – both the job they were hired to do and the need for accountability if they use excessive force, abuse their power, or break the law.<sup>3</sup>
  - iii. When we call for help, we need to know that someone with the right skills will show up to assist us. It’s also helpful to explain the role and duties of alternative first responders, including social workers, mental health experts, substance abuse specialists, EMTs, and nurses, and how we can invest in and support them.
- b. Reiterate that we have solutions that maintain safety and justice – we do not have to sacrifice one for the other.

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## Key Issue Areas

### “Defund” Attacks and Policing

Some politicians and media figures use fear and false narratives about crime to attack community-led demands for police accountability and investment in our neighborhoods. The fact is, Vera Action polls repeatedly show that most people believe police officers and police departments should be held accountable if they break the law or abuse their power.<sup>4</sup> They also believe that armed police officers should not serve as social workers, school counselors, and mental health experts, and that city budgets should better reflect community members’ demands for investment in essential services and care.<sup>5</sup>

**Below is a tested narrative to effectively respond when our opposition uses “defund” attacks:**

#### **Policing**

*“No matter our race, zip code, or genders, our kids and families deserve to live, work, and play in safety. But for decades, certain politicians have expected police to solve every social problem – from kids skipping school to mental illness and from homelessness to gun violence – while these same politicians defund essential services that address the real causes of crime.”*

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Vera Action, “Messaging Research and Polling Library,” <https://veraaction.org/messaging-research-and-polling-library>.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Foundation, “New Polling Data on Different Approaches to Public Safety in America – National and state-specific in Illinois, Minnesota, and Michigan.” 2023, <https://www.joycefdn.org/new-national-polling-data-on-different-approaches-to-public-safety-in-america>.

*No one profession can do all of that. It's time to support leaders who will implement promising new solutions to make every community safer, without exception. We want our elected officials to ensure our communities feel safe by redirecting funds toward mental health resources and other essential services that prevent crime in the long run. That means holding people who compromise that safety accountable – including police officers who use excessive force, abuse their power, or break the law. The people of [insert your area] want more police accountability and more effective crisis response that keeps all of us safe. [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]*

## Progressive Prosecutors & District Attorneys (DAs)

While progressive prosecutors across the country have come under increasing political attack, the public largely supports DAs whose priority is the community, not simply upholding the “tough-on-crime” status quo. Voters across the country firmly believe that the primary function of prosecutors is to “seek the truth, not just convictions,” and want them to “respect the constitutional and legal rights of all people.”<sup>6</sup>

**Below is a proactive sample message in defense of progressive, solutions-driven prosecutors:**

### **Solutions-Driven DAs (People Over Prosecution)**

*“All of us – no matter what we look like, where we live, or how much money we make – should have the freedom to be safe in our homes, in our schools, and in our communities. We’ve come together before across races and places to demand safety, justice, and accountability. Our district attorney should fight for those things, too. Instead of pushing more failed “tough-on-crime” policies that hurt our neighbors and loved ones, DAs must prioritize the needs of our communities, focusing on real solutions that keep all of us safe. That includes data-driven strategies to reduce crime, increase accountability, and improve safety. It means seeking the truth, not just making more arrests. We want DAs who will put the long-term safety and well-being of our community first. [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]”*

## Accountability

Voters are supportive of criminal legal reform efforts and also want to know that there is accountability in our system. But it’s a wrong assumption that when communities call for more accountability, they are calling for more or harsher punishment for civilians who have committed

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<sup>6</sup> Perry Udem, “National Survey on DAs / Prosecutors For Vera Institute of Justice,” 2024. On file with the Vera Institute of Justice.

harm. More than punishment, communities want people who commit wrongdoing to understand the harm done, make amends, learn from mistakes, and change their behavior. People also want repercussions for police who break the law or use excessive force, for politicians who ignore community demands for safety, and across the criminal legal system as a whole.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to accountability, voters are interested in it at all levels.

**Below is a sample message about further accountability in the criminal legal system:**

### **Accountability**

*“We all deserve to feel safe, no matter how much money we have, the color of our skin, or where we live. To make that a reality, we need more accountability at all levels. People who break the law need to answer for their wrongdoing, including elected officials and police officers who break the law. That means they understand the harm done, make amends, learn from mistakes, and change their behavior. Police should be held accountable for using excessive force. Just like any other public position, it’s common sense that they should lose their jobs or otherwise face repercussions if they violate our trust. Elected officials need to listen to voters when they spend billions on things that don’t keep our families safe. With more accountability at all levels, we can build a safe, just, and thriving community. [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]”*

### **Rising Prices & Retail Theft**

Safety and economic issues are directly linked. Facing a challenging climate for brick-and-mortar retail, big retailers and corporations are creating a false narrative that retail theft has increased nationwide.<sup>8</sup> As a result, a handful of politicians are pushing for harsher punishments for people who commit retail theft.

**Don’t buy the narrative about retail theft. Below is a sample message that can be used to push back on arguments for harsher punishments and more policing and surveillance in stores:**

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<sup>7</sup> PerryUndem, “Responding to Republican Narratives on Crime,” 2022, 15, <https://veraaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Responding-to-Tough-On-Crime.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Ames Grawert and Ram Subramanian, “Myth vs. Reality: Trends in Retail Theft,” Brennan Center for Justice, 2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/myth-vs-reality-trends-retail-theft>: “Despite spikes in some cities, crime data doesn’t show a nationwide increase in shoplifting and other forms of retail theft.” See also Alina Selyukh, “Retailers howled about theft last year. Why not now?” NPR, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/11/1236075589/retail-theft-crime-target-stores>.

## Retail Theft

*“Whether we’re in [X CITY] or [Y CITY], we all want to live in safe neighborhoods and to be able to provide for our families. To make that a reality, we need to elect leaders who will make sure we have what we need to thrive. Right now, many of our neighbors and community members are struggling to make ends meet, while a handful of greedy corporations jack up prices on basic items we need to feed and care for our families. At the same time, some politicians are pushing for harsher punishments for people who commit theft out of desperation and poverty. We can all agree that throwing people in jail or charging them with huge fines will not solve the underlying problem. It will just make people more desperate and leave more people struggling to provide for their families. Instead of prioritizing harsh punishments and anti-theft policies that don’t solve the problem, our elected officials should focus on fully funding quality schools for every child, affordable housing for every family, treatment for mental health and drug addiction, and opportunities to earn a good living. We must demand elected officials fund our futures and hold people accountable in ways that help our communities thrive – and make all of us safer. [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]”*

Learn more: [Messaging Guide: Telling the Real Story on Rising Prices](#)

## Immigration & the Border

Some self-interested politicians use “tough-on-crime” and “law and order” rhetoric in conversations about immigration and policies regarding the U.S./Mexico border, dangerously conflating these issues with crime and public safety. Although we never want to conflate these distinct and nuanced issues, we need to be equipped to respond to opposition attacks.

**Below is a sample narrative about immigration and the border that responds to our opposition and leads with the value of safety for all:<sup>9</sup>**

### The Border

*“All of us – no matter what we look like, where we come from, or how we speak – deserve to feel safe and make a better life for our families. We work, sacrifice, and pack up everything to provide for our loved ones and make sure our kids have everything they need to thrive.*

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<sup>9</sup> Vera Action, The Immigration Hub, PerryUdem, “Campaign Narratives on the Border and Crime,” 2024, [https://veraaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vera-Action-Immigration-Hub-PerryUdem-Memo\\_Border-Crime.pdf](https://veraaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vera-Action-Immigration-Hub-PerryUdem-Memo_Border-Crime.pdf).



We need to make sure immigrants who have lived here with their families and contributed towards the success of our communities for years can live a good life here and have a fair shot at becoming American citizens. We can find solutions for conditions at the border, moving with compassion and common sense, not hate and hostility. We must establish a fair and orderly process that respects the dignity of people with the courage and tenacity to move here for a better life. And we must fully fund things proven to improve safety and everyone's quality of life, like good public schools, access to good-paying jobs, health care, and affordable housing. We can create a better immigration system that works for all of us – whether we're Black, white, or brown, Native or newcomer. Let's focus on making life safer, more stable, and more secure for all of us, no exceptions. [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]"

Learn more: [People Move: How to Talk About Immigrant Rights in the U.S.; Campaign Narratives on the Border and Crime](#)

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## More Full Narratives

### Serious About Safety #1

Regardless of where we live, the amount of money in our pockets, or the color of our skin, we all deserve to be safe. But right now, a few politicians are trying to scare our loved ones and distract us from what we really need to achieve real safety, accountability, and justice. To make all of our communities safe, we need to get serious about safety with real solutions instead of scare tactics. We can prevent crime and make our communities safer by funding good jobs, affordable housing, and quality education. We should respond to crises by supporting a comprehensive approach that includes civilian crisis response teams and mental health specialists. And we can stop violence by supporting policies and electing officials who will work to get illegal guns off the street and invest in violence reduction strategies that have shown success across the country (like community violence intervention programs). [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]

### Serious About Safety #2

All of us – no matter what we look like, where we live, or how much money we make – should have the freedom to be safe in our homes, in our schools, and in our communities. But right now, a handful of politicians threaten our freedom to be safe by spreading fear about crime and blocking the solutions we need to address the challenges our communities face / [address the

root causes of crime, respond to crises, and keep our communities safe]. Being serious about safety means increasing treatment for mental health and addiction, creating good-paying jobs and affordable housing, and supporting policies that get illegal guns off the streets.

[INSERT CALL TO ACTION]

### **Safety, Accountability, and Justice**

Whether you're Black or white, Asian or Latine, Native or newcomer, we all want to feel safe in our communities. While we've come together across races and places to demand safety, justice, and accountability, certain self-interested politicians are pushing the same tired "tough-on-crime" policies that make our communities less safe [that ignore our demands]. We don't have to keep choosing a system that prioritizes militarized policing over solutions that actually work for us: fully funding quality schools for every child, affordable housing for every family, treatment for mental health and drug addiction, and opportunities to earn a good living, so we can all feel safe and live a good life. [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]

### **The Safest Places**

The safest places in America don't have more police, more jails, more prisons, and harsher sentences. They have good-paying jobs, quality schools, and beautiful, well-maintained parks where our kids can play. Everyone can see a doctor when they are sick and afford a home to make memories in. There's hope for the future. Instead of pouring money into what we know doesn't keep us safe, let's invest in what does. We need to fully fund things that are proven to create safe neighborhoods and improve people's quality of life, like good schools, stable housing, and affordable health care. Because everyone – regardless of who we are, where we live, or how much money we have in our wallets – deserves to work, play, and raise our children in safety.

[INSERT CALL TO ACTION]

### **Prevention**

To live a good life, all of us need to feel safe – from tribal communities to rural farms, from the suburbs to city blocks. But while we value safety, certain politicians prioritize the same tired tactics that fail to address our concerns about violence and crime. When talking about the challenges our neighborhoods face, they blame new immigrants, Black people, and people forced to struggle to make ends meet. We're tired of their distractions. That's why we're fighting shoulder-to-shoulder to fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities and improve people's quality of life – like good schools, clean public parks, and affordable housing – and

doing more to prevent crime by funding treatment for mental health and drug addiction.  
[INSERT CALL TO ACTION]

### **Bail Reform**

We all deserve to feel safe, no matter how much money we have, the color of our skin, or where we live. But money bail actually makes us less safe. When someone charged with a minor offense is kept in jail for months or years because they can't afford bail, they can lose their job and home. That fuels the cycle of crime. We can't continue a system where having more money allows someone to remain free, even if they pose a threat to the safety of our community. We have to come together across races and genders to demand a system where public safety, not wealth, determines who is released pending trial. [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]

### **Youth Justice**

#### **Raise the Age Laws - Brains Still Developing**

Whether we're Black, white, or brown, Native or newcomer, most of us believe if a child makes a mistake and goes off track, they should be helped and guided to the right path. They should be with people who love them and are best placed to guide them. The "Raise the Age" law lets the courts treat kids like kids when they make a mistake or break the law – because we understand that kids are still growing and their brains don't weigh risks the way adults do. Harsh punishment and long sentences alone lead to more violence. We need to provide young people with programs that work to turn their lives around and prevent future crime. Teenagers benefit from gun violence prevention programs that strengthen school support systems, jobs, and mental health and drug treatment services. We must invest in solutions that are proven to work instead of locking up our kids and throwing away the key. [INSERT CALL TO ACTION]

#### **Raise the Age Laws - Kids Are Struggling**

Across races, places, and backgrounds, most of us believe that when a child fails or messes up, the right thing to do is to lend them a hand. And the truth is, kids across [STATE] are struggling. The "Raise the Age" law means kids are finally being treated as kids when they make mistakes. We know how to prevent crime by addressing young people's needs – providers around [STATE] are already starting to do this effectively with services that include education, employment training and internships, mentoring, gun violence interruption, mental health services, housing, summer programs, and peer support. It's time we fully fund these programs to help our kids.  
[INSERT CALL TO ACTION]

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## More Resources

- **We Make The Future Action**
  - [Digital & Messaging Toolkit: We Know What Keeps Us Safe](#)
  - [Guide To Messaging Our Freedoms](#)
  - [Messaging Guide: Confronting Right-Wing “Crime,” “Safety,” and “Policing” Attacks](#)
- **Vera Action**
  - [Vera Action Messaging Research and Polling Library](#)
  - [Vera Action Template for Organizers at the Doors](#)
  - [Vera Redefining Public Safety Initiative](#)
  - [Vera Action: Politics of Crime and Safety](#)
  - [Campaign Narratives on the Border and Crime](#)
- **ASO Communications**
  - [People Move: How to Talk About Immigrant Rights in the U.S.](#)
  - [Messaging Guides: Justice & Safety](#)
- **A/B Partners + BlackRoots:** [The 5 Keys: Unlocking a radical reimagination of public safety](#)
- **Color Of Change:** [Narrative Matters: A Guide To Covering Protests](#)