SAFETY AND JUSTICE ON THE BALLOT IN 2024:

Making Meaning of How Crime and Immigration Impacted the Election

December 2024

Vera ACTION

In this election cycle, voters voiced a
lost sense of security and stability.
If insecurity and instability is the ticking bomb,
fears about crime and immigration
are the wick to light the fuse.

TAKEAWAY #1:
The GOP made this election about insecurity and instability—and Democrats were comparatively silent. "Migrant crime" and "open borders" supplanted "defund" as the go-to line of attack about crime.

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THE 2024 "WILLIE HORTON" PLAYBOOK WAS ABOUT BIG CITIES, MIGRANTS, FENTANYL, AND THE BORDER

THE GOP SPENT $1B+ ON IMMIGRATION AND CRIME ADS.

DEMOCRATS SPENT $319M IN COMPARISON.

@marcmolinaro · Sep 18

...rn border in which fentanyl is pouring into this

...sition that we are currently in

– Sheriff Fred Akshar

JOSH RILEY IS IN PART TO BLAME FOR THE POSITION THAT WE ARE CURRENTLY IN TODAY.

0:18 / 0:30

PRESIDENT TRUMP
WILL STOP THE INVASION

PAID FOR BY MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN INC. WHICH IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS ADVERTISING. NOT AUTHORIZED BY ANY CANDIDATE OR CANDIDATE'S COMMIT

"OVER 10 MILLION *illegal border crossings.*"
~The Economist 1/24/24

"WILLIE HORTON" ATTACKS REMAIN THE GOP'S SIGNATURE MOVE—WITH MORE $ SPENT EACH CYCLE

■ GOP   ■ Democrats

2020 (crime only)
$103M $38M

2022 (crime only)
$230M $168M

2024 (crime + immigration)
$1B $319M

Source: AdImpact

15,000 MURDERERS
20,000 RAPISTS
EVEN TERRORISTS POUR IN

"KAMALA HARRIS-BACKED BAIL FUND that freed violent criminals"
Examiner

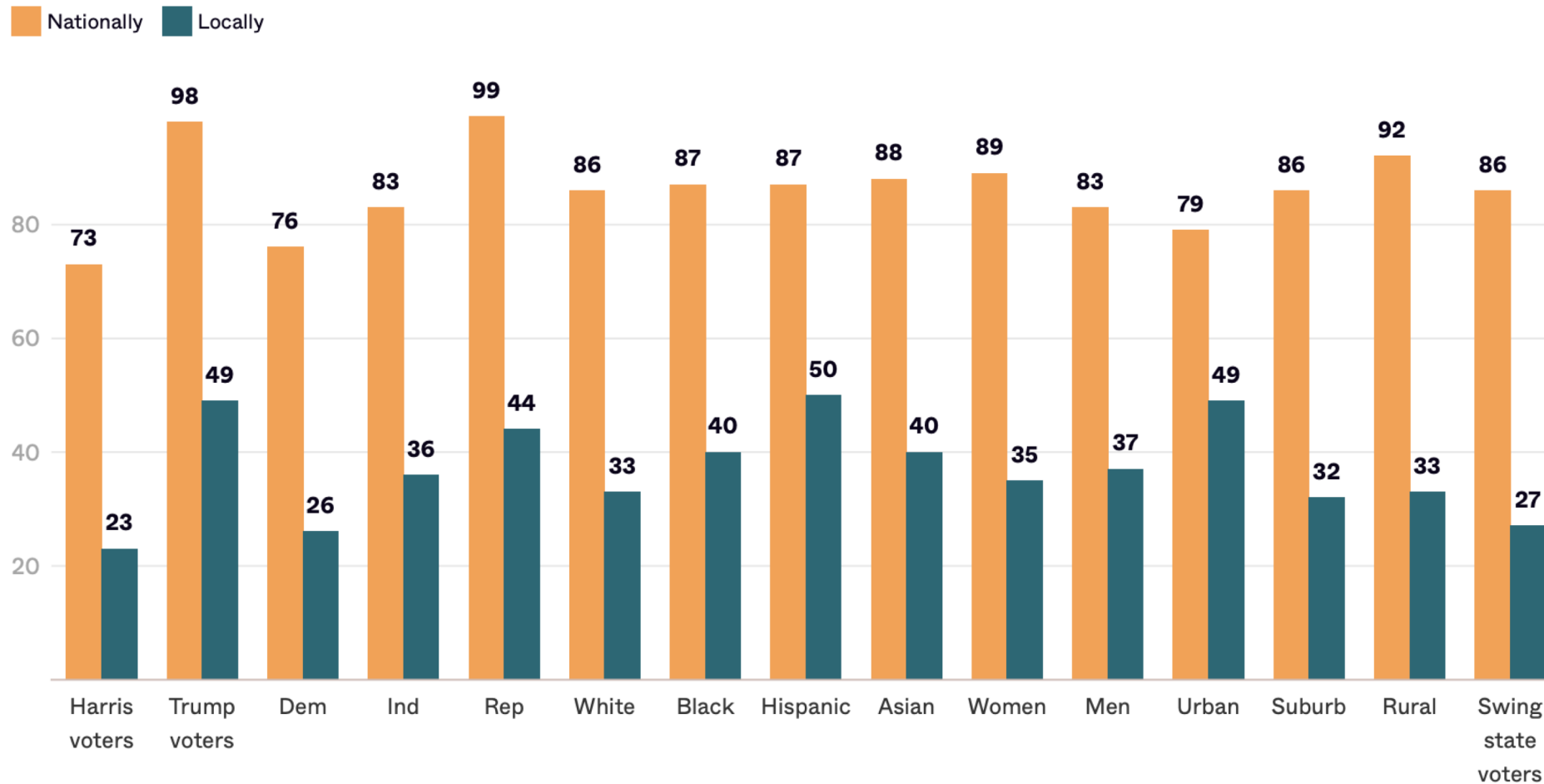Kamala Harris Always Puts Criminals First

TAKEAWAY # 2:
Even though crime is not a top voting issue, it lurks right under the surface as a critical one for voters. When races are won and lost on the margins, inoculating against this line of attack is critical.
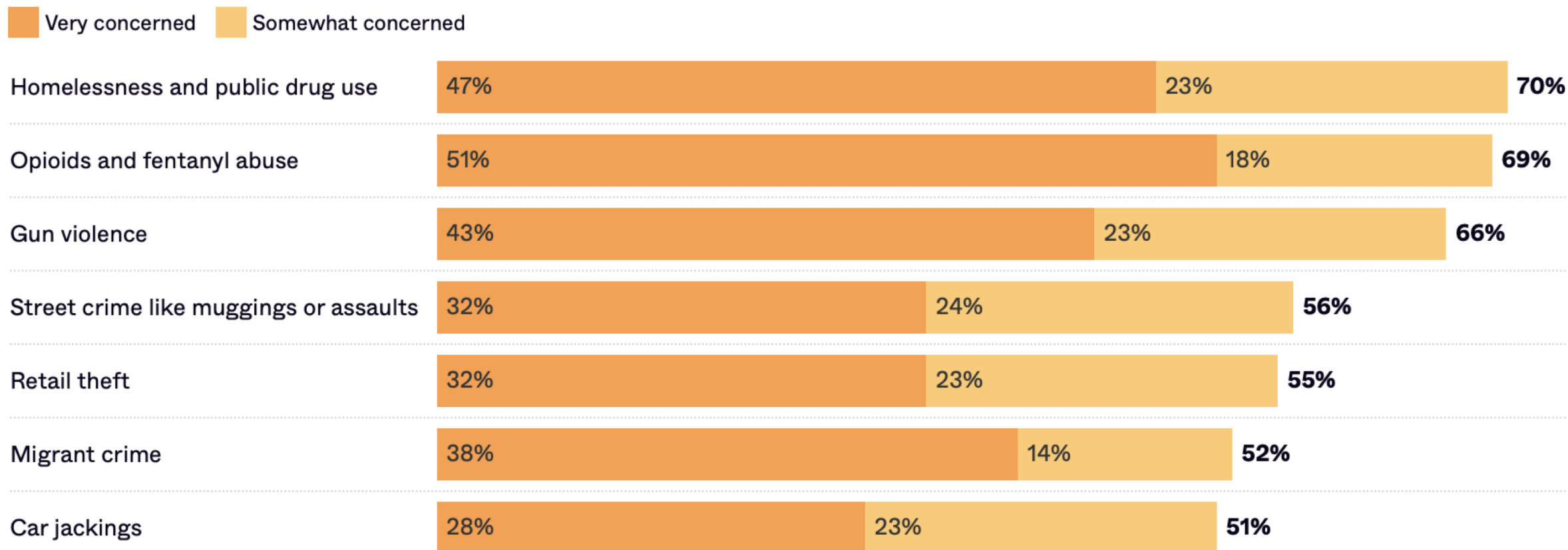
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EVEN THOUGH CRIME IS NOT A TOP-TIER ISSUE, A MAJORITY OF VOTERS VIEW IT AS A SERIOUS ONE

Do you believe crime is a very serious or somewhat serious problem?

Legend: Nationally (orange), Locally (teal)

	Nationally	Locally
Harris voters	73	23
Trump voters	98	49
Dem	76	26
Ind	83	36
Rep	99	44
White	86	33
Black	87	40
Hispanic	87	50
Asian	88	40
Women	89	35
Men	83	37
Urban	79	49
Suburb	86	32
Rural	92	33
Swing state voters	86	27

Source: GBAO exit poll commissioned by Vera Action

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HOMELESSNESS AND OPEN AIR DRUG USE ARE BIGGER CONCERNS THAN "MIGRANT CRIME"

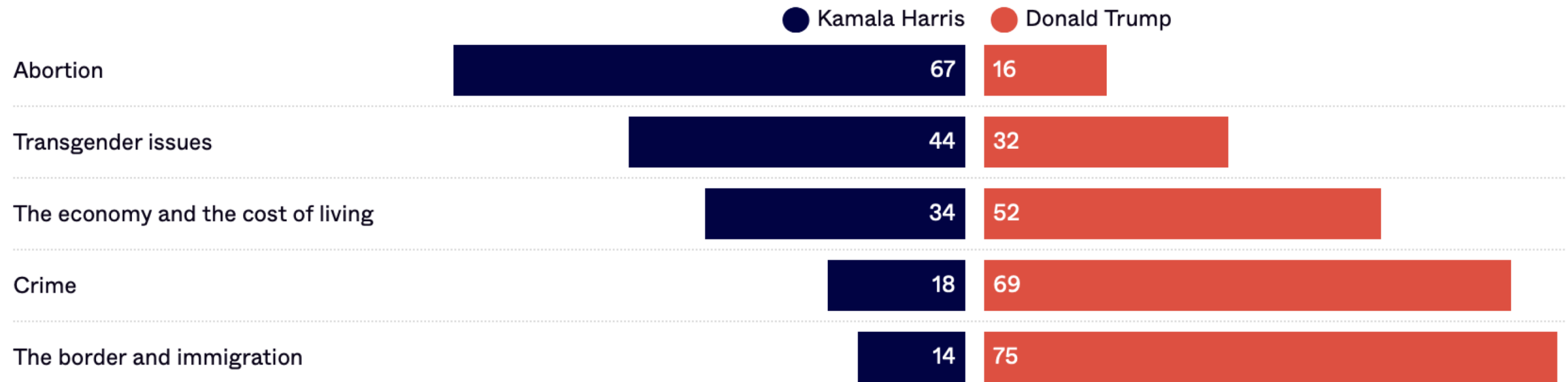How concerned are you about each of the following types of crime impacting you?

Legend: Very concerned | Somewhat concerned

Category	Very concerned	Somewhat concerned	Total
Homelessness and public drug use	47%	23%	**70%**
Opioids and fentanyl abuse	51%	18%	**69%**
Gun violence	43%	23%	**66%**
Street crime like muggings or assaults	32%	24%	**56%**
Retail theft	32%	23%	**55%**
Migrant crime	38%	14%	**52%**
Car jackings	28%	23%	**51%**

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Source: GBAO exit poll commissioned by Vera Action

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TAKEAWAY # 3:
Trying to "out-tough" the opposition doesn't work. Democrats need to create a values contrast to the GOP. Despite running a "tough-on-immigration-and crime" campaign, VP Harris's message failed to break through.

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VOTERS HEARD MORE FROM TRUMP ON PRIORITY ISSUES—THE ECONOMY, CRIME, AND IMMIGRATION

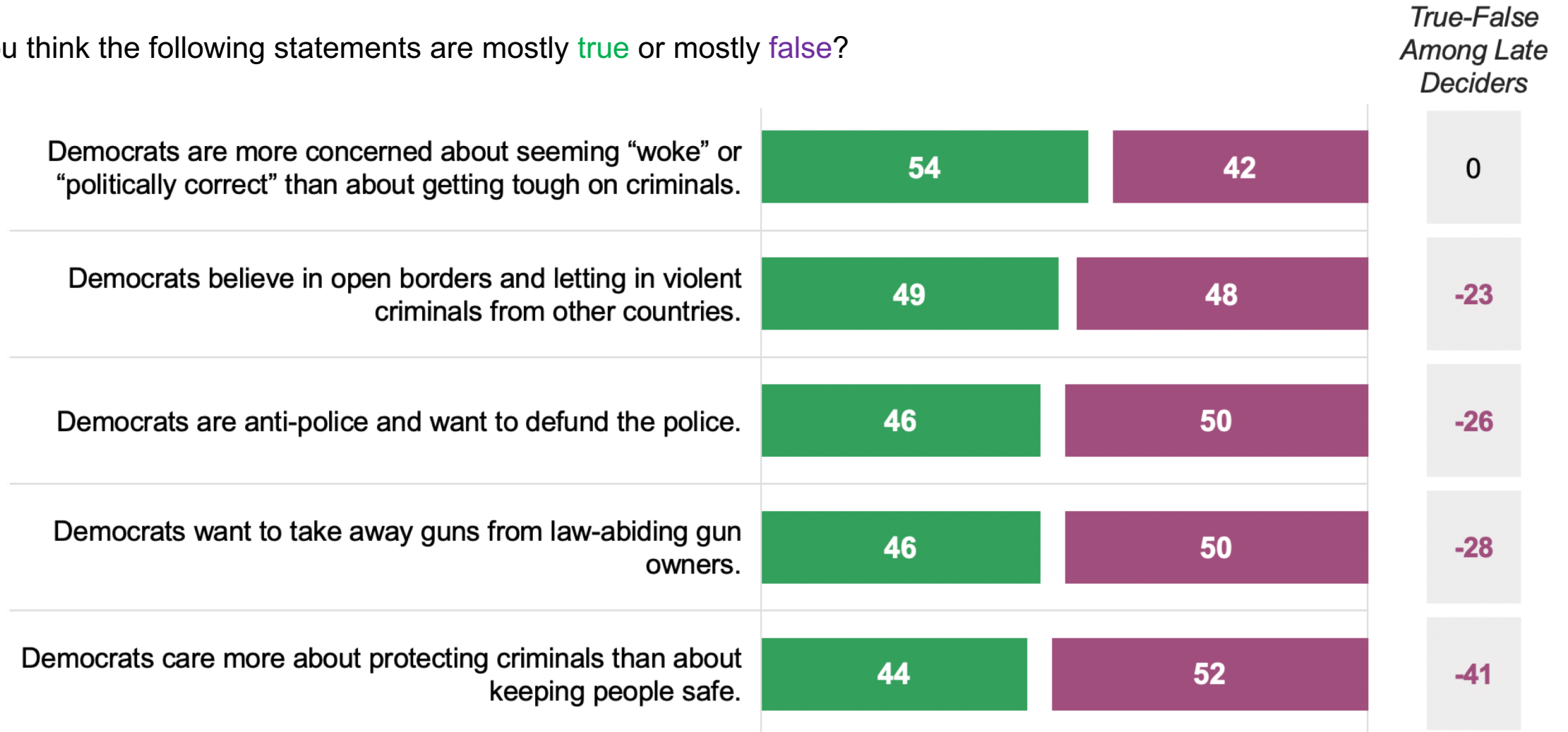Who did you hear more from on each of the following issues?

● Kamala Harris   ● Donald Trump

Issue	Kamala Harris	Donald Trump
Abortion	67	16
Transgender issues	44	32
The economy and the cost of living	34	52
Crime	18	69
The border and immigration	14	75

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Source: GBAO exit poll commissioned by Vera Action

TAKEAWAY # 4:
Crime and immigration remain a real liability for Democratic candidates, but the liabilities are not one-sided. The GOP's liability is that voters perceive the party to be about scare tactics, not real solutions.

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DEMOCRATS HAD REAL LIABILITIES ON CRIME & IMMIGRATION—ESPECIALLY WITH LATE DECIDERS

Do you think the following statements are mostly true or mostly false?

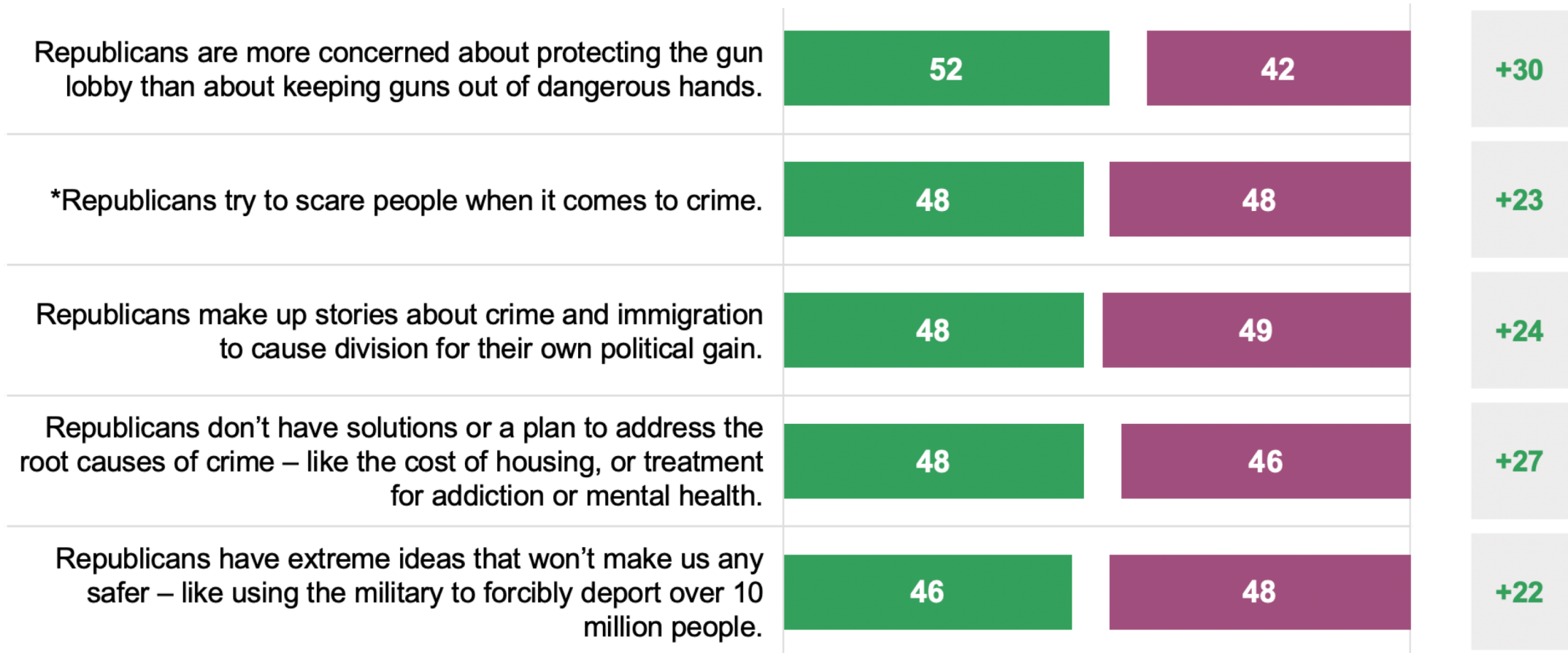|	True	False	True-False Among Late Deciders
Democrats are more concerned about seeming "woke" or "politically correct" than about getting tough on criminals.	54	42	0
Democrats believe in open borders and letting in violent criminals from other countries.	49	48	-23
Democrats are anti-police and want to defund the police.	46	50	-26
Democrats want to take away guns from law-abiding gun owners.	46	50	-28
Democrats care more about protecting criminals than about keeping people safe.	44	52	-41

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Source: GBAO exit poll commissioned by Vera Action

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BUT THE GOP ALSO HAD REAL LIABILITIES THAT DEMOCRATS FAILED TO TAP INTO WITH VOTERS

Do you think the following statements are mostly true or mostly false?

True-False Among Late Deciders

Statement	True	False	True-False Among Late Deciders
Republicans are more concerned about protecting the gun lobby than about keeping guns out of dangerous hands.	52	42	+30
*Republicans try to scare people when it comes to crime.	48	48	+23
Republicans make up stories about crime and immigration to cause division for their own political gain.	48	49	+24
Republicans don't have solutions or a plan to address the root causes of crime – like the cost of housing, or treatment for addiction or mental health.	48	46	+27
Republicans have extreme ideas that won't make us any safer – like using the military to forcibly deport over 10 million people.	46	48	+22

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Source: GBAO exit poll commissioned by Vera Action

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TAKEAWAY # 5:
Democrats can counter "tough" attacks by getting off the opposition's narrative playing field, creating a values contrast, and leading with solutions.
Flip the frame to being "serious about safety."

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A MAJORITY OF 2024 VOTERS CHOSE A "SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY" APPROACH OVER "TOUGH ON CRIME"

Which of the following statements about crime do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right?

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 more support and resources.

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 getting illegal guns off the street.

	Tough on crime	Help prevent crime
Total	47	53
Swing state voters	43	57
Independent voters	46	54
Harris voters	17	83
Trump voters	76	24
White	51	49
Black	26	74
Hispanic	42	58
Asian	37	63

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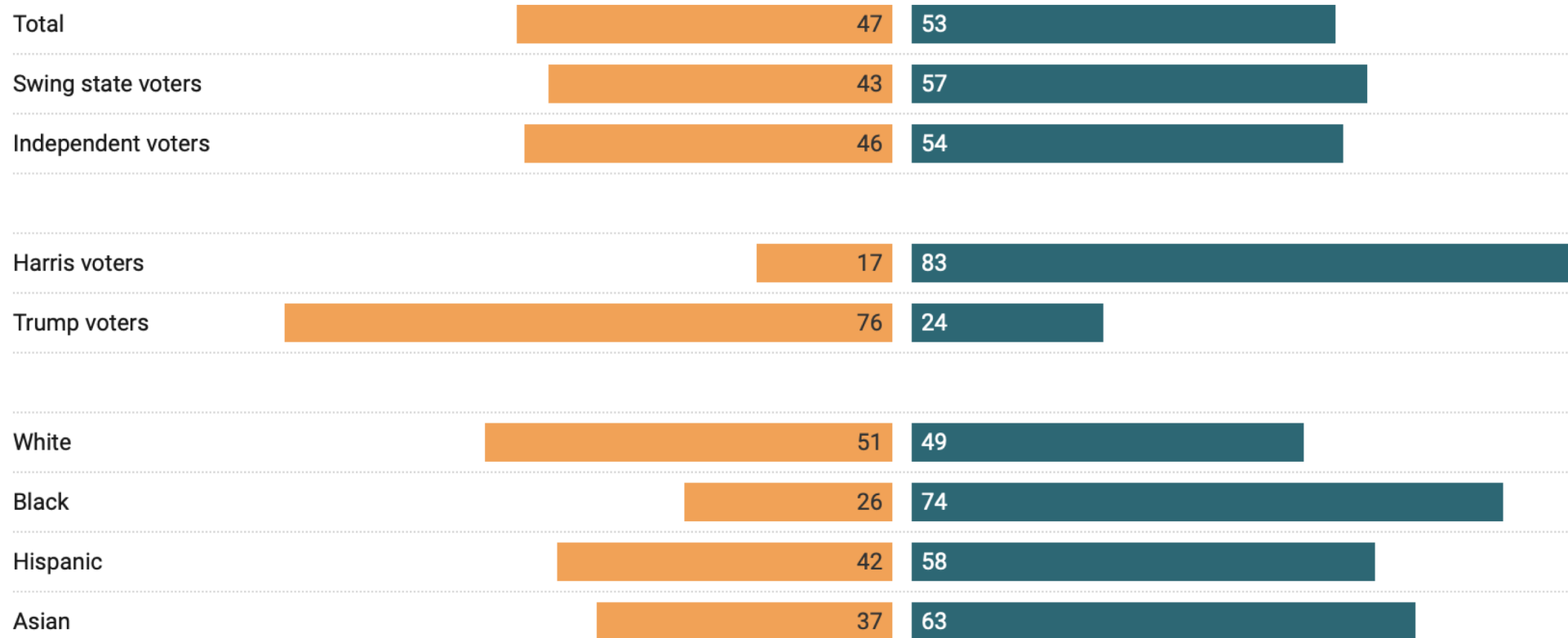
WE TESTED WHETHER VOTER PREFERENCE CHANGED WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE CANDIDATES...

BOTH CONDITIONS: Donald Trump says Kamala Harris has been soft on crime since day one. As San Francisco District Attorney, she let violent criminals go free who then murdered again. And now with the flood of illegal immigrants pouring into our country, the drug cartels are waging war on America. Kamala Harris always puts criminals first. Blood is on her hands, and America will be her next victim.
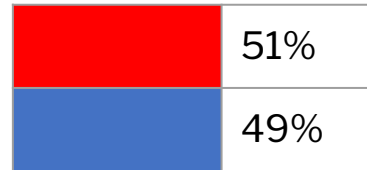
HARRIS "TOUGH ON CRIME":

Kamala Harris has spent decades fighting violent crime. As a border state prosecutor, she took on drug cartels and jailed gang members for smuggling weapons and drugs across the border. As vice president, she backed the toughest border control bill in decades. And as president, she will hire thousands more border agents and police officers and crack down on fentanyl and human trafficking. Fixing the border is tough, and so is Kamala Harris.

HEAD-TO-HEAD ATTACK V. DEM "TOUGH"

	51%
	49%

**+2**

HARRIS "SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY":

Nothing is more important than keeping you and your family safe. We all deserve leaders who are serious about safety. As Vice President, Kamala Harris invested in good schools, jobs, and treatment to break the cycle of crime. And she supported the police to investigate and solve serious crimes. America's cities are safer as a result: shootings and homicides are down nationally by more than 11 percent. We're making progress, but there's still more to do. Kamala Harris stands for safety, accountability, and justice.

HEAD-TO-HEAD ATTACK V. "SERIOUS"

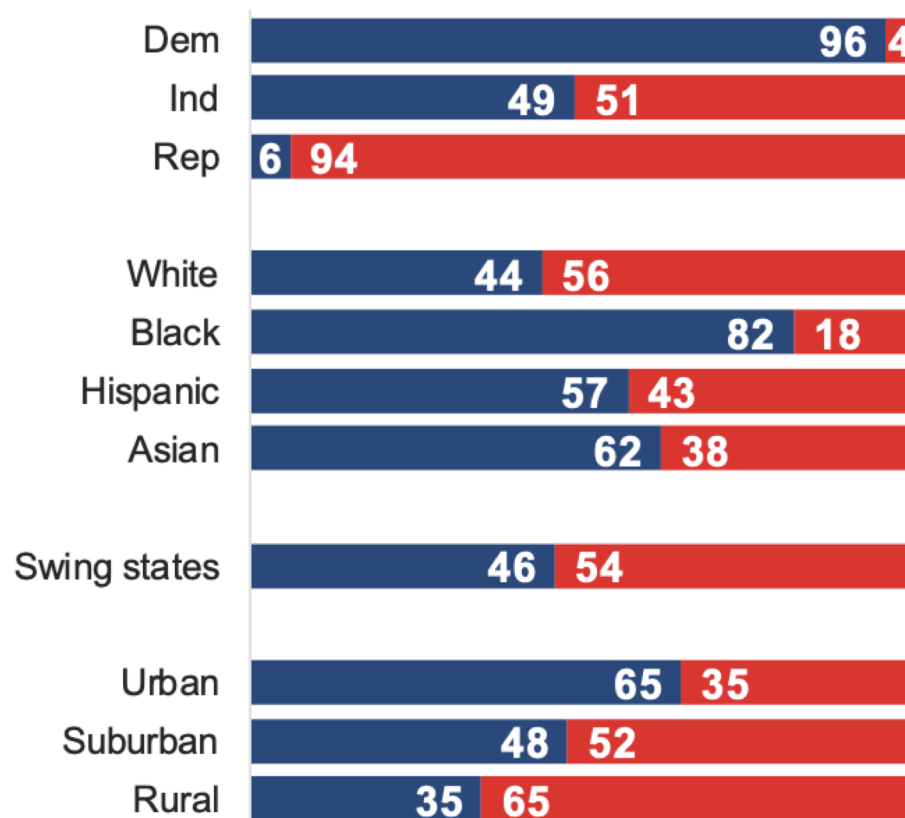|	
	51%
	49%

+2

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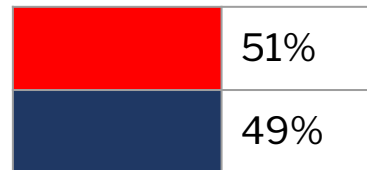
... AND A "SERIOUS" APPROACH OUTPERFORMED A "TOUGH ON CRIME" ONE WITH KEY MOVEABLE VOTERS
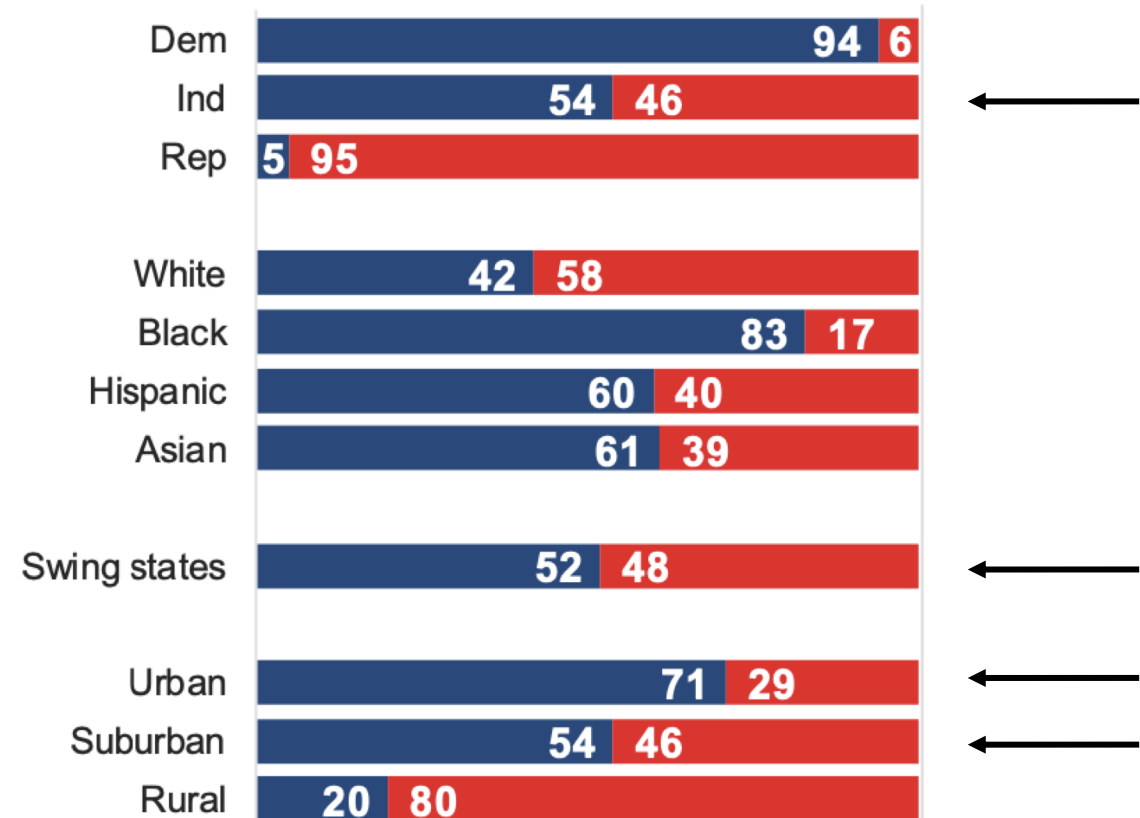
Which of the following statements about crime do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right?

*Split ½ sample

Harris Statement (Tough)* vs Trump Statement

Group	Harris	Trump
Dem	96	4
Ind	49	51
Rep	6	94
White	44	56
Black	82	18
Hispanic	57	43
Asian	62	38
Swing states	46	54
Urban	65	35
Suburban	48	52
Rural	35	65

Harris Statement (Serious)* vs Trump Statement

Group	Harris	Trump
Dem	94	6
Ind	54	46
Rep	5	95
White	42	58
Black	83	17
Hispanic	60	40
Asian	61	39
Swing states	52	48
Urban	71	29
Suburban	54	46
Rural	20	80

A FEW MORE NARRATIVE TIPS

1. **Get off the opposition's narrative playing field and onto our own using the "values, villain, and vision" framework.**
We do not win when we counter "tough" rhetoric by trying to "out-tough" the opposition. Turn the debate and get onto our own narrative turf by affirmatively messaging and inoculating against attacks using the "3 Vs."

2. **Lead with the shared values of safety, accountability, and justice.**
Acknowledge the importance of safety and that we deserve an honest conversation based in solutions, not scare tactics, about what makes communities safe. Take back and redefine accountability. Everyone can walk through the safety door to get to accountability and justice.

3. **Call out "tough on crime" as the villain and say "I'm about solutions, not scare tactics."**
Across the political spectrum, a majority don't believe "tough on crime" is working. Name it as the empty scare tactic that it is. If it worked, we would be the safest country in the world.

4. **Rely on empathy, not simply data, to persuade.**
Countering falsely-held beliefs with empathy is more persuasive than contradicting with data. Arguing about crime statistics, for example, with legislators or the public is often not effective. Setting the record straight with journalists and media is, though.

5. **Pivot to a vision by pointing to concrete solutions and things that work.**
There is strong support for community-based solutions. Highlight specific programs and how they work, who they serve, and the impact they have. This is where the data is persuasive.

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THANK YOU!

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