

HOW TO FIGHT AND WIN THE CRIME DEBATE:

Five takeaways for turning the GOP's "law-and-order" playbook into a liability and building a big-tent agenda for safety, accountability, and justice

October 2025

VeraACTION

Crime is a kitchen table issue for American voters.
Everyone wants to feel and be safe.

Under the guise of “crime control,” the Trump administration is conducting mass ICE raids, using the military to take over cities, and running roughshod over due process and the Constitution. Already, the American public is tiring of these tough-on-crime scare tactics.

Democrats have a unique opportunity to go on offense and build credibility and a strong brand on an issue that has historically been a liability for the party.

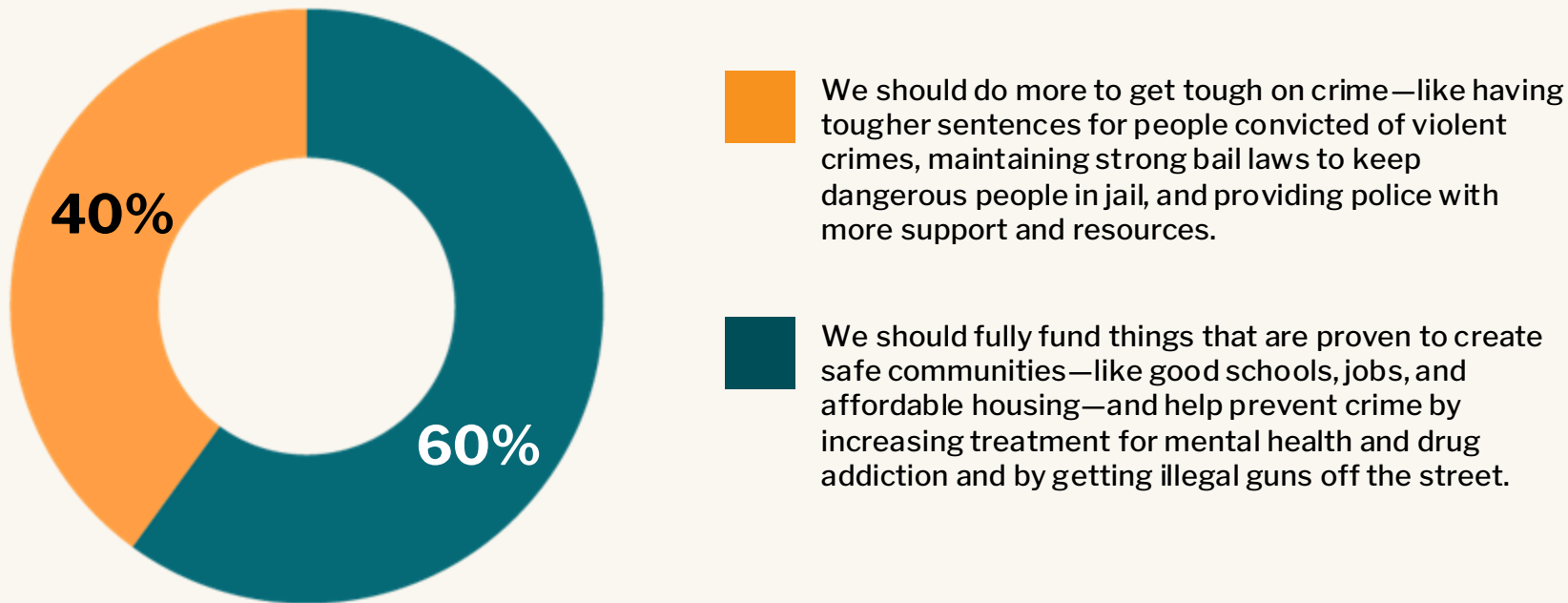
Here are five takeaways on how to do it.

TAKEAWAY #1

The conventional political wisdom about crime is out of sync with what voters want—a majority, including Independents, favor a “serious about safety” approach over a “tough-on-crime” one.

When given a choice between being “tough on crime” or “serious about safety,” voters heavily favor preventing crime and breaking its cycle

Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

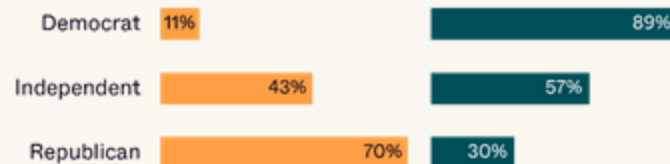
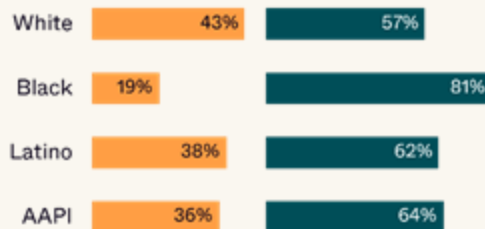
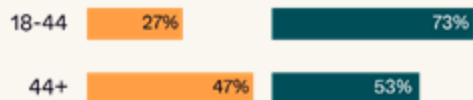


Other than Republicans, every voting bloc—including white voters, older voters, and Independents—favor a “serious about safety” approach

Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

 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.

 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.

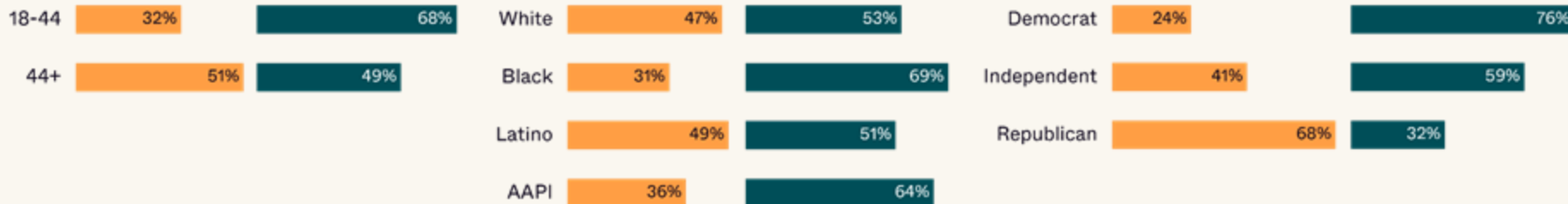


Being “serious” isn’t soft on crime or dismissive of accountability— instead it emphasizes remorse, repair, and change over strict punishment

Which of the following statements about people who break the law come closest to your view, even if none is exactly right?

We need to make sure that people who break the law are held accountable by enforcing strict punishment. 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.

To make communities safe, 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. 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.

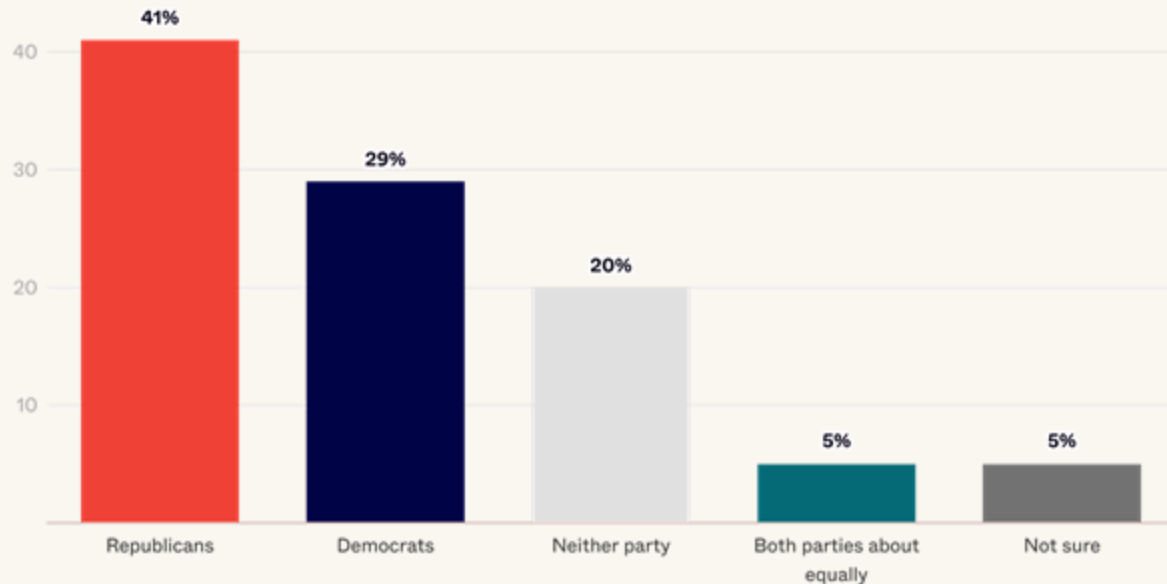


TAKEAWAY #2

Trump and the GOP have an advantage on crime—but not by much—and only because Democrats lack a clear, coherent brand. This void lets Democrats be defined as “soft” and “weak.”

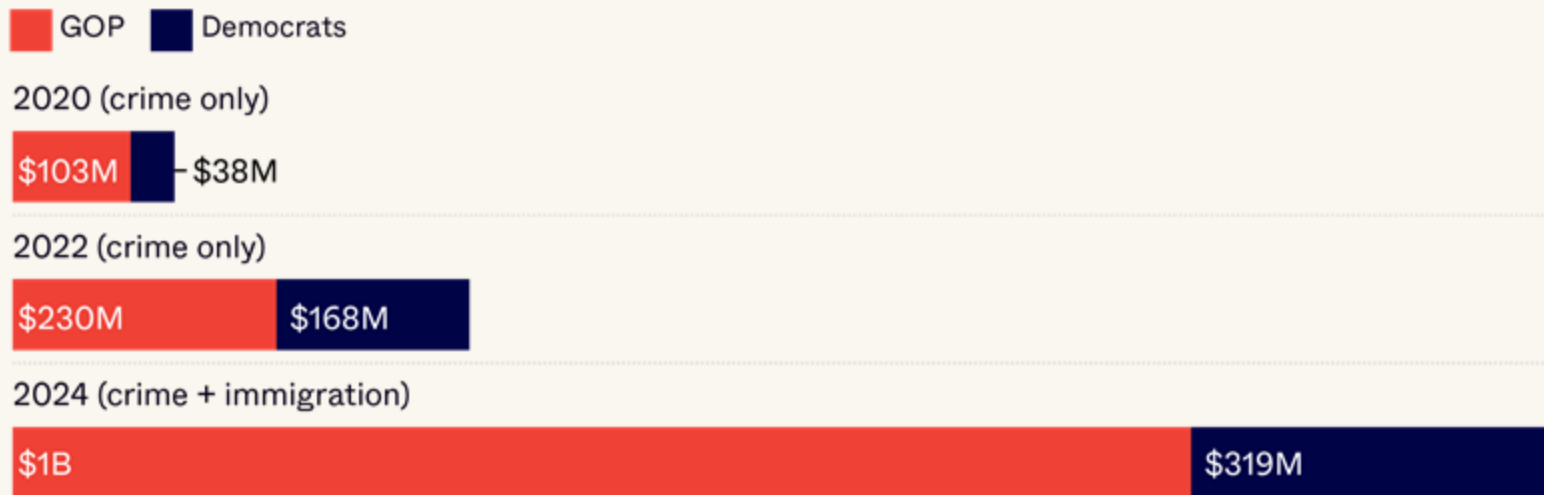
Even though the GOP maintains a +10-point lead on crime, they remain under water and one out of five voters say they trust neither party

Which party do you trust more when it comes to the issue of crime?



Trump's scare tactics exploit fears about crime, immigration, disorder—and the GOP's ad spending on it has skyrocketed in recent cycles

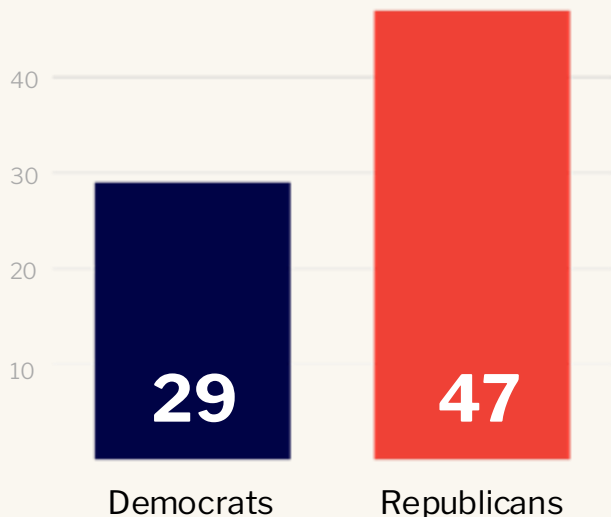
“Law-and-order” political ad spending by party in recent election cycles:



When Democrats adopt an “I-too-am-tough” tone—as Biden and Harris did in 2024—it adds to and reinforces the GOP’s brand advantage on crime

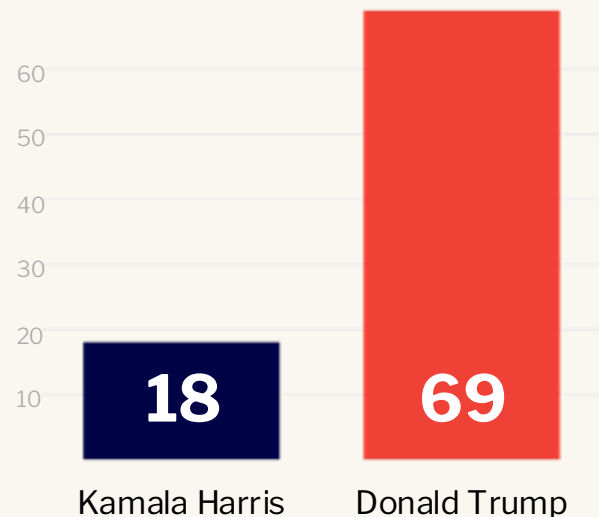
May 2024

Who do you hear more from on the issues of crime and safety, Democrats or Republicans?



November 2024

Which candidate do you hear more from on the issue of crime?



TAKEAWAY #3

From immigration to disorder, a “serious about safety” approach wins over both the base and moderate voters—and offers a clear, consistent brand on safety that Democrats can own.

Even on the thorniest issues, voters are ahead of where the political debate is—for example, they want better policing and not simply more police

Which of the following statements do you most support, even if none is exactly right?

Supporting police who put their lives on the line for us everyday and holding those who use excessive force or abuse their power accountable

35%

Taking the burden off police officers to solve every social problem so they can focus on serious crime

23%

Building strong bonds and trust between police and the community

19%

Putting more police on the streets

15%

More funding for police

7%

Prioritize promoting detectives and officers from within existing police ranks

2%

For that reason, when politicians are attacked for “defund” they should counter with a reminder that we cannot ask the police to do everything

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view, even if none is exactly right?

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.

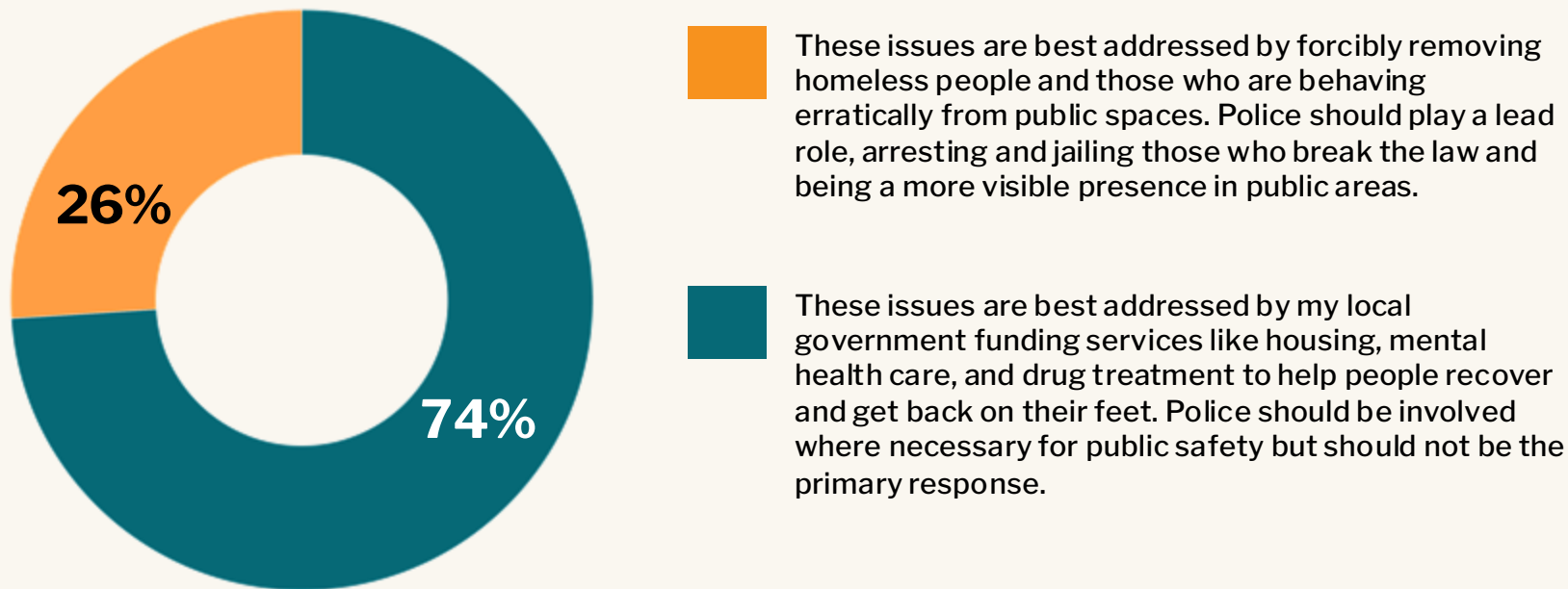
42%

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%

This “serious about safety” approach to preventing crime and breaking its cycle is strongly favored by voters when it comes to issues of disorder

Many cities are dealing with homeless encampments, public drug use, and people in crisis. Even if it's not a perfect description, which of the following statements is closer to your view?

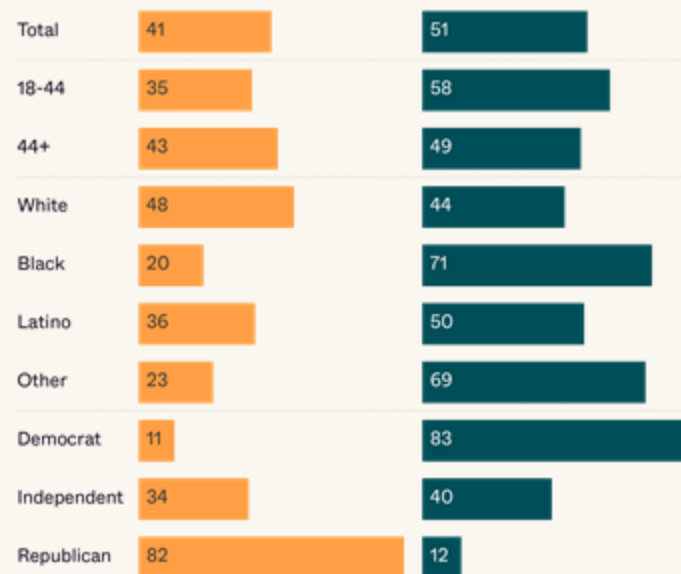


Even on immigration, the most contested wedge issue, calling out the scare tactics and turning the debate back to safety neutralizes the attack

Even if it isn't exactly right, which of the following statements comes closer to your view?

Cities are being overrun by an influx of new migrants causing chaos and crime. We can't spend billions in taxpayer money to feed, clothe, and shelter illegal migrants — many of them criminals. Meanwhile, ordinary Americans are struggling just to pay bills while illegal immigrants get free benefits. Crime has gone up because of Biden's open border policies that let migrants bring fentanyl and deadly drugs into our country and commit murder, rape, and other violent crimes while here. It's time to secure our borders, bring an end to migrant crime, and put Americans first.

My opponent uses lies and hate for political gain. Spending taxpayer money to round up and deport immigrants — many of whom are longtime residents, green card holders, and even citizens — is a political tool to get attention and divide us. Let's focus on solutions that live up to our values and make us safer. Let's secure our border and create a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who have lived here for years instead of wasting money on ICE raids that do nothing to make us safer. Let's fully fund things proven to improve safety and everyone's quality of life, like good schools, good-paying jobs, health care, and affordable housing. I'm focused on making life safer, more stable, and secure for all of us.



When given a choice between being “tough on crime” or “serious about safety,” voters heavily favor preventing crime and breaking its cycle

In three separate focus groups of battleground moderate voters, we asked White voters in MI, Black voters in NC, and Latino voters in NV to view five different ads about crime and safety (including the three linked below). Which did they find most persuasive and why?



Across the three focus groups, the top-performing message was an ad featuring a mayor’s focused policing and community-based investments to “fight crime the right way.”

TAKEAWAY #4

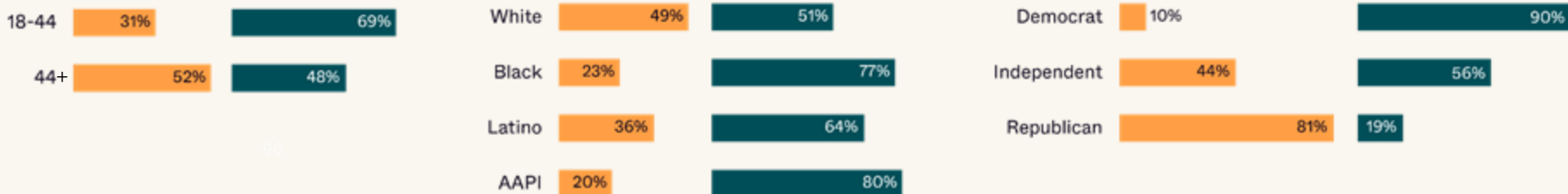
As Democrats gain ground on affordability, the GOP ratchets up the crime and immigration attacks. Counter with the message “Safety is key to a life you can afford” and attack Trump’s cuts.

Tie safety and affordability together—safety is key to a life you can afford—and win over voters that stayed home or went to the right in 2024

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

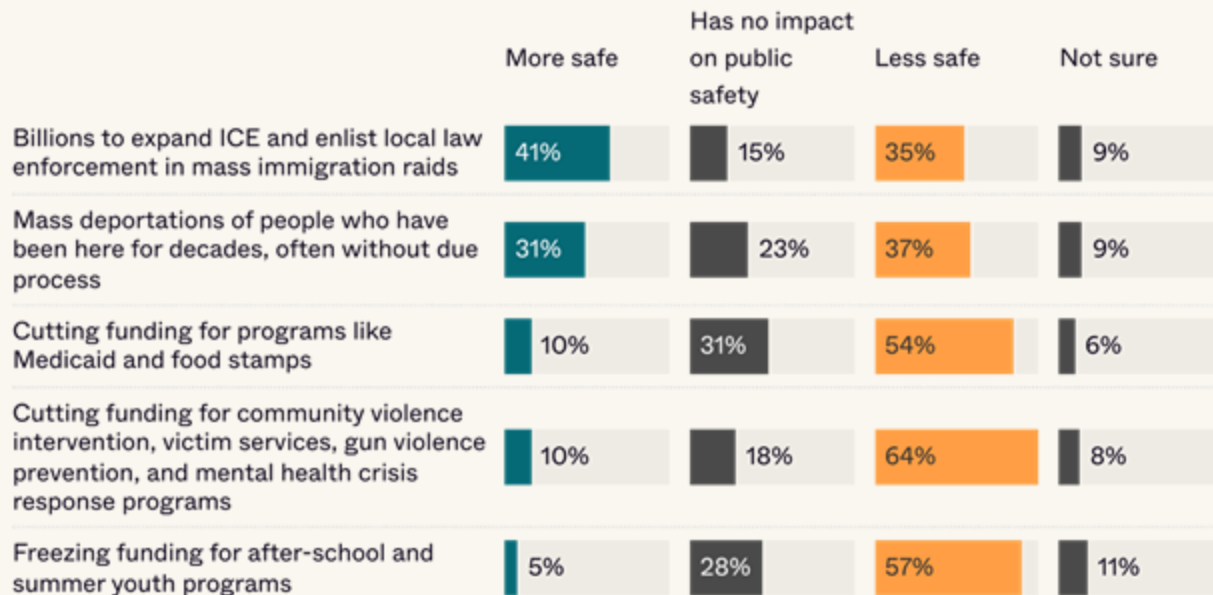
Reckless government spending surged inflation and woke politicians let crime and immigration get out of control. Hardworking families are overwhelmed by rising costs, which is why Republicans passed large tax cuts for middle class families. Tax-and-spend Democrats have made our national debt spiral out of control. More big government programs aren't going to fix anything or bring prices down. Hard-working Americans want opportunity, not handouts.

A safe community is also an affordable community. Americans are already struggling with high costs and instability but Republicans are making things worse by gutting jobs and cutting health care to give tax cuts to billionaire donors. Republicans are focused on the wrong priorities and making the lives of everyday Americans unstable and unsafe in the process. We need to invest in things that make our communities stronger and safer by investing in good schools, good jobs, affordable housing, mental health and drug treatment.



A majority of voters believe that cuts to the social safety net undermine safety—a plurality think mass raids and deportations don't make us safer

For each of the following actions taken by the federal government in recent months, say if the action makes you feel more safe, less safe, or has no impact on your safety.

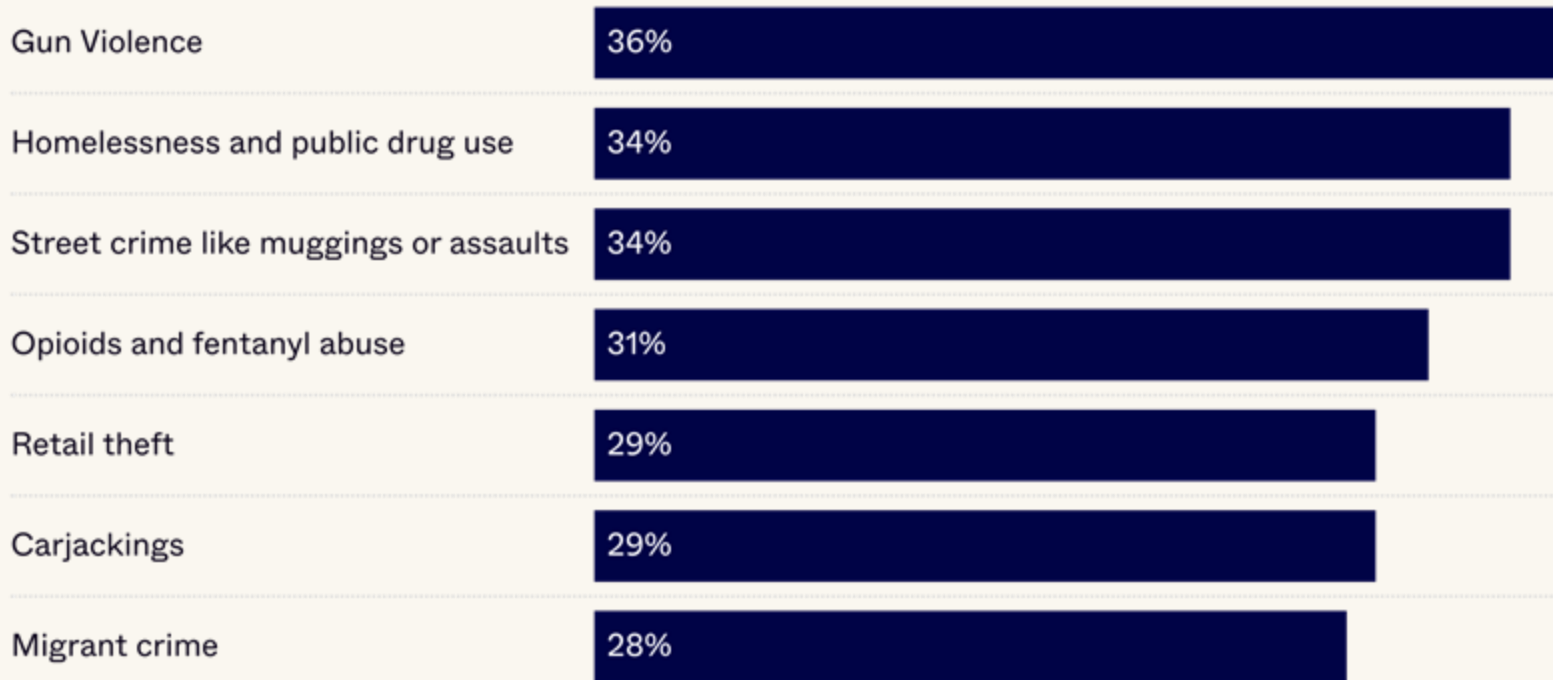


TAKEAWAY #5

Roughly 15-20% of the voting electorate are “safety and justice targets”—crime is a strong driver of vote choice *and* they will choose being “serious about safety” over “tough on crime.”

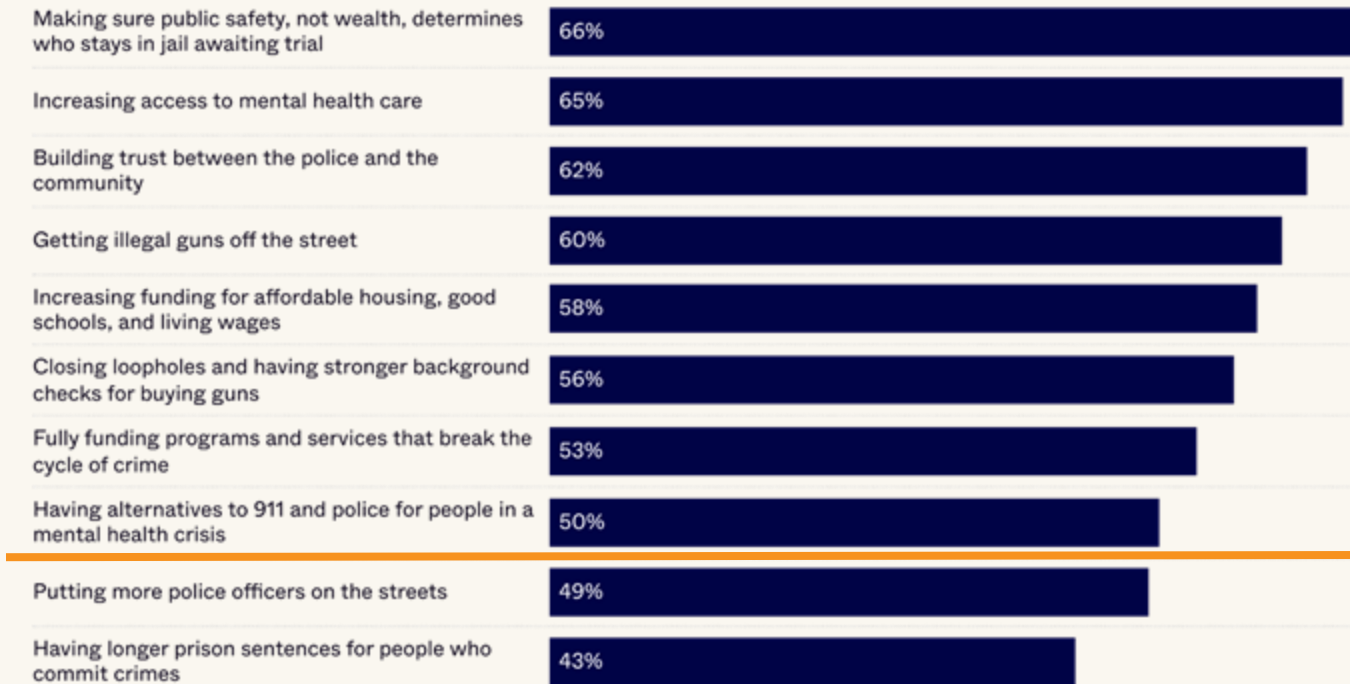
Instead of taking the bait and reacting to the GOP's emphasis on “migrant crime,” Democrats should focus on solutions for violence and crisis

Which of the following types of crime do you believe will most impact you personally?



Voters favor solutions that address the underlying drivers of crime and crisis—not “tough-on-crime” measures that dominate the political debate

Which of the following proposals do you think will do the most to reduce crime?



A “safety, accountability, and justice” policy agenda to ground messages in real solutions that appeal to American voters across the spectrum

- Better, more accountable policing
 - Higher case clearance rates, faster 911 response times, build community trust and accountability
- Ending the overdose epidemic
 - Increase treatment, build overdose prevention centers, make fentanyl test strips and Narcan readily available
- Supporting strong mental health and de-escalating crisis
 - Expand school- and community-based treatment options, mobile crisis response, 911 mental health calls
- Tackling gun violence
 - Launch gun trafficking task forces, expand Community Violence Intervention and trauma recovery centers
- Safekeeping our streets and quality of life
 - Replicate the housing command center model, invest in placemaking, expand neighborhood ambassadors
- Fairer, more accountable justice system
 - Expand second chances, invest in alternatives to incarceration, protect common-sense reforms

How can Democrats set the terms of the debate and go on offense? A “serious about safety” message in 30 seconds



[Click here to watch.](#)

A portrait of Congresswoman Summer Lee, a Black woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a black and white patterned jacket and large gold hoop earrings. She is smiling and has bright red lipstick. An American flag is visible in the background to her left.

**Congresswoman
Summer Lee**

A portrait of Senator Tammy Baldwin, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a purple blazer. She is smiling. The background is a neutral, light-colored wall.

**Senator
Tammy Baldwin**

A portrait of Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, a Black man with short dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking directly at the camera. An American flag is visible in the background to his left.

**Baltimore Mayor
Brandon Scott**

Won voters who are independent and not strongly for either party

Won voters who are less likely to have finished college

Won voters of color (Black, Latino, and AAPI)

Won voters who don't regularly seek out news about politics

FOR MORE INFORMATION:



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