

COUNTERING “TOUGH ON CRIME” SCARE TACTICS WITH A “SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY” APPROACH:

Polling for the New Jersey gubernatorial on how to win the narrative on safety, accountability, and justice

September 2025

Vera ACTION

Crime is a kitchen table issue for American voters. Everyone wants to feel safe. This election, Democrats have a unique opportunity to go on the offense by tying safety to affordability, calling out the GOP's "tough-on-crime" scare tactics, and emphasizing that cuts to the social safety net endanger the safety of our young people, families, and neighborhoods.

Democrats can make being
"serious about safety" a winning approach.

METHODOLOGY

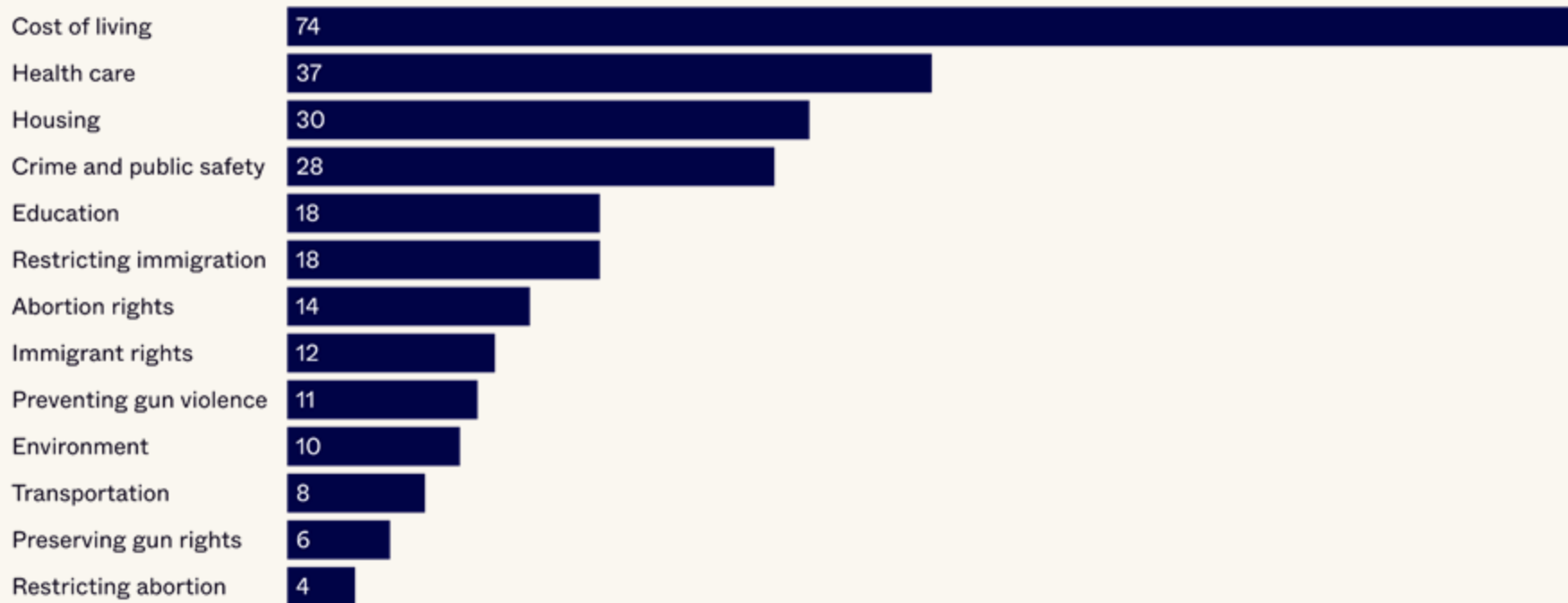
- YouGov online sample of 810 likely New Jersey general election voters
- Fielded from August 22nd-August 28th, 2025
- Respondents were weighted according to gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and New Jersey state region based on voter registration lists, the U.S. Census American Community Survey, and the U.S. Census Current Population Survey, as well as 2020 Presidential vote and approximate 2024 Presidential vote based on available results
- Margin of error +/- 4.2%.



THE POLITICAL CLIMATE ON CRIME IN NEW JERSEY

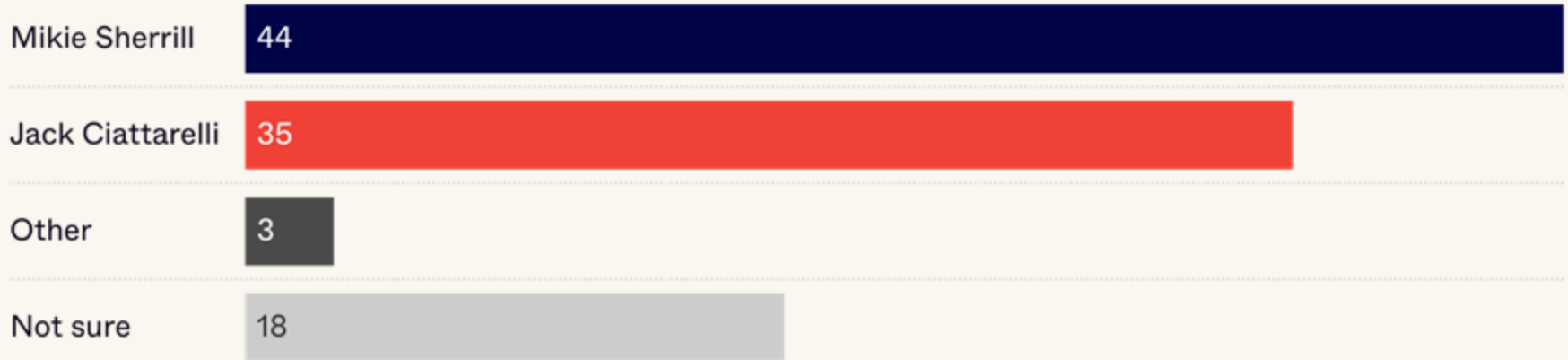
A STRONG MESSAGE THAT SPEAKS TO VOTERS' TOP CONCERNS: WE ALL DESERVE TO LIVE IN A SAFE, AFFORDABLE NEW JERSEY

Select up to 3 biggest issues in the upcoming race for New Jersey governor



WHILE SHERRILL IS AHEAD IN THE HORSE RACE...

If the election for governor of New Jersey was held today, who would you support?



... NEW JERSEY DEMOCRATS LAG BEHIND IN VOTER TRUST ON CRIME, ALTHOUGH SHERRILL'S NAME RECOGNITION HELPS CLOSE THE GAP

Who do you generally trust more on the issue of crime, Republicans or Democrats?

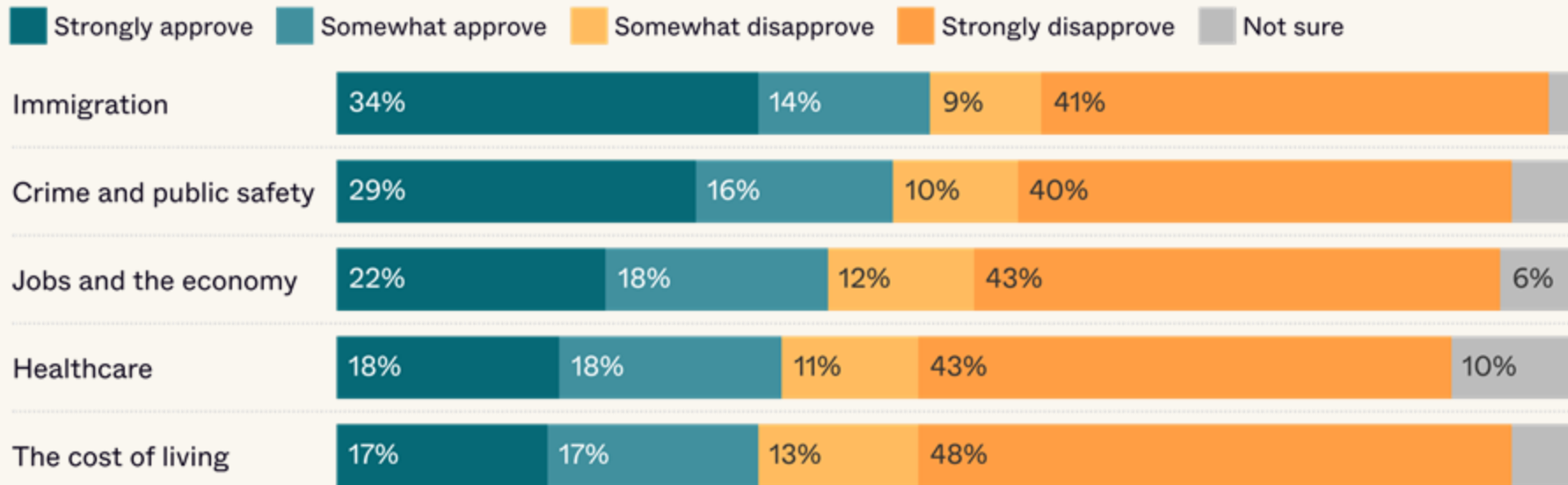


Who do you trust more on the issue of crime, Mikie Sherrill or Jack Ciattarelli?



TRUMP'S PLUMMETING APPROVAL IN EVERY CATEGORY—INCLUDING CRIME—CREATES AN OPPORTUNITY TO GO ON THE OFFENSE

Do you approve or disapprove of Donald Trump's handling of the following issues?



THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR TOUGH-ON-CRIME ATTACKS

IN RECENT ELECTIONS, THE GOP'S KEY PLAY TO SWAY VOTERS AT THE BALLOT BOX IS TO RESORT TO “TOUGH-ON-CRIME” SCARE TACTICS



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

■ GOP ■ Democrats

2020 (crime only)



2022 (crime only)



2024 (crime + immigration)

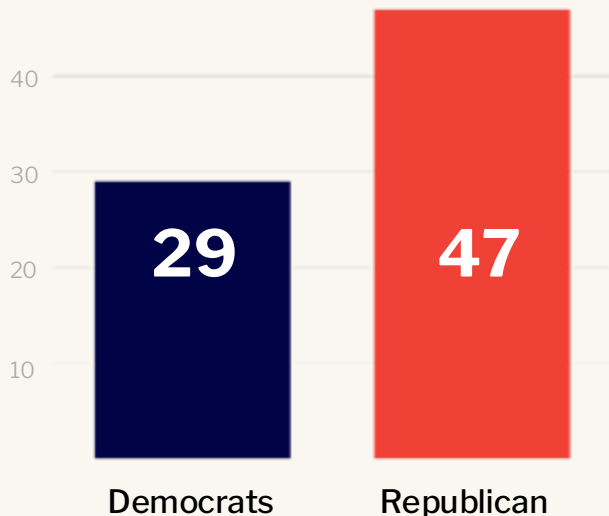


CRIME IS A PRETEXT FOR THE GOP'S POLITICAL POWER GRAB, BUT DEMOCRATS GAIN NO GROUND BY TRYING TO "OUT-TOUGH" THEM

When Democrats mimic "law-and-order" rhetoric, they reinforce the GOP's brand advantage

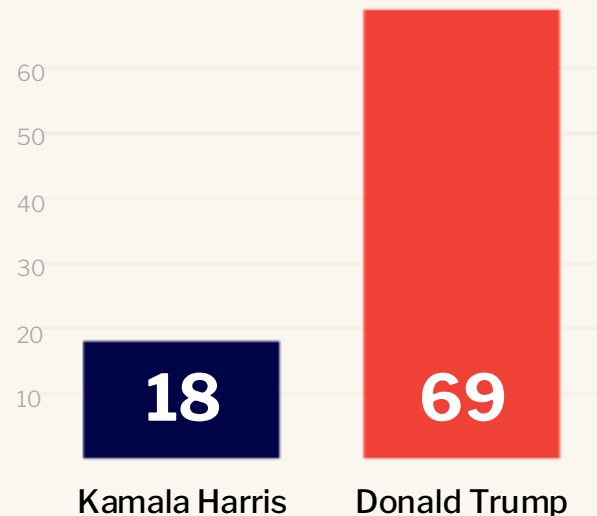
May 2024

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?



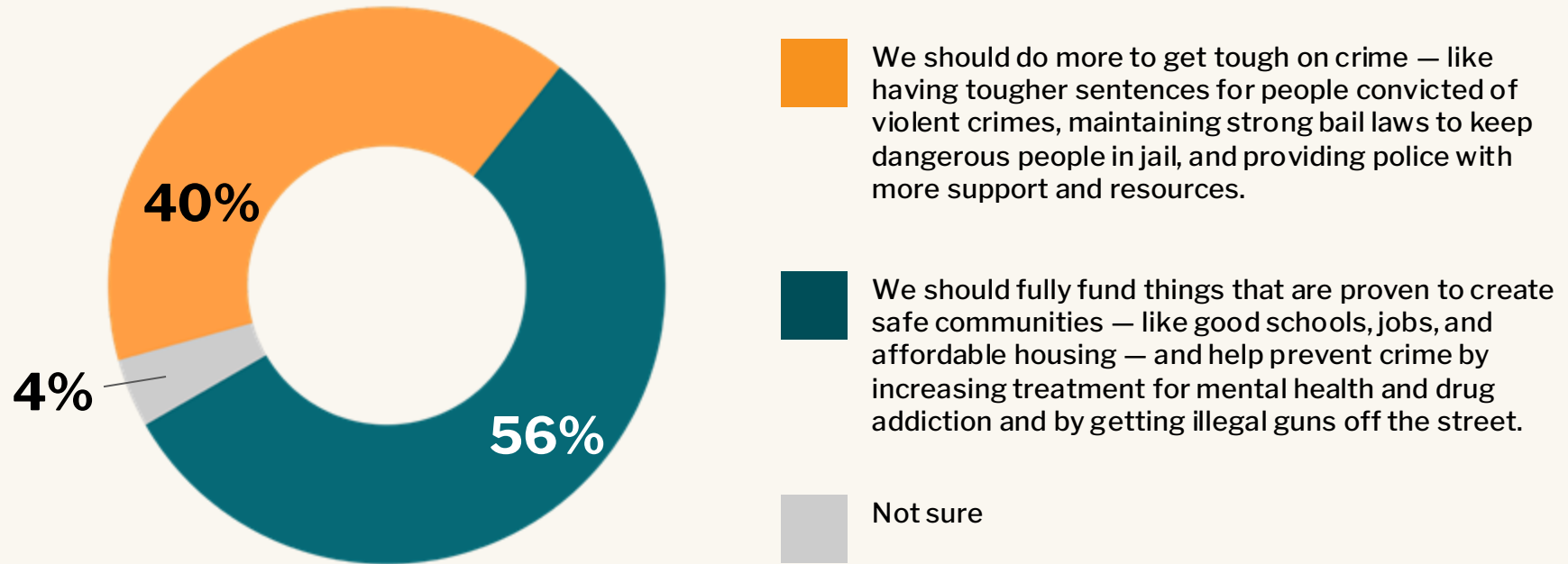
Sources: YouGov voter survey May 2024, GBAO Post Election Survey Nov 2024 (both commissioned by Vera Action)

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, VOTERS OVERWHELMINGLY FAVOR A “SERIOUS-ABOUT-SAFETY” APPROACH OVER “TOUGH-ON-CRIME”


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




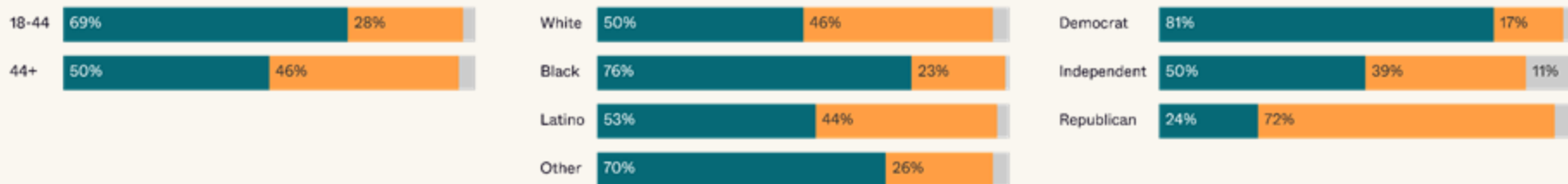
OTHER THAN GOP VOTERS, EVERY SINGLE VOTER BLOC FAVORS A “SERIOUS-ABOUT-SAFETY” APPROACH OVER A “TOUGH” ONE

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.

 Not sure



TAKEAWAY #2

Democrats have a unique opportunity to turn the “law-and-order” playbook into a liability by focusing on Trump’s cuts and contrasting them with safety solutions that improve quality of life.

DEMOCRATS CAN BUILD AN ADVANTAGE BY TYING SAFETY TO PEOPLE'S KITCHEN TABLE PRIORITIES FOR AN AFFORDABLE LIFE

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

38%

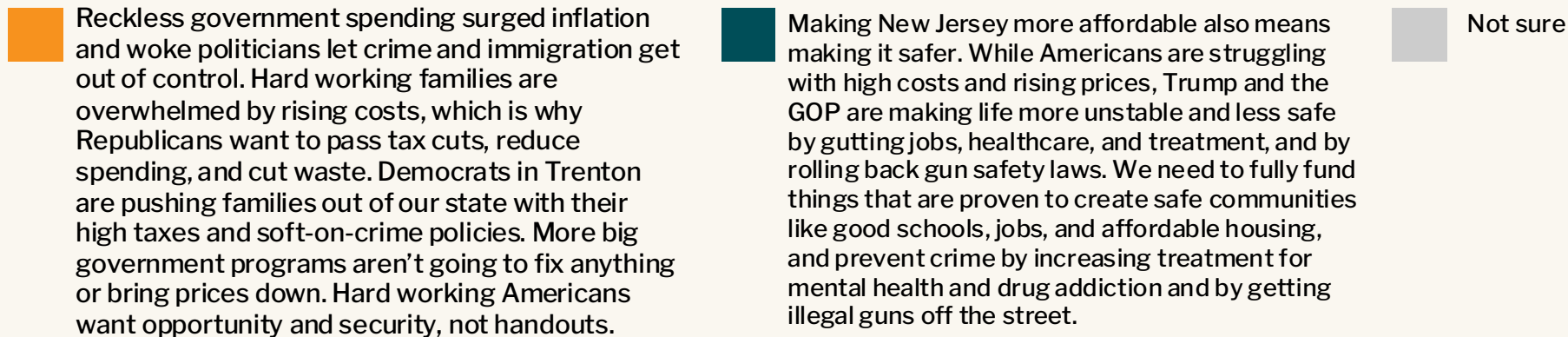
Reckless government spending surged inflation and woke politicians let crime and immigration get out of control. Hard working families are overwhelmed by rising costs, which is why Republicans want to pass tax cuts, reduce spending, and cut waste. Democrats in Trenton are pushing families out of our state with their high taxes and soft-on-crime policies. More big government programs aren't going to fix anything or bring prices down. Hard working Americans want opportunity and security, not handouts.

56%

Making New Jersey more affordable also means making it safer. While Americans are struggling with high costs and rising prices, Trump and the GOP are making life more unstable and less safe by gutting jobs, healthcare, and treatment, and by rolling back gun safety laws. We need to fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing, and prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and by getting illegal guns off the street.

TYING SAFETY TO AFFORDABILITY IS A WINNING MESSAGE FOR THE VERY VOTERS THAT STAYED HOME IN 2024 OR SHIFTED TO THE RIGHT

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



TAKEAWAY #3

Crime stats are an opening to highlight
Democratic investments in proven solutions that
prevent crime, respond to crisis, and stop
violence—
and deliver accountability and justice too.

TOUT THE HUGE DECLINE IN CRIME—BUT DO IT BY EXPLAINING HOW AND WHY DEMOCRATIC LEADERS' INVESTMENTS ARE WORKING



Source: Real-Time Crime Index



MSNBC

The crime rate is falling in spite of Trump – and because of Democratic mayors like me

Instead of working to reduce crime, Trump and Republicans in Washington have pushed unprecedented cuts to important programs.

Aug. 1, 2025, 6:00 AM EDT

By Justin Bibb, Mayor of Cleveland

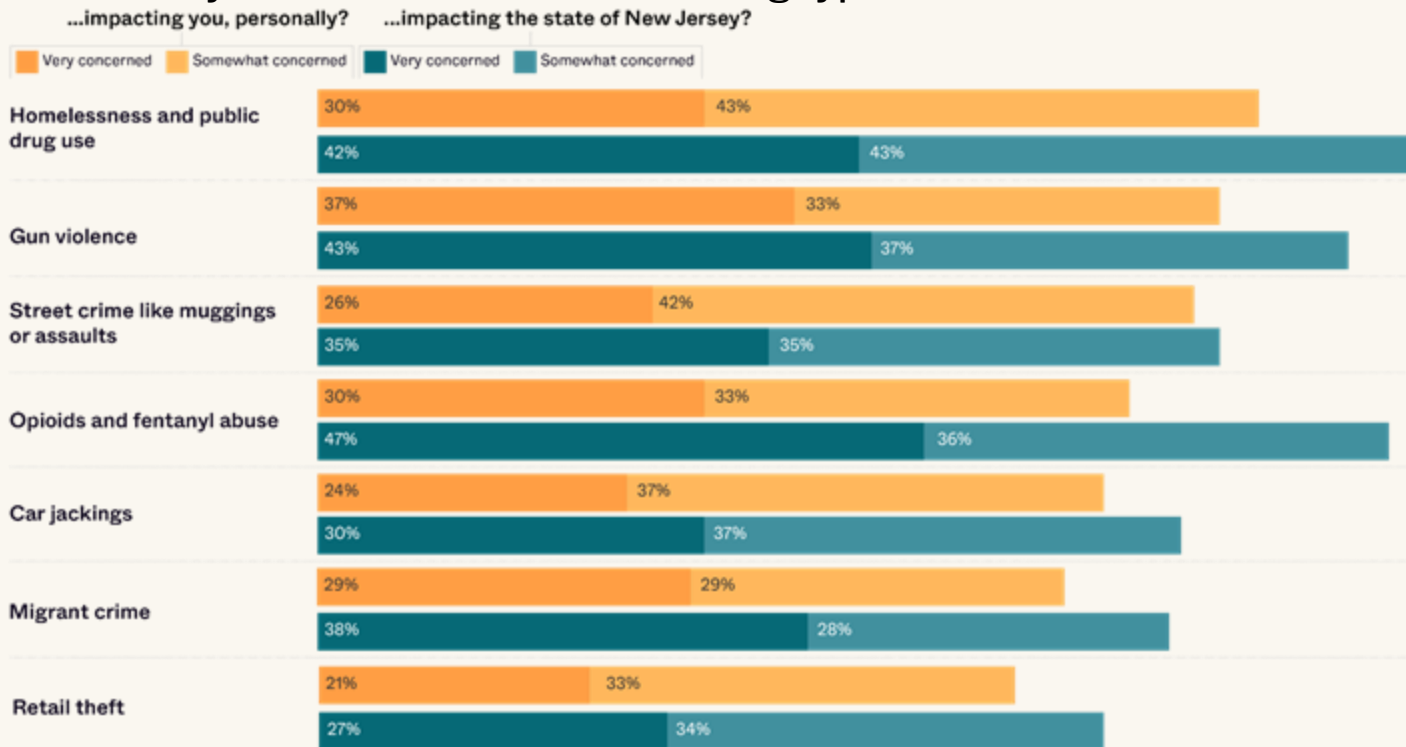
This week, the Trump administration tried to take credit for [crime dropping in cities across the country](#).

In a [post on X](#), the Department of Homeland Security tried to tout numbers it not too long ago denied even existed, stating, “HOMICIDES DOWN 17% across 30 U.S. cities under President Trump and Secretary Noem.”

The DHS is right that in city after city led by Democratic mayors, violent crime is dropping, with some cities even hitting historic lows. But it is egregiously misleading and brazenly hypocritical of the White House to try to take credit. The truth is that it’s all happening in spite of Donald Trump, not because of him.

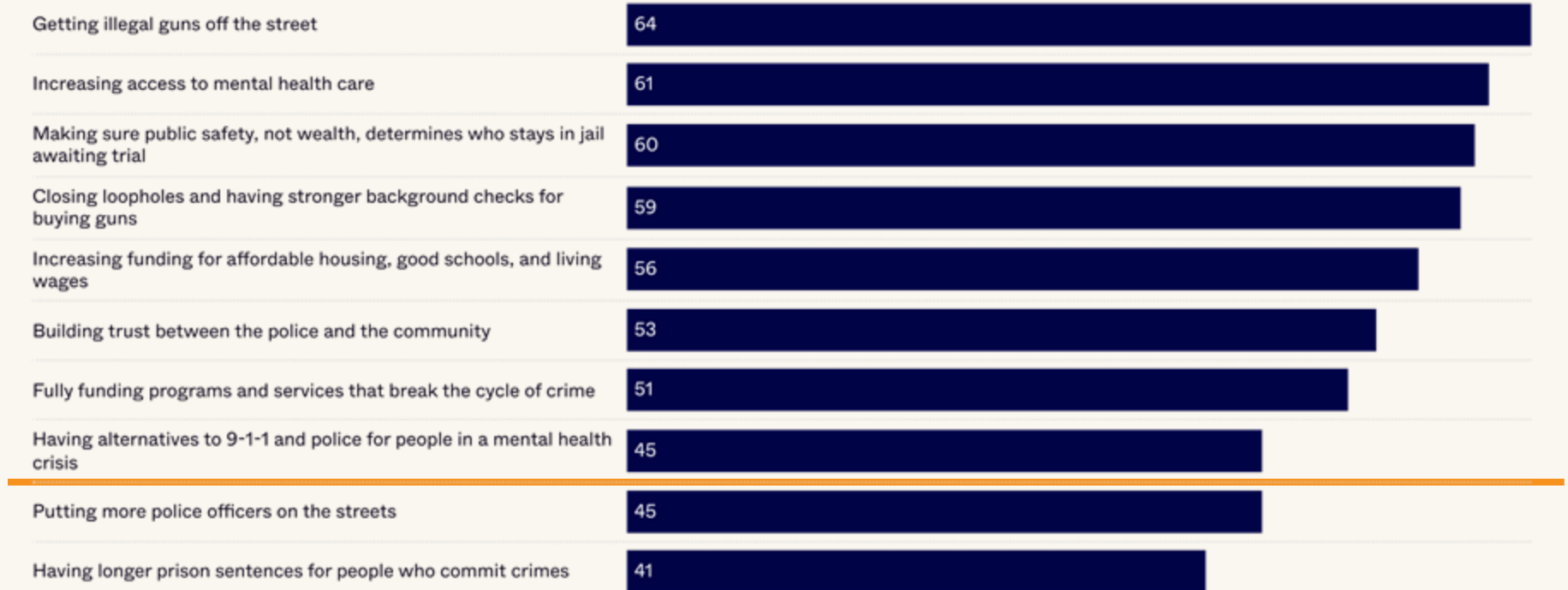
DON'T TAKE THE GOP'S CRIME BAIT—INSTEAD, LEAN INTO SOLUTIONS ON THE CRIME/SAFETY CONCERNS THAT MATTER MOST TO VOTERS

How concerned are you about each of the following types of crimes...



VOTERS MOST FAVOR SOLUTIONS THAT ADDRESS THE UNDERLYING DRIVERS OF CRIME AND CRISIS—NOT “TOUGH-ON-CRIME” MEASURES

How much do you believe the following proposals will work to reduce crime in New Jersey?

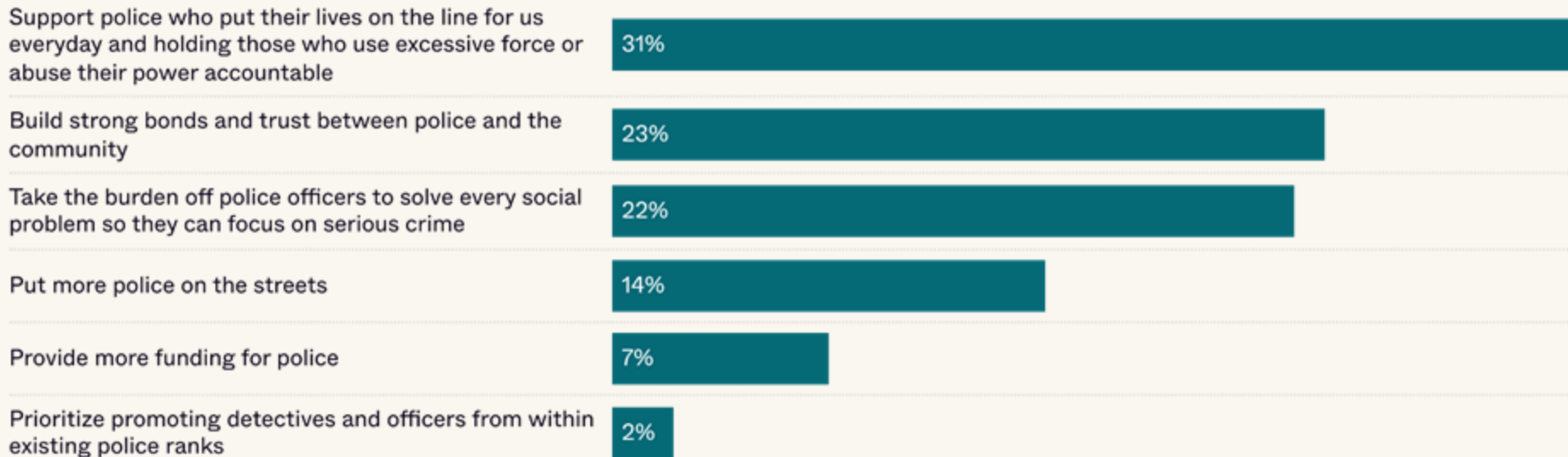


TAKEAWAY #4

Counter “soft-on-crime” attacks by tackling fear mongering head on. Voters want real solutions that make communities safer, not scare tactics—even on the most contentious crime issues.

EVEN ON THE THORNIEST ISSUE, VOTERS FAVOR BETTER, MORE ACCOUNTABLE POLICING—NOT MORE OFFICERS OR MORE FUNDING

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



IN A HEAD-TO-HEAD TEST, THIS MESSAGE OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY OUTPERFORMS A TYPICAL “DEFUND” ATTACK

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

Liberal politicians have 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 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.

33%

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 billions 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.

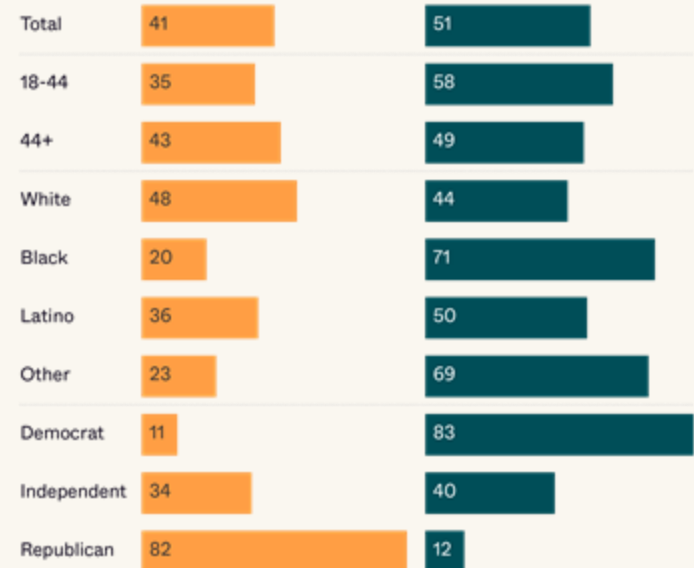
56%

EVEN ON IMMIGRATION, TURNING THE DEBATE BACK TO SAFETY PUTS DEMOCRATS ON THE OFFENSE AND NEUTRALIZES A WEDGE ISSUE

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."



TAKEAWAY #5

Inoculate against the “soft-on-crime” attacks with a strong, affirmative policy agenda that leans into safety, accountability, and justice.

A SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE POLICY AGENDA

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

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR DEMOCRATS TO CAPITALIZE ON THIS POLITICAL MOMENT: “SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY” IN A SOUNDBITE



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