

# **CALIFORNIANS CHOOSE “SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY” OVER “TOUGH ON CRIME”**

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

March 2026

**Vera ACTION**

# Headlines may signal backlash against criminal justice reform...

**NEW YORK POST**

US News Metro Long Island **Politics** World News

TRENDING NOW IN US NEWS

Mayor accused of raping drunken 16-year-old at pool party...

Trump won't rule out sending US troops into Iran 'if...'

Shocking moment pastor pushes elderly woman down cement

**POLITICS**

## No more 'get out of jail free' cards for California criminals claiming mental illness, legislators propose

By Josh Koehn  
Published Feb. 24, 2026, 3:09 p.m. ET

California 'mental health' loophole frees killers and crooks with 'terrible laws,' sheriff warns

By Stepheny Price

Fox News

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## "Reform Prop 57: Demand Justice for Victims and Pass Lorenzo's Law"

SENATOR SHANNON GROVE

## DIVERTED JUSTICE IS NO JUSTICE

SENATE BILL 1373

**CALIFORNIA INSIDER**

## Residents 'Horrified' by Homelessness, Public Drug Use in California's Capital City

## ...But polling reveals that criminal justice reform is still popular and overwhelmingly supported by the Democratic base

Vera's polling work shows that **Democrats and Independents** want real solutions to prevent crime and break its cycle.

Californians favor an approach that is **serious about safety**, upholds accountability, and delivers justice—not “tough-on-crime” rhetoric.

Leaders should **fight, not fold**, on this issue where Democrats have encountered a consistent brand problem and trust gap.

# Methodology

- Change Research conducted a poll of **1,048 likely 2026 CA voters**.
- The survey was fielded January 20-26, 2026.
- The modeled **margin of error is +/- 3.4%**.



## GENDER

**53%** Women  
**45%** Men  
**1%** Another  
identity



## RACE/ETHNICITY

**53%** White  
**4%** Black  
**19%** AAPI  
**19%** Hispanic  
**4%** Other



## POLITICAL PARTY

**54%** Democratic  
**33%** Republican  
**13%** Independent

## **TAKEAWAY #1**

**Most Californians—including Independents—favor a “serious-about-safety” approach over a “tough-on-crime” one.**

## By a margin of almost 20 points, CA voters overall prefer a “serious about safety” approach over a “tough-on-crime” one

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

**[SERIOUS]:** 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]:** 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.

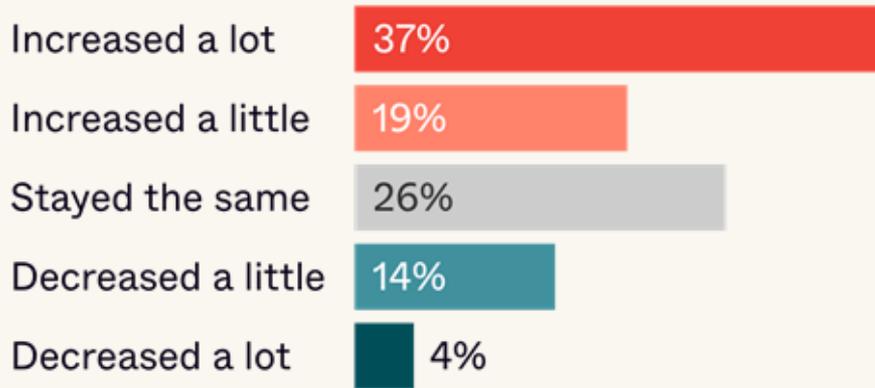


## **TAKEAWAY #2**

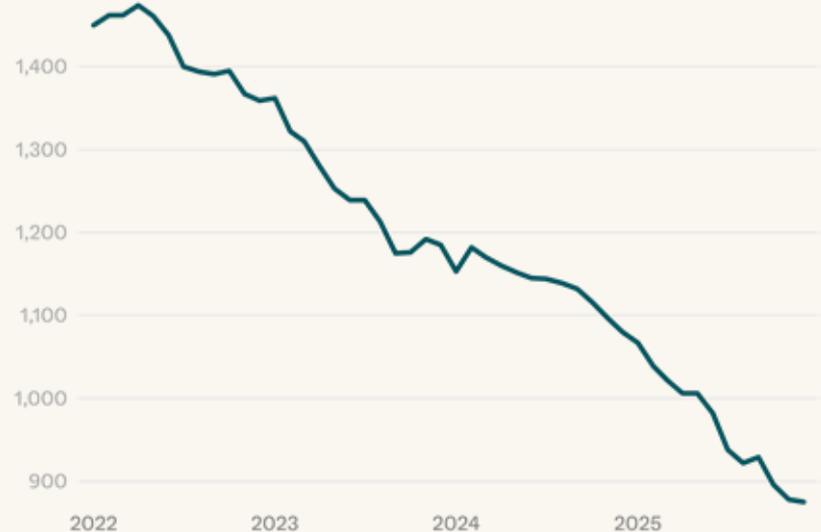
While affordability is the top concern for voters, the issue of public safety cannot be ignored—Californians remain concerned about crime, especially in major cities.

# Although the statistics show that crime—especially homicides—in California is down, most voters believe it continues to increase

Compared to four years ago, do you think crime [in California] has increased, decreased, or stayed the same?



Homicides, 12 month rolling sum



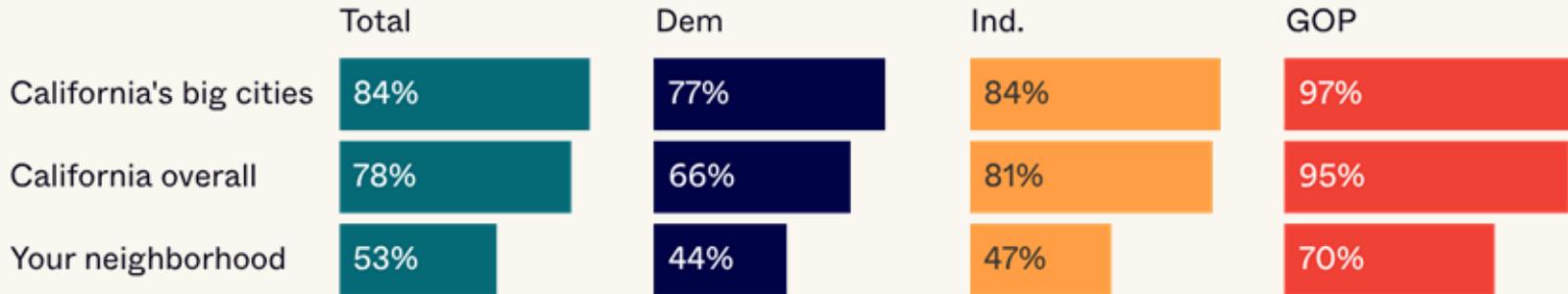
# And while most Californians are concerned about crime in big cities, they generally feel safer in their own neighborhoods

## HOW CALIFORNIA GOT CONVINCED TO LOCK MORE PEOPLE UP

California just voted in harsher penalties despite low crime rates, thanks to TV news, a \$16 million campaign, and a slow defense by criminal justice advocates.

## Walmart and Target Fund Campaign to Stiffen Shoplifting Penalties

How concerned are you about crime and public safety in each of these places?



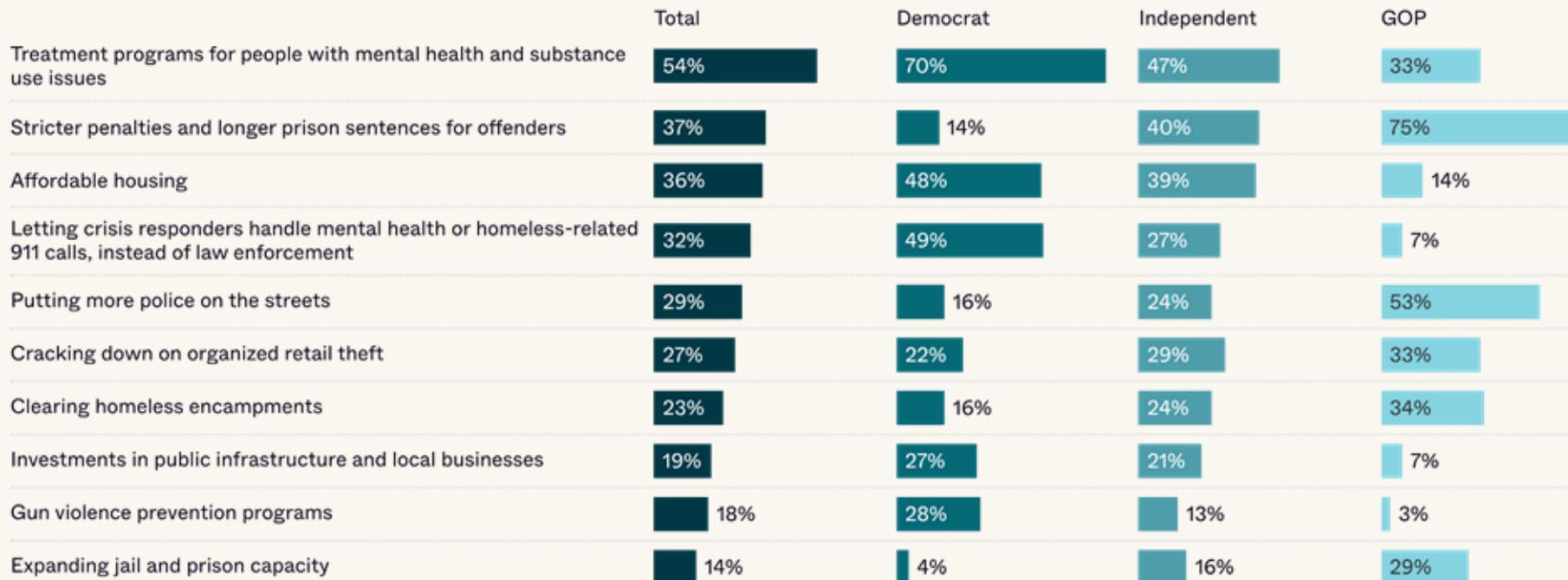
## **TAKEAWAY #3**

**Even after recent backlash reversing Prop. 47,  
Californians still support the fundamental  
tenets of criminal justice reform.**

# Californians overall believe treatment is the most effective crime reduction strategy—more than stricter penalties and sentences

Which of the following do you think are or would be most effective at reducing crime in California?

You can choose up to three.



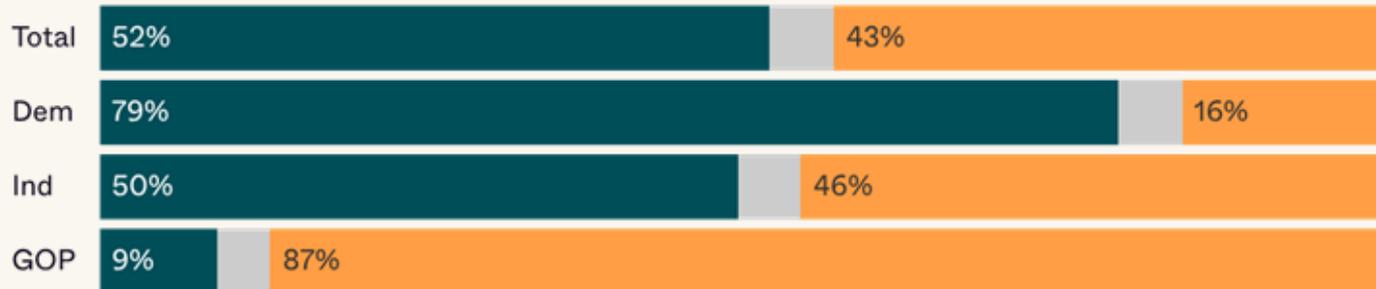
# Californians believe that criminal justice reform and support for victims go hand in hand—there is no false choice between them

Which of the following candidates would you rather vote for?

**[SERIOUS]:** We don't have to choose between supporting victims and reforming the criminal justice system. We should invest in preventing crime before it happens through drug and mental health treatment and job training, and also provide services to victims when crime does happen.

Not sure

**[TOUGH]:** For too long, our system has sided with people who commit crimes more than the victims of those crimes. We need to get tough on crime, which means putting victims first and making sure offenders are punished so justice is served.



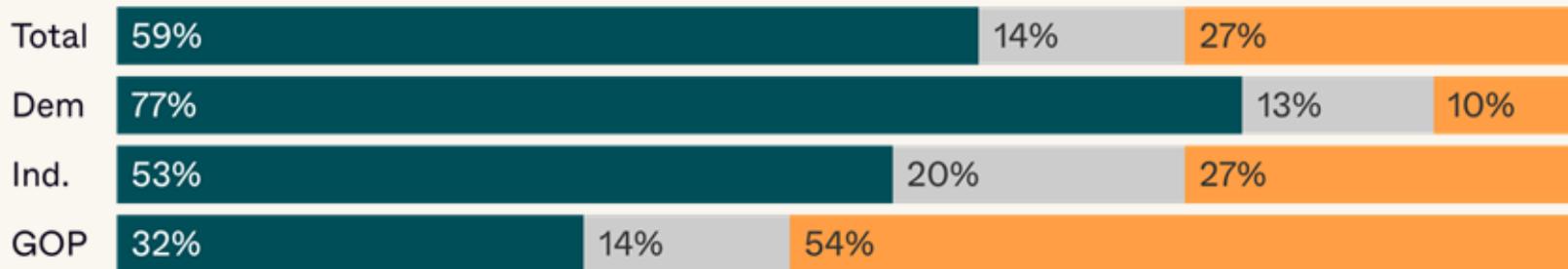
# Most Democrats and Independents still support early release for demonstrated rehabilitation when prompted on Prop. 57

Prop 57 allows people convicted of nonviolent felonies who have demonstrated rehabilitation in prison to seek earlier release under parole supervision.

Which of these comes closer to your opinion, even if neither is exactly right?

**[SERIOUS]:** Allowing earlier parole consideration for people who have demonstrated rehabilitation and good behavior is appropriate and should continue as is.

**[TOUGH]:** This policy should be eliminated because it effectively allows felons to receive lighter sentences.



## Again, when prompted on Prop. 57, almost 70% support judges to grant leniency for youth based on individual circumstances

Prop 57 also allows judges to decide, on a case-by-case basis, whether someone aged 17 and under accused of serious crimes should be prosecuted in juvenile or adult court. Previously, many young people would automatically be prosecuted in adult court, which led to more youth locked up in an adult prison.

**Which of these comes closer to your opinion, even if neither is exactly right?**

**[SERIOUS]:** We should allow the policy to continue as is. Judges can consider the specific situation, the person's history, and other relevant factors to make a decision that is in the best interest of society and supports the young person's long-term rehabilitation.

**[TOUGH]:** This policy should be eliminated to deter juveniles from crime and protect other young people from violence.



## TAKEAWAY #4

Even on the more contentious topics of diversion, mental health and substance use, and homelessness, a “serious about safety” approach *still* beats “tough-on-crime.”

# Despite relentless attacks on Prop. 47 and 57 over the years, a majority still view “repair and change” as real accountability

Which of the following candidates would you rather vote for?

**[SERIOUS]:** Public safety means holding people accountable when they break the law, while also focusing on what actually stops repeat crime. Harsh punishment and long sentences alone don't make us feel safer. Real accountability includes treatment and programs that help people see the harm they've done, learn from their mistakes, and change their behavior, preventing future harm.

**[TOUGH]:** Theft, drug trafficking, and other crimes are out of control because people do not face consequences for their actions. We need to uphold and enforce the law. If you do the crime, you should have to do the time.

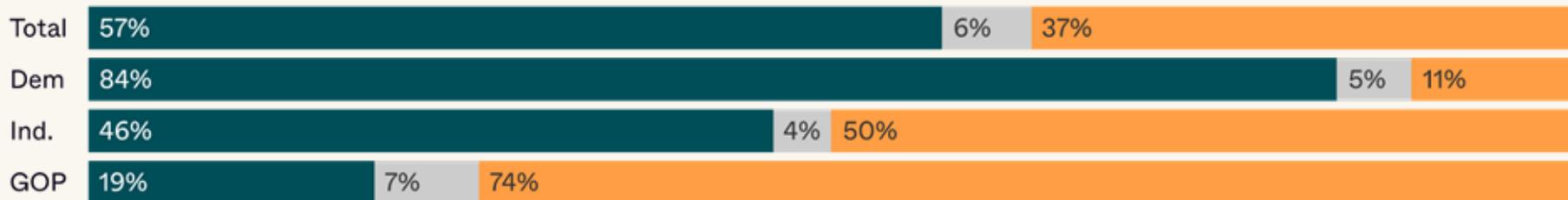


# On homelessness, Californians prefer a housing-and-services approach over indiscriminate sweeps and mandatory treatment

Which of the following candidates would you rather vote for?

**[SERIOUS]:** We all want safe, clean streets. But homelessness can't be solved by sweeping people from one street to the next. The most effective solution is to streamline our systems to get people housed faster, and provide them with services, like mental health treatment and job training, to help them get back on their feet with dignity.

**[TOUGH]:** California has spent billions on homelessness with nothing to show for it, because this isn't a lack of housing problem — it's a personal addiction and mental-health problem. We need law enforcement to clear dangerous encampments, and we must require treatment instead of letting people deteriorate on our streets.

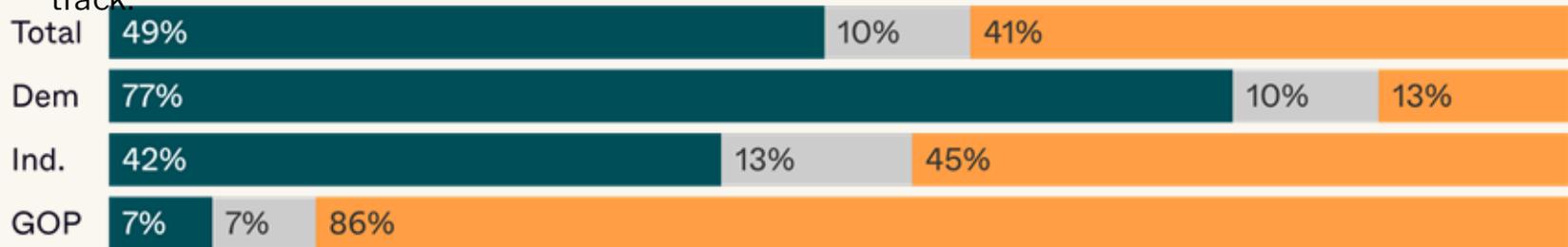


# Despite the opioid crisis being a highly contested issue, most Democrats and 42% of Independents support a treatment approach

## Which of the following candidates would you rather vote for?

**[SERIOUS]:** The opioid crisis is taking too many lives. Enforcement against traffickers is necessary, but tough-on-crime measures like harsher penalties and crackdowns alone won't prevent overdoses or keep people alive. My plan is to make sure wherever you are in California, you can access drug treatment, mental healthcare and emergency response in the case of an overdose or crisis. That's what it'll take to get California back on track.

**[TOUGH]:** The only way we'll beat the fentanyl crisis is by cracking down on smuggling at the border, going after the dealers who are poisoning our communities and hitting them with serious penalties, and forcing people who are struggling with addiction into treatment. This is not time for a gentle approach. My plan is to get tough on fentanyl and opioids and clean up California.



## TAKEAWAY #5

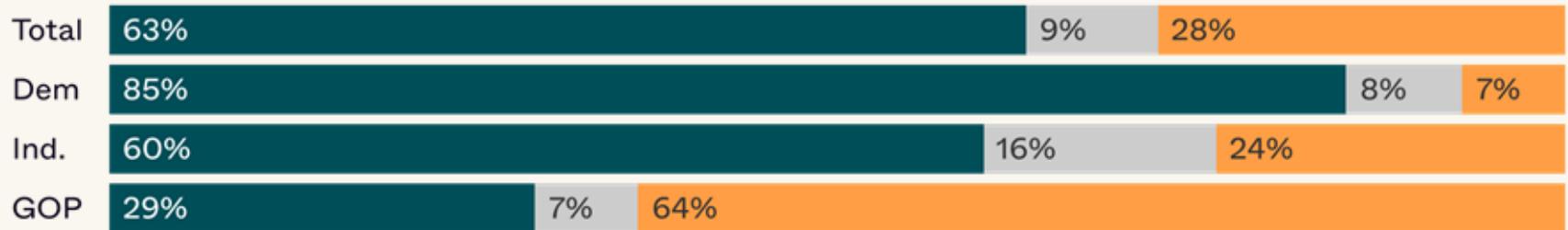
Californians prefer a targeted role for law enforcement and support police accountability.

# Californians prefer experts respond to crises involving mental health and homelessness, reserving police for serious crimes

Which of the following candidates would you rather vote for?

**[SERIOUS]:** Mental health and homelessness are serious challenges, and while police play an important role in public safety, we shouldn't ask them to do everything. We should invest in rapid response by trained mental health experts to handle cases where people are in mental health crisis and need help so police can focus on solving more serious crime.

**[TOUGH]:** Crises involving mental health and homelessness require a strong police presence. We need to hire more police officers so they can respond quickly to crises, enforce the law, and keep our neighborhoods safe for law-abiding citizens.

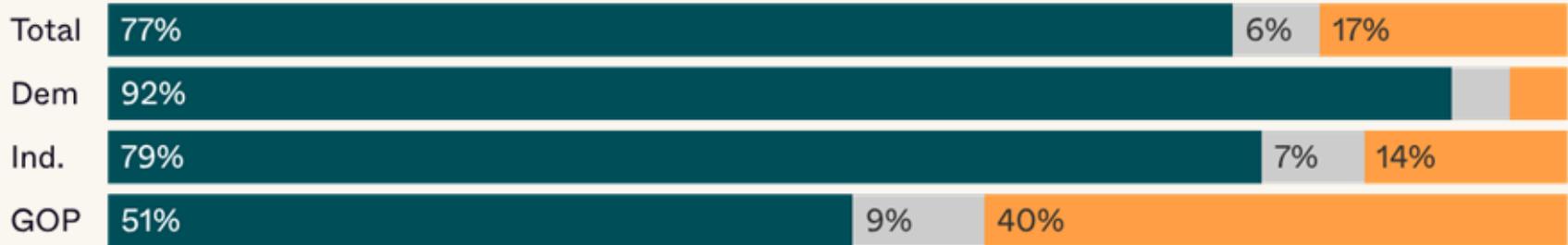


# Most voters—including Republicans—heavily support a message on policing that focuses on accountability as well as support for police

Which of the following candidates would you rather vote for?

**[SERIOUS]:** Law enforcement should be responsive, trustworthy, and accountable. We need to support the police to do the difficult jobs they are asked to do and hold them accountable if they abuse their power or break the law.

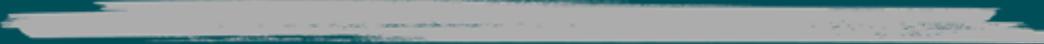
**[TOUGH]:** Police officers put their lives on the line to keep our communities safe. They need the freedom and discretion to do their jobs without excessive oversight.



# Key Takeaways

1. Most Californians—including Independents—favor a “serious-about-safety” approach over a “tough-on-crime” one.
2. While affordability is the top concern for voters, the issue of public safety cannot be ignored—Californians remain concerned about crime, especially in major cities.
3. Even after recent backlash reversing Prop. 47, Californians still support the fundamental tenets of criminal justice reform.
4. Even on the more contentious topics of diversion, mental health and substance use, and homelessness, a “serious-about-safety” approach still beats “tough-on-crime.”
5. Californians prefer a targeted role for law enforcement and support police accountability.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:



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