

A NEW PARADIGM FOR SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE:

How Democrats can win the safety narrative and counter the
GOP's "tough-on-crime" playbook in 2026

April 2026

Vera ACTION

Tackling the politics of crime and folding safety into the overall campaign message of a life you can afford

Since 2020, the GOP has spent billions attacking Democrats for being “soft” on crime. As a result, the GOP advantage on crime has doubled—from a 10-point gap to 22+ points today.

Many have rightly diagnosed that Democrats have a brand problem on crime.

What’s the right prescription?

Since 2022, Vera Action has conducted 40+ rounds of research on voter attitudes toward crime and public safety and found that voters favor a “serious about safety” approach. They want their leaders to fight, not fold, for solutions to prevent crime and break its cycle.

As the Trump administration undermines safety at every turn, Democrats have a unique opportunity to go on offense and build credibility on this issue by including safety as part of their agenda for a life you can afford.

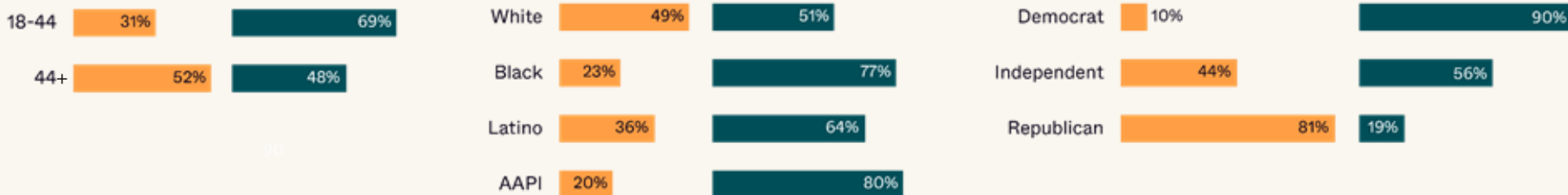
Here are three takeaways on how to do it.

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.

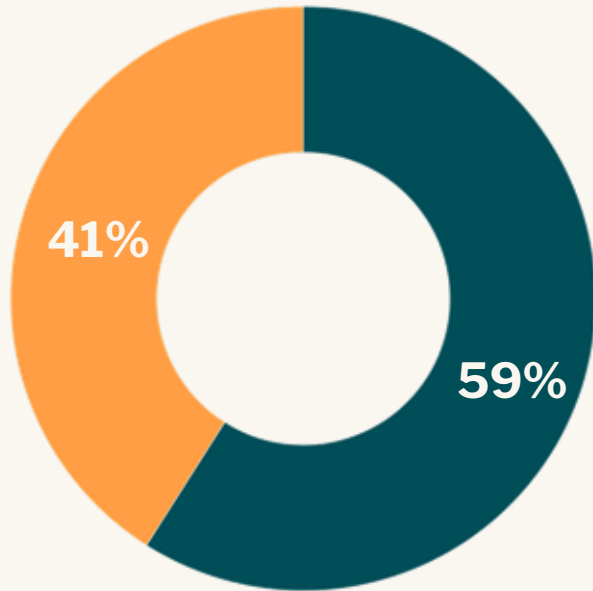


TAKEAWAY #1

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?



[TOUGH]: 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.

[SERIOUS]: 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.

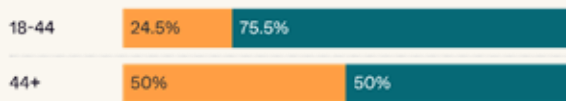
Other than Republicans, almost every voting bloc—including white voters and Independents—favors a “serious about safety” approach

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

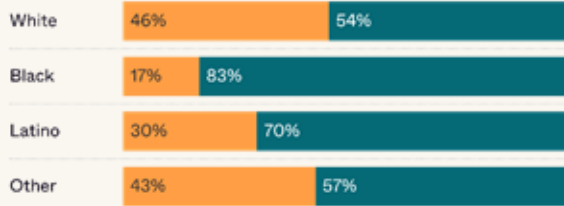
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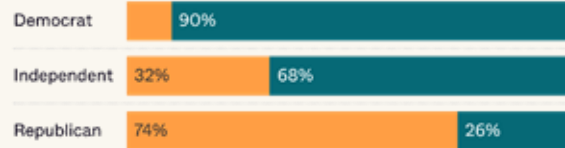
Age



Race

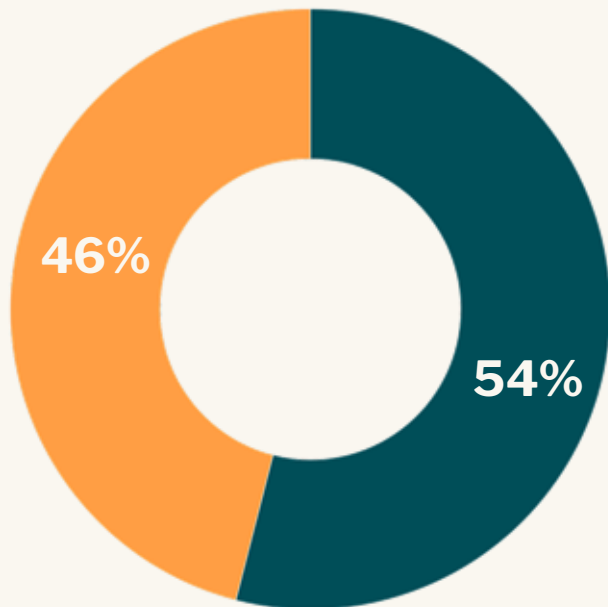


Party ID



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

Even if it isn’t exactly right, which of the following come closest to your view?



[TOUGH]: 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.

[SERIOUS]: 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

Silence is deadly. To flip the terms of the debate to a more winning frame, Democrats need to own three values—*safety, accountability, and justice*—early and often in message and policy.

Across the political spectrum, voters want to see safety, accountability, and justice—and here is how Democrats should define these values

SAFETY

- Everyone deserves to feel safe
- Talk about preventing violence, stopping repeat crimes, and keeping guns out of the wrong hands
- Use safe, strong youth, families, and neighborhoods as the frame

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Accountability means facing the consequences, taking responsibility, repairing harm, and providing people with programs that work to prevent future crime
- Accountability applies to everyone, including law enforcement

JUSTICE

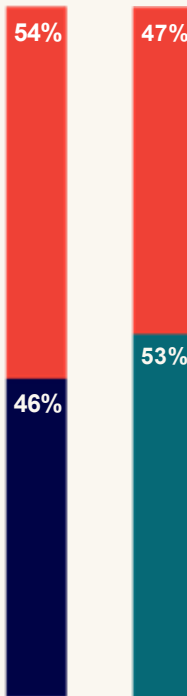
- Justice is breaking the cycle of crime—not just reacting to it
- We need a justice system that treats everyone fairly and invests in the things proven to make communities stronger and safer
- Support treatment, reentry, and interventions that reduce the likelihood of future crime

Against a GOP “tough” attack, the “serious about safety” Democrat runs ahead of the “tough-on-crime” one by 7 points—and neutralizes the attack

Based on the following statements, which candidate for office would you trust more?

[TOUGH GOP]: "I stand on the side of law and order. That means having longer sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people behind bars, and providing police with more support and resources."

[TOUGH DEM]: "I'm tough on crime. That means more cops on the beat and tough action against violent criminals. We should increase police funding and invest in new technologies like predictive policing, not defunding the police."



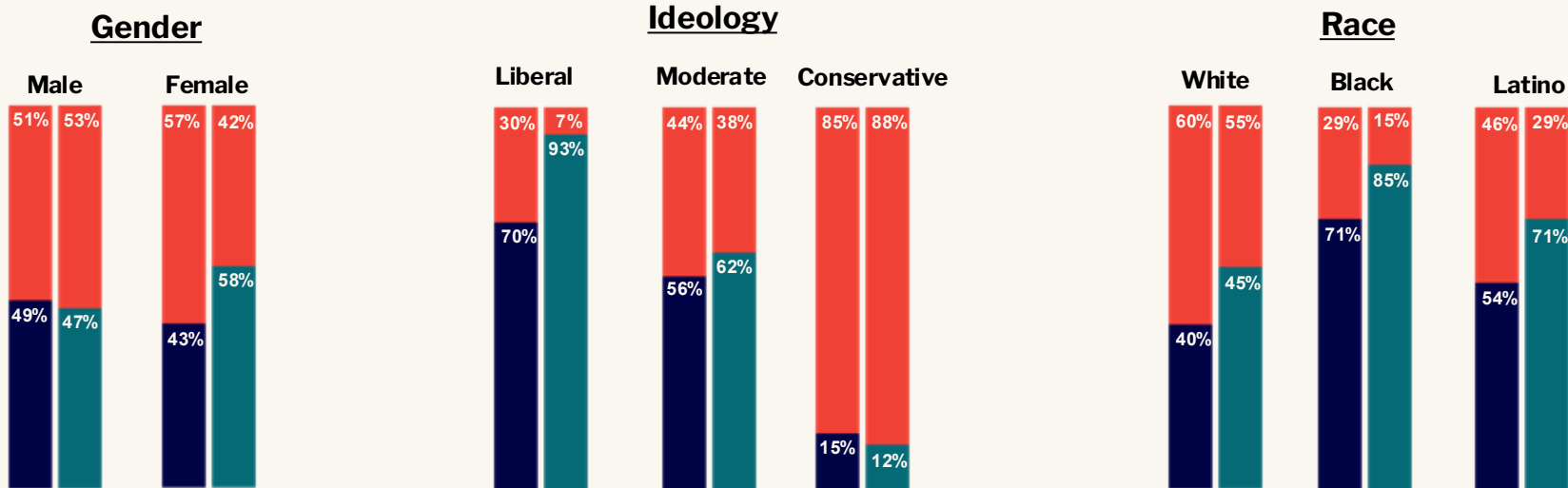
[TOUGH GOP]: "I stand on the side of law and order. That means having longer sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people behind bars, and providing police with more support and resources."

[SERIOUS DEM]: "I'm serious about safety. That means fully funding things that are proven to create safe communities—like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing—and preventing crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street."

A “tough” Democrat underperforms with moderates and base voters—because they sound GOP-lite instead of having their own message

Based on the following statements, which candidate for office would you trust more?

■ [TOUGH GOP] ■ [TOUGH DEM] ■ [SERIOUS DEM]



TAKEAWAY # 3

When the “soft-on-crime” attacks over a specific incident emerge, as they have in Iryna Zarutska’s tragic murder, Democrats need to reinforce their commitment to safety, accountability, and justice.

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The NC senate race—where crime is *the* battleline—is a prime example of where a strong “safety” message can inoculate the “soft-on-crime” attacks



If you're covering Michael Whatley's win in the North Carolina Senate primary election, please consider the following quote from the National Republican Senatorial Committee:

"While Michael Whatley will fight alongside President Trump in the U.S. Senate to put violent criminals behind bars and keep North Carolina safe, Roy Cooper puts criminals like Iryna Zarutskya's killer first. Cooper's incompetent hurricane recovery and support for higher taxes, soft-on-crime policies, and biological males in women's sports are out of step with working families," said NRSC Regional Press Secretary Nick Puglia.



After winning North Carolina's GOP Senate nomination, Michael Whatley called his opponent, former Gov. Roy Cooper, "the most soft on crime governor in the history of North Carolina."



Iryna Zarutskya was murdered by a violent criminal who Roy Cooper allowed to roam the streets after 14 arrests.

This tragedy was preventable, but Roy Cooper was too busy focused on DEI and soft-on-crime policies.



Michael Whatley for Senate ✓
February 24 · 🌐

President Trump is right.

Roy Cooper has Iryna Zarutskya's blood on his hands.



In sensationalized moments, voters want leaders to be clear that safety comes first—and they have solutions to prevent the next tragedy

Start with values and call out weaponizing a tragedy for political gain:

“

What happened is horrific. Safety is my top priority, and accountability matters. Cynical attempts to score political points are disgraceful. I am focused on securing justice and holding wrongdoers accountable, while making sure we invest in proven solutions to prevent these tragedies from occurring in the first place.

Don't concede the opposition's talking points on policy:

Enforce bail laws so that public safety, not wealth, determines who stays in jail pending trial.

Close with offering real solutions:

Ms. Zarutska deserves justice, and we owe it to her to invest in proven solutions and reject the partisan politics and empty measures that sound 'tough' but will not prevent another tragedy.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:



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