

Winning the Narrative on Safety, Accountability, and Justice in North Carolina

Five messaging takeaways from public opinion research: what NC voters bring to the ballot box on crime and public safety

April 2026

Vera ACTION

Tackling the Politics of Crime

Since 2022, Vera Action has conducted **40+ rounds** of qualitative and quantitative research on voter attitudes toward crime and public safety.

Our research shows that most voters want real solutions to prevent crime and break its cycle. Voters 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.

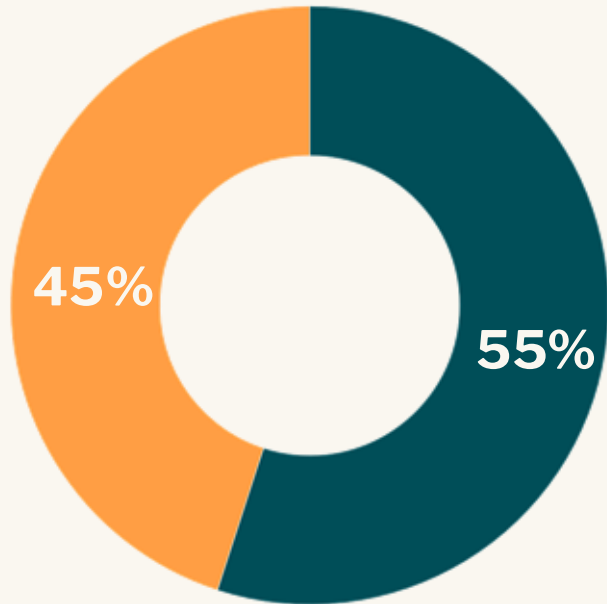
Vera Action fielded a survey with YouGov of North Carolina voters from April 21 to April 29, 2026, with a margin of error of +/- 3.8%

Takeaway #1

Most voters, both in North Carolina and nationally, favor a comprehensive approach to crime and safety.

Most NC voters favor preventing crime and breaking its cycle over a “tough-on-crime” approach

Which do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right in your opinion?



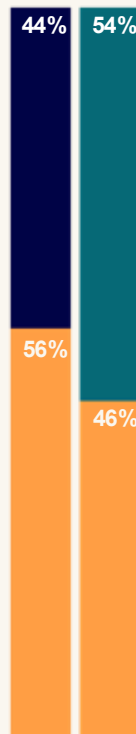
- [SERIOUS]:** We should fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities, like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing; support police to solve serious cases; get illegal guns off the street; and prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction.
- [TOUGH]:** 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.

A “tough-on-crime” Democrat performs significantly worse against Republicans than a “serious-about-safety” Democrat

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

[TOUGH DEM]: The Democrat says... "I am tough on crime. That means more cops on the beat and tough action against hardened criminals and gang members. I believe we should increase police funding and invest in new technologies like predictive policing, not defunding the police."

[GOP]: The Republican says... "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]: The Democrat says... "I am serious about safety. That means fully funding things that are proven to create safe communities, like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing; supporting police to solve serious cases; getting illegal guns off the street; and preventing crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction."

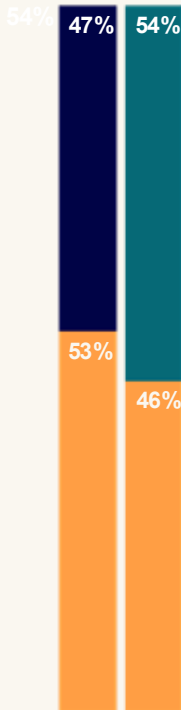
[GOP]: The Republican says... "I stand on the side of law and order. That means having longer sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people behind bars, and providing police with more support and resources."

This trend corresponds with nationwide results: Dems do better when they own a “serious-about-safety” message instead of trying to “out-tough” the GOP

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

■ **[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."

■ **[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."

■ **[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."

Takeaway #2

Get off the GOP's preferred narrative turf of who is toughest on crime. Democrats can overcome the partisan trust gap by driving home a strong message about making life safer and more affordable for all.

VeraACTION

A Dem message of “safety and affordability” outperforms the GOP message

Which statement do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right in your opinion?

[SERIOUS]: While families struggle with rising costs, Trump and Republicans are making North Carolina less safe and less secure by gutting jobs, cutting Medicaid and food stamps, pulling funding for addiction treatment, and rolling back gun safety laws. Democrats know that safety and affordability go hand in hand. The best way to help hardworking North Carolinians get ahead and stay safe is to lower costs and invest in the things that improve everyone’s safety and quality of life, like schools, good-paying jobs, affordable housing, and preventing crime before it happens.

[TOUGH]: Democrats’ failed policies are sending costs skyrocketing while allowing crime and immigration to spiral out of control. Working families are being squeezed from every direction and left to deal with higher costs and less safe neighborhoods. People can’t afford to live in the places they call home and don’t feel secure in their own communities. While weak and woke Democrats repeatedly opposed tax cuts for the middle class and imposed soft-on-crime policies, Republicans are focused on cutting taxes, reducing wasteful spending, and preserving law and order so that hardworking North Carolinians can get ahead.

54%

46%

Roy Cooper can own a serious approach to rebut “soft-on-crime” attacks

Which statement do you agree with more, even if neither is exactly right?

43%

[TOUGH]: Roy Cooper’s failed tenure as governor put all North Carolinians at risk and created an environment where violent criminals roamed freely while innocent bystanders paid the price. As Iryna Zarutska’s tragic murder on the Charlotte light rail showed, we can’t go back to Cooper’s lenient, soft-on-crime policies. In the Senate, Michael Whatley will make sure career criminals are behind bars and restore peace of mind to law-abiding Americans.

57%

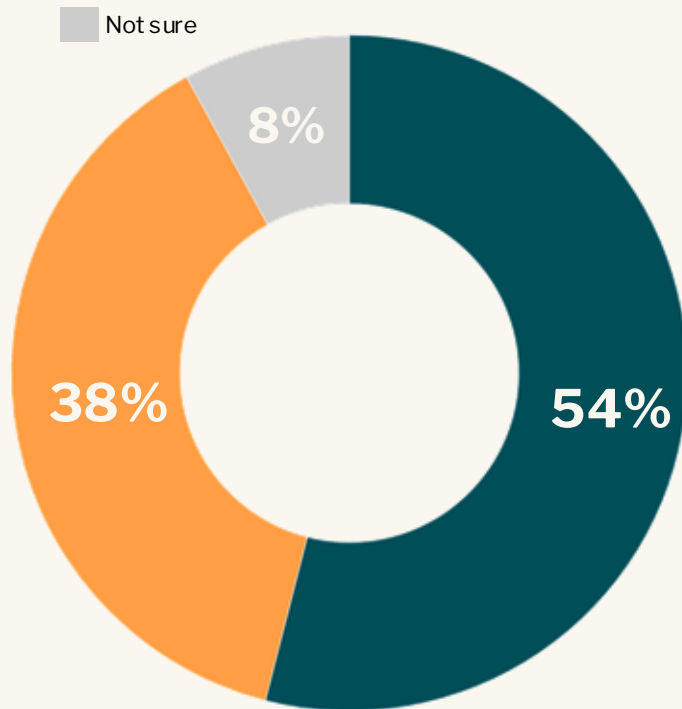
[SERIOUS]: Unlike many national Democrats, Roy Cooper is not afraid to talk about crime. He is serious about safety. He knows North Carolinians deserve to be safe, and that people who commit violent crimes must be held accountable. But fearmongering and political attacks do not make anyone safer. Roy Cooper’s approach is to support police to focus on serious crime, reduce gun violence, expand treatment for addiction and mental health, and invest in the things that prevent crime in the first place.

Takeaway #3

Use the Values, Villain, Vision framework:
own safety as a value, call out the opponents for
exploiting victims to score political points, and offer a
distinct vision.

When up against GOP attacks, own a safety as a value, call out the villain, and promote a clear vision

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

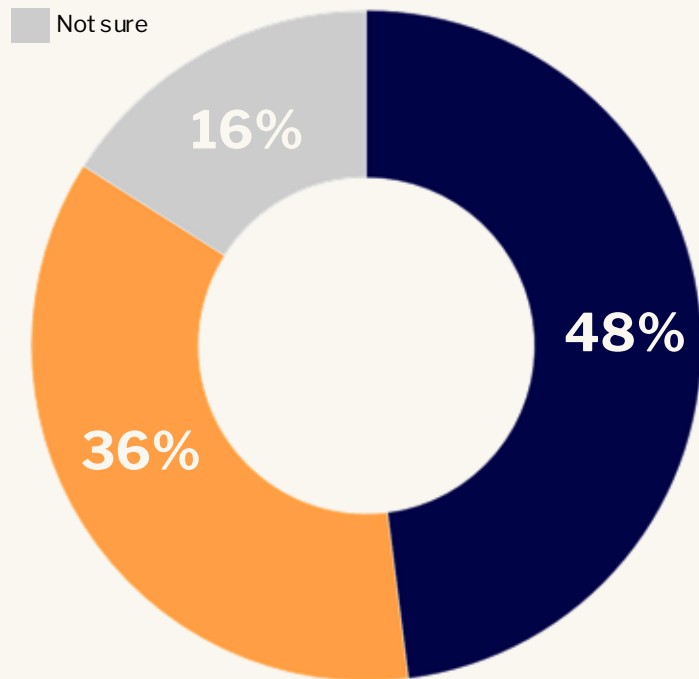


[SERIOUS]: All of us deserve to feel safe and secure in our homes, our schools, and our communities. Instead of providing real solutions to prevent crime, break its cycle, and make life more affordable for all North Carolinians, Michael Whatley and the GOP are using a woman's tragic murder to score political points. Roy Cooper is the only candidate who supported law enforcement to solve serious crime, and invested in jobs, mental health and drug treatment to prevent the next tragedy. As a US Senator, Roy Cooper will be laser-focused on keeping North Carolina a safe and secure place to raise your family.

[ATTACK]: Roy Cooper's failed tenure as governor put all North Carolinians at risk and created an environment where violent criminals roamed freely while innocent bystanders paid the price. As Iryna Zarutka's tragic murder on the Charlotte light rail showed, we can't go back to Cooper's lenient, soft-on-crime policies. In the Senate, Michael Whatley will make sure career criminals are behind bars and restore peace of mind to law-abiding Americans.

A “tough” message underperforms a values-driven message against the same attack

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



[TOUGH]: These Republican attacks are false — Roy Cooper is the only candidate who spent his career prosecuting violent criminals and keeping thousands of them behind bars. He passed tough on crime laws as attorney general and signed stricter bail policies as governor. The murder of Iryna Zarutska was a horrible tragedy, and we must do everything we can to keep North Carolinians safe and prevent the next tragedy. DC insider lobbyist Michael Whatley is desperate to distract from his support for cuts to law enforcement that make North Carolinians less safe.

[ATTACK]: Roy Cooper’s failed tenure as governor put all North Carolinians at risk and created an environment where violent criminals roamed freely while innocent bystanders paid the price. As Iryna Zarutska’s tragic murder on the Charlotte light rail showed, we can’t go back to Cooper’s lenient, soft-on-crime policies. In the Senate, Michael Whatley will make sure career criminals are behind bars and restore peace of mind to law-abiding Americans.

Takeaway #4

Even on the contentious issues of bail and policing, people prefer approaches focused on safety and accountability

On bail, talk about the need to prioritize public safety over a defendant's wealth

For each policy, say whether you think it would improve public safety a lot, a little, or not at all:

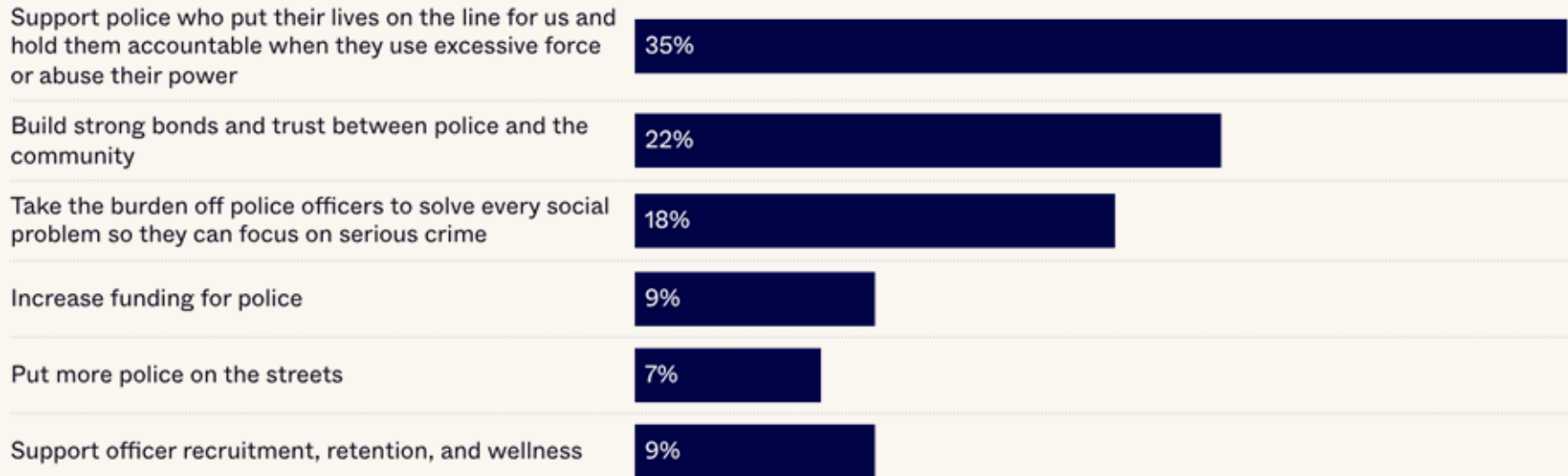
■ Improve a lot ■ Improve a little ■ Would not really improve things ■ Not sure

Making sure public safety, not wealth, determines who stays in jail pretrial



When it comes to policing, voters want to see support paired with accountability—not simply more police and bigger budgets.

Even if it isn't exactly right, which of the following is closest to your personal view? *The best way to improve public safety in our communities would be to...*

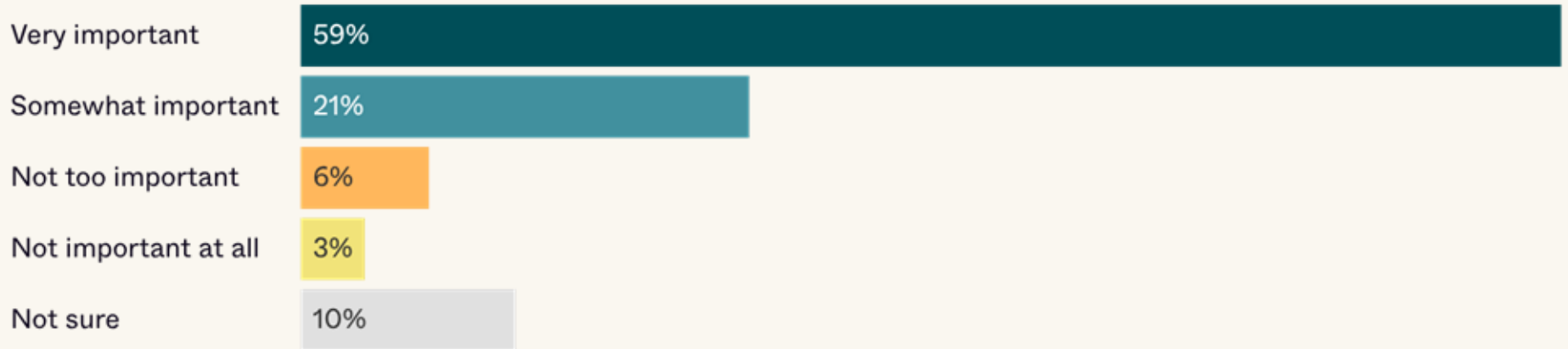


Takeaway #5

An argument that “nobody is above the law” works well with the Harvey West scandal.

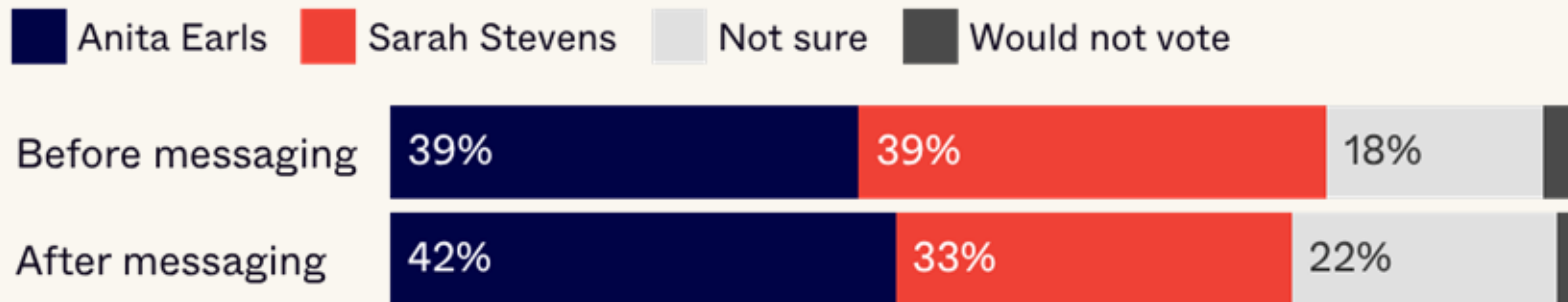
Harvey West connection is a real vulnerability for Sarah Stevens – GOP leaders fail to live up to the standards they claim

Harvey West is a convicted child sex offender who later became active in North Carolina Republican politics. Despite West's record being well-known, State Supreme Court candidate Sarah Stevens accepted his support and attended his fundraiser... **How important, if at all, would this be in your vote for the North Carolina Supreme Court?**



Sarah Stevens loses support after messaging treatment

If the election for North Carolina Supreme Court were held today, would you vote for...



Key messaging recommendations

What not to say

What to say

Nothing/silence → **“Define or be defined”**: set the terms of the debate by talking about safety early and often

Don’t assume people know where you stand → Overcome the partisan trust gap by **owning safety, accountability, and justice as core values**

Don’t reinforce tough on crime tropes → **Emphasize comprehensive solutions** like strong, accountable policing, fully funding good schools, affordable housing, and a living wage, and preventing crime

Don’t assume voters prefer Trump’s “tough” approach → Most voters prefer an approach that is **serious about safety** and don’t like Trump’s approach

CONTACT US:



Brian Tashman, Deputy Director

Vera Action

btashman@vera.org

Josie Barton, Analyst

Vera Action

jbarton@vera.org

Vera ACTION