

# **A NEW PARADIGM FOR SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE:**

Five takeaways to win the safety narrative and counter the GOP's "tough-on-crime" playbook

June 2026

# **Vera ACTION**

# Tackling the Politics of Crime

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

VA has worked with lawmakers across the country to deliver a policy agenda for safety, accountability, and justice.

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**, not “tough-on-crime.”

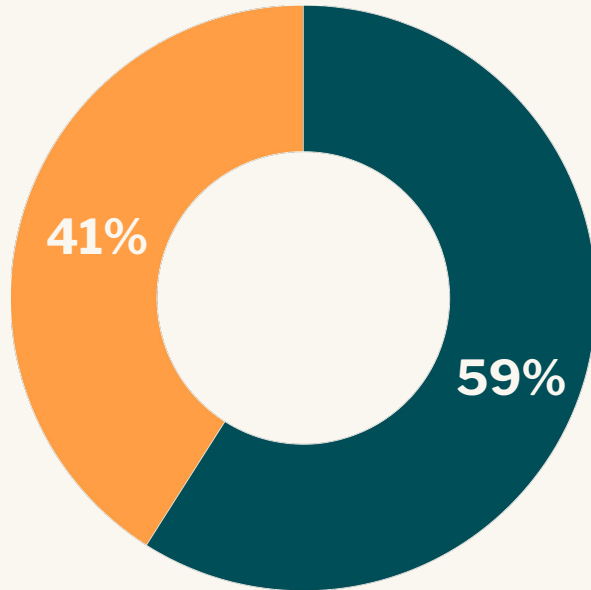
Leaders should **fight, not fold**, on this issue where Democrats have encountered a consistent brand problem.

## **TAKEAWAY #1**

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

## 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?

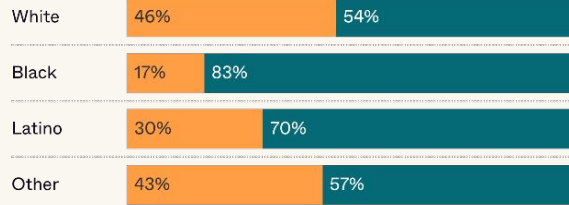
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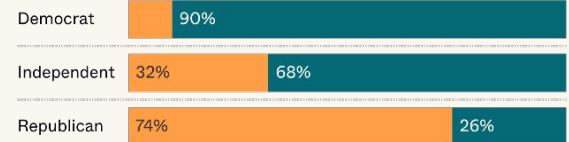
## Age



## Race



## Party ID

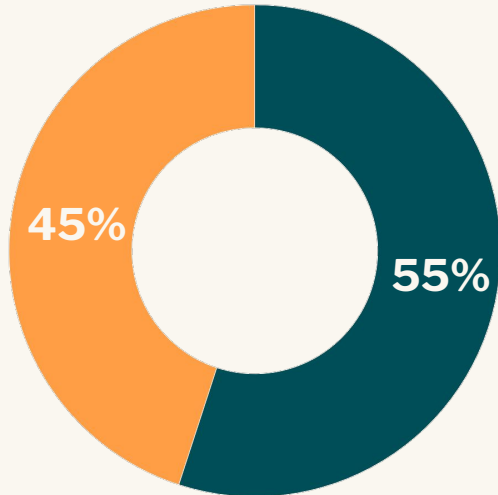


# A majority of voters in three key states—NC, VA, and WI—also favor the “serious about safety” approach

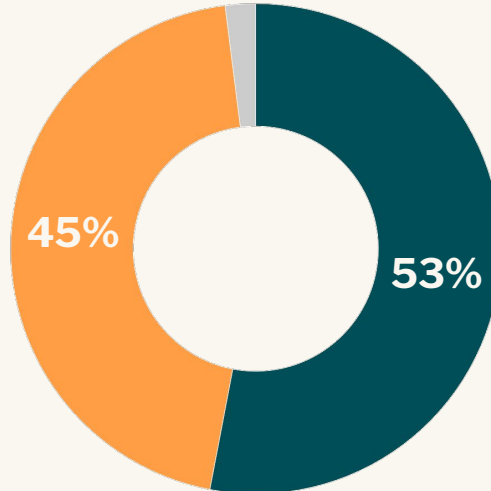
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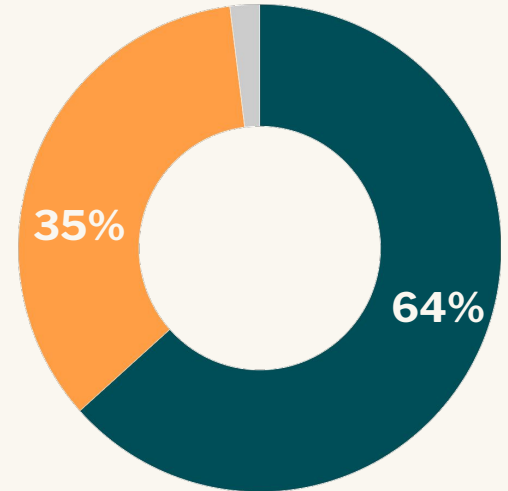
North Carolina — April 2026



Wisconsin — January 2026

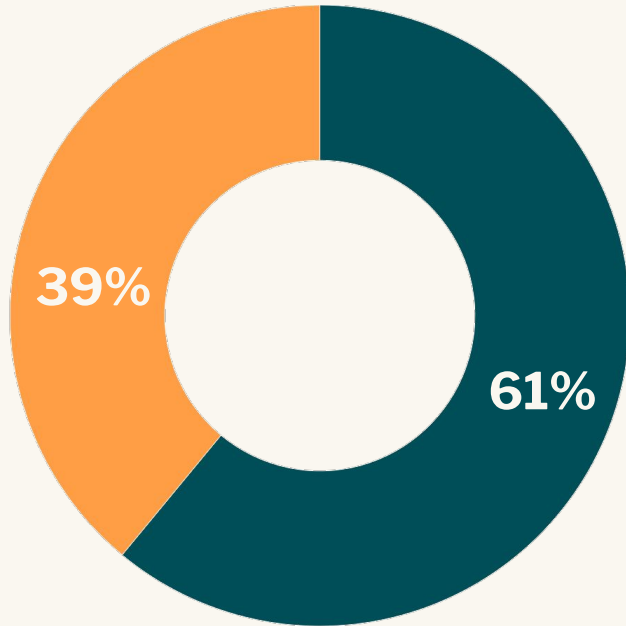


Virginia — May 2025



## Being “serious” also means upholding accountability by emphasizing repair, creating opportunities to change, and preventing future crime

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**

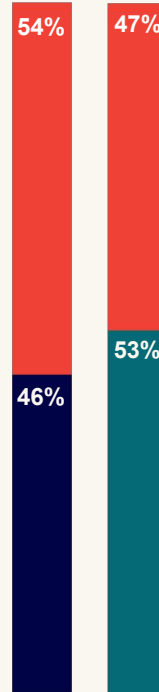
Voters trust Trump and the GOP slightly more on crime, largely because they have dominated the debate. By contrast, Democrats have remained relatively silent and are branded as “soft” and “weak.”

# Against a GOP “tough” message, the “serious about safety” Democrat outperforms

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

**[TOUGH REP]:** The Republican has said... "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]:** The Democrat has said... "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."

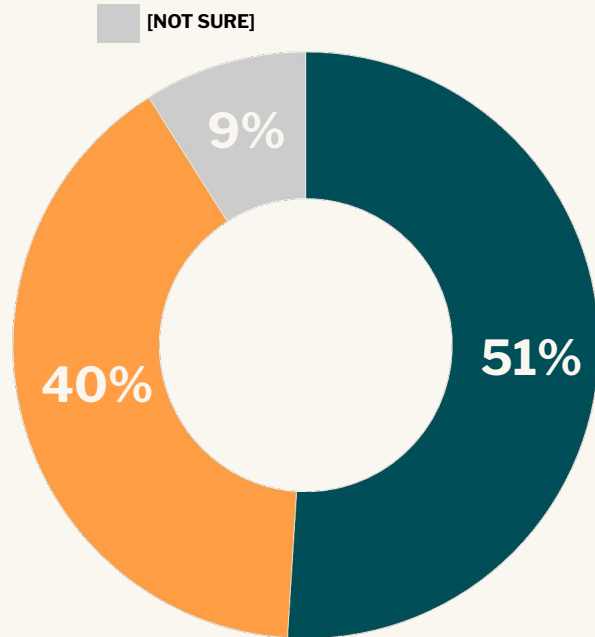


**[TOUGH REP]:** The Republican has said... "I stand on the side of law and order. That means having longer sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people behind bars, and providing police with more support and resources."

**[SERIOUS DEM]:** The Democrat has said... "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."

# Voters favor a message of “safety and affordability go hand in hand” over “weak and woke Democrats”

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



**[GOP]:** Democrats' radical policies will send costs skyrocketing and allow crime and immigration to spiral out of control. Republicans delivered real tax relief so people can keep more of what they earned, while weak and woke Democrats want to coddle criminals, defund the police, and impose open borders. Republicans are working to cut taxes, reduce wasteful spending, and preserve law and order so that hardworking Americans can get ahead.

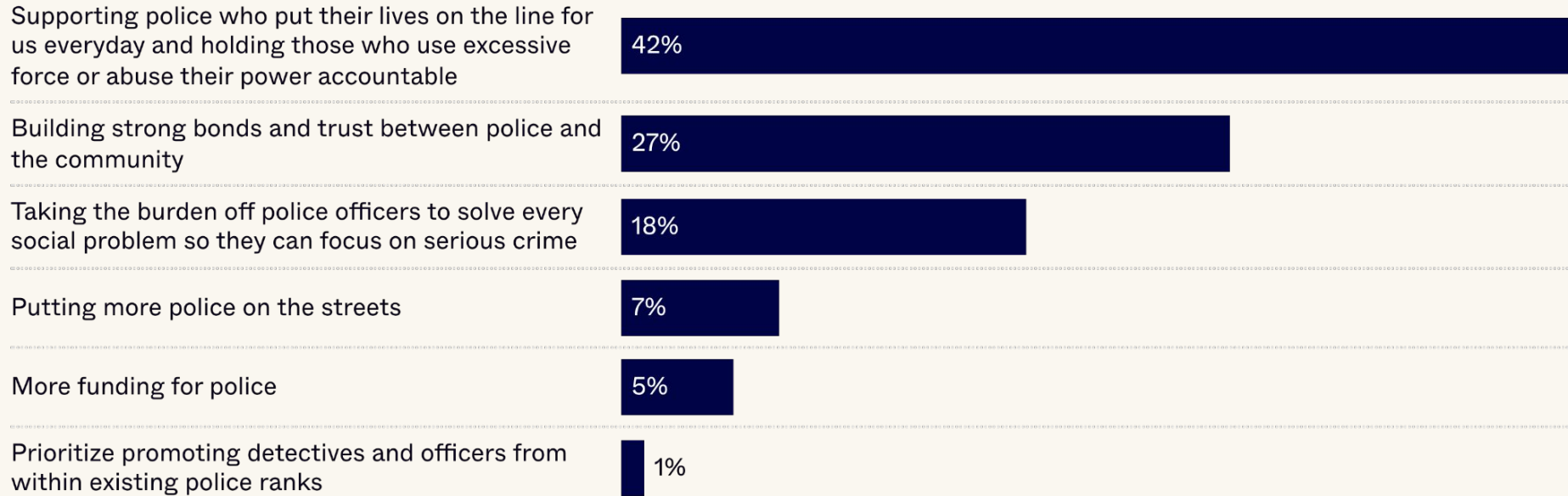
**[DEM]:** While families struggle with rising costs, Trump and the Republicans are making our country less safe and less secure by involving us in costly wars abroad, gutting jobs, and cutting Medicaid. Democrats know that safety and affordability go hand in hand. The best way to help hardworking Americans get ahead and stay safe is to lower costs and invest in the things that improve everyone's safety and quality of life, like good schools, jobs, affordable housing, health care, and preventing crime before it happens.

## **TAKEAWAY #3**

There is a way to talk about the police – and it's about better, more accountable policing, and more effective crisis response.

# Instead of debating police budgets and department sizes, lead with “support and accountability”—the message favored by most voters

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



## When facing "defund" attacks, 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 neither is exactly right?

**We need an approach that is tough on crime and preserves law and order.** But too many politicians are siding with illegal aliens, career criminals, and violent rioters over law enforcement officers. We should cut federal funding to "sanctuary cities" that release dangerous criminals onto our streets. While some radical politicians want to let unvetted illegals pour into our country, vilify brave ICE agents, and defund the police, it's up to responsible federal authorities to step in, stop the madness, and restore our safety and security.

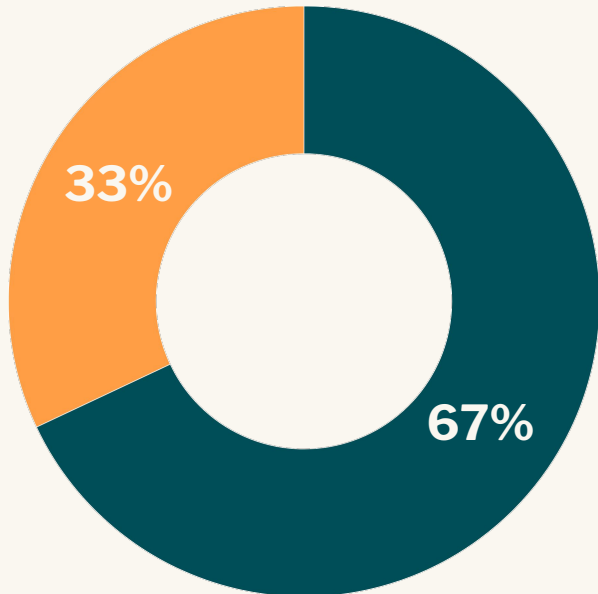
43%

**We urgently need a new approach to law enforcement in our country.** We should support our officers to do the difficult jobs they're tasked to do and demand accountability when they abuse their power or break the law. From the murder of George Floyd five years ago to Renee Good and Alex Pretti today, police and ICE brutality are undermining trust between law enforcement and the communities they are supposed to serve. We cannot continue to spend billions on law enforcement agencies whose actions are making our neighborhoods and communities less safe. We must rein in abusive law enforcement practices and invest in a new approach that prevents crime and breaks its cycle.

57%

## Even in a head-to-head, a message of support and accountability beats “unleash the police”

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



- [TOUGH]:** Police officers put their lives on the line for us everyday. They work high-stress jobs and make split-second life-or-death decisions. We cannot handcuff them by second-guessing every move. 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.
- [SERIOUS]:** Police officers are public servants who play an important role in public safety and deserve support to do their jobs well. But with that authority comes responsibility: officers must be held accountable when they abuse their power or break the law. Investing in higher case clearance rates, fast police response times, and tools to solve serious crimes—alongside strong accountability—builds trust and makes communities safer.

## TAKEAWAY #4

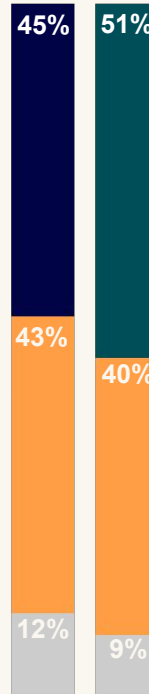
The extreme actions by this administration in Minneapolis and elsewhere have shifted public opinion, opening the door to calling out Trump's actions as making us *less safe and less secure*.

# On immigration, a “serious about safety” Democrat outperforms a “tough” message.

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

**[TOUGH DEM]:** "I'm a Democrat who says our immigration system is broken and ICE has gone too far. We should secure our border and deport those who come here illegally and commit crimes. At the same time, we must ensure regulation and accountability for ICE agents. Let's work together to build an immigration system that promotes enforcement, oversight, and security."

**[TOUGH GOP]:** "I'm a Republican who says we should work with President Trump to finish the wall, fully fund Border Patrol and ICE, and secure the border once and for all. The chaos at our southern border under Joe Biden and the Democrats flooded our communities with crime, drugs, and fentanyl. We should deport criminals who come here illegally, bring an end to migrant crime, and put Americans first."



**[SERIOUS DEM]:** "I'm a Democrat who says mass raids and violent assaults by ICE agents are making our communities less safe. Let's focus on real solutions that live up to our values and make us all safer, like securing our border and creating a path to citizenship for immigrants who have lived here for years. I'm focused on making life safer, more stable, and secure for all of us."

**[TOUGH GOP]:** "I'm a Republican who says we should work with President Trump to finish the wall, fully fund Border Patrol and ICE, and secure the border once and for all. The chaos at our southern border under Joe Biden and the Democrats flooded our communities with crime, drugs, and fentanyl. We should deport criminals who come here illegally, bring an end to migrant crime, and put Americans first."

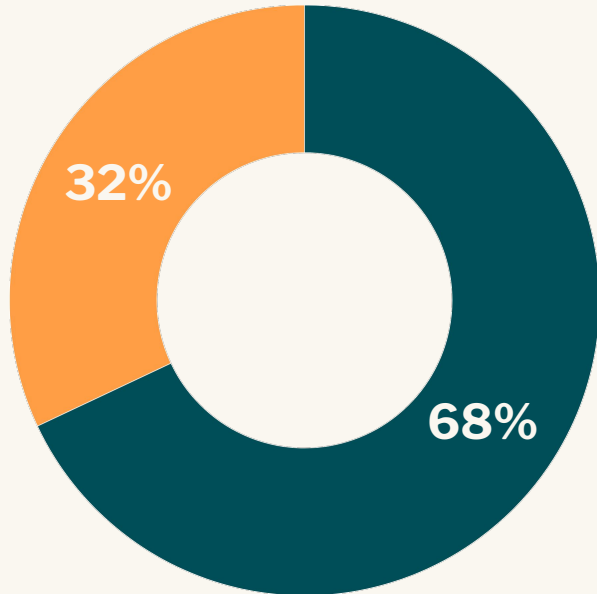
## **TAKEAWAY #5**

Even on the contentious issues of addiction, homelessness, retail theft, bail, and youth crime, a “serious about safety” approach beats a “tough-on-crime” message

**Vera** ACTION

# Responding to fearmongering about public disorder, homelessness, and mental illness by turning the debate to safety solutions wins by 30+ points

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



- [TOUGH]:** All people who commit a crime—no matter how minor—should receive a strong police response, be arrested, and face punishment. We need to take back our streets from the mentally ill and the drug addicted. Allowing soft-on-crime responses weakens the rule of law, excuses criminal behavior, and erodes public order.
- [SERIOUS]:** When people are experiencing a mental health crisis or struggling with addiction, they should be met by trained mental health professionals—not police—who can connect them to treatment and services. Addressing the root causes of these crises helps prevent future crime, disorder, and repeat offenses.

## On drugs and addiction, turning the debate from “enabling dangerous choices” to a “serious about safety” approach again wins by 30+ points

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

33%

**[TOUGH]:** Taxpayers’ money should not be used to purchase opioid reversal drugs like Narcan or drug test strips. Using taxpayer dollars this way normalizes illegal drug use and enables dangerous choices instead of discouraging them. That’s not compassion, it’s reckless and traps people in a cycle of destruction.

67%

**[SERIOUS]:** Public funding should be used to save lives during the opioid epidemic, including purchasing opioid reversal drugs like Narcan and test strips for first responders. These tools prevent overdoses, keep people alive, and give people a chance to get treatment and recover.

## Flip the narrative on retail theft from petty crime to making communities safe

**Attack:** We can thank woke prosecutors for letting American cities spiral out of control. People are scared to go into stores because of theft and looting. Hardworking employees and business owners are traumatized and scared to go to work. Organized retail crime is just happening brazenly. Evil is spreading across the country, with thieves taking whatever they want and prosecutors aren't doing a thing about it. In fact, woke prosecutors are against any charges or prosecutions for theft. There are no consequences and that's why criminals are so open, brazen, and violent with stealing. We've got to get tougher on crime. I'll start by making sure every thief is punished to the full extent of the law.

43%

**Response:** My opponent wants to use scare tactics to rile people up to win votes. Here's what I can tell you. We all deserve to live in safe neighborhoods and shop at places in peace. I will work with police to take down organized theft so that our stores don't have to lock up basics like toothpaste and shampoo. Also, some people are stealing out of desperation and poverty because they're in survival mode. Throwing them in jail or charging them with huge fines will not change their behavior. It will just make them more desperate. My focus is on holding people accountable in ways that actually stop the cycle of crime - and make all of us safer.

57%

# Prioritize community-led solutions instead of crackdowns on kids

## When You Hear...

## You Can Say...

### **“Teen takeovers” are dangerous.**

We need to impose curfews and prosecute parents when kids break the law.

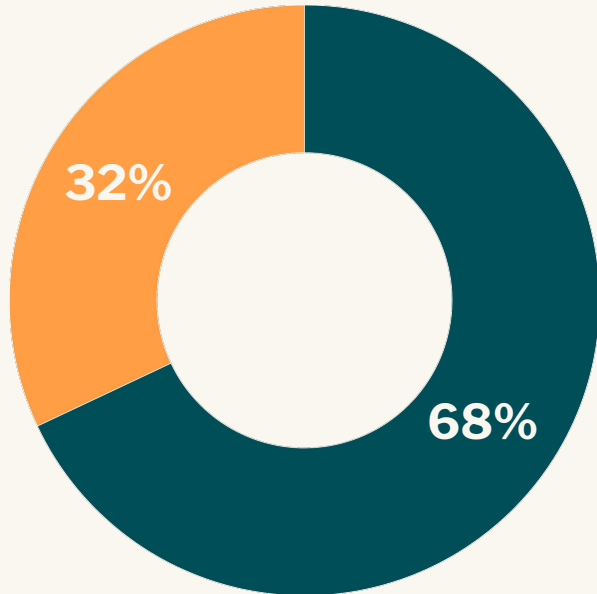
**Create youth spaces and jobs:** Our kids are in desperate need of connection. But there aren't enough places kids can go that are accessible and affordable. We need to invest in more parks, recreation programs, and youth spaces. We also must expand summer youth employment opportunities that help young people use their time constructively, earn money, and prepare for the workforce. And before we punish parents, we should ask whether they have the support they need to succeed.

**Juveniles who commit crimes need to go to prison.** Policies tying the hands of prosecutors have made it impossible to rein in juvenile crime.

**Accountability means support and change, not just punishment:** Accountability matters—full stop. Young people who cause harm should face real consequences. But if punishment alone worked, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Real accountability means consequences and opportunity to change. That means giving young people on the wrong path alternatives to incarceration and opportunities to turn their lives around. And it means making investments in community violence intervention programs that steer our kids away from violence.

## A message related to bail performs well when we say “public safety, not wealth, should determine who stays in jail before trial”

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



**[ATTACK ON BAIL]:** Democrats are hellbent on eliminating cash bail. They wanted to release dangerous criminals on their own recognizance or a nominal bond amount. Now there's blood on their hands.

**[RESPONSE]:** Cash bail actually makes us less safe. When someone with minor offenses is kept in jail for months for years because they can't afford bail, they lose their livelihoods - their jobs and their ability to get jobs in the future. That feeds the cycle of crime. We need a system where public safety, not wealth, determines who is released pending trial.

# Serious about Safety Messaging In Practice



## Safety & Security

Floridians deserve to feel safe in their schools, clubs, places of worship, movie theatres, work, and neighborhoods. We will always fight for common sense gun safety legislation, criminal legal system reform, and will support our first responders too. Anna has been making unannounced visits to state prisons, and knows that we must reform Florida's penal code, and eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline. That's why she's filed legislation on these issues, and has co-sponsored legislation to decriminalize cannabis. Anna also supports rights restoration, and has been a firm supporter of the voter-approved 2018's Amendment Four. We must also be prepared to manage the next natural disaster and cyber security threat, and prevent foreign interference with our elections.

With a loved one who has been a victim of a crime, Anna knows what it is like to navigate our judicial system and will continue to be an advocate for victims while also focusing on crime prevention including violence intervention programs and peer-to-peer mentorship.

**- State Rep. Dr. Anna V. Eskamani for Orlando Mayor**

# Serious about Safety messaging in practice

## Being serious about safety.



Alvin Bragg has worked tirelessly to build a smart, comprehensive strategy to keep our community safe and also to lift up our residents and ensure justice for all. This includes coordinating closely with fellow law enforcement partners; investing in young people; getting help for those struggling with mental health and substance use challenges; holding all accountable; and increasing gun prosecutions 20%. While there is still much more work to do, Manhattan is seeing real results. New crime stats show Alvin's safety vision works: In Manhattan, shootings are down 66% and murder is down 47% since Alvin took office, and overall index crimes are down 10% in the last two years. (NYPD Stats)

- Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg

# Serious about Safety Messaging In Practice

## SEE HOW MAYOR SCOTT DELIVERED FOR BALTIMORE

### Reducing Violent Crime

When **Mayor Scott** took office, the city was reeling from a global pandemic. There were 335 homicides and 721 nonfatal shootings in 2020. In 2023, there were 262 homicides and 636 nonfatal shootings.

- ✓ Developed Baltimore's first-ever **Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan** in order to take a **public health oriented** approach to public safety, away from the broken zero-tolerance strategies of the past
- ✓ Reduced homicides by 20%; the lowest homicide rate in nine years and the largest annual drop in history, while simultaneously cutting improper arrests in half
- ✓ 8% reduction in non-fatal shootings, 23% reduction in carjackings, 85% reduction in squeegee-related crime, illegal gun seizures up 41%
- ✓ 83% of Federal Consent Decree on track or compliant
- ✓ Expanded 911 **behavioral health diversion**
- ✓ Over 2,000 potentially violent conflicts mediated
- ✓ Creating the Office of Returning Citizens, to oversee Baltimore's first-ever Re-Entry Action Council to **serve individuals returning** from incarceration

**- Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott**

# A “serious about safety” policy agenda with real solutions for safety, accountability, and justice that appeals to a majority of American voters

## 1. Trustworthy, responsive, accountable policing

Increase case clearance rates, speed up 911 response times, and build community trust and accountability

## 2. Ending the overdose epidemic

Increase access to treatment and prioritize evidence-backed solutions (e.g., easy access to Narcan)

## 3. Supporting strong mental health and de-escalating crisis

Expand school- and community-based treatment options, mobile crisis response, and 911 mental health calls

## 4. Tackling gun violence

Launch gun trafficking task forces, expand CVI, and build trauma recovery centers

## 5. Safe streets and a good quality of life

Replicate housing command center model, invest in placemaking, and expand ambassador programs

## 6. Fairer, more accountable justice system

Expand second chance programs, invest in alternatives to incarceration, and protect common-sense reforms

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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