

A NEW PARADIGM FOR SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE:

Winning the safety narrative and countering
the GOP's "tough-on-crime" playbook in Virginia

September 2026

Vera ACTION

Tackling the politics of crime

While crime polls as a lower priority for voters than other kitchen table issues, it serves as a litmus test for many when it comes to politicians.

Does this candidate or elected leader understand that safety matters?

Since 2022, Vera Action has conducted **50+ rounds** of qualitative and quantitative research on voter attitudes toward crime and public safety. The results contradict conventional political wisdom. A majority of voters, including two-thirds of Independent voters, favor an approach that is **“serious about safety,”** with concrete solutions to prevent crime and break its cycle, over a typical “tough-on-crime” one. However, despite relatively little support for the GOP’s traditional “tough-on-crime” policies, voters trust Republicans more than Democrats on the issue. Why? Because Republicans talk more about crime than Democrats do. To fix the brand problem on crime and win voter trust, Democrats must own the issue with a new approach.

These seven takeaways are a guide for how politicians can **fight, not fold** on safety.

Vera Action fielded surveys of Virginia registered voters in 2023 (HIT Strategies) and 2025 (GSG)
The polling data mentioned in this presentation is available at veraaction.org

After \$25M was spent on crime ads in the 2023 elections, we tested ads—two “tough,” one “serious”—with a focus group of Virginia voters

#1

GOP candidate touting more funding for police and “tough-on-crime” approach



**Republican Candidate
Juan Pablo Segura**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN6zlrXQszE>

#2

Dem candidate touting support for police, police endorsements, and gun control measures



**Democratic Candidate
Nadarius Clark**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgDu65zyvT0>

#3

Dem candidate touting comprehensive approach and being “serious about safety”



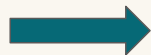
**Mock ad for a Democratic
candidate**

<https://vimeo.com/912348236/4be896715d?share=copy>

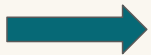
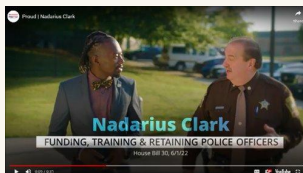
The “serious” message overall beat both the GOP and Democrat “tough” messages by 8+ points—and won or drew even with core voting blocs

Even if none is exactly right, which of these ads is most aligned with your views?

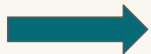
AD # 1:
GOP
TOUGH



AD # 2:
DEM
TOUGH



AD # 3:
DEM
SAFETY



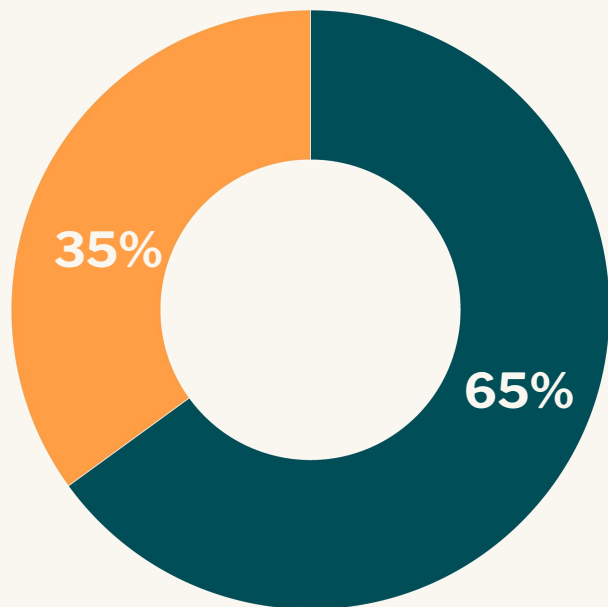
	AD # 1	AD # 2	AD # 3
OVERALL	23%	26%	34%
BLACK VOTERS	6%	36%	47%
LATINO VOTERS	17%	37%	37%
WHITE VOTERS	27%	23%	31%
GEN Z VOTERS	13%	34%	37%
BOOMERS	25%	23%	27%
DEMOCRATIC VOTERS	7%	33%	54%
REPUBLICAN VOTERS	40%	18%	15%
INDEPENDENT VOTERS	21%	28%	29%

TAKEAWAY #1

The conventional political wisdom that “tough on crime” wins is wrong—it is only potent if left unchecked. Democrats who brand themselves as “serious about safety” are in sync with voters.

Nearly two-thirds of Virginia voters prefer a “serious” approach to preventing crime and breaking its cycle over a “tough-on-crime” one

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



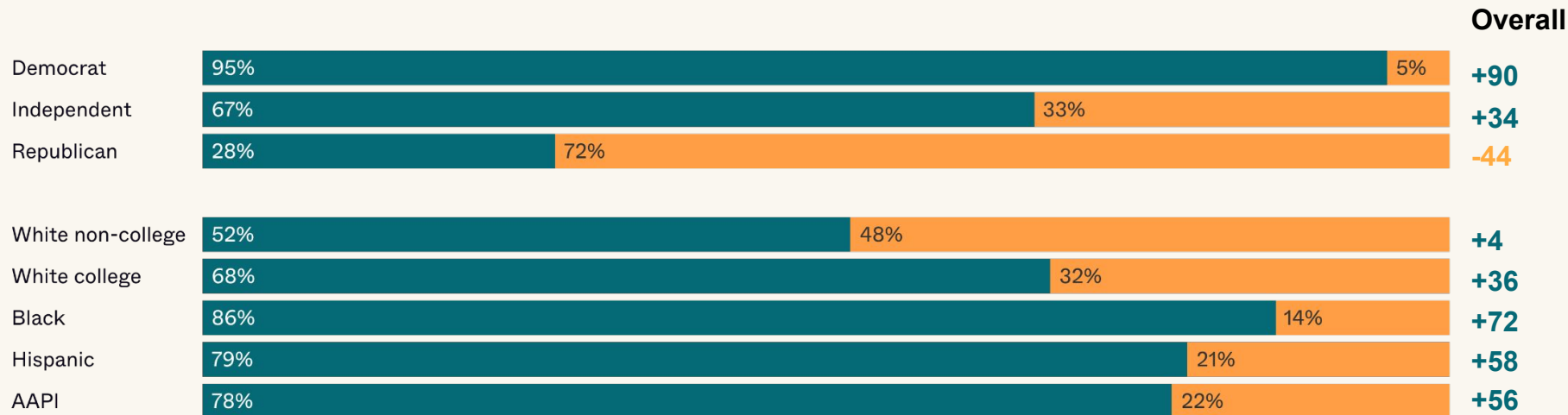
[TOUGH]: We should do more to get tough on crime—like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people in jail, and providing police with more support and resources.

[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.

A “serious about safety” approach wins with not only Democratic voters, but also Independents by +34 points and across all racial groups of voters

[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.

[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.

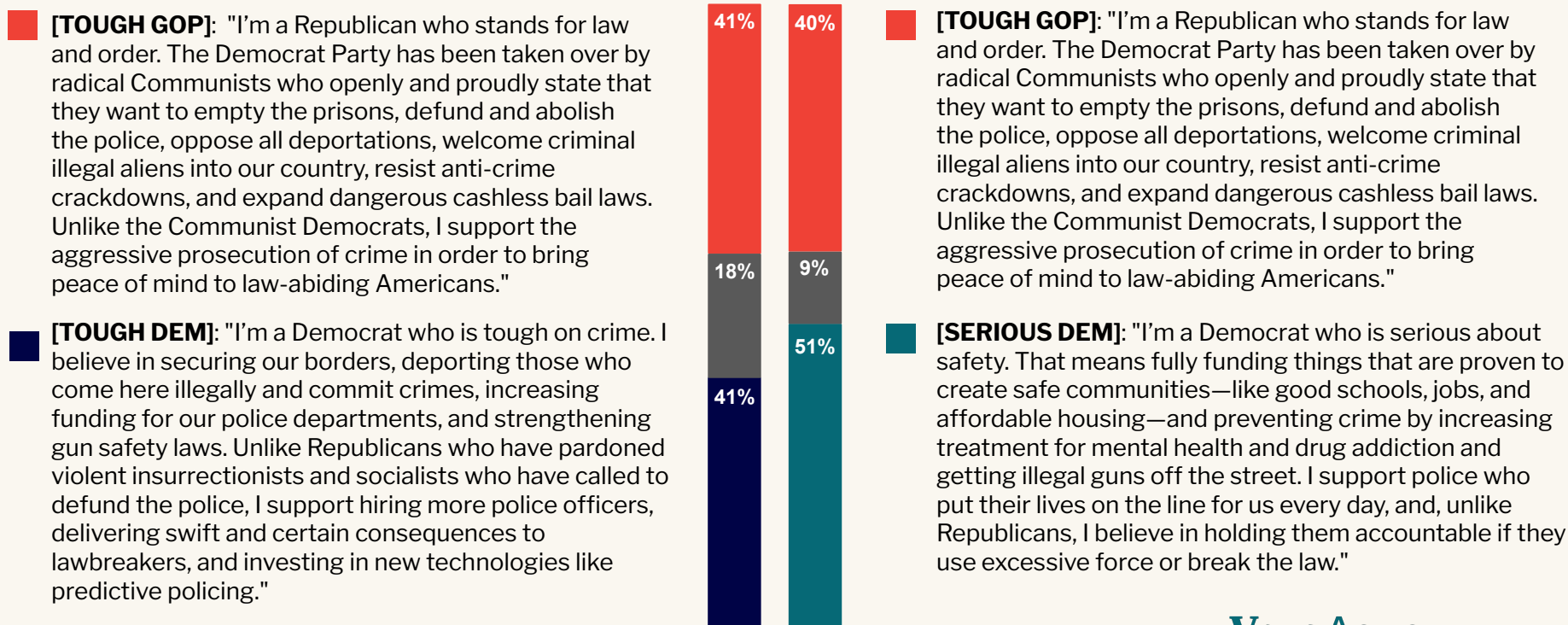


TAKEAWAY #2

A “serious” message helps Democrats own the issue of safety while maintaining credibility with voters. Democrats that try to sound “tough on crime” lose voter trust when they mimic the GOP.

Against a GOP “defund and abolish” attack, the “serious about safety” Democrat outperforms a “tough” Democrat by 10 percentage points

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



TAKEAWAY #3

Rather than debating policing on the GOP's narrative turf, change the conversation to what voters want—effective, accountable policing alongside investments in crime prevention.

Both nationally and in every state poll, including in battlegrounds, voters consistently favor effective, accountable policing—not simply more policing

Which of the following approaches to policing are a priority for you?

Choose up to two.

Support police who put their lives on the line every day and hold them accountable if they use excessive force or abuse their power

59%

Build stronger bonds between police and the community

51%

Take the burden off of police officers to solve every social problem so they can focus on serious crime

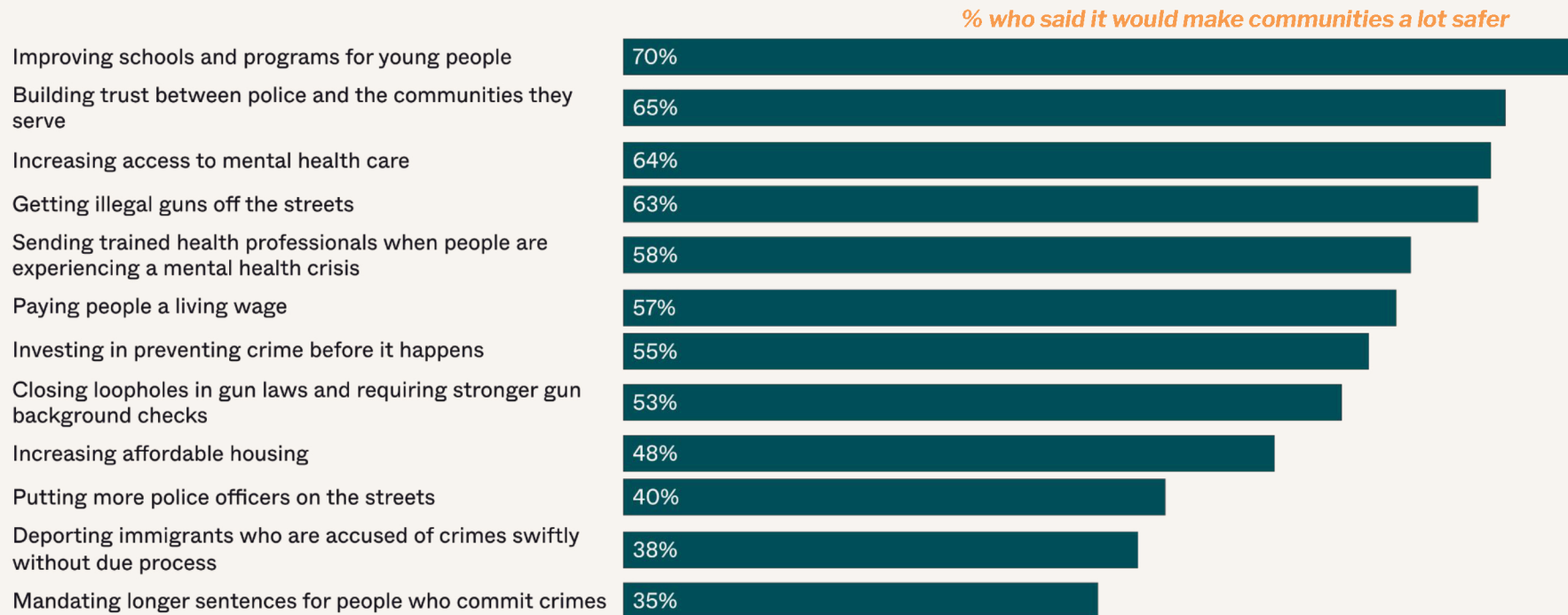
47%

Provide more funding to the police

26%

Voters strongly favor investments in preventing crime and breaking its cycle over typically “tough” approaches like enforcement and long sentences

How much safer do you believe the following policy proposals will make your community?



Source: Global Strategy Group survey May 1-7 2025 Virginia

TAKEAWAY #4

The GOP's "migrant crime" and "open border" attacks play upon voters fears about crime. Democrats can inoculate by emphasizing safety, stability, and security for everyone.

Even on immigration, a “serious about safety” Democrat outperforms one trying to sound “tough” and mimicking the GOP’s focus on the border alone

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

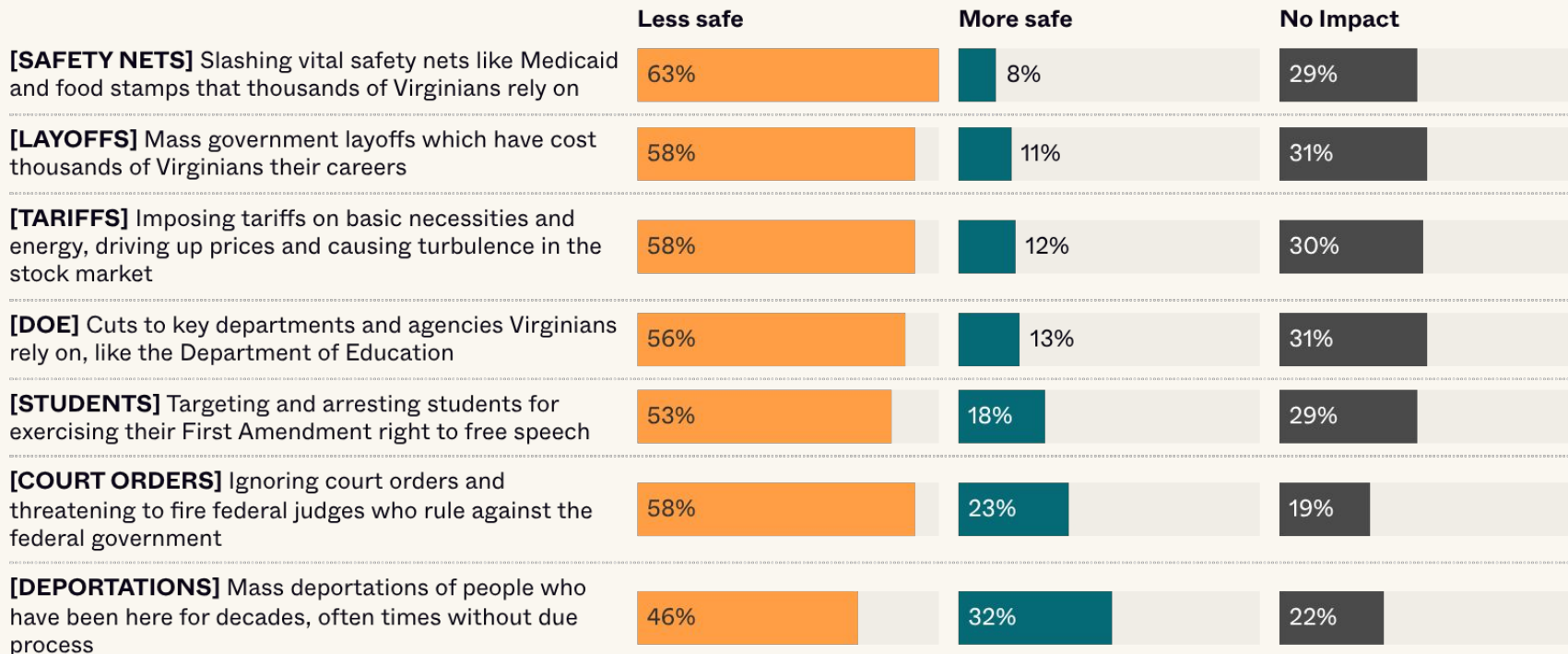


TAKEAWAY #5

Virginians believe Trump's actions are making life less safe. At a minimum, Democrats shouldn't let the GOP take credit for the crime decline—and they should go on offense by calling out unpopular cuts.

A majority of Virginia voters see the Trump administration's policies of cutting healthcare and jobs and driving up costs as making us less safe

Does this action make Virginia communities more safe, less safe, or no impact at all?

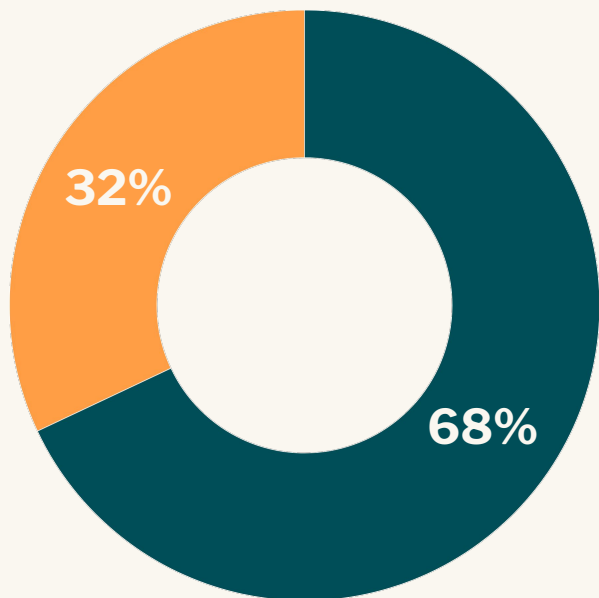


TAKEAWAY #6

Emphasizing the need to make sure public safety, not wealth, determines who stays in jail pending trial helps people understand the benefits of bail reform and points out the flaws of a cash bail system.

Counter cash bail attacks by flipping the frame to emphasize that 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.

TAKEAWAY #7

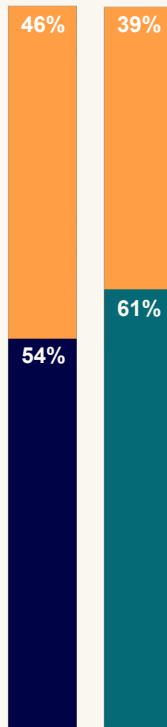
Audience matters. Conventional political wisdom to stay away from ever talking about race is wrong—a race-forward message on accountability outperforms a race-neutral one with certain voters.

While overall a race-forward “serious” message on accountability lags behind a race-neutral one against the same attack by 7 points...

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view, even if none is exactly right?

[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.

[RACE_FORWARD]: To make communities safe, everyone who breaks the law must be held accountable. But decades of evidence show that our justice system treats Black people more harshly than white people. Rather than punishing people unevenly, we need proven programs that repair harm and prevent future crime. Real accountability means recognizing harm, accepting consequences, learning from mistakes, and changing behavior.

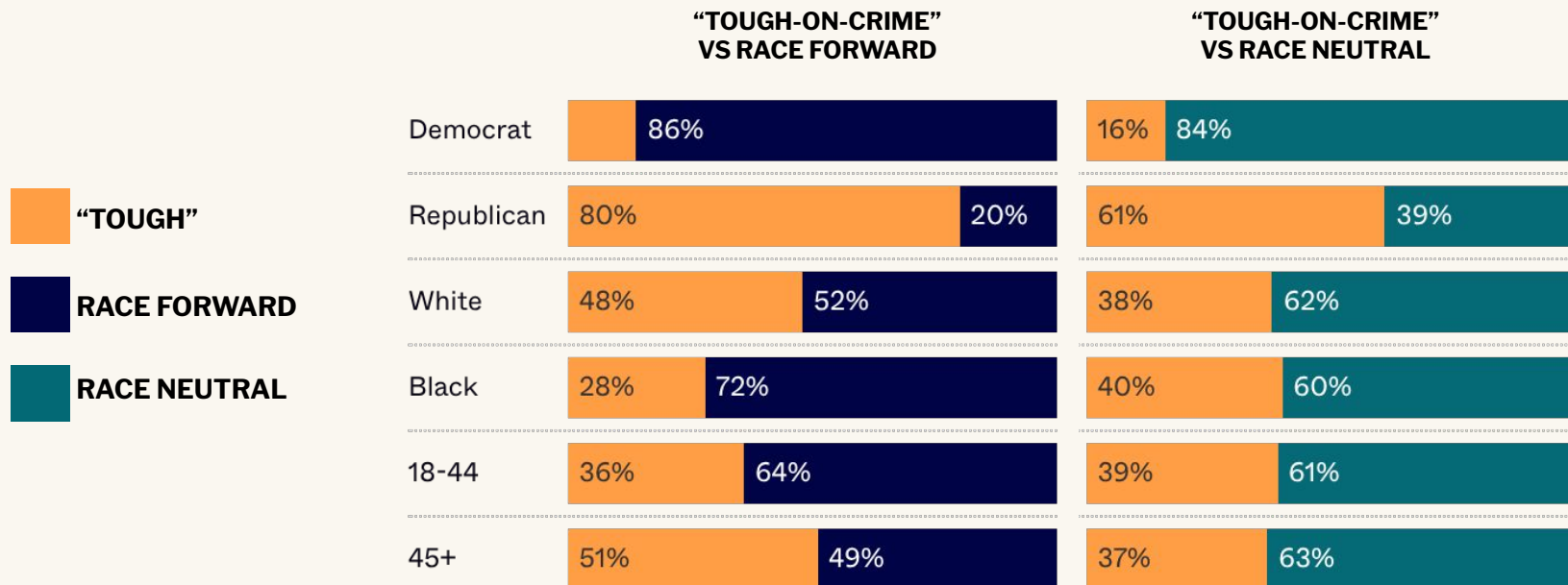


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[RACE_NEUTRAL]: To make communities safe, people who break the law must be held accountable. This means seeing the harm they've done, accepting the consequences, learning from mistakes, and changing their behavior. Harsh punishment and long sentences alone lead to more violence. We need to provide people with programs that work to turn their lives around and prevent future crime.

... a race-forward message still wins with a majority of voters—and outperforms the race-neutral message with Black and young voters

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view, even if none is exactly right?



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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