Vera ACTION

Findings from Messaging Research on Crime and Public Safety

The current political moment

Vera ACTION

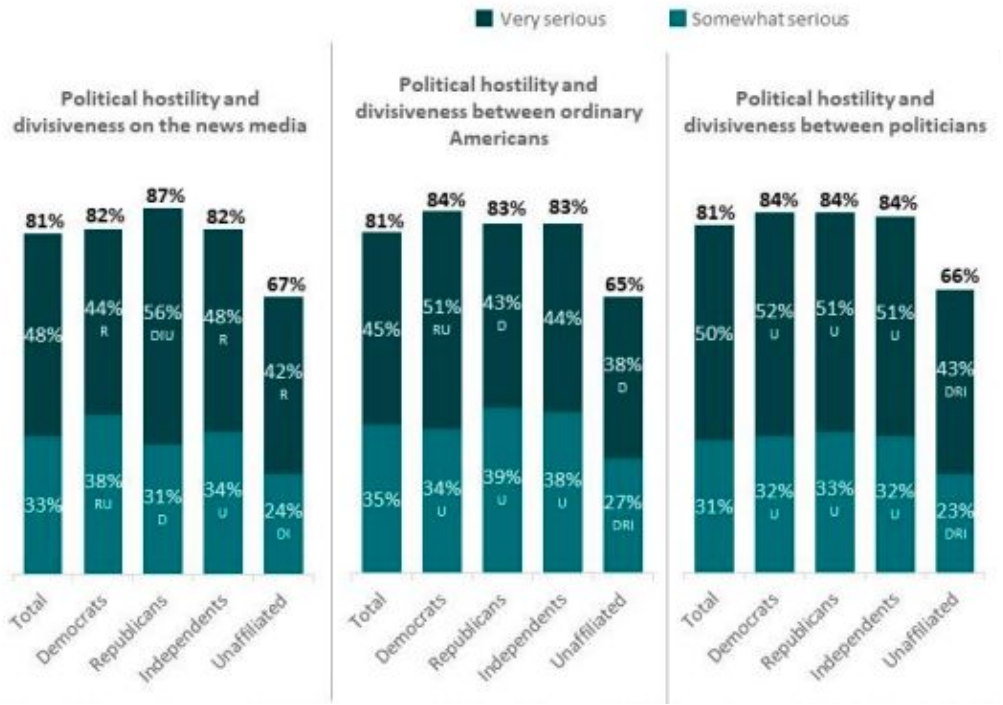
The justice reform movement is facing strong headwinds amidst a national rise in homicides and shootings and a fraught political moment. Increasingly, a false narrative is taking hold that you can have safety or you can have justice—but not both.

Many justice reform policies are popular among voters. However, without an effective narrative strategy to withstand attacks and win voters over to the simple idea that safety and justice are compatible, we risk losing ground on the policy gains made in the last decade.

This deck provides public opinion research, head-to-head comparisons of how reform messages perform against attacks, and messaging guidance to protect against backsliding and pave the way for more policy wins on justice reform.

How is the justice reform field especially vulnerable in this political moment?

Americans are tired of the political hostility and want to see elected officials do their jobs and govern effectively.



PUBLIC AGENDA

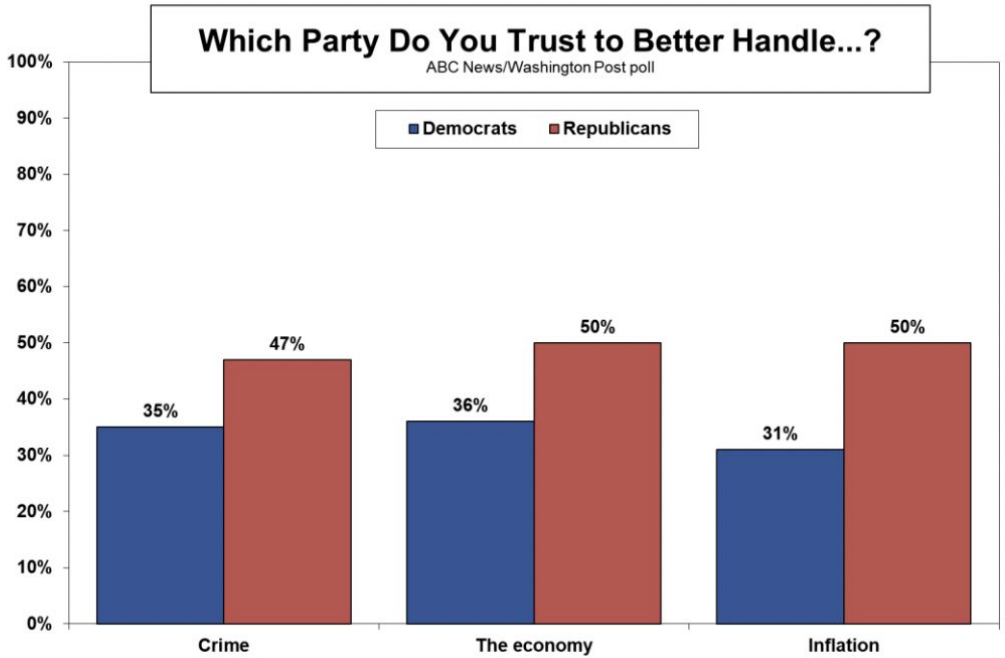
Ipsos

USA TODAY

VeraACTION

Source: USA Today/Ipsos/Public Agenda poll https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/polarization-december-2021

Most Americans don't believe either party, but especially Democrats, are strong on addressing crime and safety.



The Washington Post

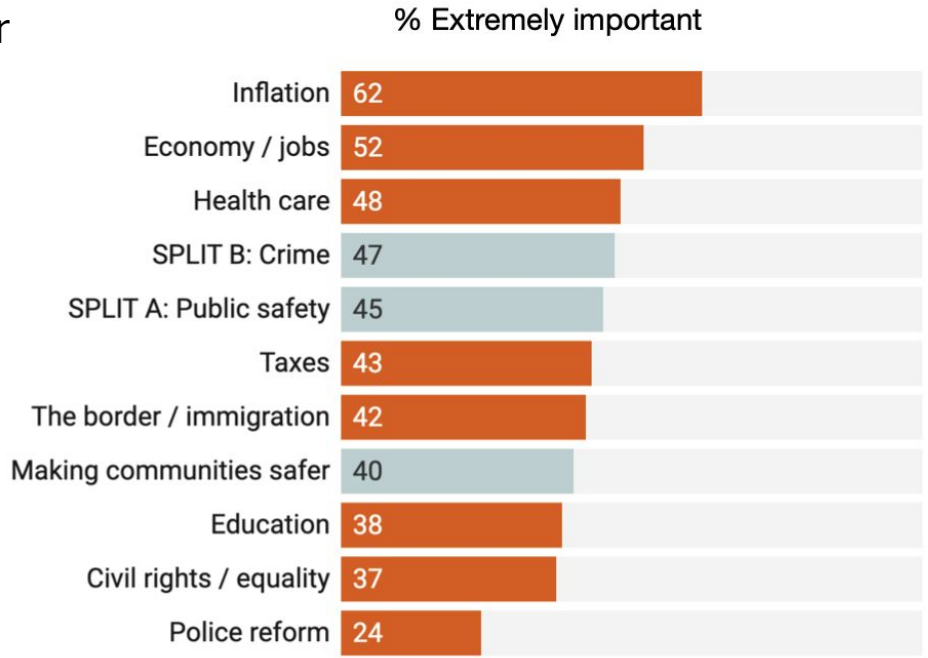
abc NEWS

VeraACTION

Source: ABC/Washington Post poll https://www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/1225a12022Politics.pdf

Crime and public safety is currently trailing inflation and the economy as a top-tier voting issue...

Think about how you decide to vote for a candidate. How important is each of these issues to **you personally** when it comes to voting this year?



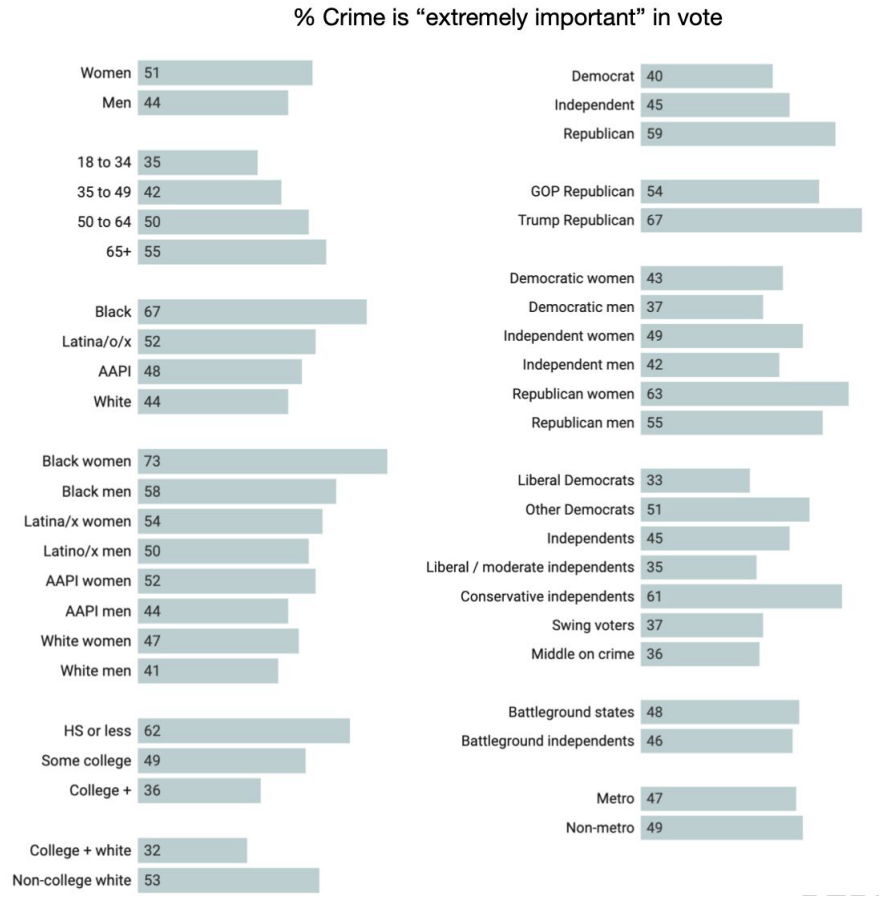
Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

… but it is a priority voting issue with Black voters, Republicans, and voters without college degrees.

Crime is most salient among:

- Black women **73%**
- Trump republicans **67%**
- Republican women **63%**
- Voters with a high school degree or less **62%**
- Conservative independents **61%**
- Black men **58%**

Interestingly, crime is <u>least</u> salient among swing voters, white men, independent men, college-educated voters, and young voters.



Vera ACTION

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Specifics from the messaging research

Vera ACTION

PERRY UNDEM

HART RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

Methodology

National survey of n = 3,876 likely 2022 voters, including:

- N = 473 Black voters
- N = 411 Latina/o/x voters
- N = 459 Asian-American / Pacific-Islander voters
- N = 1,245 battleground state voters (AZ, FL, GA, MI, MN, NC, NH, NV, OR, PA, WI)

The survey was conducted from June 2 - 17, 2022 using YouGov's online panel. The sample includes likely voters from across the political spectrum, including Democrats, Independents, and Republicans.

Margin of sampling error for total: ± 2 percentage points.

Issue areas tested

- Notions of safety
- Role of the police
- Importance of accountability
- Criminogenic effects of incarceration
- Investing in communities and preventing crime

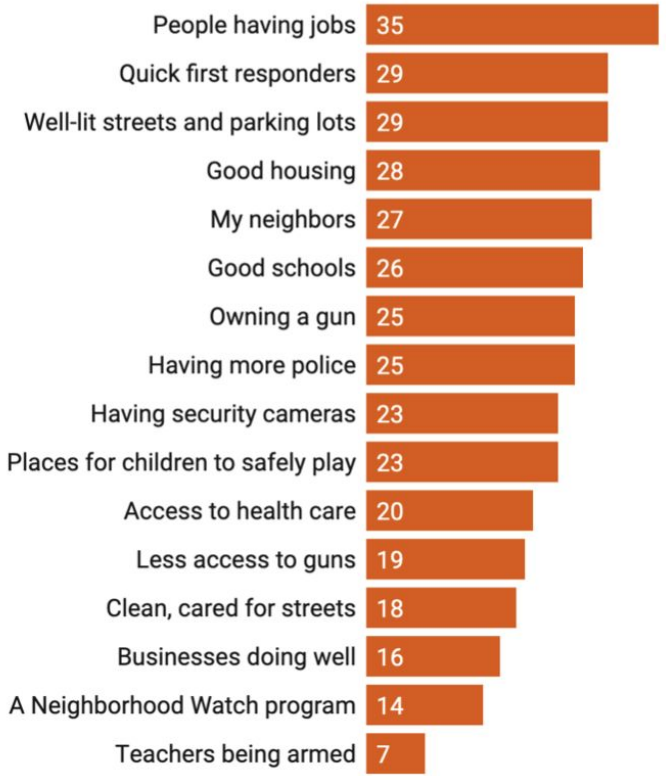
What do likely voters think makes communities safe?

Likely voters identified a range of factors that contribute to stability and neighborhood safety.

Think about being safe in your own neighborhood and community. What makes you feel safe? Choose the top 3 or 4 for you:

Jobs, housing, and schools are the top structural issues. Other top factors are:

- Quick first responders
- Well-lit streets and parking lots
- Owning a gun
- More police



Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Only conservatives and conservative independents ranked "more police" as one of their 3-4 priorities for safety.

	Women	Men	Black	Latinx	AAPI	White	18 to 34	Metro	Non-metro
Having more police		27%							

	Dem women	Dem men	Ind women	Ind men	Rep women	Rep men
Having more police				27%	37%	42%

	Liberal Dems	Other Dems	Ind	Liberal / mod ind	Cons ind	Swing	Battle-grnd	Battle-grnd ind
Having more police					39%			

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

How do likely voters view the role of the police?

Across likely voters, overall support for police is high.

72% of voters have a favorable impression of the police

25% of voters have an unfavorable impression

3% of voters are unsure

Vera ACTION

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

However, despite strong support for police, voters also favor reforms and improvements to policing.

Try to fill in the blanks here—with your own words.
When it comes to crime and making communities safer,
I want my elected officials to _____ .

Support/fund police	**16%**
Reform/improve training	**10%**
Gun control/make it harder to get guns	**8%**
Police should understand/listen to communities	**8%**

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

In addition to supporting police, there is near universal support for holding them accountable for misconduct.

We can support officers who put their lives on the line for us every day and we can hold police accountable if they use excessive force or abuse their power.

	Libral Dems	Other Dems	Ind	Liberal/ mod ind	Cons Ind	Swing	Battle-ground	Battle-ground Ind	Black	Latinx	AAPI	White	18–34
% Strongly Agree	72% 92% total agree	71% 90%	55% 89%	62% 94%	45% 83%	47% 88%	59% 89%	58% 90%	71% 86%	59% 85%	59% 91%	57% 90%	51% 78%

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

How do likely voters view the issue of accountability?

Majorities across every audience segment support more accountability—both systemic and individual accountability.

	Liberal Dems	Other Dems	Ind	Liberal / mod ind	Cons ind	Swing	Battle-grnd	Battle-grnd ind	Black	Latinx	AAPI	White	18 to 34
We need leaders who care more about actual solutions than trying to stir up people's emotions just to get elected.	81%	69%	75%	77%	74%	63%	76%	77%	75%	76%	66%	75%	62%
We need more accountability at all levels. The criminal justice system needs to be more accountable for public safety and fairness. There needs to be accountability for people who break the law. Police should be held accountable for excessive force. Elected officials need to be accountable to voters when they spend billions on things that don't work.	69%	62%	66%	69%	64%	54%	62%	65%	70%	61%	61%	63%	54%
We can support police officers who put their lives on the line for us every day and we can hold police accountable if they use excessive force or abuse their power.	72% 92% total agree	71% 90%	55% 89%	62% 94%	45% 83%	47% 88%	59% 89%	58% 90%	71% 86%	59% 85%	59% 91%	57% 90%	51% 78%

Vera ACTION

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Do likely voters understand the criminogenic effects of incarceration?

It is not yet intuitive to likely voters that time in jail or prison is so destabilizing that it leads to future arrests.

26%

strongly agree

29%

somewhat agree

Jails and prisons feed the cycle of crime, they don't prevent it. Incarceration makes people more likely to commit crime when they get out, not less likely.

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Do likely voters support an investment and prevention approach to crime and public safety?

Messages on funding, investment, and safe communities resonate across audiences and have broad appeal.

74%

agree

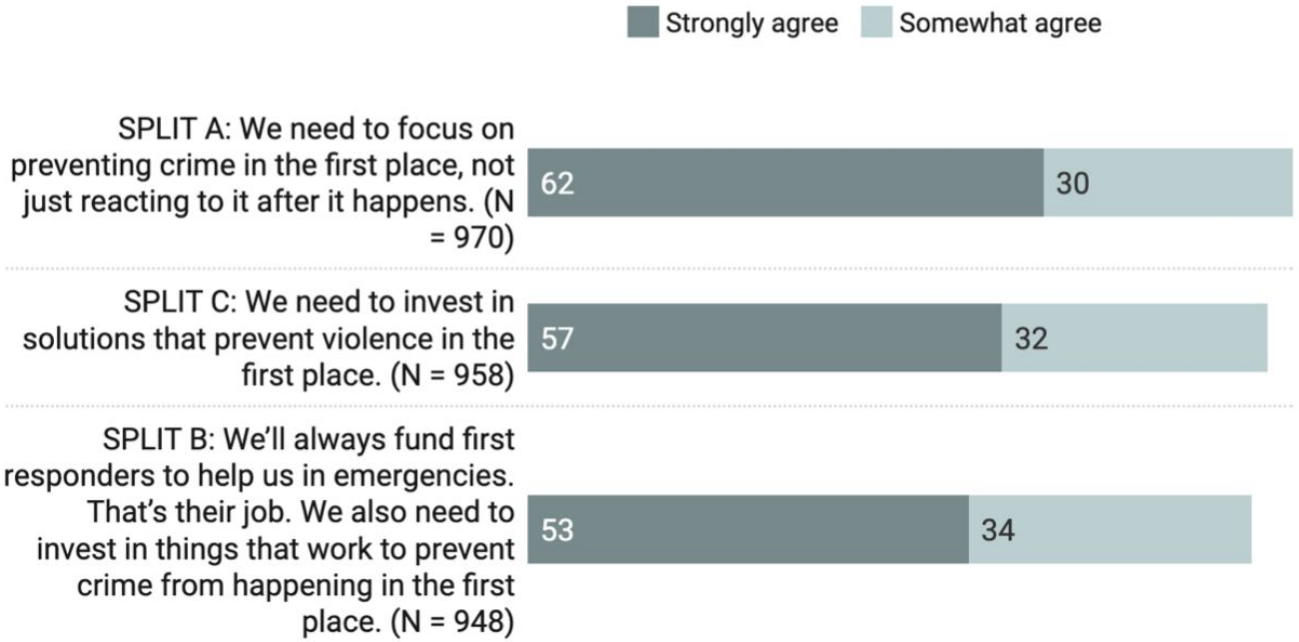
43%

strongly

The safest places in America don't have more police, more jails, more prisons, and harsher sentences. They have access to jobs and economic prosperity. They have good schools. There's housing and healthcare. There's good infrastructure. There's trust between the community and the police. There's hope for the future.

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

A straightforward "preventing crime" message garners strong agreement among a majority of audiences.

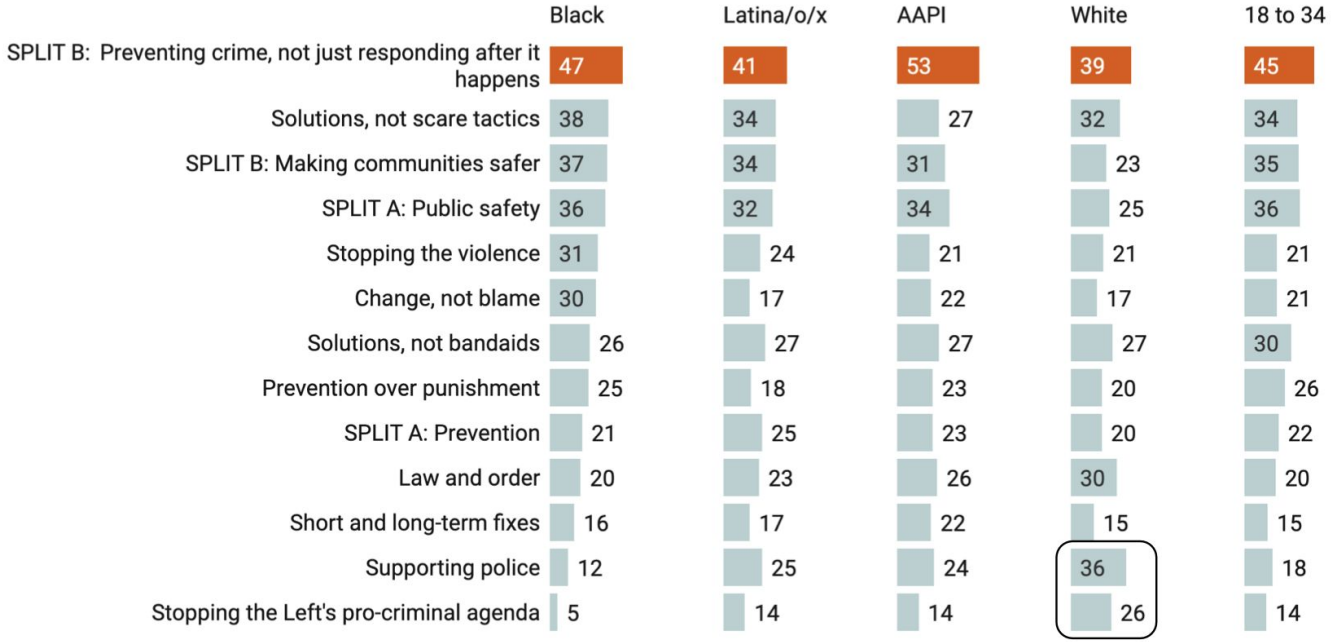


Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

When testing catch phrases, a "preventing crime" approach was the strongest performing message across all audiences.

Fill in the blank here. When it comes to crime, I want my elected officials to focus on _____ .

Pick **three** of these that are closest to your views.



Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Comparing reform versus “law and order” narratives head-to-head

- Typical Democrat versus Republican narrative
- Responding to “defund police” attacks
- Responding to attacks for supporting bail reform

Methodology

Crafted narratives that are representative of Democratic versus Republican approaches to crime and public safety. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions:

- Receiving the Democratic narrative first
- Receiving the Republican narrative first
- A control group that did not get either narrative

After reading each narrative, respondents were asked a set of questions to assess the impact. Responses to these questions were compared to the control group.

Head-to-head typical Democratic versus Republican narrative on crime and public safety

DEMOCRATIC VERSUS REPUBLICAN NARRATIVES

We crafted a Democratic narrative based on insights from recent research:

- Most voters feel distaste, if not disgust, for politicians who they feel aren't doing their jobs. Voters want solutions.
- Most people feel worried about the country's divisions.
- "New breakthroughs" in preventing and breaking cycles of crime and violence have the potential to counteract feelings of hopelessness.
- Most voters have positive feelings (though not exclusively positive) toward police.
- Unprompted, people see safe communities as having jobs, economic opportunity, education, affordable housing, good infrastructure, and other public goods.

We tested the Democratic narrative against a Republican "scare tactics" one to see how it performed.

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE

Crime is rising and many of us are feeling less safe. While some politicians will try to divide us, my focus is fixing the problems. Let's look at solutions that reduce crime, increase safety, and serve the community.

Here's what we can do. In the short-term, new breakthroughs in gun violence and crime prevention programs are showing major success now. We need to fund and replicate these programs. Police have dangerous and hard jobs. Let's support police officers who put their lives on the line for us every day. Let's make sure our first responders get better training, like how to de-escalate situations. We also have to stop the flood of illegal handguns and ghost guns that are coming into our communities.

In addition to fighting crime, we need to work on preventing it in the first place. We already have some answers on that. The safest places in America don't have more police, more jails, more prisons, and harsher sentences. They have access to jobs and opportunities. They have good schools. There's housing and health care. There's good infrastructure. There's hope for the future. We need to fully fund things that are proven to create safe neighborhoods. Everyone deserves to work, play, and raise their children in safety. Instead of trying to stir up people's emotions just to get elected, I'll do my job to fix problems and keep people safe.

REPUBLICAN NARRATIVE

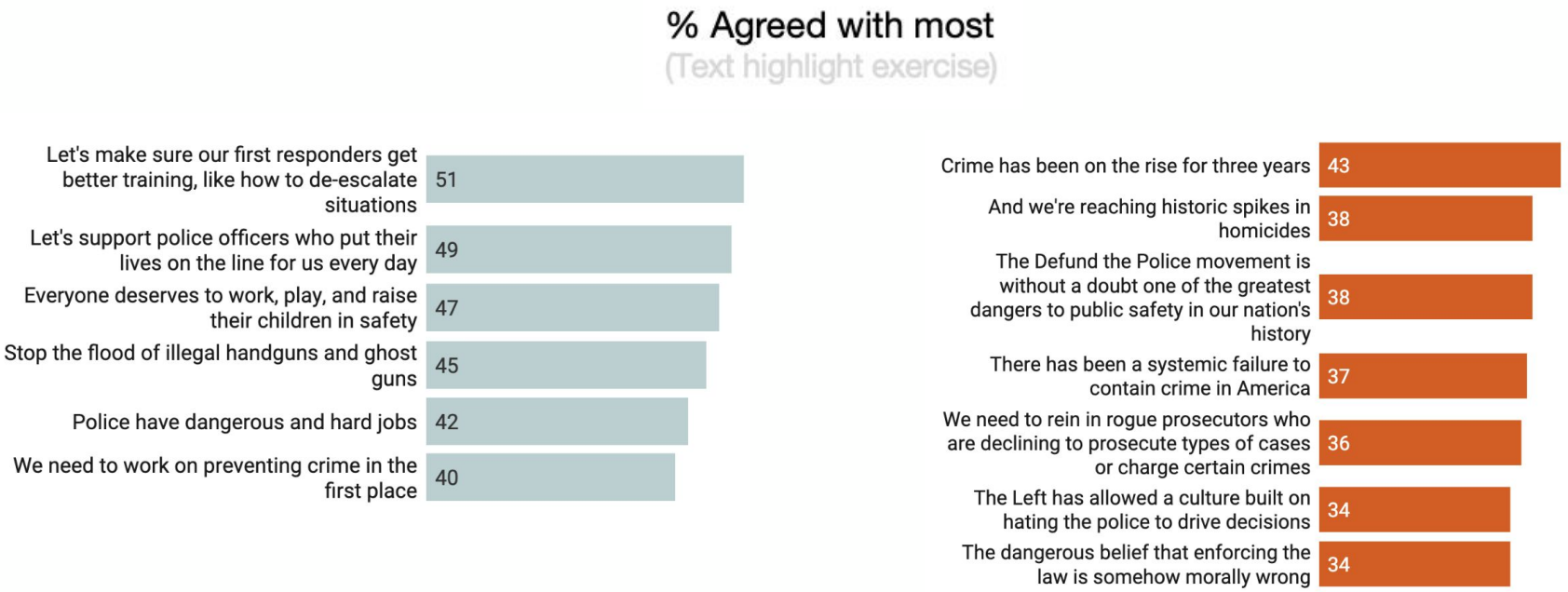
Crime has been on the rise for three years and we're reaching historic spikes in homicides, gang activity, motor vehicle thefts, and assaults. From the White House to liberal state and local governments, there has been a systemic failure to contain crime in America. It stems from the dangerous belief that enforcing the law is somehow morally wrong or even racist. It has paralyzed law enforcement agencies at all levels and created prosecutors who would rather let a dangerous criminal walk out of jail than enforce the law.

The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions surrounding law enforcement. The Defund the Police movement is without a doubt one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation's history, and Democrats are responsible for it. We need to stop subsidizing the Left's pro-criminal agenda. We need to rein in rogue prosecutors who are declining to prosecute types of cases or charge certain crimes. We need to stop federal funds to states that have "no cash bail" laws on the books.

Once again, Democrats have broken a part of our civil society, and once again it will be conservatives who will step up to piece it together.

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

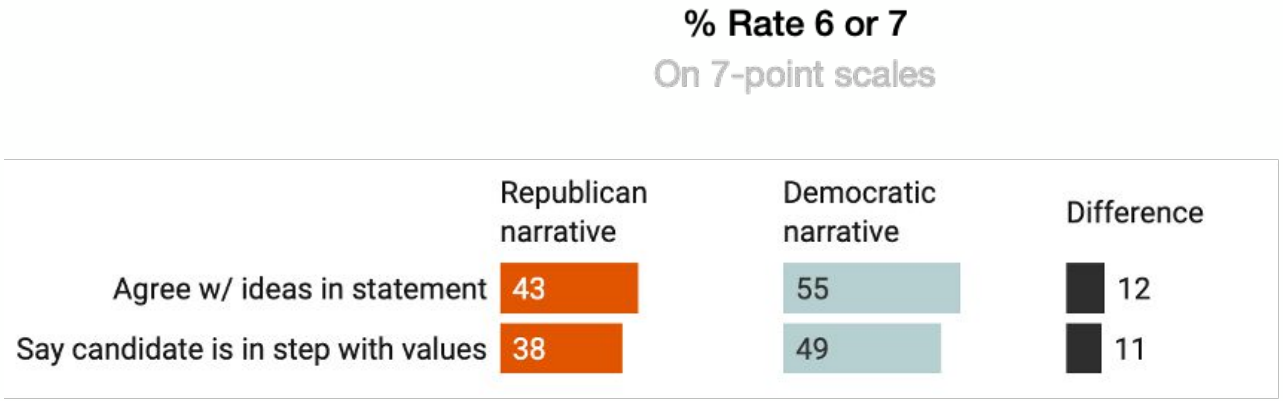
A positive, solutions-oriented message performs better when head-to-head against "scare tactics."



Vera ACTION

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

A positive, solutions-oriented message aligns with likely voters' values when head-to-head against "scare tactics."



Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Concrete solutions for addressing crime perform better when head-to-head against a more "law and order" message.

55%

agree, outperforming the GOP narrative by 10pp

Here's what we can do. In the short-term, **new breakthroughs in gun violence and crime prevention programs are showing major success now.** We need to fund and replicate these programs. Police have dangerous and hard jobs. Let's support police officers who put their lives on the line for us every day. Let's make sure our first responders get better training, **like how to de-escalate situations.** We also have to **stop the flood of illegal handguns and ghost guns that are coming into our communities**.

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

The solutions-oriented message performs better even when the messenger's political affiliation is clearly identified.

Next are two statements from two different candidates running for US House of Representatives. **Which do you agree with more, even if neither is quite right in your view?**

Candidate A: From the White House to liberal state and local governments, there has been a systemic failure to contain crime in America. It stems from the dangerous belief that enforcing the law is somehow morally wrong or even racist. It has paralyzed law enforcement agencies at all levels and created prosecutors who would rather let a dangerous criminal walk out of jail than enforce the law. Once again, Democrats have broken a part of our civil society, and once again it will be conservatives who will step up to piece it together. We've got to get back to law and order and being tough on crime.

45%

Candidate B: We've tried things like more patrols, militarized police, and incarcerating people for minor offenses. Look where we are: crime is rising, prisons are full, and the cycle is never broken, costing taxpayers billions every year. Some politicians want to throw money at things that haven't worked. I want to invest in promising new breakthroughs in gun violence prevention and crime intervention programs. I want to support police officers who put their lives on the line for us every day and I want to make sure they get better training, like how to de-escalate situations. I also want to fully fund things that are proven to create safe neighborhoods and prevent crime from happening in the first place - like good jobs, schools, and infrastructure.

55%

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Head-to-head response to “defund police” attacks

Which candidate do you agree with more?

Candidate A

The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions surrounding law enforcement. The Defund the Police movement is without a doubt one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation's history, and Democrats are responsible for it. 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.

Candidate B

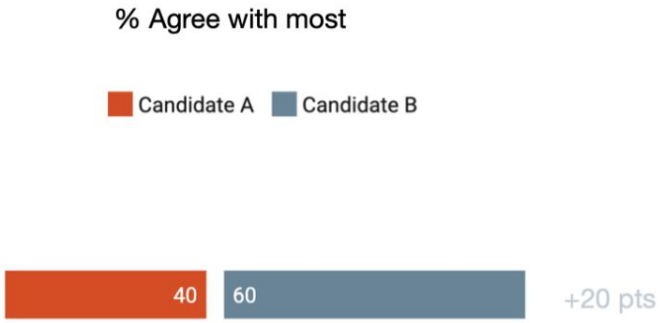
I'm not about scare tactics or slogans, and I'm not afraid to have an honest conversation. Remember when police officers were treated like doctors? When kids wanted to grow up to be them? Remember when police didn't have to carry every social problem on their back? We keep expecting the police to solve everything. We're spending $115 billion a year and putting too much on police departments. It's time to try out some promising new solutions to lift the burden. It's time for support and change, not blame. *Base n = 1,446*

I'm not about scare tactics or slogans, and I'm not afraid to have an honest conversation. We keep expecting police to solve every social problem, from kids skipping school to mental illness to homelessness to gun violence. No one profession can do that. We're spending $115 billion a year and putting too much on police departments. It's time to try out some promising new solutions to lift the burden. It's time for support and change, not blame. *Base n = 1,430*

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Overall, there's little difference between the two responses.

I'm not about scare tactics or slogans, and I'm not afraid to have an honest conversation. Remember when police officers were treated like doctors? When kids wanted to grow up to be them? Remember when police didn't have to carry every social problem on their back? We keep expecting the police to solve everything. We're spending $115 billion a year and putting too much on police departments. It's time to try out some promising new solutions to lift the burden. It's time for support and change, not blame. *Base n = 1,446*



I'm not about scare tactics or slogans, and I'm not afraid to have an honest conversation. We keep expecting police to solve every social problem, from kids skipping school to mental illness to homelessness to gun violence. No one profession can do that. We're spending $115 billion a year and putting too much on police departments. It's time to try out some promising new solutions to lift the burden. It's time for support and change, not blame. *Base n = 1,430*

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Head-to-head response to attacks for supporting bail reform

Which statement do you think is most convincing?

Statement A

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.

Statement B *split samples*

Cash bail actually makes us less safe. When someone with minor offenses is kept in jail for months or 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. *Base n = 965*

This country has two systems of justice -- one for the rich, one for the poor. If you're wealthy, you go free and you're innocent until proven guilty. But if you're poor, you stay in jail. Bail reform and reducing the use of cash bail means that public safety, not wealth, determines who is released pending trial. *Base n = 965*

It is costing taxpayers millions of dollars to keep people accused of minor offenses in jail just because they cannot afford bail – that is money we can better spend fighting and preventing crime. *Base n = 946*

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

The first response performs best overall—winning by a margin of 37 points.

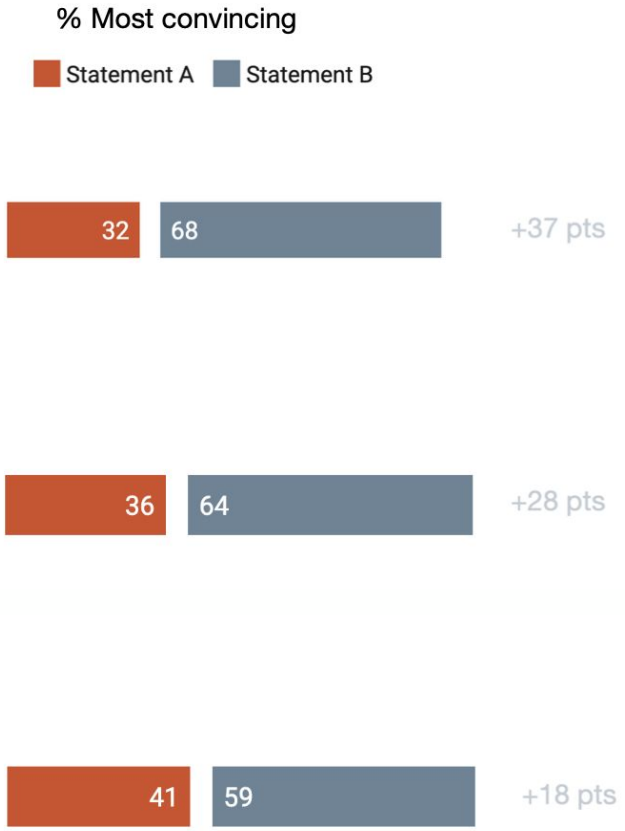
The message is also successful across many key segments.

The “two systems of justice” response works best among 18–to–34–year–olds and AAPI voters.

Cash bail actually makes us less safe. When someone with minor offenses is kept in jail for months or 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. *Base n = 965*

This country has two systems of justice -- one for the rich, one for the poor. If you're wealthy, you go free and you’re innocent until proven guilty. But if you're poor, you stay in jail. Bail reform and reducing the use of cash bail means that public safety, not wealth, determines who is released pending trial. *Base n = 965*

It is costing taxpayers millions of dollars to keep people accused of minor offenses in jail just because they cannot afford bail – that is money we can better spend fighting and preventing crime. *Base n = 946*



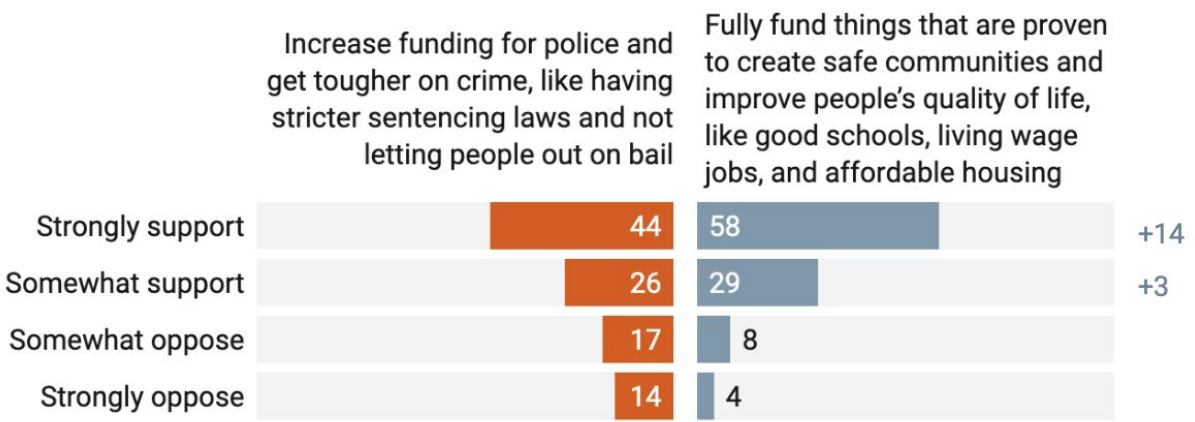
Vera ACTION

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Some lessons and takeaways

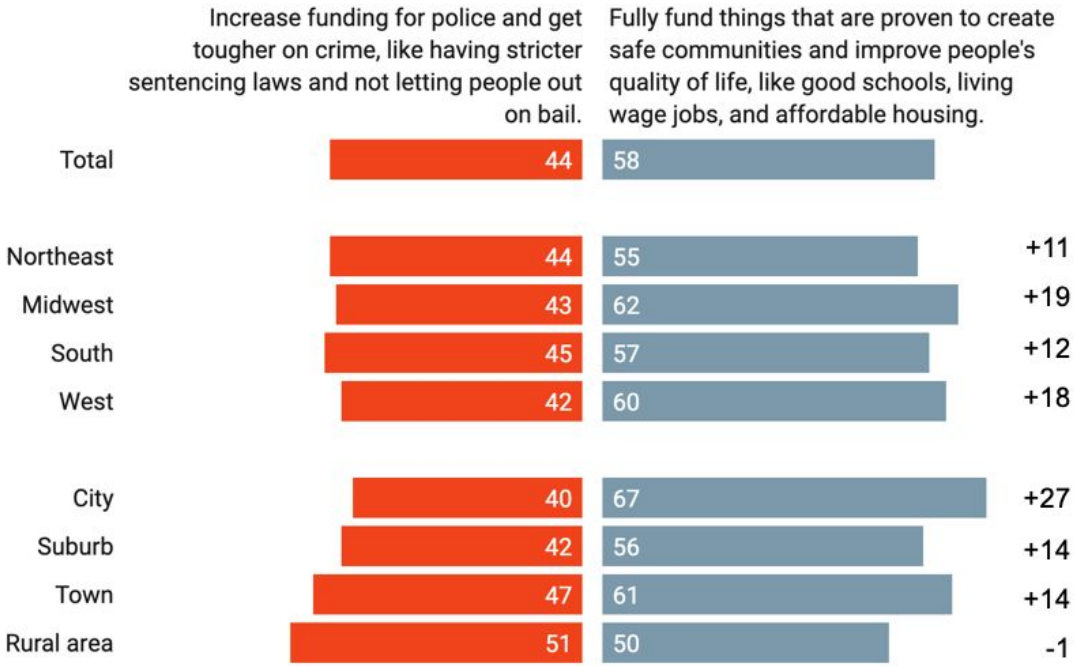
The big takeaway: voters overall support a more expansive approach to public safety than traditional "tough on crime."

Here are two ways we could work on crime. First, would you support or oppose this way:



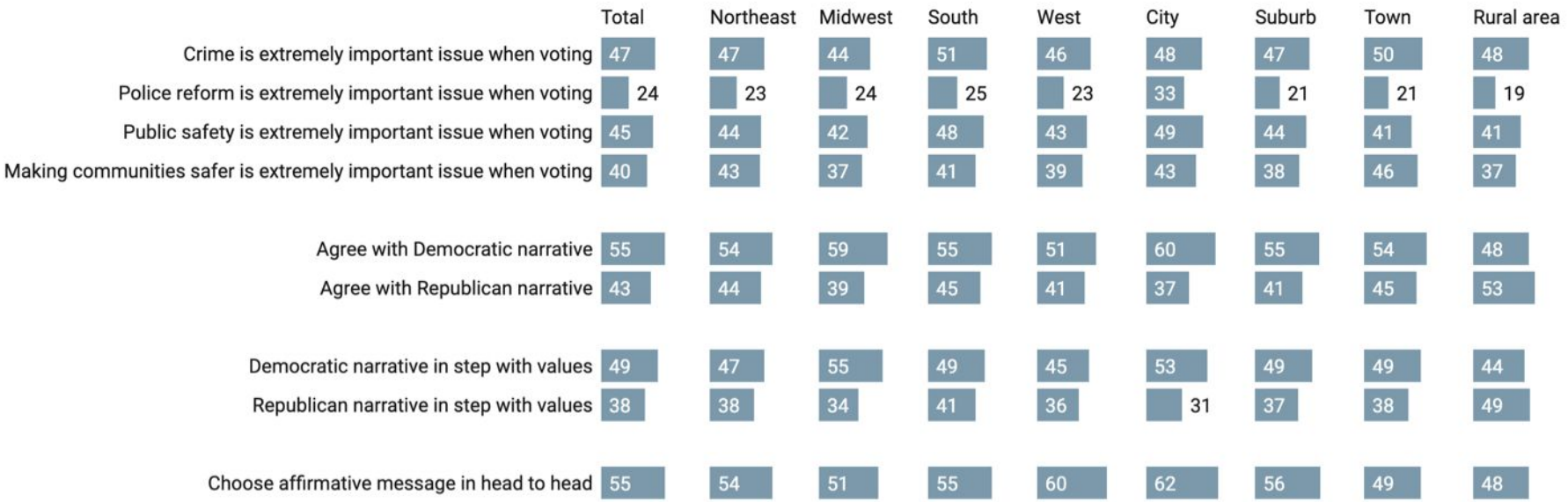
Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Likely voters across all regions support a more expansive approach to public safety, although less so in rural areas.



Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

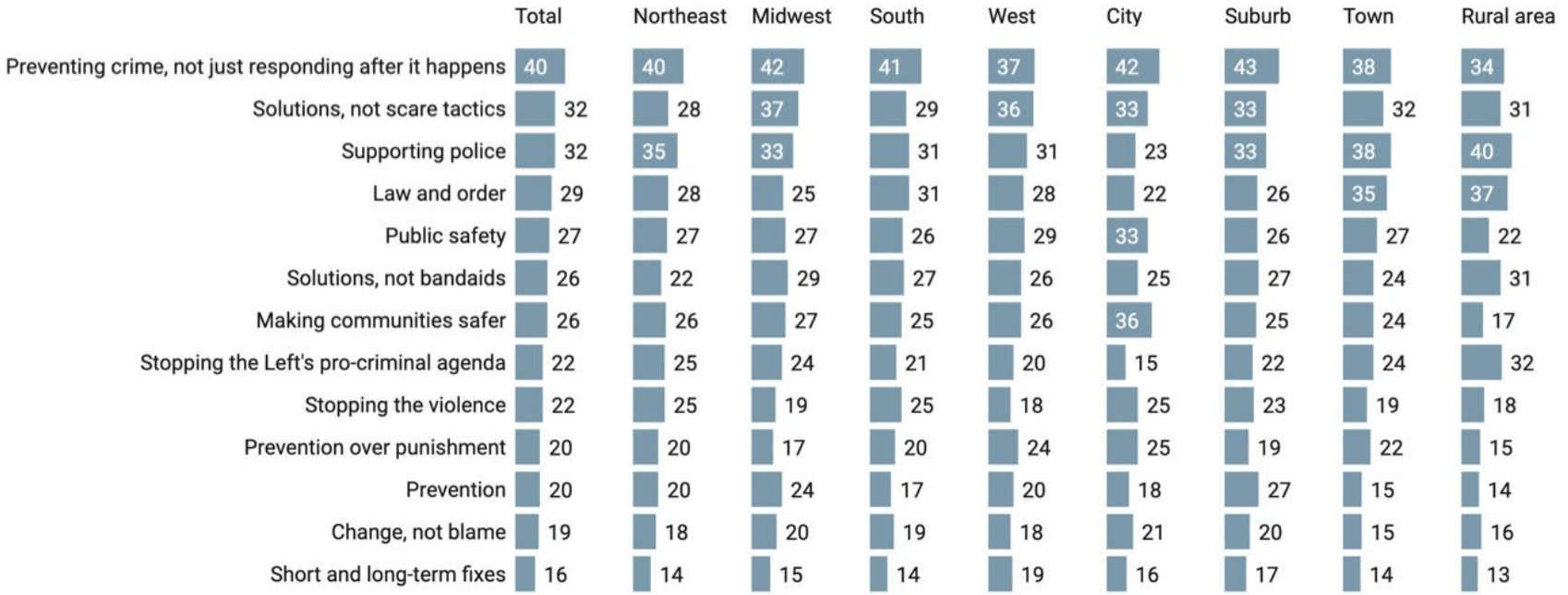
In every region, including the south, a reform-oriented "solutions" narrative outperforms a "scare tactics" one.



Vera ACTION

Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

In rural areas, a messaging frame should include support for police *and* an emphasis on "solutions, not scare tactics."



Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

Guidance for messaging effectively about public safety and justice in this political moment

Key components of an effective frame for public safety

1. **Say you're engaging in an honest conversation** by acknowledging everyone deserves to be safe. Then lead with a vision for tackling crime and increasing public safety.

2. **Begin with catch phrases that have emotional resonance** such as, "We prevent crime in the first place, we don't just react after" and "We are here for solutions, not scare tactics."

3. Most likely voters view the police favorably but also support accountability. An effective messaging frame is to **lead with saying you support the police to do the jobs they're tasked to do effectively *and* to be held accountable when they abuse their power or use excessive force.** Depending on local politics, support for police can equal better training and oversight, not simply more funding.

4. Community-based solutions are as popular (and in some places, more) with likely voters as funding for police. **Highlight those solutions** – community violence intervention, mental health first responders, affordable housing for justice-involved individuals, and treatment – as part of an expansive approach to making communities safe. Offer examples of where they work.

5. Support for most justice reform policies remains high, so **remind audiences that we can have both safety *and* justice** if attacked by opponents as "soft on crime" for championing reform.

For questions, please contact:

Insha Rahman, irahman@vera.org
Vice President of Advocacy & Partnerships and Vera Action