Winning the Narrative on Safety, Accountability, and Justice:

Leading with solutions, not scare tactics

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What do we mean by "scare tactics" on crime? The following video is a classic example of this rhetoric.

Many find this rhetoric effective because it taps into a fundamental emotion around safety—which is fear.

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Here is a different approach to talking about crime and safety—one that is based on hope, optimism, and solutions.

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GOVERNOR
KATHY HOCHUL

Weaponizing fears about safety is a familiar playbook. Yet conventional wisdom on how people react to messages about crime is wrong.

When comparing the two messaging approaches head-to-head, solutions outperform the scare tactics.

% Agree with more

■ Statement A ■ Statement B

Statement A	Statement B
Democrats' pro-criminal, anti-police agenda has created prosecutors who would rather let a dangerous criminal walk out of jail than enforce the law. And their insistence on eliminating cash bail has led to a revolving-door criminal justice system where offenders—even violent offenders—are released back to the streets where police officers are discouraged from making arrests. Democrats want to defund police and create chaos across the U.S. and we need to vote them out to keep us safe	A safe walk home at night. A bus ride free of fear. A safer state for every child. That's what I'm working for. I want to pass a comprehensive crime plan to make it happen. My plan goes after illegal guns to make our neighborhoods safer, increases street lighting, partners with law enforcement to build trust with the community, and gets help for the homeless and those suffering with mental illness. You deserve to feel safe, and I won't stop working until you do. *Base n = 680*

43	57	+15 pts

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A majority of voters support reforms that prevent crime and invest in making communities safe. Yet they often have low confidence in how elected leaders who champion those solutions handle issues of crime and safety.

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That confidence gap can be overcome by *owning* the issue of safety, accountability, and justice and making it known at every turn that you stand for all three— it's not one or the other.

Vera Action was founded in 2020 as the sister 501(c)(4) to the Vera Institute of Justice, which has fought since 1961 to end mass incarceration, protect immigrants' rights, restore dignity behind bars, and build safe and thriving communities.

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Public opinion research and surveys referenced in this deck

Vera Action conducted five rounds of research to understand what matters about safety, accountability, and justice to audiences across the political spectrum, including Democrats, Independents, and Republicans:

- *Round 1:* qualitative research in late fall 2021 of 100 "moveable middle" likely voters and tested messages in Swayable in January 2022 with over 10,500 respondents nationally.

- *Round 2:* national quantitative poll in June 2022 of almost 4,000 likely voters, with oversampling in 11 battleground states.

- *Round 3:* national online exit survey on election night of 1,800 actual voters and a second post-election quantitative survey of 2,100 actual midterm voters in 7 battleground states (AZ, FL, GA, MI, NC, PA, WI).

- *Round 4:* updated national survey in April 2023 of 2,800 registered voters, oversampling Black, Latino/a, and AAPI voters on inoculation messages.

- *Round 5:* exit surveys of actual voters in the Chicago mayoral runoff (April 2023), and the Philadelphia mayoral primary race (May 2023).

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What are the most important lessons to keep in mind for a winning message on safety, accountability, and justice?

LESSON 1.
Communities want to <u>hear</u> your solutions for preventing crime, delivering safety, and promoting justice. Silence is deadly.

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What hurts leaders on crime and safety is silence—owning the issue helps you overcome the confidence gap.

What do you want to hear from elected leaders about crime and safety?

- Their plan to make communities safer (86%)

- How to prevent crime, not just respond to it after it happens (86%)

- How they'll listen and work across the community, including across party lines, toward a common goal (84%)

- How to solve root causes and what drives crime (82%)

- New promising breakthroughs in crime (82%)

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LESSON 2.
Communities do not think the status quo approach to crime and safety is working–and they are eager for new solutions.

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Solutions that proactively address the causes of crime are seen as more effective than "tough on crime" measures.

More likely to be seen as effective:

- Working across party lines toward a common goal of safe communities (63%)

- Increasing access to mental health care (61%)

- Building trust between police and the community (61%)

- Making sure public safety, not wealth, determines who stays in jail pending trial (57%)

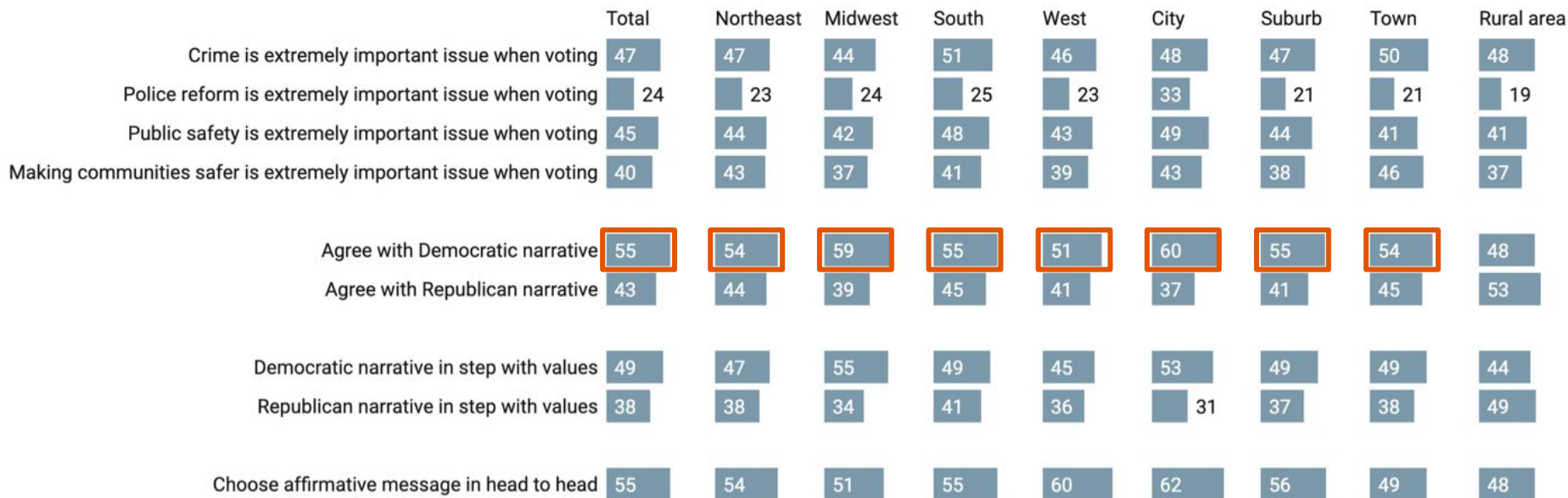- Addressing underlying economic conditions (56%)

Less likely to be seen as effective:

- Harsher sentences and mandatory minimums to keep people in prison (38%)

- Putting 100,000 more police on the ground to improve safety (43%)

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LESSON 3.

Across the geographic and political spectrum, communities favor a solutions-oriented approach to safety.

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Support for a solutions approach to safety outperforms "tough on crime" across the board—except in rural areas.

	Total	Northeast	Midwest	South	West	City	Suburb	Town	Rural area
Crime is extremely important issue when voting	47	47	44	51	46	48	47	50	48
Police reform is extremely important issue when voting	24	23	24	25	23	33	21	21	19
Public safety is extremely important issue when voting	45	44	42	48	43	49	44	41	41
Making communities safer is extremely important issue when voting	40	43	37	41	39	43	38	46	37
Agree with Democratic narrative	55	54	59	55	51	60	55	54	48
Agree with Republican narrative	43	44	39	45	41	37	41	45	53
Democratic narrative in step with values	49	47	55	49	45	53	49	49	44
Republican narrative in step with values	38	38	34	41	36	31	37	38	49
Choose affirmative message in head to head	55	54	51	55	60	62	56	49	48

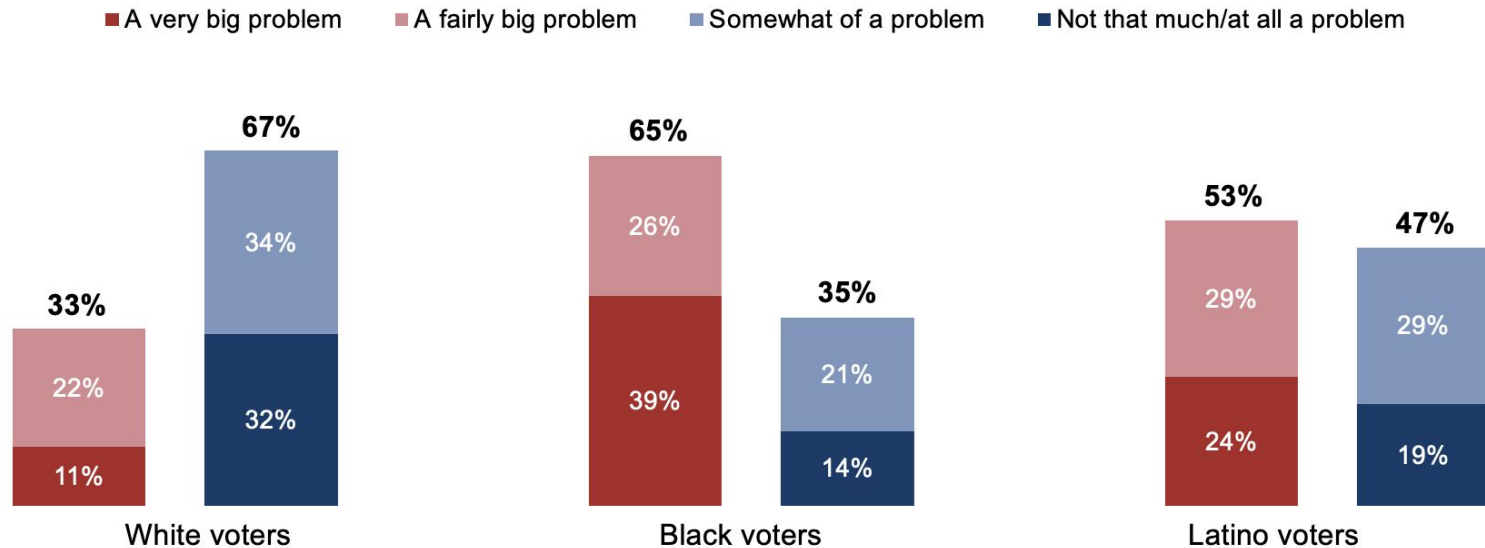Source: Perry Undem and Hart Research Associates poll commissioned by Vera Action

What does a strong, affirmative vision for safety, accountability, and justice look like?

STEP 1.
Lead with safety and make it clear that communities don't have to choose between safety *or* justice–we can have both.

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Preventing crime and delivering safety is a priority for everyone, but especially for Black communities.

How big a problem is crime *where you live*?

- ■ A very big problem
- ■ A fairly big problem
- ■ Somewhat of a problem
- ■ Not that much/at all a problem

White voters

- 33%
  - 22%
  - 11%
- 67%
  - 34%
  - 32%

Black voters

- 65%
  - 26%
  - 39%
- 35%
  - 21%
  - 14%

Latino voters

- 53%
  - 29%
  - 24%
- 47%
  - 29%
  - 19%

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Despite high levels of worry about crime, communities favor solutions over more "tough on crime."

Which approach to public safety would you be more likely to support?

Tough on crime: Doing more to get tough on crime, like having stricter sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep potentially dangerous people in jail, and giving police more support and resources.

Crime Prevention: Fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities and improve people's quality of life, like good schools, a living wage, and affordable housing, and do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and cracking down on illegal gun sales.

% More likely to support

	Tough on crime %	Crime prevention %
All Voters	47	53
White Voters	51	49
Black Voters	36	64
Latino Voters	40	60
Democrats	24	76
Independents	48	52
Republicans	69	31
Urban	45	55
Suburban	46	54
Rural	52	48
18 to 34	34	66
35 to 49	43	57
50 to 64	53	47
65+	54	46

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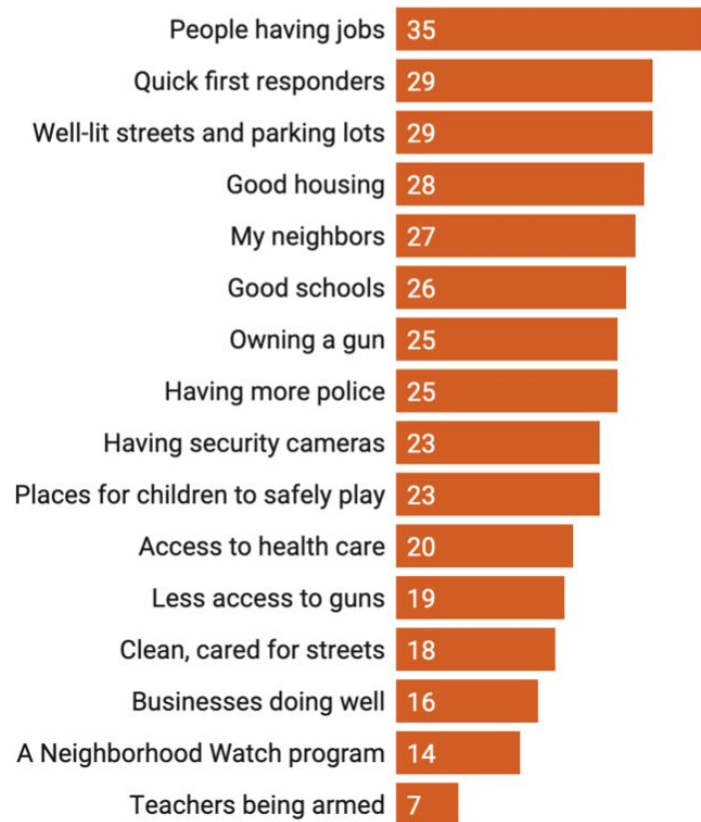
STEP 2.
Affirmatively own the issue so that <u>you</u> define your vision for safe communities– not your opponent.

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Respondents identify a range of factors that contribute to stability and neighborhood safety.

Think about being safe in your own neighborhood and community.

What factors make you feel safe?

Choose the top 3 or 4 for you.

Factor	Value
People having jobs	35
Quick first responders	29
Well-lit streets and parking lots	29
Good housing	28
My neighbors	27
Good schools	26
Owning a gun	25
Having more police	25
Having security cameras	23
Places for children to safely play	23
Access to health care	20
Less access to guns	19
Clean, cared for streets	18
Businesses doing well	16
A Neighborhood Watch program	14
Teachers being armed	7

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SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED 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.

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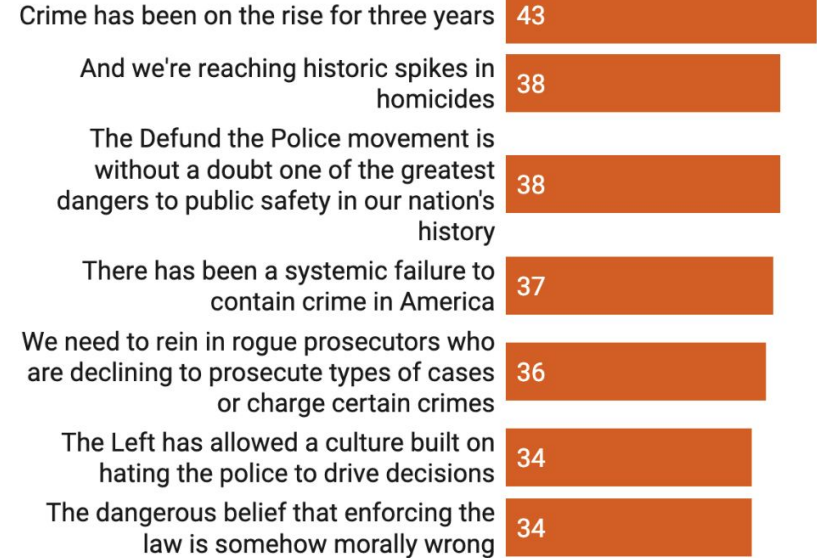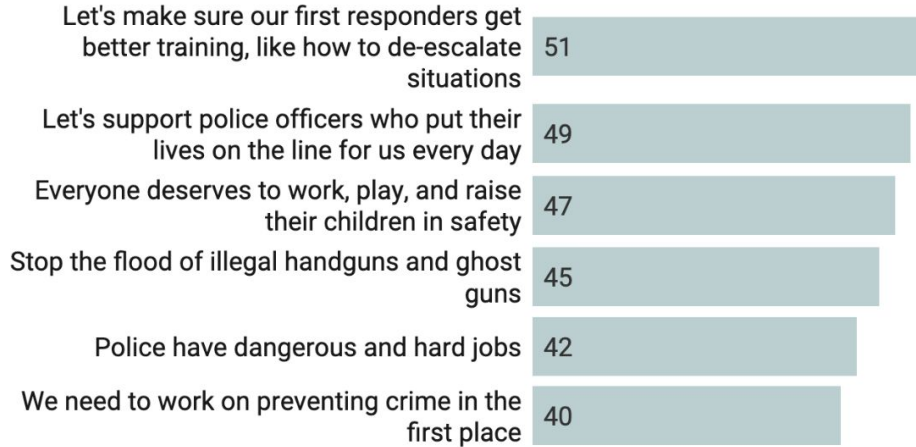
The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions surrounding law enforcement. The Defund the Police movement is without a doubt one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation's history, and Democrats are responsible for it. We need to stop subsidizing the Left's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

A positive, solutions-oriented message outperforms the opposition's "scare tactics" when compared head-to-head.

% Agreed with most
(Text highlight exercise)

Statement	%
Let's make sure our first responders get better training, like how to de-escalate situations	51
Let's support police officers who put their lives on the line for us every day	49
Everyone deserves to work, play, and raise their children in safety	47
Stop the flood of illegal handguns and ghost guns	45
Police have dangerous and hard jobs	42
We need to work on preventing crime in the first place	40

Statement	%
Crime has been on the rise for three years	43
And we're reaching historic spikes in homicides	38
The Defund the Police movement is without a doubt one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation's history	38
There has been a systemic failure to contain crime in America	37
We need to rein in rogue prosecutors who are declining to prosecute types of cases or charge certain crimes	36
The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions	34
The dangerous belief that enforcing the law is somehow morally wrong	34

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STEP 3.
Even when attacked for being soft on crime, say you're here for "solutions, not scare tactics" and stick with this message.

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"A safe walk home at night. A subway ride free of fear. A safer New York for every child. That's what Kathy Hochul is working for as governor, and she passed a comprehensive crime plan to make it happen..."

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Head-to-head, a solutions-oriented message outperforms the scare tactics *and* the "tough on crime" response.

% Agree with more

■ Statement A ■ Statement B

Democrats' pro-criminal, anti-police agenda has created prosecutors who would rather let a dangerous criminal walk out of jail than enforce the law. And their insistence on eliminating cash bail has led to a revolving-door criminal justice system where offenders—even violent offenders—are released back to the streets where police officers are discouraged from making arrests. Democrats want to defund police and create chaos across the U.S. and we need to vote them out to keep us safe

A safe walk home at night. A bus ride free of fear. A safer state for every child. That's what I'm working for. I want to pass a comprehensive crime plan to make it happen. My plan goes after illegal guns to make our neighborhoods safer, increases street lighting, partners with law enforcement to build trust with the community, and gets help for the homeless and those suffering with mental illness. You deserve to feel safe, and I won't stop working until you do. *Base n = 680*

| 43 | 57 | +15 pts |

Too many in my party thought it was okay not to talk about the growing violent crime problem in our community. They focused only on defunding the police. From day one, we needed to rush in more police. Get criminals into jail. There are less than 5 members in the U.S. House who are for defunding the police. They are extreme and aren't listening to the voters. But, the rest of us are. Our plan will add 100,000 more police on the ground. *Base n = 710*

| 44 | 56 | +11 pts |

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STEP 4.
Lean into concrete examples of solutions that prevent crime in the first place, and don't just react in the aftermath.

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While accountability matters, improving treatment, economic opportunity, and addressing homelessness matter too.

Combined top two most important issues for a candidate to address when it comes to crime, violence, and public safety

	All Voters		DEM %	IND %	GOP %
Their plans for making sure people convicted of violent crimes are held accountable for them		41%	24	40	58
Their plans for ensuring police have the support, training, and resources they need to protect the public's safety		40%	23	41	55
Their plans for reducing gun violence and stopping the flow of illegal guns		37%	56	37	20
Their plans for reducing crime by improving mental health and drug treatment services		29%	32	25	28
Their plans for reducing crime by increasing economic opportunities in communities that lack them		20%	26	24	13
Their plans for dealing with abuses of power and racism in policing		16%	24	19	9
Their plans for reducing homelessness so fewer people are living on the streets		16%	16	15	16

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Source: Hart Research Associates exit survey commissioned by Vera Action

STEP 5.
Talk about the role of police–both the job we expect them to do *and* the need for accountability if they abuse their power and break the law.

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Support for police is strong, but so is support for accountability.

89% agree

59% strongly

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.

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A solutions-oriented message even inoculates against and outperforms a scare tactic "defund" attack.

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: 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.
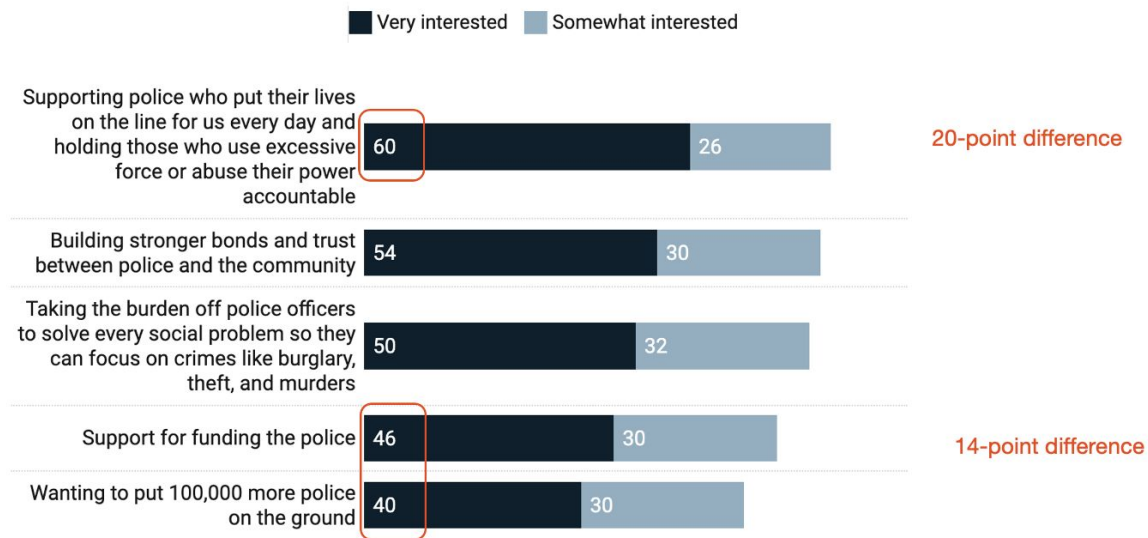
42%

Candidate B: 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.

58%

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A message of supporting police *and* holding them accountable is the strongest—20 points better than just adding more police.

When it comes to police, how interested would you have been in hearing elected leaders talk about…

Legend: ■ Very interested ■ Somewhat interested

Statement	Very interested	Somewhat interested	
Supporting police who put their lives on the line for us every day and holding those who use excessive force or abuse their power accountable	60	26	20-point difference
Building stronger bonds and trust between police and the community	54	30	
Taking the burden off police officers to solve every social problem so they can focus on crimes like burglary, theft, and murders	50	32	
Support for funding the police	46	30	14-point difference
Wanting to put 100,000 more police on the ground	40	30	

How do we tie this together as a unified, clear message that every elected leader can own?

The right messaging frame for safety, accountability, and justice

1. **Lead with the shared value of safety.**
   Acknowledge the importance of safety for everyone and say that we deserve an honest conversation about solutions, not scare tactics, to make communities safe.

2. **The villain is the "tough on crime" status quo.**
   Across the political spectrum, people do not believe the current approach to crime and safety is working. If it were, we would be the safest country in the world.

3. **Pivot to solutions.**
   The public strongly supports more investment in community-based solutions for safety and many policy proposals for justice reform. Highlight these changes as part of a comprehensive approach to crime-fighting and making communities safe.
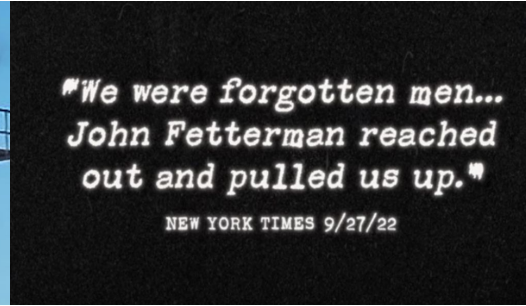
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How do we know this message works?

Republicans spent over $10 million on ads depicting Fetterman as a far-left softy—but his record suggests otherwise.

FETTERMAN = POVERTY AND CRIME

"We were forgotten men... John Fetterman reached out and pulled us up."

NEW YORK TIMES 9/27/22

POLITICS   LAW ENFORCEMENT   PENNSYLVANIA   MEHMET OZ

John Fetterman Enlists Local Sheriff For TV Ad Rebutting Soft-On-Crime Charge

"John Fetterman has the courage to do what's right," the suburban Philadelphia sheriff says of the Democrat. "Dr. Oz doesn't know a thing about crime."

By Daniel Marans

SEAN KILKENNY

SHERIFF
MONTGOMERY COUNTY, PA

Exit polls show who voted for Fetterman, Oz in US Senate race

- 37% said abortion was the issue that mattered most in deciding how they voted. Of those voters, 78% voted for Fetterman and 21% voted for Oz.

- 28% said inflation was the most important issue. Of those voters, 27% chose Fetterman and 72% chose Oz.

- 11% said crime was the most important. Of those voters, 51% voted for Fetterman and 49% voted for Oz.

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