Ten Takeaways on How Crime Impacts Elections

Everyone, regardless of how they vote, wants to be safe. Since 2020, a nationwide increase in shootings, homicides, and other offenses, coupled with high-profile debate over criminal justice reform in the wake of George Floyd's murder, has made crime a prominent issue in each election cycle—including the 2022 midterms and this year's mayoral and district attorney races. Even as crime rates drop in 2023, safety remains a perennial kitchen table issue and a priority for voters.
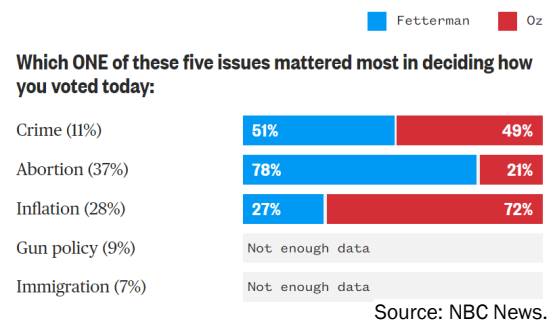
Although many politicians and pundits have painted this moment as a false choice between safety and justice—that you can have one or the other, but not both—voters are in fact rejecting "tough-on-crime" rhetoric for a more nuanced approach to safety. And candidates who demonstrate they understand these nuances are winning elections. Typically, candidates either ignore a "soft-on-crime" attack and pivot to a more favorable issue, or double down on "law-and-order" rhetoric that makes them sound indistinguishable from their opposition. But a new breed of candidates is listening to voters and *owning* the issue of safety with a strong, affirmative vision of solutions to prevent crime before it happens instead of the status quo approach of just reacting after.

In anticipation of this fall's general election season and the 2024 election cycle, Vera Action identified ten important takeaways about the impact of crime on recent elections—informed by several rounds of our public opinion research and polling, including a nationwide survey and a deep dive into seven battleground states immediately after the 2022 midterms, exit polls in this year's Chicago and Philadelphia mayoral races, and other relevant research on crime and safety.

## 1. Being serious about safety, not "tough on crime," wins elections.

Conventional political wisdom that being "tough on crime" prevails is simply wrong. Rather, in recent election cycles, it is the candidates seen as serious about safety who win. These candidates understand the importance of crime to voters, even if it is not a top voting priority, and acknowledge voter concerns by talking about safety early and often to stand out from the pack.

For example, crime was a high-profile issue in the 2022 U.S. Senate race in Pennsylvania, where Republicans spent over $10 million attacking now-Senator John Fetterman as "soft on crime." In the face of these attacks, Fetterman neither deflected nor resorted to his own version of "tough-on-crime" rhetoric. Instead, he owned the issue of safety with a strong, affirmative vision for how to prevent crime and reminded voters that safety *and* justice can co-exist. By the end of the race, Fetterman had countered the "soft-on-crime" attacks sufficiently to win, including with voters most concerned about safety. Of the 11 percent of Pennsylvania voters who said crime was their top voting issue in NBC's exit poll, 51 percent voted for Fetterman over Mehmet Oz.

Which ONE of these five issues mattered most in deciding how you voted today:

	Fetterman	Oz
Crime (11%)	51%	49%
Abortion (37%)	78%	21%
Inflation (28%)	27%	72%
Gun policy (9%)	Not enough data	
Immigration (7%)	Not enough data	

Source: NBC News.

Sometimes the candidate seen as the most serious about safety also occupies the "tough-on-crime" lane, as Eric Adams did in New York's 2021 mayoral race. No other candidate made crime the hallmark issue of their campaign as he did—and by doing so he tapped into a key priority for New Yorkers. In an Ipsos/NY1 poll

released a month before the primary, 46 percent of Democratic voters in New York City said crime/public safety was their top priority for the next mayor, more than 15 percentage points ahead of the economy or housing. Unsurprisingly, one-third of respondents ranked Eric Adams as the strongest candidate on crime. By effectively owning the safety lane more than any of his
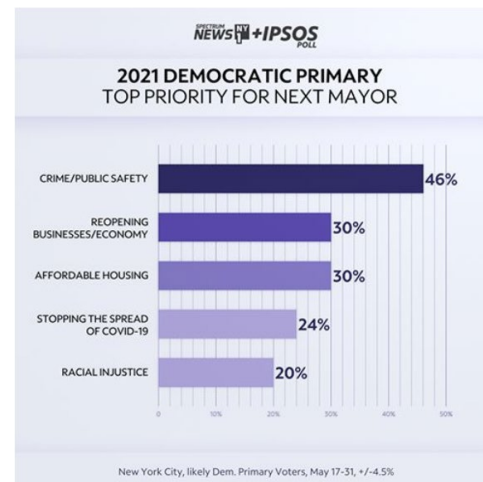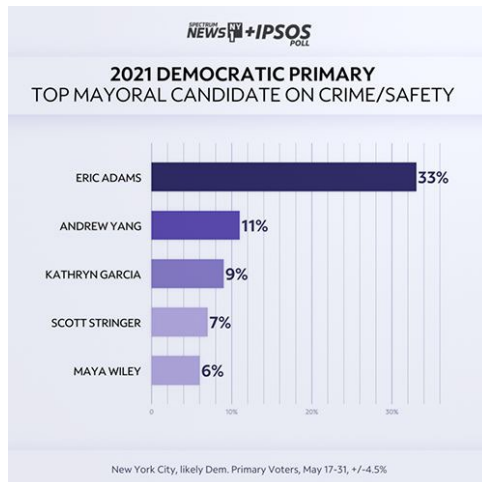
Source: NY1/Ipsos.

opponents, Adams won over the voters most affected by crime and gained a narrow margin in a crowded Democratic primary field where he ultimately won by only one percentage point.

Adams's razor-thin margin of victory in a low-turnout election and evidence from other races suggest that his win does not necessarily mean that New York City voters broadly support "tough-on-crime" policies, but rather that voters want candidates to directly address safety concerns. In the recent Philadelphia mayoral primary, our polling showed that on issues of crime, 62 percent of likely voters trusted the eventual winner Cherelle Parker, the more "law-and-order" candidate who made safety her hallmark issue, compared to 54 percent for Helen Gym, who ran on a more "prevention-first" platform. Yet despite Parker's strong association with voters as the safety candidate, when asked which approach to crime and safety they preferred (without candidate names attached), voters favored Gym's policy platform over Parker's by 12 percentage points (50 to 38 percent). Philadelphia voters, the polling indicates, were not looking for "tough-on-crime" policies, but they *were* looking for a candidate serious about safety like Parker.

2. When concerns about safety are acknowledged, voters prefer a "prevention-first" approach over "tough-on-crime" policies.

To win in elections where crime is a priority, candidates must first demonstrate that they are serious about safety. When that threshold is met, a clear trend emerges: if asked to choose between a "tough-on-crime" or "prevention-first" approach, a majority of voters choose prevention.

Democratic voters overwhelmingly support a "prevention-first" approach (76 percent), as do a majority of independent voters (52 percent). Notably, support for crime prevention is high among Black voters, who are twice as likely as white voters to say that crime is a big worry not just in general but specifically where they live.

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

Source: Hart Research Associates exit survey commissioned by Vera Action.

This same trend holds true in elections for mayor—a role voters strongly associate with responsibility for crime and safety, from appointing a police commissioner and articulating a public safety agenda to managing budget investments in crime-fighting measures. In Chicago's mayoral runoff this year, despite 80 percent of voters ranking crime as a top issue, our polling showed they viewed Brandon Johnson, with his "prevention-first" approach to safety, as nearly equally trustworthy in handling crime as his avowedly "law-and-order" opponent, Paul Vallas. When asked whose overall policy platform on crime and safety they agreed with most, voters favored Johnson to Vallas by 8 points (52 to 44 percent), and with names removed from the platforms Johnson's margin increased to 29 points (64 to 35). The 2022 Los Angeles mayoral race brought similar results. A poll released days before the election found that voters viewed Rick Caruso, a former Republican and self-funded candidate endorsed by the local police union, and Karen Bass, a longtime fixture of Democratic politics who ran on a more holistic approach to housing and safety, as roughly equally capable of handling homelessness and crime (within the poll's margin of error). Despite Caruso pumping $104 million into a race largely defined by his "law-and-order" approach and attacks on Bass as "soft on crime," Bass won by almost ten percentage points.
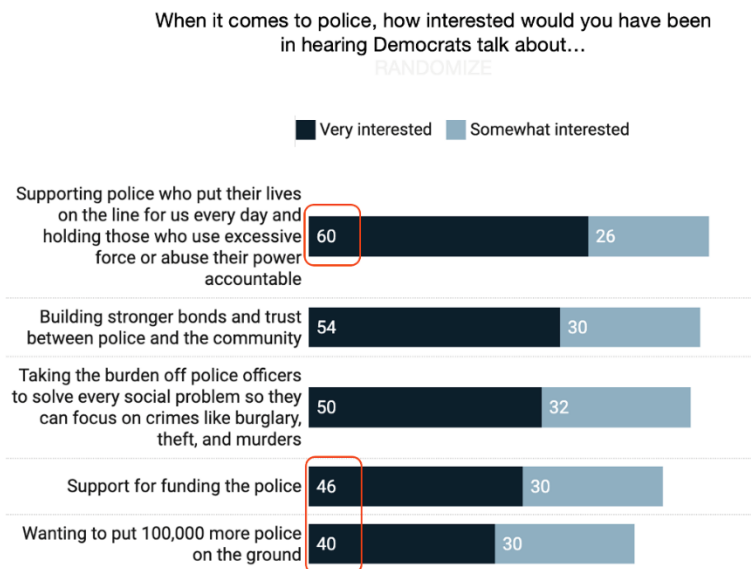
3. There is an emerging "new normal" for tackling crime: a comprehensive approach based in community-driven solutions for safety and accountability.

While conventional narratives tend to paint candidates as "progressive" reformers versus "tough-on-crime" proponents, there is an emerging "new normal" for how to win on crime and safety. In recent elections, virtually every competitive Democratic candidate has pitched a comprehensive, solutions-forward approach to safety that leverages strategies beyond police, courts, and incarceration.

There are, of course, notable differences between the crime-fighting priorities of moderate Democrats like Cherelle Parker and Eric Adams, both of whom emphasized hiring additional police officers and endorsed policies like "stop and frisk," versus those of Brandon Johnson, a progressive who placed much greater emphasis on civilian crisis response teams and mental health specialists as part of a holistic approach. However, both Parker and Adams have voiced support for police accountability, some form of alternative crisis response, and community violence intervention, among other crime-prevention programs. In other words, running only on a "tough-on-crime" platform is no longer a winning strategy. Even the stalwart campaign phrase "law and order" does not perform well with voters, especially Democrats and young voters, lagging behind phrases like "preventing crime before it happens instead of just reacting after."

This "new normal" of a comprehensive, solutions-based approach to preventing crime reflects what voters want, even on two of the thorniest issues—policing and accountability. On policing, voters prefer support with accountability to unconditional support. Voters most want to hear from Democrats about what they will do to support the police *and* hold them accountable when they break the law—more than they want to hear about police funding (by 14 percentage points) or hiring thousands more police officers (by 20 points).

Similarly, there is overwhelming support for a new approach to personal accountability. While voters want people who break the law to take responsibility for their actions, our research reveals that personal accountability

When it comes to police, how interested would you have been in hearing Democrats talk about...

RANDOMIZE

■ Very interested   ■ Somewhat interested

	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
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
Wanting to put 100,000 more police on the ground	40	30

Source: Perry Undem 2022 battleground exit survey commissioned by Vera Action.

does not equal more punishment in the minds of most voters across the political spectrum. When asked what they believe is the most effective approach to accountability, 96 percent agree, with 73 percent agreeing strongly, that accountability is acknowledging the harm done and making amends. In a head-to-head test of which message they agree with about consequences for committing a crime (see below left), a majority (62 percent) favor this approach compared to a more punitive approach. This message wins majority support (56 percent) even when our traditional response to breaking the law—incarceration—is removed (see below right).

Here are more details about two approaches for dealing with crime. Which would you want to see in the U.S.?

62%

An accountability approach focuses on people taking full responsibility for their behavior. This includes understanding the harm they've done, making amends, learning from their mistakes, and changing their behavior. Consequences can include incarceration, restitution to victims, community service, participation in treatment and programs, or other responsibilities. The goals are to repair the harm that was caused, learn from mistakes, and change behavior

38%

A punishment approach focuses on strict sentences and severe penalties for criminal behavior. This includes policies like mandatory minimum sentences and long prison sentences that keep criminals in prison. The goals are to punish those who break the law, to use the strict sentences to deter people from committing crime in the first place, and to keep people who are convicted of crimes in prison away from the community.

56%

An accountability approach focuses on people taking full responsibility for their behavior. This includes understanding the harm they've done, making amends, learning from their mistakes, and changing their behavior. Consequences can include ~~incarceration,~~ restitution to victims, community service, participation in treatment and programs, or other responsibilities. The goals are to repair the harm that was caused, learn from mistakes, and change behavior

44%

A punishment approach focuses on strict sentences and severe penalties for criminal behavior. This includes policies like mandatory minimum sentences and long prison sentences that keep criminals in prison. The goals are to punish those who break the law, to use the strict sentences to deter people from committing crime in the first place, and to keep people who are convicted of crimes in prison away from the community.

Source: Perry Undem survey commissioned by Vera Action (forthcoming).

This "new normal" has shaped candidate platforms across the Democratic political spectrum in many recent elections. In the recent Denver mayoral runoff, both the reform candidate *and* his police union-endorsed opponent adopted platforms that included a "comprehensive approach to community safety," including civilian response units and investments in housing, health care, education, and economic development. Even more traditionally "tough-on-crime" candidates have shifted their tone to include "prevention-first" policies and messages, as Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr. did when he was challenged from the left in 2019. (Zappala lost this year's Democratic primary to Matt Dugan, the county's chief public defender, and is now running as a Republican in the November general election.)

4. This "new normal" on safety is winning from Nebraska to Florida and all across the country.

Winning candidates promoting this "new normal" is not just a blue state or blue city trend. In Lincoln, Nebraska, where Republicans outnumber Democrats among registered voters, Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird won re-election despite relentless "soft-on-crime" attacks by her opponent, Suzanne Geist, who was endorsed by the local police union. Gaylor Baird's campaign responded by setting the record straight on crime trends and touting her plans for greater oversight, accountability, and transparency within the police department. Similarly, in Jacksonville, Florida, where 58.6 percent of voters in the county are registered as Republican or unaffiliated and 47 percent of voters ranked crime as their top issue in an April 2023 poll, Donna Deegan beat her Republican challenger with strong support from independent voters in a hotly contested race for mayor. Despite Republicans labeling her "Defund Donna" and running racially charged attack ads around crime, Deegan held her ground and responded with her own ad that said, "I support our police and have the plan to keep our neighborhoods safe and healthy."

Source (clockwise from top middle): *New York Times,* Daniel Davis Campaign, *Nebraska Examiner,* Suzanne Geist for Mayor.

The success of candidates promoting this "new normal," even in purple and red districts, was especially pronounced in recent prosecutorial races. District attorneys focused on reforming the office to deliver both safety *and* justice have won coast-to-coast, even after San Francisco voters recalled District Attorney Chesa Boudin in June 2022. In the second half of last year, 11 reform-minded prosecutors won election or re-election across the country:

- Steve Mulroy (Shelby County, TN)
- Kimberly Graham (Polk County, IA)
- Robert Galibois (Cape and Islands, MA)
- Vicki Behenna (Oklahoma County, OK)
- Kelly Higgins (Hays County, TX)
- Leesa Manion (King County, WA)

- Pamela Price (Alameda County, CA)
- Ryan Mears (Marion County, IN)
- Mary Moriarty (Hennepin County, MN)
- John Creuzot (Dallas County, TX)
- Joe Gonzales (Bexar County, TX)

This preponderance of results, and not Chesa Boudin's outlying recall, should be the lead in any story about the reform prosecutor movement. For example, in Shelby County (Memphis), Tennessee, law professor and reformer Steve Mulroy handily defeated longtime Republican incumbent, Amy Weirich, who said on the campaign trail that she "did not apologize for being tough on crime." In Polk County (Des Moines), Iowa, Kimberly Graham was elected county attorney on a platform of ending money bail for low-level offenses, declining to prosecute low-level cannabis possession, and addressing racial and economic disparities in the legal system. In Dallas County, Texas, Democratic incumbent District Attorney John Cruezot faced a well-funded Republican challenger in one of the year's highest-profile district attorney races—widely seen as a referendum on whether reform prosecutors can maintain voter support for policies that decriminalize poverty and mental illness once in office. Cruezot cruised to re-election, even as his policies to limit prosecution of low-level theft and cannabis offenses were fodder for "soft-on-crime" attacks on the campaign trail. Across the bay from San Francisco, in Alameda County (Oakland), California, Pamela Price, a civil rights attorney who ran for district attorney on a reform platform, emerged as the top candidate in a heated Democratic primary in the same election cycle in which Chesa Boudin was recalled from office.

5. The true "tough-on-crime" candidates, endorsed by police unions, are losing.

Another emerging trend in recent election cycles is the diminishing role of police unions and the power of their endorsements. In several major mayoral races, the police union-endorsed candidate has lost—including Andrew Yang in the 2021 New York City mayoral race; Paul Vallas in Chicago; and Daniel Davis, who called the Jacksonville, Florida, police union's support the "most coveted endorsement in the city." In Philadelphia, the police union-endorsed candidate, Jeff Brown, came in last place in a five-way race with less than ten percent of the vote. Results from Vera Action's recent exit polls in the Chicago and Philadelphia mayoral elections show that, although voters view the police and law enforcement overall favorably, they have a less positive opinion of police unions. Only 40 percent of Chicago voters said they viewed the local police union very or somewhat favorably, compared to 60 percent for the Chicago Police Department. Among Philadelphia voters, 50 percent viewed the Philadelphia Police Department favorably, compared to only 34 percent for the Philadelphia Fraternal Order of Police.
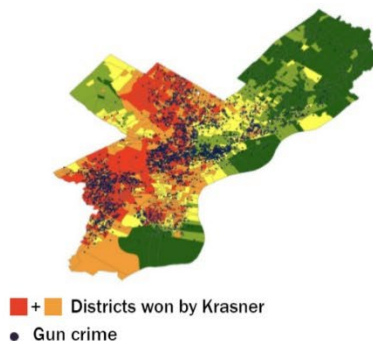
6. The voters most concerned about safety can make or break a race.

Many of the races profiled above were decided on the margins, like Eric Adams's one point victory in a crowded mayoral primary. And the winning candidates in these races share a common trait: they led with a strong, affirmative message on safety and conveyed it to the voters who care most about crime. In other words, they acknowledged voters' worries about safety and made them feel heard.
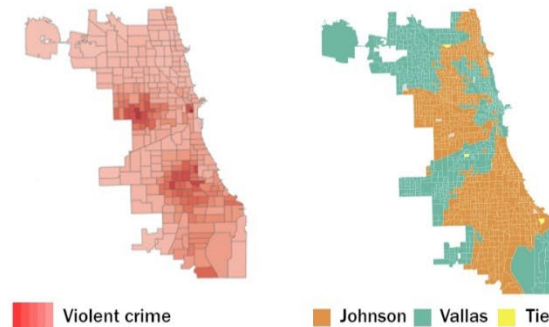
This approach bears out particularly with Black voters. In our polling, Black respondents were more likely than any other demographic to rank crime where they live as a big problem *and* were also most supportive of a "prevention-first" approach to safety. However, the key for candidates is that being serious about safety is a prerequisite to winning over safety-concerned voters. This dynamic explains the victories of candidates as relatively diverse in their politics as Brandon Johnson, Karen Bass, Cherelle Parker, and Eric Adams. They all made safety a major campaign issue and won with strong support from Black voters.

This phenomenon explains how Philadelphia can show strong support for candidates as seemingly different as moderate Cherelle Parker and reform-minded District Attorney Larry Krasner, who won reelection in 2021. What unites Parker and Krasner is not a shared position on crime and public safety, but that both are seen by Philadelphia voters—especially Black voters—as being serious about safety and speaking to concerns about crime. In the days before the Democratic mayoral primary, our polling showed that voters viewed *both* Parker and Krasner favorably—ahead of the city police department (by 7 and 10 points respectively) and police union (by 26 and 23 points). The same dynamics held true in Chicago, where voters most affected by crime turned out in high numbers to elect Brandon Johnson.

Source: Twitter, John Pfaff (Philadelphia) and Jake Sheridan (Chicago).

The maps above tell a clear story. On the left, a map of Philadelphia shows the correlation between gun crime and districts won by Larry Krasner. On the right, two maps of Chicago show a similar pattern, with violent crime closely mapping onto districts won by Brandon Johnson. In both Philadelphia and Chicago, local polling found that crime, especially gun violence, was voters' top public safety priority. By sharing a similar tack of listening to the voters most affected by this issue, Krasner and Johnson won their races.

7. "Soft-on-crime" attacks are only potent if left unmet.

During recent elections, candidates attacked as "soft on crime" often responded by pivoting to another issue that felt more "winnable." For example, until October 2022 polls showed a much tighter race than expected, New York Governor Kathy Hochul mostly ignored the issue of crime on the campaign trail, even as her Republican challenger, Lee Zeldin, made bail reform and increased crime in New York City the centerpiece of his effort to unseat her. When crime came up, Hochul generally pivoted to talking about the right to abortion and the need to defeat Trump. Leaving the attack hanging sows doubt and undermines voter confidence in the candidate's ability to handle the issue.

Another frequent response from Democrats to "soft-on-crime" attacks in 2022 was to launch a counter-offensive by pointing out inconsistencies in their opponents' support for law enforcement, such as Republican support for "defunding the FBI" or the January 6 insurrection that left several police officers dead. In the Wisconsin U.S. Senate race, incumbent Republican Ron Johnson painted Democrat Mandela Barnes as the "defund candidate" and attacked him for his support of criminal justice reform. Democrats responded by running an ad blasting Johnson for calling the January 6 attack on the Capitol a "peaceful protest." Even though this strategy responds to the attack with a counter-offensive, it fails because it still leaves the "soft-on-crime" attack unmet. It does not address what voters really want to hear: solutions to address issues of crime and safety in *their own* communities. Barnes lost by just 1 percent as a Black Democrat in a state Donald Trump won in 2016, but he lost by more than 20 percentage points among the 13 percent of Wisconsin voters who said crime was the most important issue to their vote.

Our messaging research has found that by meeting a "soft-on-crime" attack with a consistent message about preventing crime before it happens instead of just reacting after, politicians can inoculate against and neutralize the potency of these attacks. This finding speaks to a bigger issue on the campaign trail: the opportunity gap on safety messaging. Polling shows that voters are not satisfied with how *either* party handles crime—but our research indicates that Republicans have an edge simply because they talk about it more often than Democrats. Some have pointed to the $157 million that Republicans spent during the 2022 election cycle on crime ads, which by and large failed to sway voters, as evidence that crime is less of a motivating issue than assumed. However, that is the wrong takeaway from a unique election cycle. Without the Supreme Court's decision on abortion, Democrats likely would have suffered at the polls as a result of "soft-on-crime" attacks. Still, it is not too late for candidates to learn that the conventional wisdom of responding to "soft-on-crime" attacks with more "tough-on-crime" rhetoric is wrong. If candidates of any political persuasion approach the issue with a strong, affirmative vision for crime and safety, they can win.

Few candidates know this better than John Fetterman, who neutralized safety-related attacks from the beginning. He owned the issue and ran on his record, including his role in granting clemency as lieutenant governor, and he released memorable campaign ads featuring trusted messengers and stories about safety and justice. One ad featured a sheriff who declared, "I'm sick of Oz talking about John Fetterman and crime. Here's the truth: John gave a second chance to those who deserved it." When Fetterman was attacked for supporting criminal justice reform, his campaign released another ad featuring two formerly incarcerated brothers whom he assisted in their bid for clemency.

FETTERMAN GAVE A
SECOND CHANCE
TO THOSE WHO DESERVED IT.
John gave a second chance, to those who deserved it.

Source: John Fetterman campaign.

Another strong example of neutralizing "soft-on-crime" attacks took place in Illinois, where legislators passed bail reform in 2021 and have weathered feverish backlash ever since, including $40 million spent attacking incumbent legislators for being "soft on crime" during the 2022 midterm cycle. Instead of changing the subject or retracting their support for bail reform, Illinois Democrats on the campaign trail—from Governor Pritzker to local incumbents—defended the new law, talking about the need to make sure public safety, not wealth, determines who is released or remains in jail pending trial. Every incumbent Democrat in Illinois sailed to re-election on November 8. Moreover, a November post-election public opinion poll found that 60 percent of Illinoisans maintained a favorable or neutral view of bail reform despite the incessant attacks and fearmongering.
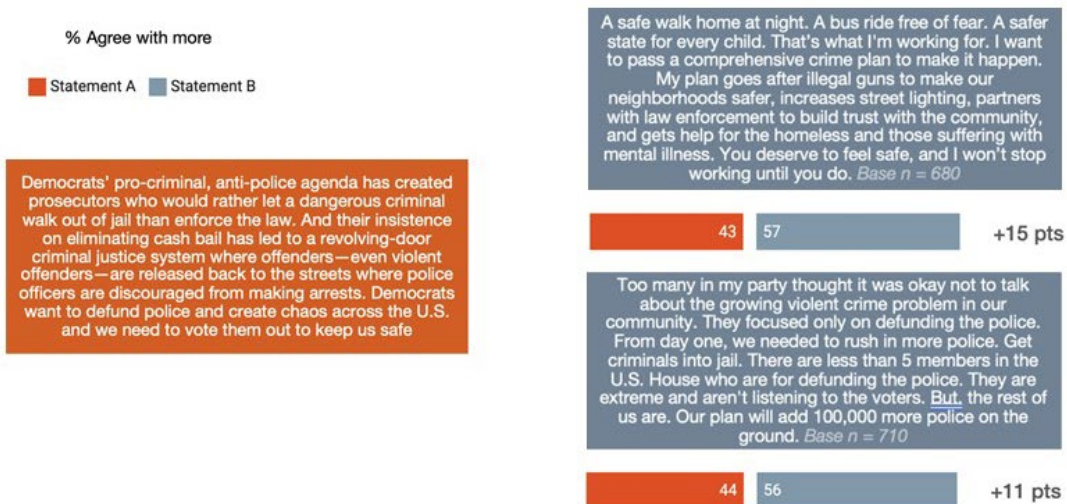
8. Candidates lose ground when they talk about safety too little or too late.

Kathy Hochul's narrow win over Lee Zeldin was not for lack of funding or the opportunity to shape a different narrative on crime and safety. After Labor Day, the Hochul campaign spent $1.5 million a week running ads attacking Lee Zeldin as a "MAGA Republican" who opposed abortion rights and underscoring his close ties to Donald Trump. While abortion and democracy were priority issues to Democratic voters nationally, they were less important in New York. Weeks before the election, polling found that crime, not abortion or threats to democracy, mattered more to New Yorkers.

Multiple factors drove the outlying importance of crime in New York's midterms. One is that bail reform immediately drew strong backlash from some New York prosecutors and members of law enforcement after going into effect statewide in 2020. Despite credible evidence that the new bail law has had at most a negligible effect on crime rates, the uproar continues even today. Second, according to data from Media Cloud, a media tracking outlet, news coverage of crime across the New York media market jumped by 42 percent in 2022 over the same time period the year before, making it a more visible issue for New Yorkers than in previous years. Third, crime did increase across New York (as it did nationwide amid the social upheaval of the pandemic), and especially in New York City, where it went up overall by 23.5 percent in 2022 compared to the previous year, despite a decline in homicides and shootings.

The tightness of this race in a state where Democrats have historically won gubernatorial races by double digits was not inevitable. In a post-election poll, Vera Action conducted a head-to-head test of two messages. The first was a typical "soft-on-crime" attack in the vein of Zeldin's attacks on Hochul. The second was closely based on an ad the Hochul campaign released, called "Safe," weeks before November 8. The ad touted Hochul's strong, affirmative vision for a safer New York, leading with, "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." After hearing both messages, respondents heavily favored (by 15 percentage points) the solutions-oriented message for preventing crime and delivering safety over the scare tactics "soft-on-crime" ad. If the Hochul campaign had led with this message throughout the election season instead of staying silent on the issue of crime and safety, the election results might have been different—both for the gubernatorial race and the downballot U.S. House races in Long Island and upstate New York.

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

Source: Perry Undem 2022 battleground exit survey commissioned by Vera Action.

9. The national media story about crime and elections glosses over local politics.

Elections for state and municipal offices are local stories. So is crime. But media often tries to fit these conversations into neat, national narratives—reducing voter demands and candidate identities to false binaries like "progressives" versus "moderates." This can lead candidates to take reactive, losing positions on safety that ignore the needs of voters, as in several 2022 New York congressional races.

Source (clockwise from top left): WHYY, *Vanity Fair*, *Daily Beast*, Politico, AP, *New York Post*.

During the Philadelphia mayoral primary, as in Chicago and elsewhere, national outlets regularly ran this flattening coverage. AP declared, "Philadelphia Democratic mayoral primary pits moderates against progressives," while Politico called it "The next battle for the soul of the Democratic Party." Meanwhile, local media dug into the more complex reality. The Lenfest Institute for Journalism produced polling on the needs of Philadelphians, and outlets like the Inquirer and the Pennsylvania Capital-Star looked at how Parker built a winning base of Black voters, among other detailed explorations. Meanwhile, echoing Lenfest's polling, GQR/Vera Action exit polling showed that the story on safety was indeed more complicated: Philadelphians were very concerned about crime and safety, but 72 percent of voters preferred a solutions-based approach, while only 22 percent preferred a "tough-on-crime" approach. Voters ranked solutions like cracking down on illegal guns, increasing mental health services and drug addiction programs, and offering more jobs far above adding police or passing more punitive bail laws. Reporting that captures these nuances not only helps electeds govern better, but also helps candidates in future races avoid drawing the wrong conclusions about voter needs.

10. For an accurate picture of how crime impacts elections, look beyond the sensational outlier cases to the overall trends.

Disproportionate media coverage of sensational outliers does a disservice to our ability to see the real trends in how crime impacts elections. On reform prosecutors, national media outlets intensely covered Chesa Boudin and the well-funded San Francisco district attorney recall campaign, but stayed relatively quiet on the 11 other prosecutors who ran and won on a reform platform in the same year. These included the district attorney right next door to San Francisco in Alameda County and, additionally, three incumbent reform prosecutors in Virginia who fended off primary challenges in 2023. On bail reform, voters would be reasonable in thinking the entire country has soured on pretrial justice based on the negative coverage of New York's bail law. Yet many jurisdictions have adopted or passed meaningful bail reform in recent years— including the 2021 SAFE-T Act in Illinois, a landmark bail settlement last year in Shelby County (Memphis), Tennessee, and in June 2023, a huge legal victory in Los Angeles to increase cite and release without bail for people charged with nonviolent offenses. Finally, while many took the wins of Eric Adams and Cherelle Parker to indicate a general desire for "tough-on-crime" policies, every winning mayoral candidate in the first half of 2023 ran on a prevention-first platform or incorporated many of those solutions into their overall approach to crime and safety. Across the board, the broader landscape of election results, as well as the data and polling about what voters really want when it comes to safety, undermines the conventional but false wisdom that concern about crime equals more support for the "tough-on-crime" status quo.