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Talking Affirmatively about Crime & Safety is a Winning Strategy for Candidates

New Playbook Emerges from National and Battleground Survey Results¹

To: Interested Parties

From GQR and Vera Action

A new survey conducted by GQR and Vera Action of voters nationally and in battleground states shows that candidates should not shy away from talking about crime and safety and offers a new message framework for candidates for elective office. While voters tend to trust Republicans more on crime, Democrats also have an opportunity to address voters' most pressing concerns about violent crime and community safety.

The poll shows that most voters want leaders to offer a comprehensive approach that addresses violent crime and illegal guns while investing in services that stop crime before it happens such as mental health and drug treatment services. When candidates employ a comprehensive approach, they are speaking to blocs of voters both parties would like to engage or win over, including Black women, independent women and younger voters. Indeed, when both parties engage in a back and forth on crime, Democrats improve their image as the party that is keeping communities safe.

Crime and Gun Violence are Top Concerns

Crime and gun violence are top concerns for voters, falling behind inflation and the cost of living among voters' priorities, but landing higher than taxes, public education, and climate change. Republicans are more likely to prioritize crime over gun violence, while Democrats are more likely to cite gun violence than crime as a top problem. Independents assign crime and gun violence equal priority.

Fully 92 percent of voters in both national and battleground surveys say crime is a serious problem, including 57 percent who say it is a very serious problem. Concerns about public safety are even more pronounced among women, Black voters and older voters. Women are 6 points more likely to say that

¹GQR conducted a survey among 1,500 registered voters (2,426 unweighted) across the country with oversamples among Black, Hispanic/Latino, and AAPI voters from August 10-23, 2023. Interviews were conducted using live dialing, text-to-web interviews, and online panel. The battleground survey is among 1,332 registered voters (1,735 unweighted) in presidential battleground states (Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin). Interviews were conducted via online panel. The data in both surveys are weighted to ensure the sample's regional, age, education and gender composition reflects that of the estimated registered voters.

crime is a very serious problem than men. Nearly 80 percent of Black women say crime is a very serious problem, compared to 61 percent of Black men. The gender gaps are narrower between Hispanic women and Hispanic men – 60 percent compared to 57 percent – as well as between AAPI women and men, 52 percent and 45 percent. A large 68 percent majority of older voters say crime is a very serious problem, compared to 46 percent of younger voters.

Figure 1: Voters view crime as a serious problem in the country

%	<i>Very Serious Problem</i>	<i>Somewhat Serious Problem</i>
National	57	34
Men	54	35
Women	60	34
Independent men	43	43
Independent women	59	35
White men	53	36
White women	57	36
Black men	61	32
Black women	79	18
Hispanic men	57	31
Hispanic women	60	34
AAPI men	45	43
AAPI women	52	37
Younger	46	43
Older	68	27

Even though voters view crime as a serious problem, nearly all voters say they feel safe in their own community (90 percent total safe, 38 percent very safe). However, there is a pronounced racial and gender gap. As Black women are the most likely to say that crime is a very serious problem, it is not surprising that Black women are the least likely to feel safe (only 24 percent feel very safe). There are similar patterns with Hispanic women (60 percent crime very serious problem, 24 percent very safe). White women (57 percent crime very serious problem, 37 percent very safe), AAPI women (35 percent very safe) and independent women (59 percent crime very serious problem, 32 percent very safe) are less likely than independent men to say they feel very safe (43 percent crime very serious problem, 48 percent very safe).

Figure 2: Women are less likely to feel very safe

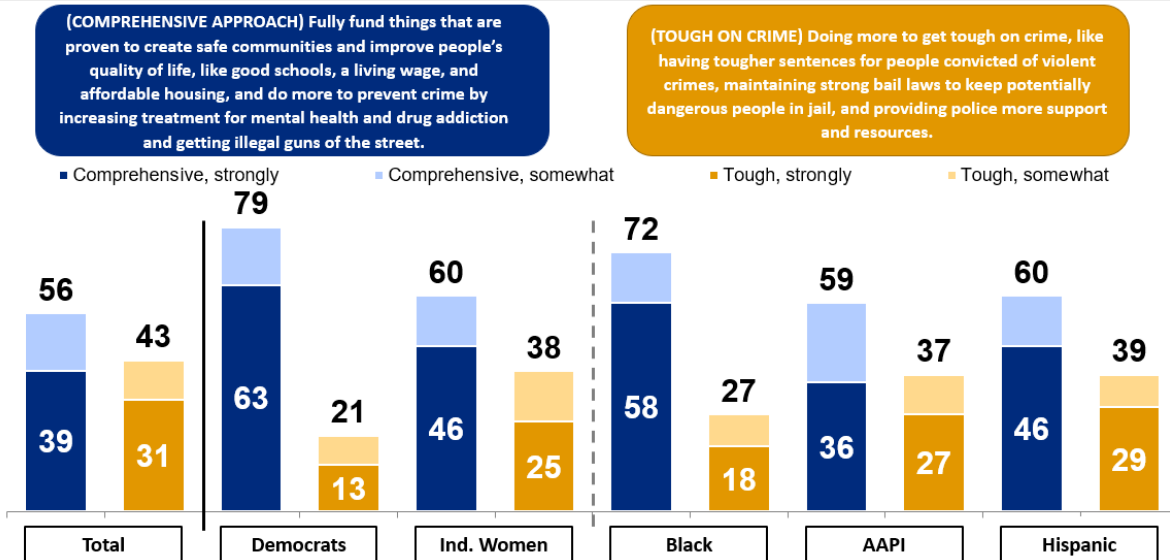
	<i>Very Safe</i>	<i>Somewhat Safe</i>
National	38	52
Democrat	38	50
Independent men	48	46
Independent women	32	56
Republican	36	56
Men	43	49
Women	34	56
White men	45	48
White women	37	55
Black men	36	51
Black women	24	62
Hispanic men	37	50
Hispanic women	24	58
AAPI men	39	47
AAPI women	35	55

Voters Favor a Comprehensive Approach to Safety that Prevents Crime, Stops the Violence, and Addresses Guns

Voters want a comprehensive approach to safety that addresses violent crime and illegal guns but also prevents crime before it happens. This comprehensive message wins over a “tough-on-crime” message by 13 points among all voters, 56 percent to 43 percent. The comprehensive message wins by 45 points among Black voters, 22 points among AAPI voters, 21 points among Hispanic voters, and 22 points among independent women. Republicans prefer the tough on crime approach by 41 points.

Figure 3: Voters favor a comprehensive approach over tough-on-crime framing

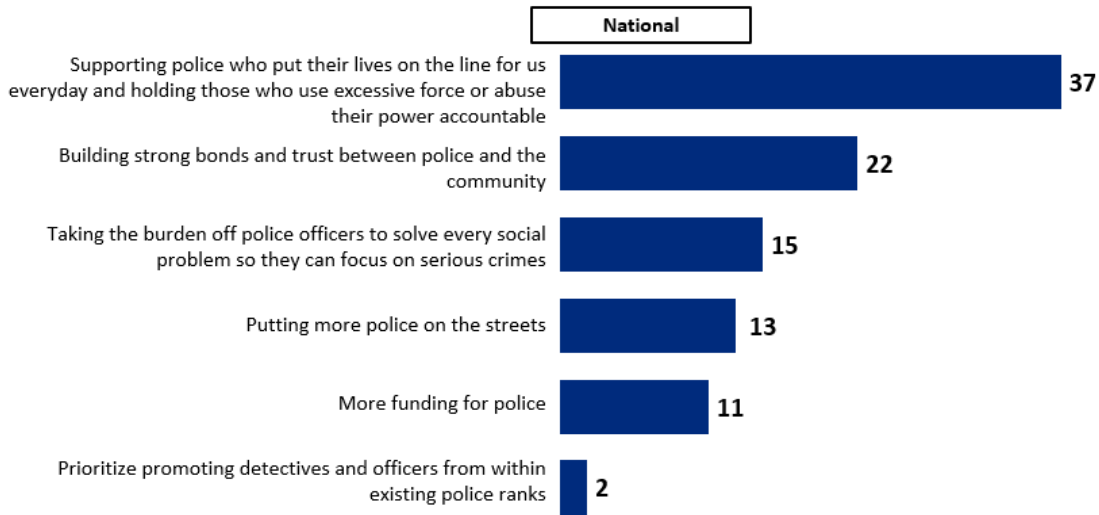
Now, I am going to read you some statements on the issue of public safety. After I read these statements, please tell me which one comes closer to your point of view on how public safety should be handled.



Supporting law enforcement is an important piece of the conversation, but often is posed in binary terms (e.g., fund the police, defund the police). We asked voters to choose from a more comprehensive set of statements about the police. Nearly 40 percent of voters say that we should “support the police who put their lives on the line for us but also hold accountable those who use excessive force or abuse their power.” This is the most important statement among Democrats, Republicans, and independents, including independent women.

Figure 4: Statements about police

Which of the following statements about the police do you support the most, even if none is exactly right:



Crime in Electoral Context

Overall, voters view Democrats as weaker in their handling of crime and safety than Republicans. In an experiment we tested two different Democratic messages against the typical Republican messaging on crime.² Voters read one of two Democratic messages: one with a comprehensive prevention message that includes stopping violence and addressing guns, and the other with a “tougher” message on crime. While the partisan messages on crime test equally well among all voters, important differences emerge among groups of voters. Among independent voters – especially women – and Hispanic voters, the Democratic comprehensive approach is most compelling.

² See appendix for question wording.

Figure 5: Testing a comprehensive approach versus tough on crime messaging

% Democrat frame – Republican frame	<i>Democratic Comprehensive Frame</i>	<i>Democratic Tough Frame</i>
National	51 – 48	48 – 50
Democrat	88 – 11	84 – 15
Independent men	51 – 48	46 – 51
Independent women	62 – 34	46 – 48
Republican	9 – 91	12 – 86
Black	81 – 16	80 – 19
Hispanic	60 – 39	54 – 42
AAPI	53 – 42	52 – 43

The survey also includes an experiment in which half the sample hears a Democrat talking about crime versus without it. The impact of talking proactively about crime is clear as Democrats, when they include a message on safety as one of their “kitchen table” issues, gain significantly among independent women, Hispanic voters, younger voters and voters who say they do not feel safe.

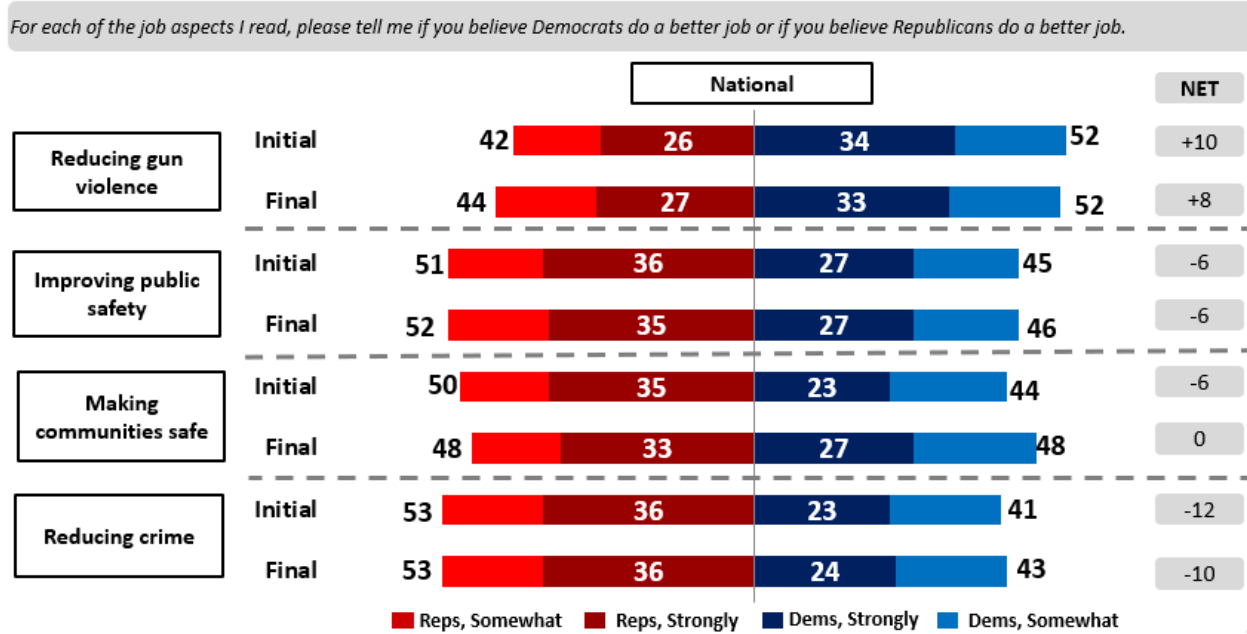
Figure 6: Talking about safety matters for key groups

(NET Democrat – Republican)	<i>Congressional Vote WITH CRIME</i>	<i>Congressional Vote WITHOUT CRIME</i>	<i>Net WITH CRIME advantage</i>
National	+1	-2	+3
Independent	+1	+1	0
Independent women	+6	-6	+12
Hispanic	+19	+11	+8
Ages 18-29	+38	+27	+11
Don't feel safe in their neighborhoods	+14	+2	+12

The benefit of talking about crime and safety is clear. At the beginning of the survey, voters say Republicans are better at handling crime issues than Democrats on all aspects of crime, except in dealing with guns. Voters give Republicans a 12-percentage point edge as the party that is best on crime, a 6-percentage point advantage on improving public safety, and a 6-percentage point edge on making communities safe. Democrats best Republicans by 10 percentage points on reducing gun violence.

At the end of the survey, which includes messages of similar tone and length from Democrats and Republicans, Democrats gain on keeping communities safe among all voter and on reducing crime among swing voters. Independents move 11 percentage points toward Democrats on who is better at making communities safer. Democrats gain ground among young people when it comes to making communities safer (+12 percentage points) and reducing crime (+6 percentage points). Independent women move 9 percentage points toward Democrats on who is better at reducing crime, and pure independents (no leaners) move 20 percentage points toward Democrats.

Figure 7: Which party does a better job on crime and safety



Conclusion

Crime and safety is a top issue for most voters and must be addressed by candidates, and particularly those seen as weaker on the issue. Simply put, people want safer communities and support a range of measures to produce that outcome. Voters prefer a comprehensive approach that prioritizes prevention, stops violence, and addresses guns. Voters value the role law enforcement plays; they want police to have the respect and resources they need, but also better relationships with communities and to be held accountable. Prevention, stopping violence, addressing guns, and better policing and accountability are the pillars of this powerful comprehensive message.

APPENDIX: Messages tested

Democrats comprehensive and tough on crime frames vs. Republican

(SPLIT) (DEM ATTACK/RESPONSE - COMPREHENSIVE) Democrats stand for safety, accountability, and justice. They will make communities safer with real solutions that prevent crime before it happens by investing in good schools, affordable housing, treatment for mental health and drug addiction, and well-paying jobs. They will break the cycle of crime by holding people accountable when they violate the law and build a just system that treats everyone fairly. Democrats support police who put their lives on the line everyday, while also holding them accountable if they abuse their power or break the law. They will get illegal guns off the street and focus police resources on solving the most serious cases.

(SPLIT) (DEM RESPONSE - TOUGH) Democrats are committed to keeping communities safe and reducing crime. They support giving police more funding so there are more police on the ground and in communities. Democrats want to give police and prosecutors the tools to solve and prosecute homicides and other violent crimes. They support speedy processing of rape kits to help solve rape cases, and enforcing laws to protect women from domestic abusers. They will make sure repeat violent offenders and people committing crimes with guns do not get early release from prison. They will support strict penalties for convicted drug dealers to stop the flow of drugs into our communities.

(GOP) Republicans will make hard-working, law-abiding citizens the priority. They will end the revolving door that releases violent criminals right back onto the very streets they committed their crimes on. They will make prosecutors do their jobs and enforce all the laws. They will fund the police and provide resources to rebuild the ranks of departments who have lost officers due to a lack of support and low morale. They will increase security at the border and go after traffickers bringing in drugs like fentanyl from Mexico and China. Republicans will stand up to Democrats and restore law and order in America.

Democrats with and without crime vs. Republican

(DEM W/ CRIME) Democrats stand for stability and security. They have helped improve the affordability of health care, invest in infrastructure, and lower costs for families. They are working to grow the middle class, cut the cost of prescription drugs, and support small businesses and end tax loopholes for big corporations. They are serious about safety and will prevent crime before it happens. They will increase treatment for mental health and drug addiction, invest in jobs and housing, get illegal guns off the street, and focus police resources to clear and solve backlogs of the most serious cases. And they will fight for freedom against abortion bans that take away women's rights and endanger their health.

(DEM W/OUT CRIME) Democrats stand for stability and security. They have helped improve the affordability of health care, invest in infrastructure, and lower costs for families. They are working to grow the middle class, cut the cost of insulin and prescription drugs, and support small businesses and end tax loopholes for big corporations. They will stand up to extreme politicians who try to take away our freedoms and threaten our democracy. And they will fight for freedom against abortion bans that take away women's rights and endanger their health.

(GOP) Republicans stand for freedom, prosperity, and opportunity. They will cut taxes and spending that has led to massive debt and inflation. They will secure the border, send illegal immigrants back to their home countries, and stop the flow of fentanyl and drugs into America. Republicans will enforce the law so that dangerous criminals don't walk free because of lax bail laws or prosecutors who don't do their jobs to prosecute. They will stand with the police and will make more police funding a top priority.