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Winning the Fight on Crime and Public Safety

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Crime is falling—substantially. But even record declines in violent crimes have not erased voters’ concerns. More than 1.1 million violent crimes still occurred nationwide last year, and 43% of voters say crime is increasing nationally; just 23% say it is decreasing.

Dismissing or ignoring voters’ concerns because national crime rates are improving won’t make those concerns—or the political problems behind them—go away.

Our recent poll of 1,400 likely voters across 2026 House battleground districts, conducted with Global Strategy Group, examines Democrats’ longstanding trust deficit on crime and public safety. Paired with two recent Global Strategy Group polls for GIFFORDS, the polls reveal two realities: voters remain concerned about crime and skeptical of Democrats’ ability to address it, but the polling also identifies ways to change those perceptions.

Democrats Have a Trust Problem on Crime

Despite everything that has happened over the past two years—from National Guard takeovers and ICE shootings in US communities to cuts in federal law enforcement funding—voters still broadly trust Republicans more than Democrats on crime and public safety.

That advantage holds whether voters are asked who will keep them safe, reduce crime, crack down on violent crime, or even prevent crime. A plurality chooses Republicans each time.

[Chart: Party Trust on Public Safety]

In the polls for GIFFORDS, conducted among 1,400 likely voters in House battleground districts and 1,400 in Senate battleground states, both with Black and Latino oversamples, Republicans led Democrats on every major measure tested. In Senate battlegrounds, that advantage ranged from 7 points on keeping people safe to 14 points on cracking down on violent crime. Democrats faced similar deficits in House battlegrounds, with even wider gaps among swing voters. These deficits weren't quite as sharp with Black and Hispanic voters, but far starker with white voters. The topline is clear: voters do not yet trust Democrats to deliver public safety.

The Prevention Paradox

Voters already know Democrats' interest in crime prevention, and they support many prevention policies. Yet that support has not translated into greater trust in Democrats to prevent crime.

In the GIFFORDS survey, Republicans led Democrats on preventing crime by 9 points in Senate battlegrounds and 6 points in House battlegrounds. Among swing voters, those gaps widened to 20 and 11 points, respectively.

Yet those same voters responded positively when Democratic prevention policies were spelled out. In Senate battlegrounds, 61% preferred an approach centered on mental-health care, addiction treatment, youth programs, and community violence prevention to a conventional Republican argument for tougher sentences. An approach combining accountability and prevention did even better, earning 63% support.

Third Way's recent polling found a similar pattern. A Democratic candidate emphasizing community prevention programs led over a Republican candidate emphasizing harsher penalties and expanded police powers, 57% to 43%. A candidate emphasizing an approach with accountability and prevention does even better, 60% to 40%.

The problem then may not be the policies themselves. **Voters can support prevention programs while doubting Democrats will use them successfully to make communities safer.**

Part of the explanation may lie in how voters define prevention. The Third Way polling found that voters don't limit it to social programs or the underlying causes of crime. Many see enforcement and accountability as prevention, too.

In Third Way's poll, 63% described hiring more officers, improving training, and increasing patrols in neighborhoods that need them as ways to prevent crime. Just 10% called those actions primarily punishment; another 26% considered them both.

Likewise, 47% called specialized police training and technology to solve more violent crimes prevention, while another 35% considered it both prevention and punishment.

That reveals a gap between how prevention is often discussed in policy circles and how voters understand it. For many voters, prevention also means stopping someone from committing another crime.

Prevention, in other words, cannot be reduced to a list of programs. Democrats' discussion of prevention should also encompass stopping repeat offenses. Simply saying "prevention" more often won't close the trust gap; voters want to know how it will make them safer.

How Democrats Should Talk About Crime

Republicans have long held the upper hand on crime. But the polling points to three meaningful ways Democrats can address that trust deficit: (1) show voters that Democrats understand their concerns about crime, (2) talk about local officials and institutions voters trust to fight crime, and (3) offer a proactive public safety vision that explicitly includes accountability.

Name the Public Safety Threats Voters Fear

The starting point is to acknowledge voters' concerns and name the threats they have in mind.

In the GIFFORDS poll, mass shootings generated particularly widespread concern. Among Senate-battleground voters, 51% were extremely concerned, and 77% were extremely or very concerned. Cybercrime and online scams also loomed large, with 72% extremely or very concerned.

Voters also expressed concern about domestic violence, random violence in public places, political violence, and drug-related violence.

Their concerns extend well beyond traditional street crime. They include violence in schools and public spaces, online scams, and threats, often missing from conventional debates over policing and sentencing.

Focus on the Local Institutions Voters Trust

Voters have far more confidence in local institutions than in politicians to address crime. Those institutions—and the support they need to do their jobs—deserve a central place in Democrats' public safety discussions.

The GIFFORDS poll makes the contrast clear. Local police came first by a wide margin: 67% of Senate-battleground voters and 65% of House-battleground voters selected them as able to address crime. Local prosecutors and judges followed, at 49% and 54%, respectively.

No political institution or national political figure tested came close.

Voters also want those local institutions to have the resources they need to deliver. In Third Way's survey, 87% viewed protecting funding for local police, prosecutors, crime victims, and violence-prevention programs as an effective way to fight crime.

That creates a clear connection between voters' trust in local institutions and a discussion of how to help police, prosecutors, and judges do their jobs more effectively.

Offer a Public Safety Vision That Starts With Accountability

Voters want more than a choice between tougher punishment and traditional prevention programs. Their priorities span both. And Third Way's polling shows why an explicit commitment to accountability matters.

Asked to select the three most important actions for reducing crime, voters chose ensuring people who commit crimes are caught and serve their sentences (34%), providing police with community resources and training (33%), and investing in mental-health and addiction programs (29%).

Among swing voters, police resources and training led at 35%. Accountability and mental-health and addiction programs followed, each at 32%.

The Third Way message tests point in the same direction. One group compared a Democratic candidate emphasizing community prevention programs with a Republican candidate criticizing Democrats' approach to policing and criminal justice. The Democratic statement received 57% support overall and among swing voters.

Another group heard a similar comparison, but the Democratic statement paired prevention with an explicit commitment to holding people who commit crimes accountable. Support for this version was 60% overall and 63% among swing voters.

[Chart: Who Do You Agree with More, Even if Neither is Entirely Correct?]

Prevention still matters. But in Third Way's polling, a message that also made accountability explicit drew greater support.

That finding takes on added significance because voters associate the two types of policy with different parties.

Some of voters' highest crime-reduction priorities also sound the least like conventional Democratic ideas. Among swing voters, 51% associated ensuring people serve their sentences with Republicans, compared with just 18% who associated it with Democrats. Police resources and training showed a similar gap: 43% associated the policy with Republicans and 26% with Democrats.

Mental health and addiction programs produced the opposite result: 53% associated them with Democrats, compared with 17% who associated them with Republicans.

[Chart: Crime Reduction Action Importance vs. Sound Like a Dem]

The disconnect is clear: accountability and police resources are among voters' priorities, but voters are less likely to associate them with Democrats.

There are numerous ways for Democrats to signal that they care about accountability and enforcement. People who commit serious crimes should be caught and held responsible. That includes stopping repeat violent offenders, gun and drug traffickers, online predators, and scammers—and giving law enforcement the resources and training to do that work fairly and effectively.

But public safety also means preventing the next crime. That includes mental health care, addiction treatment, keeping guns out of the wrong hands, opportunities for young people, and interventions that stop violence before it happens. The two commitments are not in conflict: enforce the law, solve crimes, stand with victims, and address the conditions that produce violence.

Improving clearance rates is one clear-cut example of accountability. In 2024, law enforcement agencies cleared fewer than 44% of violent crimes. That left more than 650,000 violent crimes without an arrest or another resolution.

As we explained in a [recent memo](#), policymakers can take concrete steps to solve more serious crimes and get victims answers. It would help communities, [especially marginalized ones](#), and make accountability more than a contest over who sounds tougher.

How to Handle the Inevitable “Soft-on-Crime” Attack

Given Republicans' longstanding advantage on crime, a “soft-on-crime” attack is predictable. The question is not whether the attack will come, but when it will arrive—and how voters will respond.

The first rule is not to dismiss it. Brushing aside voters' legitimate safety concerns risks confirming the very impression Democrats need to address: they either don't take crime seriously or defend policies that make it worse.

The Third Way survey tested two moments: what happens when voters hear a Democratic argument before the attack, and what happens when they hear a response afterward.

Before the Attack, Go on Offense

Before a Republicans launch a Democrats are “soft-on-crime” attack, Democrats need to go on offense. Doing so will soften the ground and minimize the impact of the Republican attack.

Among voters who heard only the “soft-on-crime” attack, support moved 7 points away from the Democratic candidate. Among those who heard the Democrat attack the Republican first, the earlier message substantially reduced the attack’s effect.

[Chart: Before the Attack, Go on Offense]

What should that attack include? The survey also found Republicans are most vulnerable when their actions can be shown to put children, families, and communities in danger—especially with the threat of child predators. Here were the best-performing attacks against Republicans:

- *“Republicans blocked efforts to crack down on platforms that allow predators to target children online and use AI to generate and share realistic sexual images of children.”*
- *“Republicans voted to block the release of the Epstein files four separate times, even after learning that Jeffrey Epstein’s sex trafficking operations exploited girls as young as 14 for sex.”*

(Un)fortunately, Republicans have given the public plenty of examples of the party’s willingness to abandon the safety of children, families, and communities in favor of politics. Hit them with that hypocrisy. Here are just a few examples:

- **Republicans have cut funding for law enforcement.** Under President Trump, the Department of Justice has cancelled more than \$800 million in public safety grants, including funding for child-abuse investigations and Children’s Advocacy Centers

that help law enforcement identify, investigate, and prosecute people who prey on children.

- **Republicans have failed to keep kids safe from gun violence.** Shootings have been the number one killer of kids for the last 6 years. Republicans have repeatedly and overwhelmingly voted against closing a loophole that allows people convicted of domestic abuse to buy a gun without a background check.
- **President Trump is using law enforcement funding to pursue ideological battles.** For the few funds that are going out the door at the Department of Justice, the Administration has attached conditions to them that have nothing to do with public safety and everything to do with politics. Law enforcement agencies and public safety organizations must now agree to conditions related to immigration, gender, vaccines, diversity initiatives, and more to get the funding they need to keep communities safe.
- **ICE under Trump is making communities less safe.** By aggressively pushing agents to meet quotas over quality and abandoning any semblance of accountability, this Administration has unleashed chaos into American communities.
- **This Administration has abandoned accountability for fraud.** President Trump's pardons are out of control: if he continues at his current pace, President Trump will have pardoned nearly 450 fraud offenses across his time in office. That is four times more pardoned fraud offenses than Presidents Bush, Obama, and Biden combined.

After the Attack, Don't Just Pivot

After a “soft-on-crime” attack, the instinct may be to move to friendlier ground, such as the economy. It's the familiar advice never to fight on an opponent's turf.

Don't do it. Or at least, don't do it without first addressing crime.

After the attack, an economy-only Democratic response moved voters 15 points toward the Democratic candidate. But pairing that economic response with a message on crime produced a 21-point shift.

[Chart: After the Attack, Don't Just Pivot]

So, while it is fine to pivot to weak Republican ground like the economy, it is also important to respond to the crime attack, either by attacking Republicans on the ground described above or, even better, providing a positive Democratic vision for crime and public safety.

Conclusion

Even as crime declines, voters still want less crime and real accountability when crime happens. Republicans continue to hold the trust advantage on both. But the gap is not fixed. The polling suggests Democrats can challenge voters' assumptions by going beyond the usual Democratic playbook: pair prevention with accountability, back policies that make the system work, and put victims—especially children—at the center of the public safety debate.



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