



MEMO Published January 30, 2024 · 14 minute read

Accountability & Prevention: How to Talk about Crime



Takeaways

- Crime is a top priority for many Americans, and they trust Republicans more than Democrats to address it.
- Republican crime attacks on Democrats are salient and Democrats need to push back.

- Voters know there are complex reasons for crime, but when the dust is settled, they believe that the person committing the crime is ultimately responsible.
- Voters favor solutions to crime that address both accountability and prevention, and they generally don't think Democrats care enough about holding people who commit violent crime accountable for their actions.
- A Democratic message emphasizing both accountability and prevention is effective, along with acknowledging voters' crime concerns and noting there's still work to be done.

Republican crime attacks on Democrats have become more potent over the past decade and likely cost Democrats key Congressional seats in the past two cycles. Republicans have accused Democrats of being “soft-on-crime,” defunding the police, and letting violent criminals roam our streets. In too many instances, Democrats have failed to respond effectively, so voters believed the narrative they were being told. Republicans will undoubtedly make crime a major flash point in 2024 elections, and Democrats need to be prepared to push back.

In conjunction with Global Strategy Group, Third Way and the Center for American Progress Action Fund (CAP Action) conducted two rounds of qualitative and quantitative research to better understand voters' perceptions of crime and how they view the Democratic Party on that issue. We conducted online journaling sessions from June 21st to 23rd with six groups: white urban base voters, white suburban swing voters, Black urban base voters, Black suburban swing voters, Hispanic urban base voters, and Hispanic suburban swing voters. We also conducted an online quantitative survey from October 11th to 29th of 1,211 likely 2024 battleground voters with oversamples of Black,

Hispanic, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) battleground voters. For more detailed information, see the methodology section at the end.

Of the twelve issues we tested, we found that crime is a top three priority for voters, and they don't trust Democrats to handle it. Voters associated Democrats with controversial policies like defunding the police. They trust Democrats to address gun violence, but they see crime as encompassing much more than guns. Although they agreed more with Democrats that the causes of crime are systemic, many solutions they favored are more associated with Republicans. Voters wanted solutions that address both **accountability** for those who commit crimes and **prevention** of crime moving forward. They trusted Democrats when it came to prevention and addressing the root causes of crime, but they didn't think Democrats cared enough about accountability. Republican crime attacks on Democrats are potent because voters truly care about this issue, and Democrats need to respond with a message acknowledging crime as a real concern while emphasizing *both* accountability and prevention.

Voters don't trust Democrats on crime.

Reducing crime is a top priority for the majority of Americans, but they don't think it's a priority for Democrats. Eighty-two percent of voters said reducing crime was either a top or major priority for them, with 51% marking it a top priority. It was their third highest priority, behind only strengthening the economy (89%) and protecting Medicare and Social Security (86%). Critical for Democrats, it was a high priority for voters of color and swing voters as well, with 81% of Black voters, 70% of Hispanic voters, and 73% of swing voters saying it was a top or major priority.

Not only do voters say crime is a high priority, but despite the fact that crime rates have declined nationally for two years, they think it's getting worse. Only 7% of voters said crime in the United States was decreasing, with 70% saying it's increasing. They feel more optimistic about their communities than the country as a whole, though, with only 44% saying crime was increasing in their own

community. Forty-six percent of Black voters, 47% of Hispanic voters, and 46% of swing voters agreed with this statement. But just because fewer voters said crime was increasing in their communities than in the country doesn't mean they think it's decreasing. Only 6% of voters said crime was decreasing in their community; 50% said it was staying the same.

“Crime definitely exists in my community... I think the incidence is higher than when I lived here as a teenager. I don't remember hearing about crimes as much, though there was no internet then. –Hispanic urban female base voter.”

Despite their answers on whether crime is increasing or decreasing, the majority of voters do say they feel safe in their communities. Only 15% of voters said they felt unsafe in their communities, though 19% of Black voters and 21% of Hispanic voters said they felt unsafe. Voters felt much safer in their communities than the country at large, with 35% of voters saying they didn't feel safe in the US. We saw a similar trend with voters in the online journals—many said that safety was a big concern for them, but they felt safe in their own community.

“In my town of residence, I feel fairly safe. But in neighboring Philadelphia, no way. The gun violence from gangs is claiming children's lives just walking home from school. –White suburban female swing voter.”

This disconnect is likely driven in part by national media coverage of crime, where Republicans have dominated the narrative. Democrats need to talk about crime and help set the record straight.

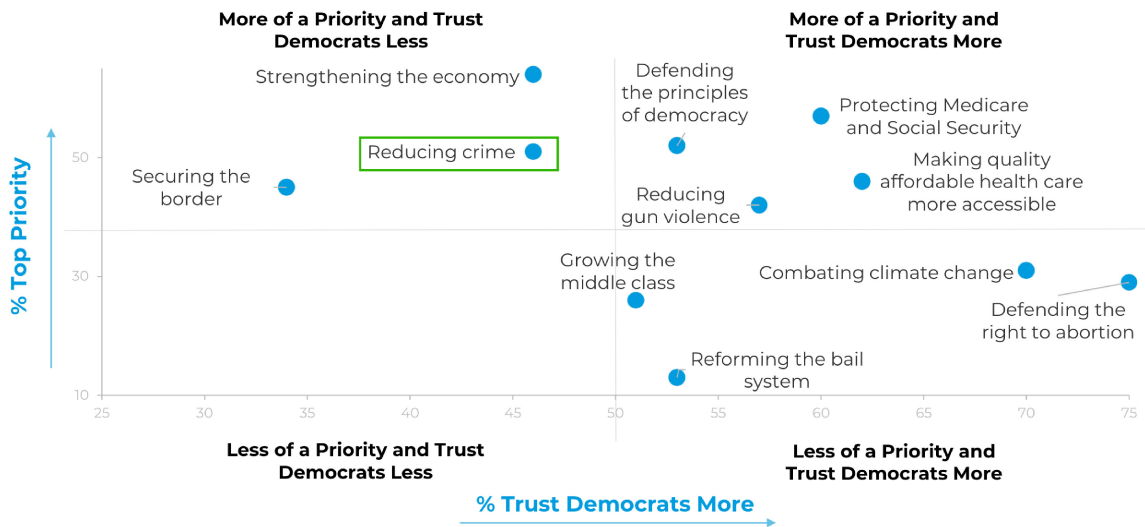
When voters were asked who they trusted more to reduce crime, Republicans beat out Democrats by eight points (54-46). Black voters trusted Democrats more by a 62-point margin, but Hispanic voters only trusted Democrats more by a 4-point margin. Swing voters trusted Republicans to reduce crime by an 8-point margin. The national and swing vote margins show that Democrats are not out of the ballgame when it comes to crime, but underlying findings show deeper skepticism towards Democrats that cannot be ignored.

For example, when we asked voters in the online journals what Democrats in Congress are doing to reduce crime, many voters either didn't know or could only point to gun control. Some base and swing voters brought up "defund the police" and "soft-on-crime policies" unprompted.

“ [Democrats’] track record speaks for itself. Talks of defunding the police while reducing what crime you can prosecute has not yielded positive results whatsoever. –Black suburban male swing voter. ”

It's clear that Democrats are strong on gun safety, but other than that, voters don't know what Democrats are doing to reduce crime. In our six focus groups consisting of urban and suburban white, Latino, and Black Americans, only urban, white base voters preferred a Democratic approach to crime over a Republican approach. Notably, we allowed each focus group participant to define these different approaches.

Voters Trust Republicans More on Their Top Priorities, Including Crime



Source: Third Way, Center for American Progress Action Fund, and Global Strategy Group conducted a national online survey of 1,211 likely 2024 battleground voters from October 11–29, 2023.

Democrats are underwater on crime with the voters they need to win majorities in Congress, and the numbers are also bleak for President Biden. While 55% said they think President Biden supports and values law enforcement, only 43% agreed that he was working to reduce crime. Swing voters trusted him even less, with only 33% agreeing with the statement. Only 46% of Hispanic voters and 44% of AAPI voters said the President was working to reduce crime.

Crime has been an important issue in the past few elections, and it's going to be important in 2024. Democrats need to make it clear that they think crime is a high priority, too, and tell voters how they're working to address it.

Voters lean towards accountability on near-term solutions.

Voters agree with Democrats that crime is a result of a combination of systemic problems, but they tend to trust solutions that are more associated with Republicans when it comes to addressing crime in real time. Voters said the top three factors causing crime in their area were drug addiction (70%), lack of

values (68%), and poor parenting (62%). Other major factors included mental health issues (60%) and the rising cost of living (57%). Black and Hispanic voters were more likely to point to economic and social factors, like a lack of economic opportunity and drug addiction, as major factors. Less than half (48%) of voters said crime was caused by the court system not giving criminals harsh enough sentences, a point often made by Republicans. They were more likely to blame prosecutors for not doing enough to convict criminals than the court system for handing out “light” sentences. Voters know that crime is caused by systemic issues like poverty and addiction, but a lot of voters also think there’s a lack of accountability for criminals.

“I would say crime is increasing because of high prices and inflation and police being overworked and weak laws. –Hispanic suburban male swing voter.”

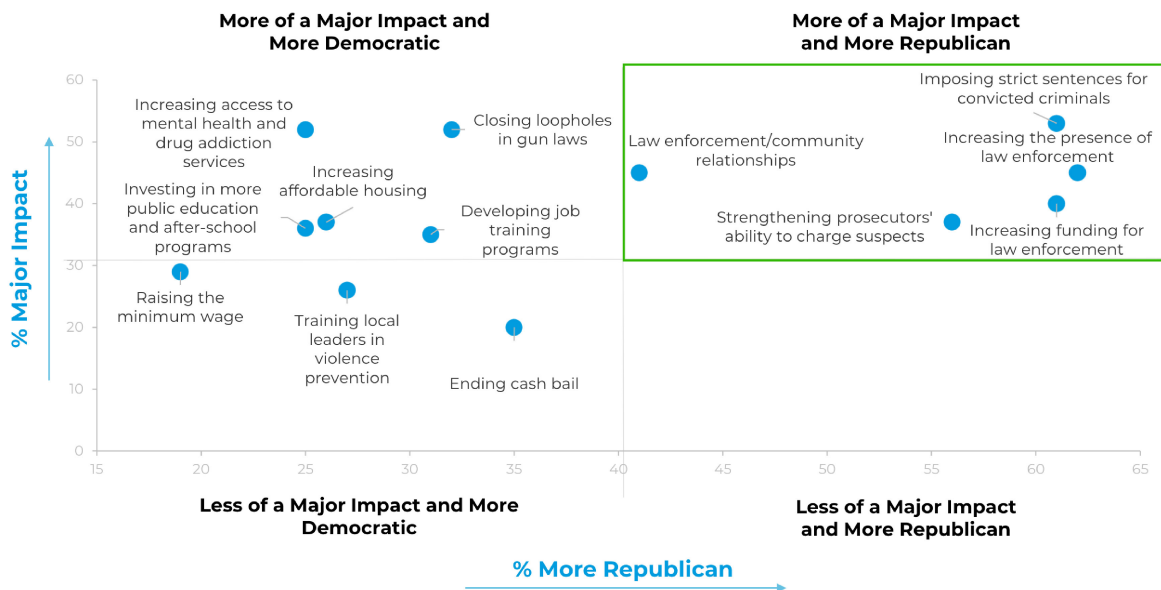
Just 45% of voters said weak gun laws were a major factor causing crime, ranking nine other factors higher. When discussing crime, Democrats can certainly talk about gun laws, but they should not use it as a crutch. Voters see crime as more than a gun issue.

When it comes to solutions to address crime, voters favor measures that focus on accountability and prevention—that is, holding criminals accountable and responsible for their actions while also taking measures to address both the root causes of crime and other effective actions to prevent it from happening in the first place. Voters said the three actions they thought would have the most impact on reducing crime were imposing strict sentences for convicted criminals (53%), increasing access to mental health and drug addiction services (52%), and closing loopholes in the law that allow criminals and other dangerous people to get their hands on guns (52%). Swing voters also ranked these as their top three. Voters also highly favored actions to build relationships between law

enforcement and the communities they serve, increase the presence of law enforcement, invest in more public education and after-school programs, and develop job training programs. Black voters had slightly different priorities, ranking closing gun loopholes for criminals and increasing affordable housing as their top two, followed closely by building relationships between law enforcement and communities. The majority of voters of color didn't think imposing strict sentences would have a major impact on reducing crime, favoring efforts to address the root causes and improve relations with police instead. However, Black voters were in favor of increasing police presence.

Out of the five actions voters think will have the most impact on reducing crime, they associate three of them with Republicans more than Democrats. Voters thought Republicans were more likely to support imposing strict sentences for convicted criminals, increasing the presence of law enforcement, and building relationships between communities and law enforcement. They thought Democrats were more likely to support increasing access to mental health and drug addiction services and closing loopholes in gun laws. Voters trust Democrats to address the root causes of crime, but they trust Republicans on accountability and policing, vital areas of improvement for Democrats. To win the crime narrative, Democrats need to focus on both accountability and prevention and reassure voters that they do genuinely care about the former.

Voters Trust Republicans More on Accountability and Policing



Source: Third Way, Center for American Progress Action Fund, and Global Strategy Group conducted a national online survey of 1,211 likely 2024, battleground voters from October 11-29, 2023.

Messaging Recommendations: Accountability and Prevention

Crime is a major priority for voters, which means attacks from Republicans are potent and can't go unanswered. When shown a negative crime message from Republicans, the margin of support for Democrats went from +2 to -5, a swing of seven points. But after seeing positive messages for Democrats that emphasize both preventing crime and holding those accountable who commit it, Democrats regained the ground they had lost. Crime attacks were even more potent with swing voters, dropping their margin of support for Democrats by 24 points. But again, positive messages that included a strong accountability frame were able to neutralize these attacks and wipe out Republican gains. This shows that Democrats need to speak proactively about keeping communities safe from crime and respond to these attacks—not be seen as changing the subject. If left unanswered, voters will believe the narrative Republicans are pushing.

After testing six positive messages, we recommend an approach that emphasizes **both accountability and prevention:**

- **Invoke the value of safety.** Everyone, no matter where they live, deserves to feel safe from crime.
- **Acknowledge that there is still too much crime.** Far too many Americans don't feel safe right now.
- **Demonstrate bipartisanship.** Joe Biden and Democrats in Congress are committed to working with anyone, regardless of party, to reduce crime. (Voters didn't find it believable if Democrats tried to take all the credit.)
- **Focus on accountability and prevention.** Democrats are committed to holding criminals accountable for their actions and investing in proven measures to prevent crime from happening in the first place.
- **Provide solutions that pass the accountability and prevention test and are relevant to local communities.** They are working so every community has what it needs to hold violent criminals accountable and prevent future crime before it happens. That includes more community policing on the street, directing law enforcement to prioritize catching violent criminals, access to mental health and drug addiction services, more effective police-community collaborations, going after illegal guns and closing loopholes that allow criminals to get their hands on guns, and getting more teens into after school programs and summer jobs.
- **Recognize there's more work to be done.** There's more work to do, but Joe Biden and Democrats in Congress won't be satisfied until you feel safe where you live, work, go to school, shop, and play.

This is the proactive crime message that Democrats should run on:

accountability *and* prevention. Democrats should prioritize positive messaging over negative messaging, but also shouldn't be afraid to hit Republicans. Positive and negative messaging should be separate tracks where possible, as positive messages tested better when invoking bipartisanship, not attacking Republicans. Republicans are going to spend hundreds of millions of dollars attacking

Democrats on crime, and Democrats have to go on offense. When attacking Republicans on crime, Democrats should:

- **Make extremism the problem.** MAGA extremists have taken over the Republican Party. We've seen it day after day, from their total abortion bans to election denial and efforts to restrict American citizens' rights.
- **Connect extremism to crime.** Now they've taken their extremism to the next level—voting against commonsense policies that would reduce crime by keeping guns out of the hands of criminals and domestic abusers and putting violent criminal gun traffickers in prison for up to 15 years.
- **Hit them on accountability.** It might sound crazy that Republicans voted against holding violent criminals accountable, but it's true.
- **Invoke law enforcement.** Law enforcement officers even support these policies, but MAGA Republicans don't.
- **Tie back to extremism.** That's extreme and it only puts our families at risk at a time when crime rates are too high.

Conclusion

Republican crime attacks on Democrats are clearly landing with American voters. If Democrats stay silent on crime, voters will continue to believe the only story they're hearing—that the party and its candidates are “soft-on-crime.” Democrats need a positive message that focuses on both accountability for criminals and addressing the root causes of crime, not just one or the other.

Methodology

Global Strategy Group and Third Way conducted two rounds of qualitative and quantitative research to better understand voters' perceptions of Democrats and crime. We conducted online journaling sessions from June 21st to 23rd with six groups: white urban base voters, white suburban swing voters, Black urban base

voters, Black suburban swing voters, Hispanic urban base voters, and Hispanic suburban swing voters. Participants were from New York, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Michigan, Wisconsin, Nevada, and Arizona. We also conducted an online survey from October 11th to 29th of 1,211 likely 2024 battleground voters, including 606 presidential battleground state voters, 605 House battleground voters, 337 Black battleground voters, 308 Hispanic battleground voters, and 310 AAPI battleground voters. Presidential battleground states included Nevada, Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan, Georgia, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. House battleground districts included: AK-AL, AZ-01, AZ-02, AZ-06, CA-03, CA-06, CA-09, CA-13, CA-22, CA-27, CA-40, CA-41, CA-45, CA-47, CA-49, CO-03, CO-08, CT-05, FL-09, FL-13, FL-15, FL-27, IA-01, IA-03, IL-17, IN-01, KS-03, MD-06, ME-02, MI-03, MI-07, MI-08, MI-10, MN-02, MT-01, NC-01, NC-06, NC-13, NC-14, NE-02, NH-01, NH-02, NJ-07, NM-02, NV-01, NV-03, NV-04, NY-01, NY-02, NY-03, NY-04, NY-17, NY-18, NY-19, NY-22, OH-01, OH-09, OH-13, OR-04, OR-05, OR-06, PA-01, PA-07, PA-08, PA-10, PA-17, SC-01, TX-15, TX-34, VA-02, VA-07, WA-03, WA-08, and WI-03.