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Community-Based Public Safety: How Localized Efforts Can Reduce Crime and Make Policing More Effective

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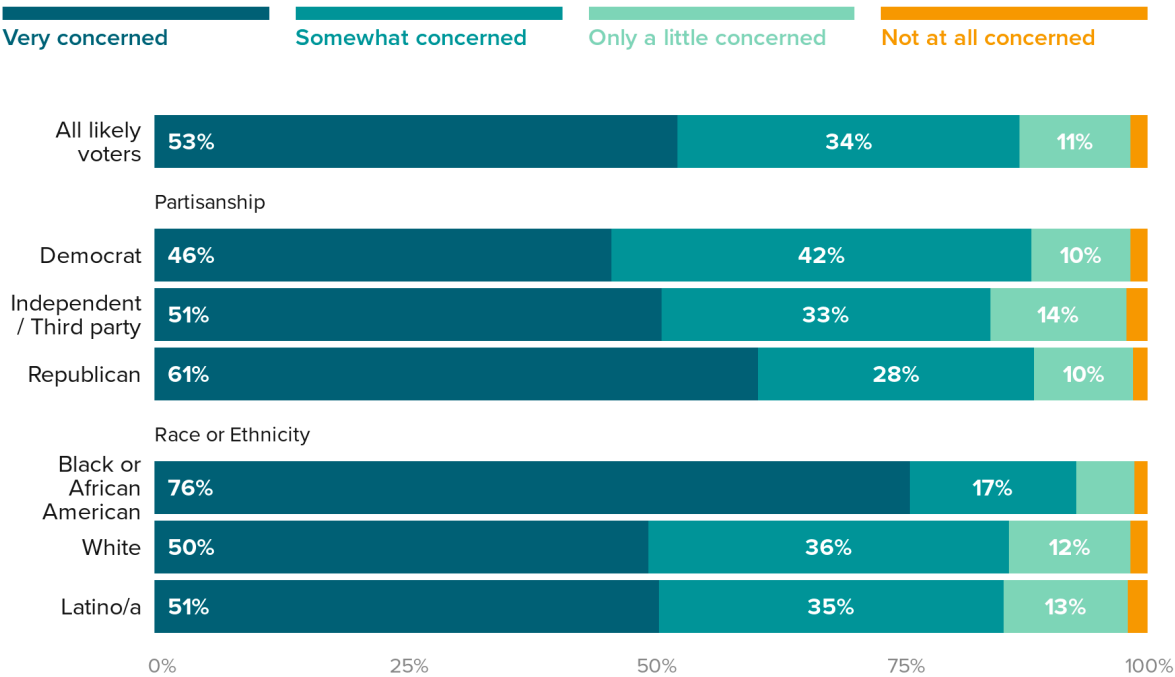
Introduction

Although crime rates are currently far lower in the U.S. than during their peak in the early 1990s, the electorate is becoming increasingly concerned about crime and public safety. Multiple high-profile mass shootings have brought renewed attention to public safety in the United States. The Uvalde, Texas, massacre, in particular, led to the first piece of federal gun control legislation in nearly 30 years, but that bill failed to address another urgent public safety issue that the shooting highlighted: the incompetence of U.S. police and lack of community support systems for reducing violence. High-profile examples of police incompetence present a unique opportunity to translate public outrage into tangible policy change.

New Data for Progress polling finds that 87 percent of voters are “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned” about crime, including 88 percent of Democrats, 84 percent of Independents, and 89 percent of Republicans. Black voters have the highest level of concern about crime, with 93 percent reporting they are “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned.”

Voters Are Very Concerned About Crime

How concerned or not concerned are you about crime?



September 8–12, 2022 survey of 1,240 likely voters

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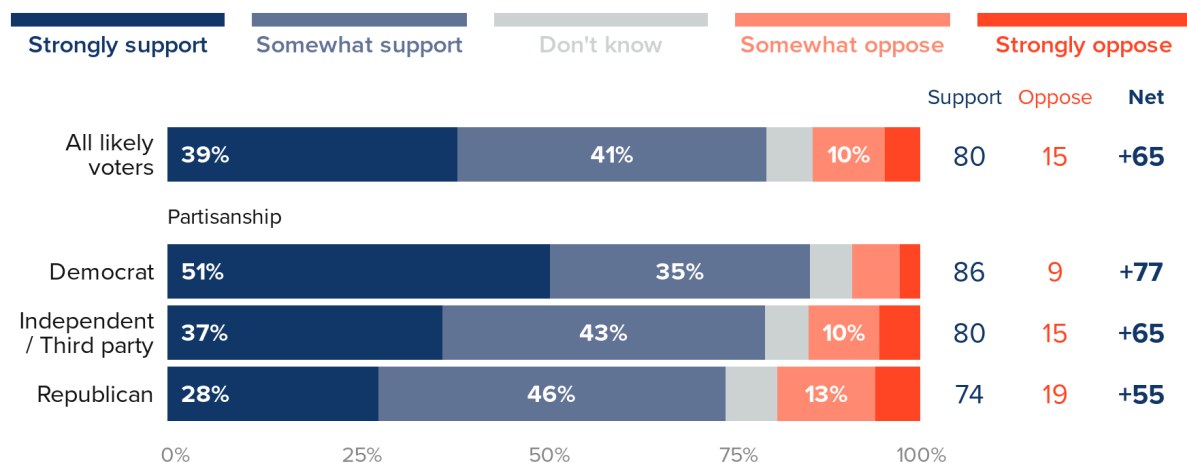
In response to growing concerns about crime, the White House and members of Congress are pushing for legislation that would increase funding for police departments. Increasing police spending, however, is not the most effective method for mitigating or preventing crime or improving public safety. There is little correlation between police spending and crime rates. Additionally, the majority of 911 calls are unrelated to crime, police only spend a fraction of their time responding to crime, most arrests are for low-level offenses, and police only solve one-third of serious crimes. And given the high rates of police violence against civilians, especially people of color, police often threaten the safety of the very individuals they are supposed to protect.

Community-based public safety programs and investments in violence prevention offer more effective, humane options for improving public safety while addressing some of the root causes of criminal activity. Such programs would allow police departments to focus on addressing violent crime rather than low-level offenses.

Voters Widely Support Shifting Non-Criminal Responses Away From Police Departments to Increase Time Spent on Serious Crimes

Studies have found that police only clear about a third of serious crimes.

Knowing this, would you support or oppose moving responsibilities unrelated to crime, like responding to a mental health crisis, away from police so they can focus on improving clearance rates for violent crime?



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Data for Progress polling illustrates that these policies are popular with voters. After voters are informed that police only clear about one-third of serious crimes, 80 percent support moving responsibilities unrelated to crime, like responding to a mental health crisis, away from police so they can focus on improving clearance rates for violent crime. This includes 86 percent of Democrats, 80 percent of Independents, and 74 percent of Republicans.

Police officers are the default response to a range of community issues unrelated to crime because there are insufficient alternative interventions to these issues. Police are asked to respond to mental health crises, substance abuse, traffic issues, homelessness, noise complaints, welfare checks, and other issues, even though they often lack the training and expertise to respond to many of these situations.

Sending police officers to respond to community issues puts people at risk of unnecessary arrest, incarceration, and even violence. Incidents of police brutality often start with a 911 call about a low-level offense or noncriminal behavior that doesn't necessitate an armed first responder. These situations can quickly escalate and turn violent. Rayshard Brooks, for example, was killed after a police call about him sleeping in his car, and police killed Elijah McClain after someone called 911 saying he “looked sketchy.”

And police killed George Floyd after being called to the scene over a counterfeit \$20 bill. According to Mapping Police Violence, most police killings in 2021 were of people suspected of nonviolent offenses or no crime at all, underscoring the importance of reducing police and civilian contact.

Shifting police responsibilities unrelated to serious and violent crime to community-based public safety programs can reduce the risk of police brutality, limit the number of people (particularly those with marginalized identities) being incarcerated for low-level offenses, and allow police officers to focus on issues directly related to public safety. Specifically, governments at the city, state, and federal levels should fund community-based public safety responses, including crisis response units, violence interrupters, and non-police responses to traffic safety. Furthermore, they should invest in programs and services that help people most impacted by over-policing while reducing crime, including community-based treatment for substance use and mental health disorders, neighborhood infrastructure, community nonprofits, and affordable housing. These interventions in tandem can help improve community outcomes while giving police departments more capacity to direct their efforts toward mitigating violent crime.

Police Responsibilities Unrelated to Violent Crime

Police spend the vast majority of their time responding to low-level offenses and noncriminal matters, which indicates that many of their functions would be better served by other agencies and departments. A 1970 study found that police only spent 3 percent of their time responding to crimes against people and 15 percent of their time responding to crimes against property. The rest of their time was spent on traffic enforcement, social services, and administrative tasks, including “coffee breaks, meals, community relations, taking reports, running errands, attending court, serving warrants, and performing as police technicians.” Many of these functions are not necessary for improving public safety and allow police to neglect addressing the most pervasive threats to safety, particularly violent crime.

Many police functions could be better served by other, specialized agencies focused on specific, community-based issues, especially those related to traffic enforcement, social services, and interpersonal conflicts. Targeted interventions are a much more effective and humane way to respond to community issues, such as those pertaining to mental health, and allow police to focus their time and resources on addressing more serious criminal pursuits. Moreover, there are many ways to reduce crime by investing in public health, social services, and economic support, and to help people targeted by overpolicing and reduce the footprint of our criminal justice system. Traffic is one example of a police responsibility that could easily be performed by another agency.

TRAFFIC

Traffic encounters are the most prevalent type of contact people have with police: 8.1 percent of drivers experienced a traffic stop in 2018, and a total of 24 million people had a police contact via a traffic stop that year. However, an analysis of more than 160,000,000 police traffic stops found that police traffic stops do not lead to reduced traffic deaths. Police have enormous discretion during traffic stops, which leads to stark racial disparities in enforcement. Research consistently shows that police officers disproportionately stop Black drivers. During traffic stops, police are much more likely to search Black drivers, even though white drivers are more likely to have contraband on them than Black drivers.

And traffic stops can easily become dangerous for civilians, especially people of color, underscoring the importance of shifting traffic responsibilities to another agency. Philando Castile was pulled over for a broken taillight and ended up being fatally shot by police. Sandra Bland was pulled over for not using a blinker when she changed lanes, was arrested, and then died in jail. Her death was ruled a suicide. Maurice Gordon was pulled over for speeding and then was shot six times by police. In April 2022, the Guardian identified nearly 600 people who have been killed by U.S. police during traffic stops since 2017.

In light of these events, cities around the country have banned police from pulling people over for minor offenses. Some cities are also increasing their use of automated enforcement, like red light cameras and speeding cameras, which reduce police contact with drivers. Cameras are effective at reducing speeding and thereby reducing the risk of fatal car accidents. Not only does automated enforcement reduce the amount of police contact with civilians, it also limits discretion and can help ensure that people of color aren't disproportionately punished for traffic violations.

However, there are concerns about automated enforcement that cities should consider before starting or expanding the practice. Automated enforcement only reduces racial disparities so long as cameras are not disproportionately placed in communities of color, as was found to be the case in Washington, D.C. Additionally, automated enforcement further expands state surveillance, raising concerns about privacy, especially when automated enforcement programs are housed within police departments. Finally, many critics are concerned about cities using automated enforcement to generate revenue at the expense of drivers with no clear plan to invest this revenue into communities.

SUBSTANCE USE

In addition to responding to traffic issues unrelated to serious crime, police are also tasked with responding to issues, including substance use and mental health disorders, that are fundamentally about public health. While drug use may indicate someone has a substance use disorder and needs treatment, often it does not merit any sort of police response. There were over 1.5 million drug arrests in 2018, most of which were for possession, which does not pose an immediate public safety threat. And that year, 40 percent of arrests for drug possession were related to marijuana, a drug that has been legalized in 19 U.S. states as well as the District of Columbia. Additionally, as with other types of arrest, Black people are disproportionately arrested for drug-related crimes. Although they made up just 12 percent of the U.S. population in 2019, Black people accounted for 27 percent of those arrested for drug offenses.

Once arrested, people with substance use disorders rarely get appropriate treatment. Even though two-thirds of people in jails have been diagnosed with substance use disorders, jails rarely offer treatment for those disorders. Instead, they cut off people from their healthcare and their support systems. According to government data from 2007-2009, only 19 percent of people in jail who met the criteria for drug dependence or abuse participated in a drug treatment program since admission to their current facility. For instance, few jails offer medication-assisted treatment (MAT), the gold standard for treatment of opioid use disorder. As a result, people often end up cycling in and out of jail, without ever receiving the treatment and support they need, putting them at higher risk of overdose and other negative health outcomes. Behind bars, overdose is the third leading cause of death. And formerly incarcerated people are at a much higher risk of overdose because people are forced to abstain behind bars and end up with a lower tolerance for drugs, meaning that a typical dose prior to incarceration can lead to an overdose once released.

Allocating resources toward connecting people with critical services and treatment rather than criminalizing them is more effective for mitigating substance abuse-related issues at their source. This notion also applies to those with mental health disorders who end up caught in a similar cycle of arrest and incarceration.

MENTAL HEALTH

Despite their lack of medical and behavioral health training, police spend a significant amount of their time responding to mental health crises unrelated to public safety. About one-third of people with serious mental health disorders have their first contact with mental health treatment via law enforcement.

All too often, people with mental health disorders end up arrested and incarcerated or even killed rather than having their needs met in a more appropriate, de-escalatory way. Police are not trained in dealing with complex behavioral issues and often end up escalating the situation and doing far more harm than good. In 2015, at least 124 cases were identified where police killed someone in the throes of a mental health crisis. People with mental health disorders are 16 times more likely to be killed by police, and at least a quarter of people killed by police have some sort of mental health disorder.

Police often resort to arresting people during mental health crises, rather than connecting them to mental health care. And, as with substance use disorders, people arrested with mental health disorders rarely receive appropriate treatment. Even though people in jail are five times more likely to have a mental health disorder and 64 percent of all people in jail have a mental health problem, only 1 in 6 people in jail with a mental health disorder reported receiving treatment since admission.

Moreover, incarceration often exacerbates mental health disorders, as people are cut off from friends, families, their job, their regular healthcare providers, and other support systems that are critical for sustaining their mental and emotional well-being. And poor conditions in jails, including overcrowding, solitary confinement, and violence, only make mental health conditions worse. As a result, suicide is the leading cause of death in local jails, illustrating the dangers of low-level arrests for mental health disorders and the importance of preventing mentally ill people from being needlessly entangled in our criminal justice system.

When police officers do take individuals with mental health disorders to treatment, it takes a tremendous amount of time and resources. Police are often tasked with transporting people with mental health crises to treatment, especially in cases where people exhibit suicidality. The Treatment Advocacy Center estimates that police spend about 20 percent of their time responding to and transporting individuals with mental health disorders to medical facilities and waiting for their admission. Police often need to travel long distances to get people to mental health facilities, wait for a transfer of custody, and wait for a bed to open. Not only does this cumbersome and time-intensive process incentivize police officers to arrest rather than transport people to treatment, it also suggests that it would be more efficient to dedicate more resources to mental health treatment and less to criminalization.

Moreover, there is evidence that deploying mental health professionals instead of police to deal with behavioral health crises can lead to reductions in crime. After Denver started a mental health crisis response pilot program, there was a 34 percent reduction in low-level offenses in neighborhoods served

by the program and no subsequent increase in violent offenses. The program was also much more cost-effective than sending police officers to deal with community issues. A similar model could be used to respond to issues related to homelessness.

HOMELESSNESS

Low-income and marginalized communities tend to bear the brunt of over-policing in the U.S., and those who are homeless are especially vulnerable. Cities around the country have criminalized activities associated with homelessness, such as panhandling, lying or sitting on public sidewalks, and camping, even though these activities pose no threat to public safety and homeless people have to engage in them just to survive. As a result, unhoused people are arrested at extremely high rates. In Sacramento, California, unhoused people account for 42 percent of arrests. And in Portland, Oregon, unhoused people account for nearly half of all arrests.

This is an enormous amount of resources and energy being expended to arrest unhoused people who are often economically marginalized and have complex behavioral needs. People with experience in health and human services would be better suited than police to respond to issues related to homelessness. In addition to ensuring that unhoused people's needs are addressed by individuals with specific expertise, this would allow police to focus their efforts and resources on issues more directly related to public safety.

INTERPERSONAL DISPUTES

Finally, police are often called upon to respond to interpersonal disputes, like noise complaints, conflicts between neighbors, trespassing, and unruly pets. During these calls, police have to play the role of mediator, even though they lack conflict mediation expertise and are often not members of the communities they are policing. While minor conflicts can sometimes escalate into violence, most interpersonal conflicts do not require an armed first responder. There is also a risk that police will escalate the conflict rather than resolve it, and a minor conflict will lead to an arrest or police violence against civilians. Police departments should not be the main agency responsible for mediating minor conflicts between community members; this role would be better suited for trained conflict resolution specialists whose expertise is in de-escalating interpersonal disputes.

By investing in community-based public safety alternatives that respond to issues related to traffic, behavioral health problems, and interpersonal disputes, as well as programs that reduce violence, we can make communities safer while allowing police departments to allocate more time and resources toward addressing serious crimes.

Policy and Advocacy Recommendations

In order to improve public safety, local, state, and federal governments should invest in community-based alternatives to policing, including mental health crisis responders, civilian mediators, and non-police traffic responses. This would allow police departments to dedicate more time and energy to solving serious crimes while reducing the number of marginalized people who come into contact with police.

1. INVEST IN COMMUNITY-BASED PUBLIC SAFETY ALTERNATIVES

- a. **DEPLOY NON-POLICE RESPONSES FOR LOW-LEVEL TRAFFIC OFFENSES.** To reduce the risk of police brutality related to minor safety violations and allow police to use their time and energy responding to serious crimes, local and state governments should assign traffic safety issues to other entities, like transportation agencies. These agencies would use unarmed traffic safety officials to respond to traffic incidents, like breakdowns and car accidents, and enforce traffic safety laws like speeding or running a red light. Police officers would still respond to more serious and public safety-threatening crimes like hit-and-runs or driving a stolen vehicle.

Specifically, these traffic safety officers would be responsible for:

- i. Responding to traffic incidents, like car accidents and breakdowns;
- ii. Providing traffic control during roadwork, events, and traffic incidents;
- iii. Enforcing traffic safety laws, like speeding or running a red light;
- iv. Educating the public about road safety; and
- v. Overseeing automated enforcement.

This traffic safety model could follow the lead of other countries that already rely on non-police entities to respond to traffic incidents. In England, a government entity that oversees the country's major roads and motorways relies on unarmed traffic officers instead of police officers to respond to traffic incidents where there are no serious injuries and no suspicion of crime, like crashes and breakdowns. Officers have the power to stop and direct traffic and are meant to promote safety on the roads rather than enforce criminal law.

And some cities in the U.S. have already started shifting traffic responsibilities away from police to other agencies or increasing their use of automated enforcement. For example, in July 2020, Berkeley, California, announced that it was creating the Berkeley Department of Transportation, which will use unarmed civilians to enforce traffic laws.

If cities use automated enforcement to reduce the scope of policing, they should follow the guidelines below to mitigate the risk of undue harm on communities:

- i. Cities should not charge excessive fees that can end up funneling people into the criminal justice system due to lack of payment;
- ii. Cities should ban the use of facial recognition software in automated enforcement systems and limit who has access to the traffic data to limit surveillance of city residents;
- iii. Traffic agencies, not police departments, should have authority over automated enforcement;

- iv. Cities should be clear about how revenue from automated enforcement is spent and have a clear plan for investing it into communities; and
- v. Robust oversight of automated traffic enforcement programs should ensure they are not doing more harm than good.

b. **CREATE CRISIS RESPONSE UNITS TO RESPOND TO ISSUES RELATED TO MENTAL HEALTH, HOMELESSNESS, AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS.** Cities around the country have started investing in non-police crisis response programs for issues related to mental health, substance use, and homelessness. These units would be operated by mental health agencies, public health departments, or a non-law enforcement public safety agency, and would be responsible for:

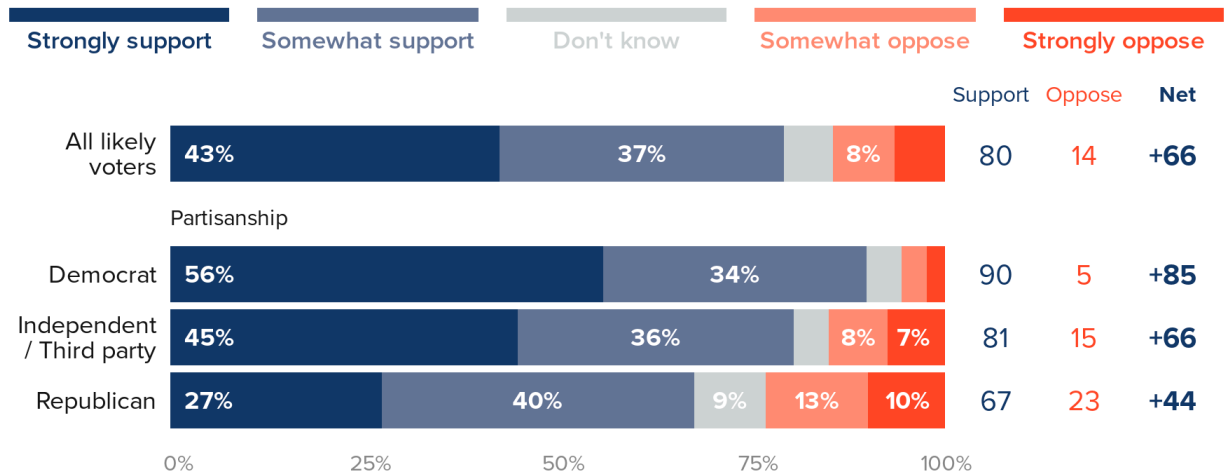
- i. Responding to community-based issues related to behavioral health issues like mental health crises and substance misuse;
- ii. De-escalating mental health crises and connecting people with appropriate care and services;
- iii. Performing wellness checks; and
- iv. Responding to calls about homelessness and connecting unhoused people with goods and services.

For example, CAHOOTS is a crisis response program, developed in Eugene, Oregon, over 30 years ago, that offers a promising model for other cities to follow. Under this model, 911 dispatchers are able to route nonviolent mental health-related calls to the CAHOOTS program, which sends a two-person crisis response team consisting of a medic and a crisis worker with extensive training in mental health. These workers deal with a range of issues, including conflict resolution, welfare checks, substance abuse, suicide threats, and more. In 2017, CAHOOTS responded to 17 percent of 911 calls received by the Eugene Police Department. And at an annual expense of \$2.1 million, CAHOOTS costs a fraction of the cost of policing and saves the city of Eugene an estimated \$8.5 million in public safety spending annually. The program reduces the risk of police brutality against people with behavioral health problems and allows police officers to spend their time and resources addressing serious crimes in Eugene rather than policing behavioral health.

Deploying non-police first responders to issues related to homelessness and behavioral health is popular with voters. Eighty percent of voters support creating a new agency of non-law enforcement emergency responders who respond to issues related to mental health, substance use, and homelessness. This includes 90 percent of Democrats, 81 percent of Independents, and 67 percent of Republicans.

A Majority of Voters Support Creating a New Agency of Responders to Address Mental Health, Substance Use, and Homelessness

Would you support or oppose creating a new agency of non-law enforcement emergency responders that respond to issues related to mental health, substance use, and homelessness?



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- c. **DEPLOY VIOLENCE INTERRUPTERS TO MEDIATE CONFLICTS AND REDUCE COMMUNITY VIOLENCE.** Specifically, these violence interrupters would:
- i. Mediate minor conflicts between community members that could escalate into dangerous situations;
 - ii. Identify people most at risk of committing violence and connect them with services like job training, education, and behavioral health treatment; and
 - iii. Work with community leaders, residents, religious groups, business owners, and other stakeholders to change community norms around violence.

In the past two years, Indianapolis; Savannah, Georgia; and Knoxville, Tennessee, have all either started or expanded violence interruption programs. Violence interruption programs reduce the amount of interpersonal disputes that police need to respond to, and research indicates these programs can lead to significant reductions in crime, especially gun violence.

For example, the Cure Violence model understands violence as a public health issue. The model relies on violence interrupters to prevent retaliations after shootings, mediate ongoing conflicts, and follow up after disputes to ensure they don't become violent later. Outreach workers target the people most at risk of violence, help them change their behavior, and link them to social services like job training and drug treatment. And the program works with community leaders to change norms around

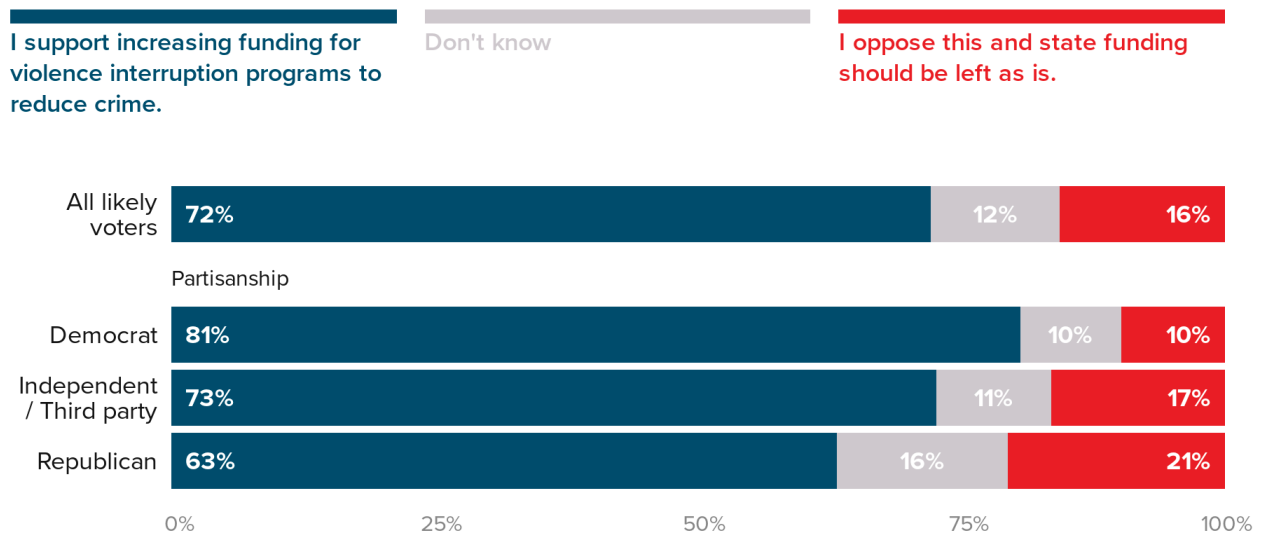
violence. According to Cure Violence, its program led to a 56 percent reduction in shootings in New Orleans, a 56 percent reduction in killings in Baltimore, a 42 percent reduction in killings in Kansas City, and an 18 percent reduction in killings in New York.

Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of voters support increasing funding for violence interruption programs to reduce crime, including 81 percent of Democrats, 73 percent of Independents, and 63 percent of Republicans.

A Majority of Voters Support Increasing Funding for Violence Interruption Programs to Reduce Crime

Violence interruption programs target the people most at risk of violence, help them change their behavior, and link them to social services like job training and drug treatment. Research has shown violence interruption programs can lead to significant reductions in crime among community members.

When thinking about increasing funding for violence interruption programs **in your state**, which of the following comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?



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Community-based public safety interventions are not the only mechanisms for improving public safety, however. Increasing spending on healthcare, community infrastructure, and affordable housing can all reduce crime without expanding the scope of our criminal justice system.

2. INCREASE SPENDING ON PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAT ARE SHOWN TO BOTH REDUCE CRIME AND HELP THE PEOPLE MOST IMPACTED BY OVER-POLICING.

To reduce crime and mitigate public safety issues at their source, we must invest in public health, community infrastructure, and housing. This strategy aims to prevent harm by prioritizing early intervention rather than simply responding to it after the fact. Specifically, cities, states, and the federal government should:

- a. **EXPAND MEDICAID ACCESS AND INVEST IN COMMUNITY-BASED TREATMENT FOR SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS.** Increased access to healthcare, especially substance use treatment, can decrease both violent and financially motivated crimes. The Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion significantly increased access to healthcare among low-income adults. And estimates show that "states that expanded Medicaid have experienced a 5.3 percent reduction in annual reported violent crime rates relative to non-expansion states" due to reductions in aggravated assaults. This yielded an estimated \$4 billion in savings for states that expanded Medicaid while making it easier for low-income people to access healthcare.

States can go further than expanding Medicaid. Simply increasing the number of substance use treatment facilities can significantly reduce local crime. And this policy is extremely popular with voters: 88 percent support their community expanding the number of treatment centers for substance use and mental health disorders.

- b. **INVEST IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURE, LIKE LIGHTING AND CROSSWALKS, WHICH ARE ASSOCIATED WITH DECREASED ADOLESCENT HOMICIDES.** One study showed that clearing rundown, vacant lots in poor areas reduced crime by 13 percent, including a 29 percent reduction in violence, a 22 percent reduction in burglaries, and a 30 percent decrease in nuisances. Voters widely support improving neighborhood infrastructure. A majority (86 percent) of voters support clearing rundown, vacant lots to reduce the likelihood of crime. And nearly all voters (91 percent) support their community improving street lights.

Furthermore, community nonprofits that focus on mitigating violence and strengthening community ties are associated with reductions in violent crime. Researchers estimate that in a city with 100,000 residents, every 10 additional community nonprofits focused on crime and community leads to a 9 percent reduction in the murder rate, a 6 percent reduction in the violent crime rate, and a 4 percent reduction in the property crime rate. Investing in community nonprofits to reduce crime enjoys bipartisan support from 86 percent of voters.

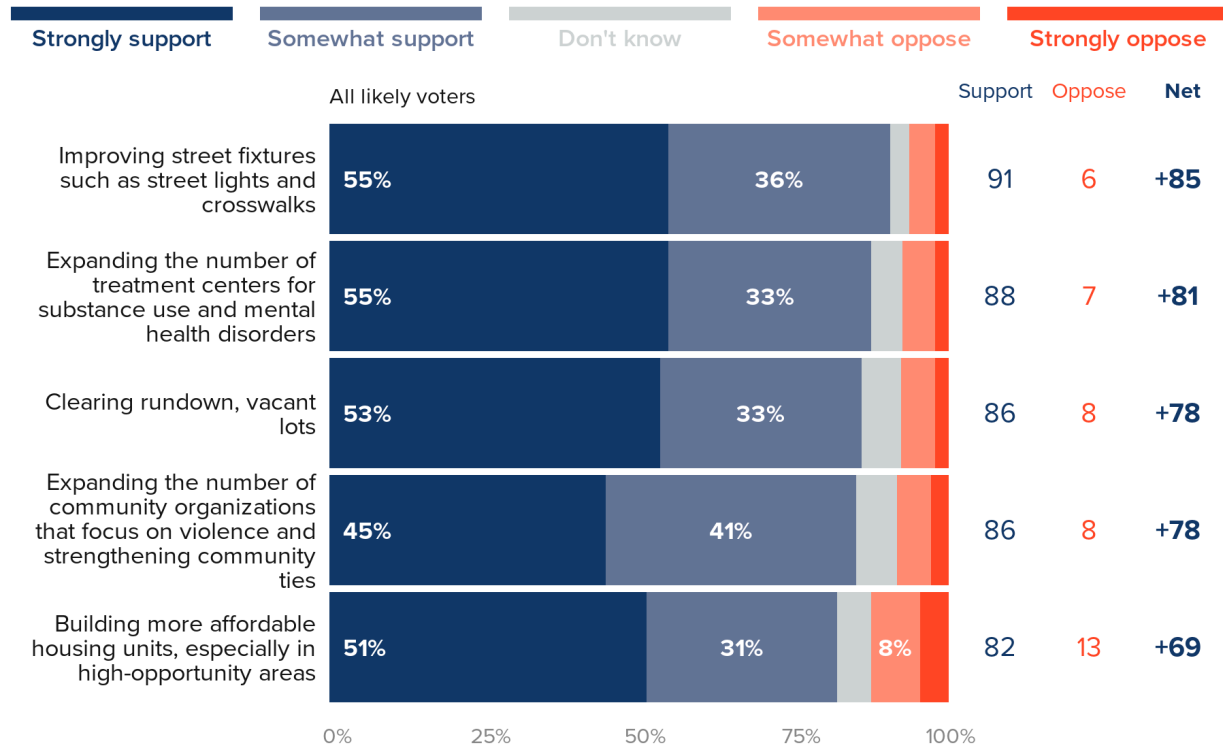
- c. **BUILD AFFORDABLE HOUSING, ESPECIALLY IN HIGH-OPPORTUNITY AREAS.** Low-income housing development in poor neighborhoods is associated with significant reductions in violent crime. And investing in affordable housing as a means of crime prevention is popular with voters. A majority (82 percent) of voters support building more affordable housing units, especially in high-opportunity areas.

Investments in community infrastructure are not only highly effective in reducing crime but have strong levels of support across party lines.

Voters Support Investments in Community Infrastructure to Reduce Crime Rates

Below are several investments that studies have shown lead to reductions in crime rates.

Please indicate whether you would support or oppose your community investing in each of the following to reduce crime rates:



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Improving public safety in the U.S. will require a significant, multisectoral effort. However, by leveraging community-based investments and spending on social services and programs to reduce crime, we can begin to chart the path toward a system that helps those in need instead of criminalizing them.

Conclusion

Investing in community-based public safety alternatives and violence prevention is an effective way to improve public safety without expanding policing, and these investments are extremely popular with voters. Police spend a remarkable amount of time addressing community issues unrelated to public safety, even though they often lack the training and resources to respond appropriately. Community-based public safety alternatives and violence prevention measures, such as crisis response units, violence interrupters, and investments in healthcare and affordable housing, seek to address the root causes of crime and connect people to resources and services they need rather than simply punish them. All of these interventions would allow police to focus on addressing serious, violent crimes rather than low-level offenses and community issues that can quickly escalate into police violence.

By developing community-based public safety alternatives to policing and investing in public health and social services, the U.S. can transform our approach to public safety.

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