

# What To Do and How to Talk About Public Safety & Crime in 2024

At the April [Ideas Summit](#) hosted by the NewDEAL Forum, elected officials and experts gathered to discuss concrete policies that support public safety and how Democrats can most effectively communicate about the issue with residents.

While [data](#) shows that violent crime has [decreased](#) under President Biden compared to when he took office, there is more to do, and polls show Americans are increasingly worried about public safety and crime. From 2021 to 2024, the percentage of respondents who said addressing crime should be a top priority for Congress and the President increased from 47 percent to 58 percent ([Pew Research](#)). In 2024, the numbers are highest for Republicans (68 percent) compared to 47 percent for Democrats.



It is not enough to point to charts and graphs showing reductions in homicides and other violent crimes. Elected officials' job is to keep communities safe and ensure that residents *feel* safe.

This document outlines four common-sense policy ideas to address crime and public safety and three messaging suggestions based on the work of NewDEAL Leaders and conversations at the Ideas Summit.

## Policy Ideas

**1. Emergency Response Updates.** Americans are concerned about violent crime, yet a significant amount of police time is spent on responses to 911 calls for nonviolent situations, including issues stemming from mental health problems. One problem is that our 911 system has not been significantly updated since the 1950s. In most places, 911 can send only fire, police, or medical staff. But a lot has changed in the past 70 years, and **Albuquerque, New Mexico** is trying something new.

**Mayor Tim Keller** has added a [Community Safety Department](#) that can be dispatched in circumstances that don't require a police presence, such as addressing mental health calls, homelessness issues, and certain domestic situations. Employees in this department are trained in dealing with these situations and de-escalation tactics. Last year, the Community Safety Department responded to 60,000 calls, freeing up the police department to respond to situations for which they are trained, such as violent crime.

Another benefit: by statute, police can only take people to jail. Similarly, EMS can bring people to hospitals. The Community Safety Department, however, has more flexibility. It can provide transportation to homeless shelters or even doctors' offices.

**2. Gun Safety.** Americans know that there is a gun violence epidemic across the country. In the past decade, we have witnessed mass shootings at music festivals, in schools, at places of worship, in malls, and too many other places to name.

There are a plethora of common-sense policy ideas that would make communities and states safer without infringing on Second Amendment rights. Policies include [strengthening background checks](#), [enacting red flag laws](#), [banning bump stocks](#), addressing untraceable “ghost guns,” and [closing loopholes](#) that allow violent criminals easy access to guns. Group like [Moms Demand Action](#) and [Giffords](#) are two stellar organizations that can provide both data and policy ideas.

**3. Office of Violence Prevention.** In 2022, **St. Louis Mayor Tishaura Jones** created the city’s first Office of Violence Prevention. [The office](#) “coordinates public safety resources and community violence intervention programs to make St. Louis neighborhoods safer.” Funded in part by the American Rescue Plan, the office uses data-driven strategies to address violent crime.

In 2023, St. Louis saw a [dramatic decrease](#) in violent crime: Homicides dropped by 21 percent from the previous year, reaching a 10-year low for the city. Further, total violent crimes (including murder, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, felony theft, and auto theft) dropped by 22 percent.

**4. Focus Police Attention on Major Crimes, Not Minor Infractions.** Led by **City Attorney Zach Klein**, Columbus, Ohio, is finding creative, effective, and compassionate ways to reduce unnecessary police interactions. When it comes to low-level, nonviolent crimes – such as petty theft – the city’s [diversion program](#) works with offenders to identify the root cause of why they committed a crime. When discussing the program on NewDEAL’s *An Honorable Profession* podcast, Klein [said](#) the city must “take a step back and address the root causes of crime, in a way that will make our communities safer in the long run.”

Crimes can stem from food insecurity, housing issues, drug addiction, or employment issues. Once identified, offenders receive a tailored plan to address those underlying needs, such as a diversion plan that requires they visit a local food pantry. Klein also spearheaded [“Project Taillight,”](#) which offers free car repairs to low-income residents to reduce traffic stops for infractions like broken taillights.

“We needed to stop what we deemed a completely preventable police interaction,” Klein said of the program’s vision. The program replaces headlights and taillights, repairs safety features, and offers regular emissions inspections at no cost to eligible households to provide Columbus residents with reliable, safe transportation.

Since its implementation in 2020, traffic safety has improved, and police spend less time dealing with minor infractions, freeing up time to focus on major issues that keep the community safe. Thus far, single mothers have been the biggest beneficiaries of Project Taillight.

# Messaging Guidance

**1. Guns:** Democrats have the American people on their side and should prioritize emphasizing gun safety policies when they talk about their approach to public safety. Lax gun safety laws are allowing the streets to be flooded with guns, giving violent criminals easy access to deadly weapons. Democrats will pass common-sense laws to keep guns out of the hands of violent criminals. Yet Republicans at the local, state, and national level block these policies time and time again.

As those at the Ideas Summit noted, Democrats are right on the issue: A majority (56 percent) of Americans [support](#) stricter gun laws, while only 12 percent support less strict laws. Americans want common-sense gun safety laws to make our communities safer.

**2. Anecdotes to Accompany Data:** Data is a powerful tool but its impact is amplified when accompanied by anecdotes that provide something more tangible for people to connect with the need for policy solutions.

When Utah State Sen. Stephanie Pitcher worked across the aisle to pass a bail reform bill, she was armed with data and anecdotal evidence. In her state, bail was set based on the severity of the crime rather than the potential threat to the community of those indicted. Pitcher used data to show that the bail system was broken, highlighting statistics showing the bail bonds industry failed to ensure people showed up for their court dates.

However, more than data, Pitcher used anecdotes to strengthen her messaging. She noted the potential of a wealthy murderer who could get out on bail simply because they were wealthy. Conversely, poor defendants arrested for less serious offenses were stuck in jail despite being a very low risk to the community.

Putting a face to policy recommendations by making data and statistics more concrete with actual or potential examples helps lawmakers and the public understand the issue on an emotional rather than solely intellectual level.

**3. Don't Avoid the Issue.** The adage of politics remains true: "If you're explaining, you're losing." Don't fall into the trap of using conservative framing or explaining how a proposal won't undermine public safety. At this point, you have already lost the debate. Instead, tout the positive impacts of the legislation and reject the framing of opponents. At the same time, don't dismiss concerns about crime no matter what data might say.

State Rep. Christine Hunschofsky, who represents Parkland, Florida, balked at the notion that her ideas for gun safety would undermine public safety. "As someone who represents Parkland, if you don't think I care about public safety, you're nuts," she told those gathered at the NewDEAL Forum Ideas Summit.

In addition, she advocated for attacking conservative proposals intended to generate media attention rather than address real issues. Democrats can become trusted messengers by showing they are focused on real solutions, not performative stunts. Making issues personal helps connect with residents and lets them know that they are heard and that you understand the problem from a human perspective.