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Overall Findings From Messaging Research
on Reimagining Public Safety

To: Interested Parties
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Change Research and HIT Strategies conducted a four-stage research project from September, 2021 through March, 2022 to gauge public opinion on policy proposals to reimagine public safety. We conducted a landscape review of existing research, one baseline poll, six focus groups and two subsequent messaging polls. The polls were conducted with nationally representative samples. The focus groups were segmented to both base supporters (strongly support "defund") and moderates (neither strongly opposed or in favor of "defund") (see Methodology Statement).

Building off previous research, we tested a range of messaging elements and frameworks to identify how best to connect to, and grow, the base of people committed to reimagining public safety. This memo outlines the researcher's findings and recommendations for how to talk about public safety in a national context in a way that expands the coalition of support.

Key Findings

1. **A majority of American voters support alternatives to policing - we just need unifying messaging in order to get through to everyone.** When given the option between maximizing funding for police departments or diverting some funding to alternative first responders, education, anti-poverty, and housing, 62% of Americans prefer funding the alternatives. 60% of Americans would prefer an alternative first responder instead of a police officer to respond to substance abuse episodes. 65% would prefer an alternative first responder instead of a police officer to respond to a homeless encampment. 75% would prefer an alternative first responder instead of a police officer to respond to someone in mental or emotional distress.[1]

2. **In order to expand support for reimagining public safety, messaging needs to bridge the gap between the base supporters and people who are persuadable but need more information about the goals of the movement.** 27% of Americans support "defunding the police" with no explanation or definition of the phrase, while 51% support a *definition* of defunding the police that explains one of its primary policy goals without using the words "defund the police."[2]

3. **While a majority of Americans trust police to keep them safe, there are large gaps by racial group.** 81% of Latinx Americans and 77% of White Americans trust the police either "a great deal" or "a moderate amount", compared to only 54% of Black Americans (meaning, almost 1 in 2 Black Americans do not express trust in the police).

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[1] Data from poll 1.
[2] Data from poll 2. More detail on this definition in Section II.

We suggest focusing your messaging on the <u>solutions</u> (where the agreement is) rather than who to blame for the problem.[3]

4. **Demographically, the groups most supportive of reallocating money away from police budgets and towards prevention and alternatives (both "persuadables" <u>and</u> "base supporters") consist of more young people (18-49), Black people, and Latinx women.**

5. **Our best messages...**
   - **Center the community and the solution, not the conflict.** Talk about what <u>does</u> keep communities safe and articulate a positive vision for community safety.
   - **Call out our reliance on the police to solve every problem.** *"Let's end our over-reliance on police to fix problems that shouldn't be their job to handle in the first place by funding better-suited first responders for certain emergencies."*
   - **Argue for "common sense" solutions.** *"It's just common sense that police are not the right answer to every single problem."*
   - **Call for prevention instead of punishment, particularly when combating the "crime rising" narrative.** *"If we want to actually protect people, and not just posture and signal about being tough on crime, we have to think about prevention, not punishment. We have to address the reasons for these problems instead of spending limited city budgets on flooding the streets with cops."*

I. Goal Of Our Research. Our main goal in conducting this research was to craft effective messaging aimed at a persuadable audience that would also be embraced by the base supporters, thus appealing to as many people as possible. We sought to identify common ground between base supporters and people who are not yet committed to reimagining public safety, which includes police divestment and reallocation of resources, using language that resonated with them and that spoke to their fears, beliefs, and hopes. This memo outlines our best strategic guidance on how to talk about these issues with people who are not yet convinced, but convincible.

II. Identifying Our Persuadables. One of the priorities of this research was to identify who our persuadable audience is, and what messages resonate best with them, and to ensure that any messaging tailored to persuadables did not alienate base supporters. To assess this, we gauged respondents' support for "defund the police" and, separately, for a definition of the underlying policies that do not use the words, "defund the police."[4]

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[3] Data from poll 1.
[4] Data from poll 2.

● 0 ● 1 ● 2 ● 3 ● 4 ● 5 ● 6 ● 7 ● 8 ● 9 ● 10

			TOTAL SUPPORT	TOTAL OPPOSE

[DEFUND] Do you support or oppose defunding the police?

46	5	3	4	4	11	4	6	4	11	**27**	**62**

[REALLOCATE] Do you support or oppose reallocating some funds from the police budget to non-police responses to public safety needs, such as professional teams trained to deal with mental health crises, homelessness, or domestic violence, and programs shown to prevent participation in criminal activity?

22	4	3	4	3	14	6	9	7	5	24	**51**	**36**

*0=strongly oppose and 10=strongly support.*

We identify "base supporters" as respondents who express support for both "defund the police" and reallocation from police budgets. By contrast, we identify "persuadables" as respondents who express opposition to "defund the police" but support reallocating some funds from police budgets.

We validate our "persuadables" definition by measuring whether these respondents would prefer to put as much money as possible into police departments, or increase spending on alternative first responders and on root cause prevention. 8 in 10 persuadables prefer the latter option; only 2 in 10 prefer to maximize police funding.

Funding - Police or Alternatives?

"We hear a lot these days about town and city budgets and how much to spend on different community needs. Some say we should put as much funding as possible into our police departments, empowering them with more resources to keep communities safe. Others say it is important to increase spending on alternative first responders better equipped to respond to many 9-1-1 calls currently handled by armed police, and on social services in order to alleviate poverty, improve education, and lower the costs of housing, so we address the root causes of crime. What is your opinion?"

	Oppose Both	Oppose Defund, Support Reallocate	Support Both
Put as much funding as possible into police departments	79	21	2
Increase spending on alternative first responders and education, anti-poverty, and housing to address root causes of crime	21	79	98
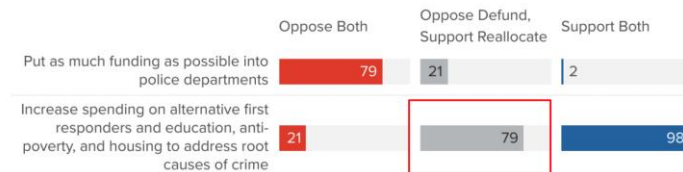
Demographically, we identified that the groups most supportive of reallocating money away from police budgets (both "persuadables" and "base supporters") consist of more young people, Black people, and Latinx women.

	Oppose Both	Oppose Defund, Support Reallocate	Support Both
Latinx 18-49	22%	35%	42%
Black 50+	24%	39%	37%
Black women	27%	31%	42%
Black men	29%	32%	38%
Black 18-49	31%	26%	43%
Latinx women	34%	22%	44%
White 18-49	38%	22%	40%
Latinx men	39%	37%	25%
White women	44%	27%	29%
White men	51%	20%	29%
Latinx 50+	51%	22%	27%
White 50+	54%	25%	21%

more supportive ↑
less supportive ↓

The groups that are least supportive are Latinx men, White people, Latinx people over 50, and particularly White people over 50.

III. Why People Are Open to Alternative First Responders

58% of all respondents believe that alternative first responder programs could work in their communities, and through open-ended questioning in our first poll, we surfaced some promising messaging opportunities, shown below.[5]

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[5] Data from poll 1.

Other Responders Are Better Equipped For Certain Emergencies. Overall, 1 in 4 people point out that in certain crisis situations, experts other than police are better suited to respond.

OTHER RESPONDERS BETTER TRAINED/EQUIPPED TO HANDLE

When a person is in a mental health crisis they need a mental health specialist not a person with little to no training and a gun." (White woman, Biden voter)

"When there is a situation, we should send the best available help to it. Sometimes this might be the police, sometimes other personnel, and sometimes both." (Latino man, Trump voter)

"We need people that specialize in those fields. A Police officer, should just be that. If others can help the police, when situations such as Domestic violence and other simpler issues arise, help from another resource would be great, and less intimidating." (Black woman, Biden voter)

"When dealing with a mentally unstable person, it takes much patience and special training." (White man, Trump voter)

Police Can Make Things Worse Because They Lack Relevant Expertise. 1 in 5 bring up the fact that police cannot be the answer to every problem, and make things worse in certain situations because they lack the qualifications to address the emergency and end up using force.

NO NEED FOR WEAPONS/POLICE COULD MAKE IT WORSE/UNDERQUALIFIED

"The police don't need to be called for everything, and they can put people of color in a state of anxiety and danger because they won't call for help when they need it. If they aren't worried about the police killing them then people will be more likely to call for help in dangerous or unpleasant situations" (Black woman, DNV)

"The presence of armed police can be intimidating and implies that there is problematic behavior that needs to be physically controlled and/or that the community needs to be protected from the person in crisis. That is not helpful when someone is in crisis." (White woman, Biden voter)

"Someone who shows up to a crisis with a gun is far more likely to use it than somebody who is trained in crisis intervention & diffusion" (Latino man, Biden voter)

"To many people are killed for strange behavior, mental breakdowns and domestic disputes." (Black woman, Biden voter)

Police Are Over-Tasked. Some respondents bring up the problem of police being asked to wear too many hats, when they should be devoted to serious crime, like investigating homicide.

POLICE ARE OVER-TASKED

"Because it's absurd to have one poorly trained officer perform as peacekeeper, counselor, negotiator, and social worker." (White woman, Biden voter)

"I think it is unfair to expect police to also train to be doctors/ social workers/psychologists." (White woman, Trump voter)

"Because there are real crimes that law enforcement need to be working on, and proper health professionals are much more appropriate, and could save more lives because of their specialties." (White man, Trump voter)

"It frees the police to be able to handle more serious crimes" (Black woman, Biden voter)

To Truly Fight Crime, We Must Address Root Causes. Many respondents also bring up the need to address the upstream problems that lead to crime, to prevent harm or wrongdoing from happening in the first place.

THIS FOCUSES ON ROOT CAUSES

"Access to things like a mental health care help prevent crimes from happening instead of reacting to them after they happen." (White woman, Biden voter)

"Because these other parties start to [address] the underlying problems instead of simply punishing or frightening those driven to crime." (White man, Biden voter)

"There is a terrible meth and opiod prob here-if police haven't done anything-and rarely do anything of help-let someone give it a try-they would hopefully be less racist" (White woman, Biden voter)

"Crime in my community has a nearly direct correlation with poverty and poor education. The police are not equipped to address those problems." (White man, Biden voter)

IV. Crafting the Message, Piece By Piece

Building from these insights we surfaced in poll 1, we began to craft initial elements of our messaging in the focus groups. The focus groups allowed us to identify messaging angles that are popular with both our persuadable audiences and our base support audiences. Below is a formula for messaging that we tested in the focus groups, in which we found virtually everyone in our target audiences can agree on the root causes of crime, but disagree about who is at fault for public safety problems and prefer not to dwell on where to place the blame.

The theme of prevention over punishment was most popular with both our base and persuasion audiences. This theme highlights that we have focused for too long on *punishing* people for crime and that it is time to focus on *preventing* crime by investing in root causes and then continue on to list the services that best suit your community. These investments that participants particularly liked included education, after school programs, healthcare services, childcare services, and job training.

We generally suggest using this formula to build a message:
1. *State the problem* (this is where the most disagreement comes from)
2. *Cite a shared value to bring connection*
3. *Offer a solution* (this is where we agree)

Focus group participant reactions to our tested statements along with our recommendations are below.

Problem Statements
Across all groups, participants find common ground on the statements that are highlighted in green, such as agreeing that police are being asked to do services they shouldn't be doing and that there are better alternatives. This sentiment warms up the audience for embracing a solution rather than casting blame: the idea of "alternatives" is not framed as a response to police failures, but as a solution to our collective desire for common-sense policy that pairs the right responder with the right emergency. This intro helps to prevent the jump that many of the persuasion participants would make when we introduced public safety measures: assuming we are advocating for no first responders to emergencies at all, and visualizing the chaos of the opposition's attack ads that circulated during the 2020 election.

Problem Statement Themes (in order of popularity)
Wording in green is sentiment that received positive feedback by participants, yellow represents conflicting feedback, and red represents negative feedback.

    A. Our public safety problem comes from police officers asked to do too much in terms of social services where other professionals could fill in the gaps such as social workers or mental healthcare professionals.

    B. Our public safety system puts almost all of its resources into policing and other efforts to respond to harms that have already happened, instead of investing in programs that can prevent violence in the first place.

    C. The public safety problem comes from politicians continuously neglecting the needs of those most vulnerable by sacrificing social safety nets and services that help keep people out of poverty with health care and housing.

    D. Our public safety problem comes from politicians failing to support police officers with enough training and resources.

    E. Our public safety problem comes from a few bad apples in police departments that target people of color and keep the public from trusting officers to do their job.

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Value Statements

There aren't many ways to go wrong with a value statement according to the participants we talked to. The wording that they praise most is **"the health and wellbeing of everyone"** as they like that it captures all aspects of need for a person. When asked what they like about the message, some participants in the Black and Latinx groups appreciate the "Black and Brown community" call outs; other Black and Latinx participants are more conflicted, worried that highlighting these specific communities would make the message less broadly popular and preferring language that explicitly describes "everyone" instead of specific groups. Overall, the groups conclude it is important to highlight that services uplifting Black and Brown communities will uplift *everyone*.

Value Statement Themes (in order of popularity)
Wording in green is sentiment that received positive feedback by participants, yellow was conflicting feedback, and red was negative feedback.

  A. Prioritizing public safety is important to ensure the health and wellbeing of everyone.
  B. Prioritizing public safety is important to ensure that every Black and Brown community can benefit from the same kind of safety that wealthier, predominantly white communities enjoy everyday without constant police intervention.
  C. Public safety is important because we should all care about uplifting people out of poverty and ensuring no one is forced to live on the streets.
  D. Prioritizing public safety is important to ensure that our families are all safe in their own homes and walking the streets at night.

Solution Statements

The **"prevention over punishment"** sentiment seems to be the clear path forward as a way to center messaging for our solutions. Participants widely embrace the "prevention over punishment" framework for a number of reasons, but primarily because it clearly makes the point that shifting our focus to *preventing*, rather than reacting to, crime could bring about change while uplifting the community as a whole. Participants really like citing and including research wherever possible because they found statements more powerful when they could be verified.

Solution Statement Themes (in order of popularity)
Wording in green is sentiment that received positive feedback by participants, yellow was conflicting feedback, and red was negative feedback.

  A. We have focused long enough on locking people up to solve the public safety problem; we should start turning to addressing root causes of crime like poverty and inequitable access to opportunity to uplift the whole community by focusing on prevention instead of punishment.
  B. We can improve public safety by using some of the police budget to increase social services so that the proper professionals are being sent to emergency calls that the police do not need to handle, such as someone on drugs, a homeless encampment, or someone in emotional or mental distress.
  C. We can improve public safety by allowing police to focus on other more serious matters other than responding to calls about people on drugs, experiencing homelessness, or mental distress; especially when there are more qualified professionals who have the education and training to handle these situations.

D. We can improve public safety by holding our elected officials accountable to ensure that our social services are being invested in and expanded to account for the increasing number of people falling into poverty and onto the streets without access to food, healthcare, or housing.

IV. Message Guidance

CENTER THE COMMUNITY AND THE SOLUTION, NOT THE "VILLAIN" AND THE CONFLICT. Instead of asserting how and why police fail, talk about what we know <u>does</u> keep communities safe and articulate a positive vision. Remember that our knowledge and research sometimes runs counter to people's intuition (for example, people are totally unconvinced by arguments that reference evidence that in many circumstances, contact with police can actually increase, not decrease, likelihood to commit crime).

CALL OUT OUR RELIANCE ON POLICE TO SOLVE EVERY PROBLEM. Persuadables express some reflexive resistance to saying that police/policing is the problem, and for this audience, messaging about police failure is less effective than messaging about positive solutions. Calling out our *reliance on policing to solve every problem* is a more successful frame. Frame this as police doing more harm than good when they try to do other people's jobs.

"Police cannot be the answer to every kind of societal issue. They are not mental health experts, or addiction specialists, or housing coordinators, and they do a poor job addressing these needs and can even cause more harm than good. Let's end our over-reliance on police to fix problems that shouldn't be their job to handle in the first place by funding better-suited first responders for certain emergencies."

On a scale of 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), **54% of all respondents, 80% of persuadables, and 91% of base supporters rate this between a 7 and a 10**.[6]

ARGUE FOR "COMMON SENSE" SOLUTIONS. Message alternatives to policing as a common-sense solution that pairs the right responder with the right emergency.

"It's just common sense that police are not the right answer to every single problem. Isn't this something we already know? When someone is having a medical emergency, don't we send paramedics? Mental health emergencies call for trained mental health professionals; people struggling with homelessness or addiction need experts to connect them with resources. If we want to deal appropriately with these problems, our city budgets should devote more money to alternative first responders, not just pour money into police budgets."

On a scale of 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), **49% of all respondents, 71% of persuadables, and 93% of base supporters rate this between a 7 and a 10.**[7]

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[6] Data from poll 3.
[7] Data from poll 3.

WHEN COUNTERING "CRIME RISING" NARRATIVE, EMPHASIZE PREVENTION.
Acknowledge people's concerns about safety and empathize with their desire to feel safe in their communities. Talk about the (research-validated) importance of addressing root causes of crime in order to prevent it, not just punish it.

"No one wants to fear violence in their communities or to have their property destroyed or stolen. But if we want to actually protect people, and not just posture and signal about being tough on crime, we have to think about prevention, not punishment. The evidence is clear: research shows a strong connection between failure to provide social services and higher rates of crime, and we have to start investing in these proven solutions. We have to address the reasons for these problems instead of spending limited city budgets on flooding the streets with cops."

On a scale of 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), **49% of all respondents, 77% of persuadables, and 91% of base supporters rate this between a 7 and a 10.**[8]

BACK UP YOUR FACTS AND CONNECT THEM TO NARRATIVES. People want to see proof and research, but they also need us to tell a convincing story with a clear, compelling narrative. Remember that we are talking about people's sense of safety in their communities. If we want to convince them, we have to give them a clear theory of the case, and proof that our ideas are good ones.

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[8] Data from poll 3.

FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Focus groups were 90-minute groups conducted online through Zoom by HIT Strategies, December 7-9, 2021 and were informed by the first baseline poll. There were 8-10 participants per group. All focus groups were conducted in English. Participants were recruited via an opt-in online panel through a third-party nationwide focus group vendor. A recruitment screener based on what is defined in the "demographics" column to ensure that participants best fit the specifications of the study and received compensation for completing the focus group.

GEO	DATE & TIME	DEMOGRAPHICS
Nationwide	5:30pm – 7:00pm ET Tuesday, December 7, 2021	White, Female, Ages 35-60, Moderate or Democrat, Progressive or liberal, Favorable towards ACLU, Suburban, Somewhat favorable or opposed to Defund the Police, 50% Parents with kids under the age of 18.
Nationwide	7:30pm – 9:00pm ET Tuesday, December 7, 2021	Mixed race, Mixed gender, Ages 35 – 60, Democrat, Progressive or Liberal, Favorable towards ACLU, Strongly supports Defund the Police
Nationwide	5:30pm – 7:00pm ET Wednesday, December 8, 2021	Latinx, Female, Ages 18-50, Democrat, Progressive or liberal, Favorable towards ACLU, Somewhat favorable or opposed to Defund the Police
Nationwide	7:30pm – 9:00pm ET Wednesday, December 8, 2021	Mixed race, Mixed gender, Ages 18 – 34, Democrat, Progressive or Liberal, Favorable towards ACLU, Strongly supports Defund the Police
Nationwide	5:30pm – 7:00pm ET Thursday, December 9, 2021	Black, Female, Ages 35-60, Democrat, Progressive or liberal, Favorable towards ACLU, Somewhat favorable or opposed to Defund the Police, 50% Parents with kids under the age of 18.
Nationwide	7:30pm – 9:00pm ET Thursday, December 9, 2021	Black, Male, Ages 35-60, Democrat, Progressive or liberal, Favorable towards ACLU, Somewhat favorable or opposed to Defund the Police

POLL METHODOLOGY

Three polls were conducted in total. We used some or all of the following sources to recruit respondents:
- targeted advertisements on Facebook and Instagram.
- targeted advertisements on individual websites via Google and/or Facebook's ad platform.
- text messages sent, via the Switchboard platform, to cell phone numbers listed on the voter file for individuals who qualified for the survey's sample universe, based on their voter file data.

Poll 1: Change Research 1,991 American adults nationwide from October 25-28, 2021 including an oversample of Black adults. A total of 1,877 respondents came from Facebook advertisements, and a total of 114 respondents came from text messages.

Poll 2: Change Research 1,980 American adults nationwide from January 20-25, 2022 including oversamples of both Black and Latinx adults. A total of 1,229 respondents came from Facebook advertisements, and a total of 759 respondents came from text messages.

Poll 3: Change Research 1,514 American adults nationwide from February 26-March 1, 2022. A total of 1,272 respondents came from Facebook advertisements, and a total of 265 respondents came from text messages.

Regardless of which of these sources a respondent came from, they were directed to a survey hosted on SurveyMonkey's website. Ads placed on social media targeted any adult living in the United States. As the survey fielded, Change Research used dynamic online sampling: adjusting ad budgets, lowering budgets for ads targeting groups that were overrepresented and raising budgets for ads targeting groups that were underrepresented, so that the final sample was roughly representative of the population across different groups. All three surveys were

conducted in English and Spanish.

The surveys were conducted online by Change Research. They were commissioned by the ACLU, which works on a range of policing issues employing a variety of different strategies. Post-stratification was performed on age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, region, and 2020 presidential vote. Weighting parameters were estimated based on the electorates from the 2020 general election, obtained from the voter file. That is, if a given age bracket or gender group represented x% of the 2020 electorate, then that same group would be roughly weighted to x% in this survey.

The modeled margin of error*, which uses effective sample sizes** that adjust for the design effect of weighting, are as follows:
- Poll 1: 2.82%
- Poll 2: 2.57%
- Poll 3: 2.91%

Participation in the survey was voluntary; no incentives were offered for participation. Participants were given the opportunity to voluntarily provide personal information, including their name and email, but this information was used only to confirm users' identity, and was not shared with any third parties. Before sharing any such information, participants were shown a privacy policy indicating how the information would be used. The survey was conducted in accordance with AAPOR guidelines.

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* We adopt The Pew Research Center's convention for the term "modeled margin of error"(1) (mMOE) to indicate that our surveys are not simple random samples in the pure sense, similar to any survey that has either non-response bias or for which the general population was not invited at random. A common, if imperfect, convention for reporting survey results is to use a single, survey-level mMOE based on a normal approximation. This is a poor approximation for proportion estimates close to 0 or 1. However, it is a useful communication tool in many settings and is reasonable in places where the proportion of interest is close to 50%. We report this normal approximation for our surveys assuming a proportion estimate of 50%.

** The effective sample size adjusts for the weighting applied to respondents, and is calculated using Kish's approximation (2).

(1) https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2018/01/26/for-weighting-online-opt-in-samples-what-matters-most/ (2) Kish, Leslie. Survey Sampling, 1965.
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