

To: Interested Parties

From: Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Sandra Markowitz, *Lake Research Partners*

RE: Exit Poll Findings on Perceptions of Crime, Public Safety, and Philadelphia's Next Mayor

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The following memo offers key insights from a survey of registered, likely voters conducted in the final days of the Democratic primary for mayor in Philadelphia. In yet another major-city municipal election where crime and public safety dominated the issue agenda, voters once again showed an understanding of these issues far more complex and nuanced than the political discourse and conventional wisdom would have suggested. The most traditional “law and order” candidate, endorsed by the Philadelphia Fraternity of Police, won less than 10 percent of the vote. The winner of this election—Cherelle Parker—as well as the two other leading candidates—Rebecca Rhynhart and Helen Gym—responded to voter enthusiasm with platforms that offered a comprehensive approach to preventing crime and delivering safety.

This survey reveals that when offered options for how to address these issues, **voters overwhelmingly express a preference for a solutions-oriented approach to crime that includes tackling root causes over traditional “tough on crime” approaches.**

We also see in this data differentiated views of the police, whom voters tend to support, and the police union, which they view critically. District Attorney Larry Krasner is also quite popular among voters, despite attacks from politicians and a media narrative presenting him as a highly controversial figure, highlighting the support for a prevention-oriented approach to safety. Most important for the future of the city, voters elevate a host of policies to reduce crime, most prominently more mental health services and drug addiction programs and cracking down on illegal guns, over adding to (or subtracting from) the police force.

This memo is based on a survey of 600 likely Democratic primary voters in Philadelphia using voter file sample. Seventy percent of respondents were called via live phone calls to cells and landlines and 30 percent via text-to-online methodology. The survey was conducted from May 11 – 16, 2023. The margin of error is +/- 4.0 percent at the 95 percent confidence interval.

Key Takeaways

1. Concerns over crime and safety dominated voters' issue agenda.

- With near unanimity, 97 percent of voters agree that crime is a serious problem in Philadelphia, including three-quarters (76 percent) who see it as a very serious problem. Just 2 percent of voters do not see crime as serious problem. However, as detailed on the following page, voters overwhelmingly prefer an approach to safety that focuses on preventing crime and addressing its root causes over a “tough on crime” approach.
 - Voters are somewhat less likely to describe crime in their own neighborhoods as a serious problem, though more than two-thirds (70

percent) still agree with this characterization compared to 29 percent who do not.

- Concerns over crime—both citywide and in voters’ own neighborhoods—look to be more pronounced among voters of color than among white voters, though concerns are elevated across the board.
- Gun violence is far and away the most troubling aspect of crime to voters, with 53 percent picking it as one of their top two most concerning aspects, followed by violent crime at 28 percent.
 - Illegal guns come in at 20 percent, followed by street crime at 17 percent and juvenile crime at 16 percent. Hate crimes and carjackings are top concerns for 12 percent of voters each, followed by sexual assault and domestic violence (11 percent), illegal drug use (10 percent), and gangs (7 percent).
- The issues voters most want the next mayor to address indicate both a broader agenda and a more thoughtful approach to dealing with crime and public safety than political debate and media coverage often suggest.
 - **The issues voters consider “very important” for the mayor are dealing with the root causes of crime (84 percent), safe communities (84 percent), public education (84 percent), guns (82 percent), dealing with the drivers of crime (81 percent), and addressing crime more generally (79 percent).**
 - Close behind in a second tier of concerns voters rank “very important” for the next mayor to address are asbestos-free school buildings (76 percent), homelessness (74 percent), affordable housing (70 percent), the economy and jobs (69 percent), public infrastructure, e.g., more green spaces, well-lit and maintained streets (69 percent), drugs (66 percent), healthcare costs (62 percent), and public transportation (60 percent).

2. Philadelphia voters would much rather address crime and public safety through crime prevention and tackling root causes than a “tough on crime” approach.

- When asked to select which of two statements they think is a better approach to addressing crime and public safety in Philadelphia, fully 72 percent side with the following: *“Fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities and improve people’s quality of life, like good schools, a living wage, and affordable housing, and do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and cracking down on illegal gun sales.”*
 - Just 22 percent of voters prefer the “tough on crime” approach outlined in the following alternative statement: *“Doing more to get tough on crime, like having stricter sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep potentially dangerous people in jail, and giving police more support and resources.”*
 - Every major demographic and political group in the city prefers the broader, solutions-oriented approach to crime prevention. This includes 69 percent of Black voters, 67 percent of Latino voters, and 74 percent of white voters.

3. Despite the conventional wisdom that a tougher approach to crime won out, here is what voters see as the most effective policies for reducing crime: cracking down on illegal guns (32 percent choose this as one of their top two solutions), providing more mental health services and drug addiction programs (32 percent), offering more jobs and economic opportunities (26 percent), providing more after-school programs (24 percent), and implementing proven violence prevention programs (20 percent).
 - Slightly lower on the list of preferred solutions is increasing police in neighborhoods/more community policing (18 percent).
 - At the bottom are a range of “tough on crime” policies such as hiring more police (13 percent), changing bail laws to keep violent criminals in jail (11 percent), and having stricter penalties and longer sentences (10 percent).
4. While all three leading candidates earned voters’ trust on crime and public safety, the candidate with the solutions-oriented approach to preventing crime handily wins the debate over the “tough on crime” candidate in a blind head-to-head.
 - In a two-way engaged debate, juxtaposing two unnamed candidates’ positions on crime and safety, the candidate with the solutions-oriented message on crime prevention has the clear edge, winning 50 percent to 38 percent.

Now I am going to read you some statements about the candidates for Mayor. Please say which one comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right.

[ORDER OF STATEMENTS RANDOMIZED]

Candidate one’s top priority will be to ensure everyone in Philadelphia is safe and feels safe. As a Councilmember, this candidate helped launch the first non-police mental health mobile crisis units to allow police officers to focus on violent crime and urgent situations requiring their expertise. As Mayor, they will expand crisis response services to improve how we respond to mental health needs, homelessness, addiction, and domestic violence. They will get illegal guns off our streets, reduce 9-1-1 response times, and work to prevent crime before it happens instead of just reacting after.

50 percent prefer this approach

Candidate two will end the sense of lawlessness in Philadelphia and bring order back to our city. This candidate will hire 300 more beat and bike police officers to put in every neighborhood and rehire retired police to fill administrative positions to get more cops on the street. They’ll hold cops accountable but refuse to let crime and violence take over our city. They’ll invest in mental healthcare and teen mentoring and get guns off our street. They opposed the loudest voices asking to defund the police.

38 percent prefer this approach

- In a version of the engaged debate where the two alternating positions are attributed to Gym and Parker, voters are roughly split in their preferences (46 percent for Parker to 42 percent for Gym). While the media narrative may cast the election as a rejection of Helen Gym’s stance on crime, there is nothing in the data to substantiate that conclusion. In fact, the numbers suggest Gym might have improved her chances by doubling down on her prevention-focused message for community safety.

5. **All three of the leading candidates in the mayoral race—Cherelle Parker, Helen Gym, and Rebecca Rhynhart—entered Election Day personally popular and with credibility in voters’ eyes on matters of crime and public safety.**
- The three leading candidates all boast similarly positive personal image ratings. Sixty percent of voters have a favorable impression of Parker (incl. 26 percent very favorable), 58 percent have a favorable impression of Rhynhart (incl. 24 percent very favorable), and 51 percent have a favorable impression of Gym (incl. 23 percent very favorable).
 - Majorities of voters have trust in all three candidates when it comes to reducing crime in Philadelphia. Levels of trust are slightly higher for Parker (62 percent) and Rhynhart (61 percent) than for Gym (54 percent), but the difference is modest. This is despite [a media narrative](#) centering Parker (along with Jeff Brown, Allen Domb, and Amen Brown) as the “tough on crime” candidate.
6. **Highlighting the support for a prevention-oriented approach to safety, voters view progressive district attorney Larry Krasner, who has long embraced this approach, favorably (57 percent favorable to 30 percent unfavorable).**
- His favorability among voters is just above the Philadelphia Police Department (50 percent favorable to 45 percent unfavorable) and significantly higher than support for the Philadelphia Fraternal Order of Police (34 percent favorable to 52 percent unfavorable).

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