



# Five Big Ideas for New York City's Next Mayor to Deliver Safety, Accountability, and Justice

By  
Alana Sivin  
Benjamin Heller  
Brian King

March  
2025

**IDEA #1** Invest in the full range of tools in the public safety toolbox to prevent crime, respond to crisis, and stop violence. 5

**IDEA #2** Deliver better, more effective, and more accountable policing that lives up to the responsibility of the role. 10

**IDEA #3** Make the subways safer by comprehensively addressing the daily signs of crisis and neglect. 16

**IDEA #4** Improve the shopping experience for both workers and consumers. 19

**IDEA #5** Close Rikers Island and implement a new approach to accountability and safely reducing the jail population. 21

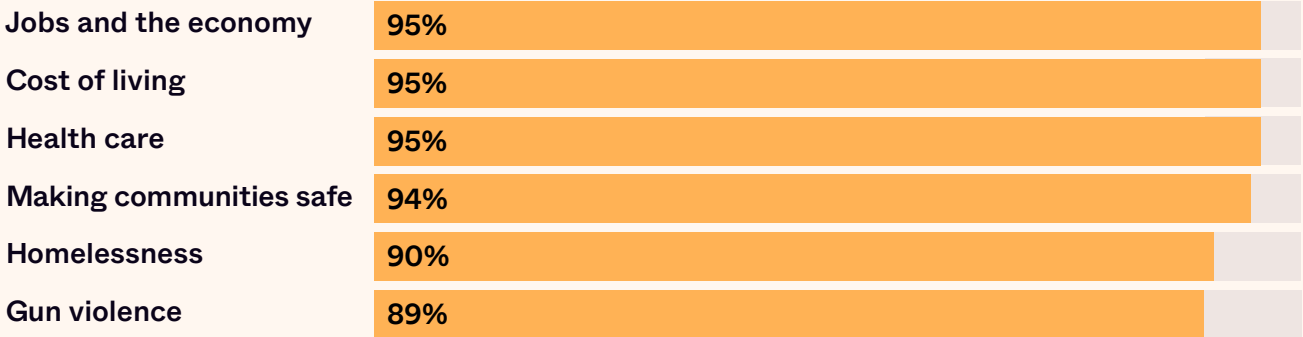
# Introduction

A comfortable place to live. An easy commute on the subway. Green spaces, well-lit streets, and good schools. Economic opportunity and the chance to get ahead—not just get by. This is the New York City that we deserve. To make it a reality, the next mayor must prioritize safety, accountability, and justice.

Yet we know that success will not come easily. New York City remains one of the safest cities in the country and has made significant progress since crime increased sharply during the pandemic. Today, shootings and homicides have declined toward pre-pandemic levels, and young people aged 15 to 29 are committing fewer violent crimes than before the pandemic. Major crimes have fallen to a two-year low, yet overall, remain almost 30 percent higher today than in 2019, including a troubling rise in felony assaults and grand larceny.

When the 5BORO Institute recently asked 3,000 New Yorkers to choose two words describing their feelings about the city, a third chose “unsafe.” Polling and media coverage reveal a feeling that things are not quite right—from signs of everyday disorder, like vacant storefronts and dirtier streets, to the perception of a city out of control, with more people in crisis on the subway and retailers locking toothpaste in plastic cases—all of which exacerbates worries about crime.

**Vera Action asked likely Democratic voters which issues are important or very important to their vote.**



Source: Vera Action poll conducted by Lake Research Partners, December 12-19, 2024, n=640 likely New York City Democratic primary voters.

There are no simple answers to these hard problems, but New Yorkers deserve an honest debate—one grounded in facts and evidence on what works to prevent crime and make our neighborhoods, subways, and stores welcoming places for all. An honest debate means following the data, even when it contradicts frequently repeated assumptions. For example, New Yorkers should know that multiple studies have found that reforms such as [Raise the Age](#) and [bail reform](#) have had no meaningful impact on crime rates despite much baseless exaggeration. Undoing these reforms will not solve anything, but rollbacks will make New York’s criminal justice system less fair. In fact, when reminded about the injustice of the old cash bail system—which allowed rich people to pay their way out of jail while poor people languished behind bars—a [majority](#) (52 percent) of New York City voters remain supportive of the state’s bail reform law.

New Yorkers deserve more than just tough talk or performative measures that fail to address the underlying drivers of crime, crisis, and violence. The next mayor can

- increase **safety** by championing a comprehensive approach of relying on the right tools and responders to prevent crime, respond to crisis, and stop violence;
- deliver **accountability** at all levels—for people who break the law; for police when they abuse their power; for elected officials when they misuse public money, ignore evidence and data, and squander trust; and for the criminal justice system to actually keep us safe; and
- administer **justice** by reducing unnecessary arrest and incarceration and by following the law to close Rikers Island once and for all.

New Yorkers know that there is no false choice between safety, accountability, and justice—we deserve and can have all three.

This report presents concrete solutions in five areas: building a comprehensive community safety infrastructure; delivering better, more accountable policing; increasing subway safety; making the shopping experience better for businesses and consumers; and closing Rikers Island. Our goal is to broaden the debate in this mayoral race to reflect what a majority of New York City voters want: a comprehensive approach to preventing crime, responding to crisis, and stopping violence instead of going back to “tough-on-crime” policies.

## IDEA # 1

**Invest in the full range of tools in the public safety toolbox to prevent crime, respond to crisis, and stop violence.**



In a [December 2024 poll](#) from Vera Action with Lake Research Partners, New York City Democratic likely primary voters ranked “making communities safe” as a top priority—trailing only behind jobs and the economy, cost of living, and healthcare.

Too often, politicians assume that voters concerned about safety want to see stricter laws and more police. In fact, voters want a response that prevents crime before it happens instead of just reacting after. By a margin of 16 percentage points, New York City Democratic primary voters prefer a comprehensive approach to safety that includes fully funding good schools, jobs, affordable housing, treatment, and gun violence prevention over getting more “tough on crime.”

## New York City Democratic primary voters prefer a message of comprehensive safety solutions to a “tough-on-crime” message.

### TOUGH ON CRIME

Do more to get tough on crime—like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people in jail, and providing police more support and resources.

42%

### COMPREHENSIVE SAFETY

Fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities—like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing—and help prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street.

58%

Source: Vera Action poll conducted by Lake Research Partners, December 12-19, 2024, n=640 likely New York City Democratic primary voters.

Further, 52 percent of white voters, 64 percent of Black voters, 56 percent of Latino voters, and 64 percent of AAPI voters in New York City prefer the comprehensive approach to safety.

New Yorkers understand that we need to use the full range of tools in the public safety toolbox to prevent crime, respond to crisis, and stop violence. While New York City has in recent years invested more than \$200 million in community-based violence prevention, \$50 million in treatment to fight the opioid crisis, and \$6.4 million in dedicated housing for people frequently cycling through the jail system, community-based public safety investments pale in comparison to the \$11 billion annual budget of the New York Police Department (NYPD).

**Community-based public safety investments pale in comparison to the \$11 billion annual budget of the NYPD.**

For too long we have deployed police as the first and only responder, asking them to intervene in mental health crises and other crisis situations that they are not well positioned to handle and are beyond their expertise. This can result in avoidable tragedies like the police shootings of Win Rosario, Raul de la Cruz, and many others in moments of crisis. Instead of tasking police officers to do the jobs of social workers and mental health providers, the next mayor must build out a robust, comprehensive public safety infrastructure that relies on the right community-based tools and the right responders.

## EXPAND COMMUNITY-BASED TREATMENT AND CRISIS RESPONSE TO MEET THE ACUTE NEED.

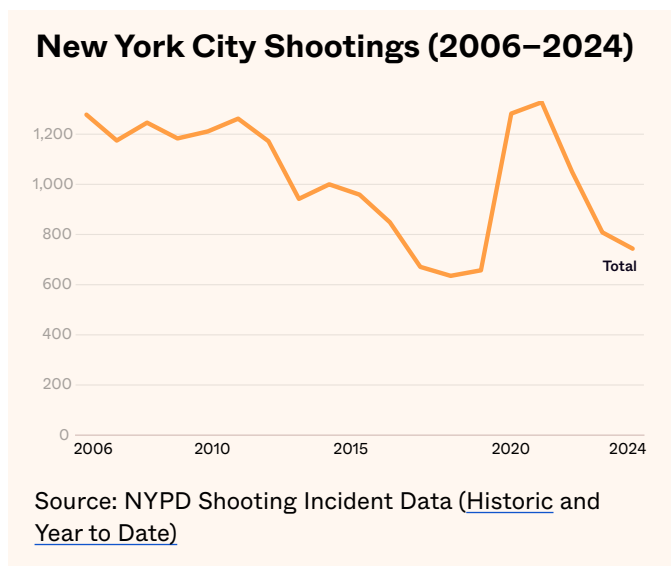
Mental health and drug treatment, housing, jobs, education, and services can be a firewall to prevent crime in the first place and [break its cycle](#). The next mayor can rightsize investment in community-based public safety infrastructure by:

- **Delivering an unprecedented investment in the city’s infrastructure of community-based crisis response, treatment, and services.** This includes expansion of [Intensive Mobile Treatment \(IMT\)](#) teams, which provide proactive support to people with serious mental health conditions, and expansion of community-based crisis response teams, such as [B-HEARD](#), which send trained civilian experts instead of police to address mental health-related 911 calls. To [reduce hospital stays and cut costs](#), the city must also expand its network of [crisis respite centers](#), [clubhouses](#), and [stabilization centers](#) staffed by teams of physicians, social workers, case workers, and peer specialists. For example, [one year of services](#) at a clubhouse reduces psychiatric admissions and costs the same amount as a two-week psychiatric stay. Finally, when people are hospitalized for a mental health crisis, they must be [discharged with a stabilization plan](#) for care in the community to keep them from cycling in and out of hospitals and jail.

## ADDRESS THE DRIVERS OF GUN VIOLENCE WITH A NEIGHBORHOOD-SPECIFIC APPROACH.

Neighborhoods are unlivable when residents regularly hear gunshots or fear going outside. New York City has made tremendous progress in reducing gun violence—with shootings this year at their lowest [since 1993](#)—but there is still more to do. The next mayor can drive down gun violence even further by:

- **Doubling funding for proven community-based interventions to expand programs to neighborhoods in need.**  
Community violence intervention



(CVI) programs, which are under the city's Crisis Management System, provide mentorship and services for people at greatest risk of committing or experiencing gun violence. These investments save lives. In New York City, CVI programs have contributed to a 21 percent reduction in shootings in the neighborhoods where they operate. Existing community-based and hospital-based CVI programs must be expanded, and the city should commit to at least doubling the current funding for these programs to launch programs in new neighborhoods and health care facilities.

## **BUILD MORE AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND INVEST IN PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENTS THAT MAKE STREETS AND NEIGHBORHOODS SAFER.**

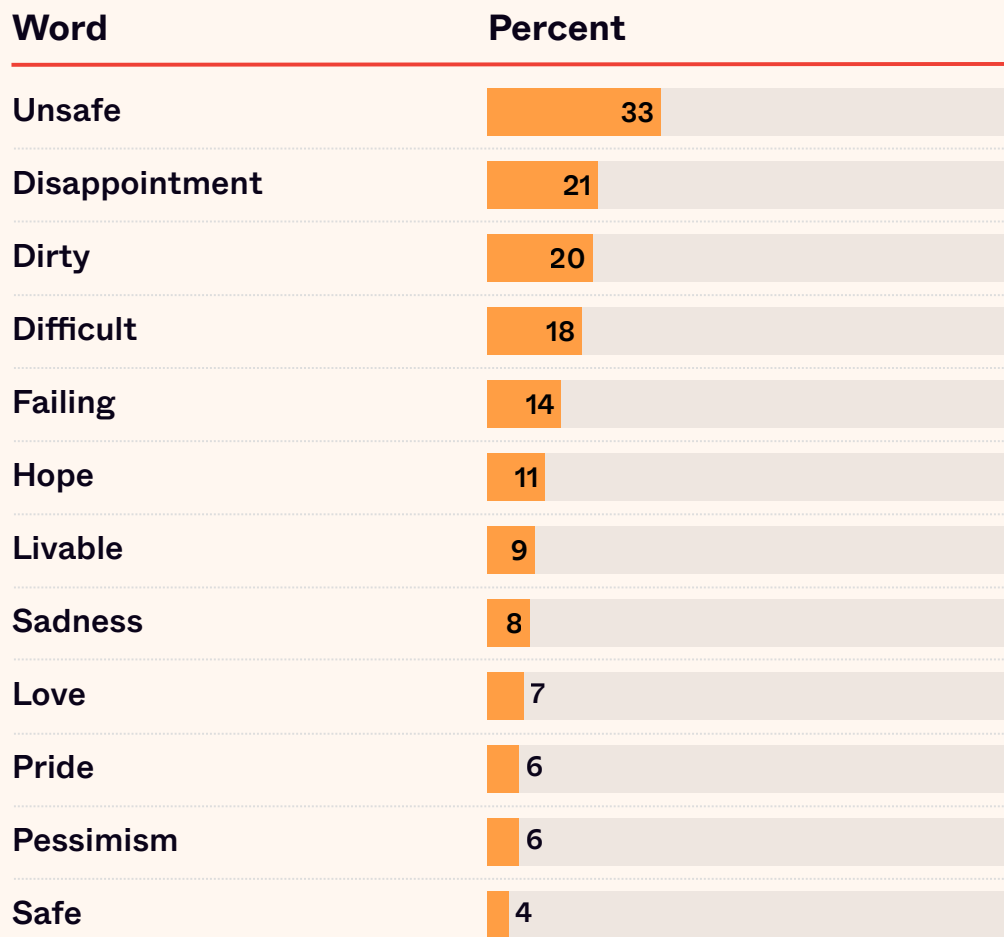
A safe neighborhood has good schools, affordable housing, access to medical care and other treatment, well-paying jobs, and neighbors who look out for each other and are invested in where they live. When it comes to our built environment, the next mayor can make it safer by:

- **Expanding access to vouchers and supportive housing programs.** New York City is facing a severe shortage of safe, affordable, and stable housing, and housing costs are growing at a greater rate than other major cities. Lack of housing leads to many New Yorkers cycling in and out jail, and a stable home is essential to breaking that cycle. The city must prioritize housing vouchers and expand programs like Justice Involved Supportive Housing (JISH) that provide treatment, medical care, and services in addition to a stable home. Permanent supportive housing has been proven to reduce incarceration, homeless shelter stays, and emergency hospitalizations. And it does so at a fraction of the cost of incarceration: a year of JISH for one person costs just \$41,833 compared to \$507,000 for a year on Rikers.
- **Building better physical infrastructure to make the city safer.** When the 5BORO Institute survey asked voters to choose two words to describe the city, 20 percent said “dirty” and only 9 percent chose “livable.” Simple fixes, such as more green spaces and better lighting, both improve quality of life *and* reduce crime. One study in Philadelphia showed that cleaning and greening vacant lots was associated with a 12.3 percent reduction in gun assaults citywide, while a New York City study showed that better lighting reduced serious crime in public housing complexes by 4 percent. New York City should revitalize the original Mayor’s Action Plan (MAP) for Neighborhood Safety program, a targeted community-based safety investment in 15 public housing developments that led to a 15.4 percent drop in misdemeanors



and a 6.3 percent drop in major felonies in those communities compared to public housing developments that were not a part of the original MAP. Building upon [lessons learned](#), the MAP program should expand investment in beautification, sanitation, and neighborhood cleanup beyond the original 15 communities. The city should select new communities by identifying neighborhoods that lack green spaces and playgrounds, have the highest number of vacant and abandoned lots, and the most density of shelters and treatment programs.

**The 5BORO Institute asked 3,000 New York City adults to pick the two words that “best describe how you feel about New York City right now.”**



Source: 5BORO Institute, “[The People’s Pulse](#)” survey, conducted by Slingshot Strategies, January 21-30, n=3,000 NYC adults.

## IDEA #2

**Deliver better, more effective, and more accountable policing that lives up to the responsibility of the role.**



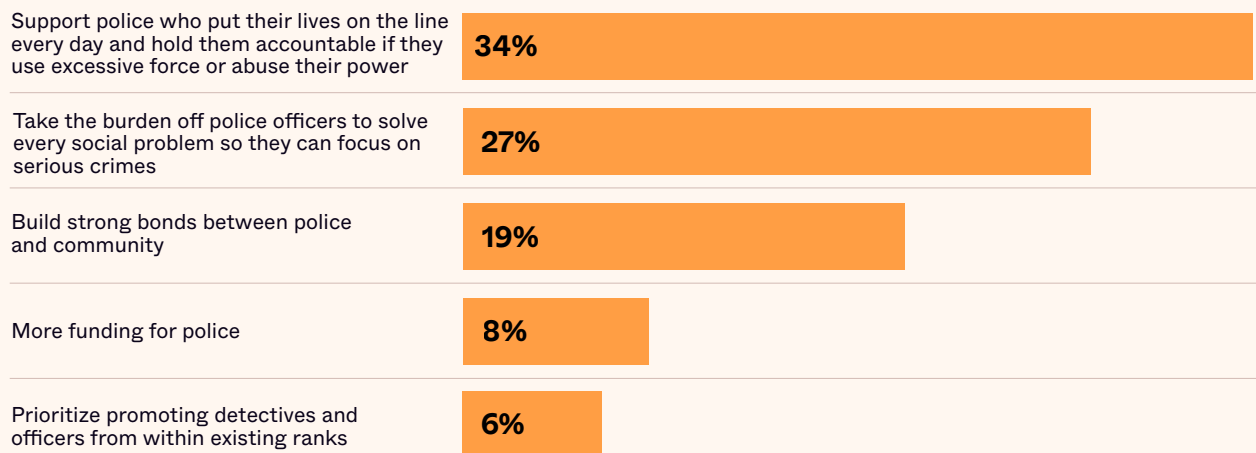
Police are the largest part of the city’s public safety infrastructure and serve as the default first responder to many situations and crises—from very minor to extremely serious. While it has been a few years since the NYPD polled public sentiment, their last survey in 2020–21 bears this out: roughly two-thirds of New Yorkers overall said that the police address the concerns of the community, stand up for the community’s values, treat people with respect, and can be trusted. But those numbers plummeted by 20 percentage points or more among residents in neighborhoods experiencing the highest levels of violent crime. We need an honest conversation about what constitutes accountable, efficient, and effective policing for all New Yorkers—but that debate is too often overtaken by fraught politics.

By all measures, the NYPD is unique in its size and budget. It has roughly 34,000 sworn police officers and costs \$11 billion a year. Even with recent retention challenges, the NYPD

still has more police per capita than most jurisdictions. Yet despite its levels of staffing and resources, many NYPD officers are dissatisfied with their work. Extra shifts led the city to spend more than \$1 billion on overtime costs in the last fiscal year alone. This is not sustainable, either for the budget or for the officers forced to work such long hours, where job stress and fatigue can lead to impaired performance and put the public at risk.

In the December Vera Action poll, the top response on policing (one-third of New York City Democratic primary voters) was supporting the police and holding them accountable if they use excessive force or abuse their power. Focusing only on more funding for police lagged by 26 percentage points.

### **New York City Democratic primary voters prefer a message of supporting the police and holding them accountable.**



Source: Vera Action poll conducted by Lake Research Partners, December 12-19, 2024, n=640 likely New York City Democratic primary voters.

The answer to our city’s policing problems cannot be simply more police—but rather to deliver better, more effective, and more accountable policing.

### **INVEST IN TRAINING AND REDEPLOYMENT TO OVERHAUL NYPD OPERATIONS AND CULTURE.**

When police are on the beat, patrolling the subways, or responding to an emergency, we need to support them so that they can focus on responding to violence and serious crime. The next mayor can rightsize the budget and staffing of the NYPD, restore dignity and well-being to policing, ensure officers feel proud to wear the uniform and supported to do their jobs, and build a new culture from the ground up by:

- Civilianizing the force.** As highlighted in a [2019 survey](#) by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, maintaining historic levels of police staffing has been a long-standing challenge for departments across the country. Generational differences, the public image of law enforcement, and rigidity in hiring have led to fewer applicants overall. It is [not obvious](#) that increasing the current head count of sworn officers or expanding the department budget will deliver better policing outcomes. Crime has recently [plunged](#) in many cities despite shrinking police forces, perhaps most notably in [Minneapolis](#). Instead of trying to maintain an outdated staffing model, the NYPD should embrace a structure that is more responsive to the demands of modern-day policing. One answer is to [employ civilians](#) for specific functions that do not require officers' expertise so that current sworn officers can be redeployed on patrol and other critical functions. Civilianizing is a decades-old trend, but too few police departments have meaningfully adopted this strategy despite the potential to save costs, improve outcomes, and boost morale. The next mayor can make New York City a national leader by hiring civilians in many of the administrative and management roles currently occupied by uniformed officers—such as transit and traffic enforcement, investigations, community engagement, forensics, and internal affairs—so that current sworn officers can be redeployed. NYPD Commissioner Tisch has already moved [500 sworn officers](#) back to key roles like patrol, a first step in this direction.

- Focusing on the right priorities and limiting low-level enforcement, especially on the subways.** Officers should focus on the most important priorities—such as [improving response times](#) and [raising case clearance rates](#) by investigating and solving violent crime. The mayor and governor have sent [thousands of law enforcement officers](#) (including the [National Guard](#)) into the subways over the last few years, and arrests for fare evasion rose by [126 percent](#) in 2024. Despite more police in the subways and heightened enforcement, a [recent survey](#) found that barely half of New Yorkers (52 percent) report feeling safe on the subway



during the daytime—a number that drops to only 28 percent at night. And serious tragedies, like the [shooting of four people last year](#) following a jumped turnstile, only further underscore that this kind of zealous enforcement of low-level conduct is not without cost. Officers on patrol in the subways should aim to deter violent encounters and, instead of focusing on low-level enforcement that [does not improve safety](#), should be a reassuring presence to all riders. They can do so by avoiding overt displays of weapons, body armor, or other gear that intimidate many straphangers and do more to [undermine trust in police](#) than to make the subways safe.

- **Improving training and evaluation.** The importance of strong training to improve policing cannot be overstated. In [one three-city study](#), procedural justice training was associated with a 14 percent crime decline, with officers making fewer arrests and residents perceiving them as less likely to harass or use unnecessary force. Several [recent studies](#) also found that rigorous de-escalation training leads to double-digit drops (anywhere from 28 to 40 percent) in use-of-force incidents. However, procedural justice and de-escalation skills are “[perishable](#),” meaning that they must be reinforced by regular training updates and a department culture that prioritizes safe, respectful, and constructive interactions with the public. Regularly evaluating officers on their performance—which includes their ability to stop violence, solve cases, and keep New Yorkers safe—is key to making these operational changes permanent.
- **Implementing culture change from the ground up.** The [trust gap](#) between [some New Yorkers](#) and the police can make this job difficult and [undermine safety](#). But trust will not be repaired by training and operational changes alone. True culture change towards a “[guardian](#)” [approach to policing](#)—in which officers are “inclusive and respectful in their interactions, display empathy, and exercise patience in citizen encounters”—requires an officer mindset of less cynicism toward the public and more confidence in their own legitimacy. [Research](#) shows that a “guardian” culture within a department leads to more emotionally intelligent and procedurally just policing. The NYPD needs to engage in this kind of culture change across its four bureaus (Patrol; Transit, Housing & Transportation; Investigative; and Administration), 78 precincts, 12 transit districts, and nine Police Service Areas that patrol public housing. Starting at the precinct level, the department should implement [individualized coaching](#) and [professional development](#) to promote

**In one three-city study, procedural justice training was associated with a 14 percent crime decline.**

officer resiliency, learning, and growth that applies to all aspects of hiring, retention, and promotion—from patrol ranks all the way up to commanding and executive officers, with a particular focus on sergeants and equivalent mid-level roles that serve as a linchpin in shaping police culture. Coaching and development must also include officer wellness, including managing mandatory overtime.

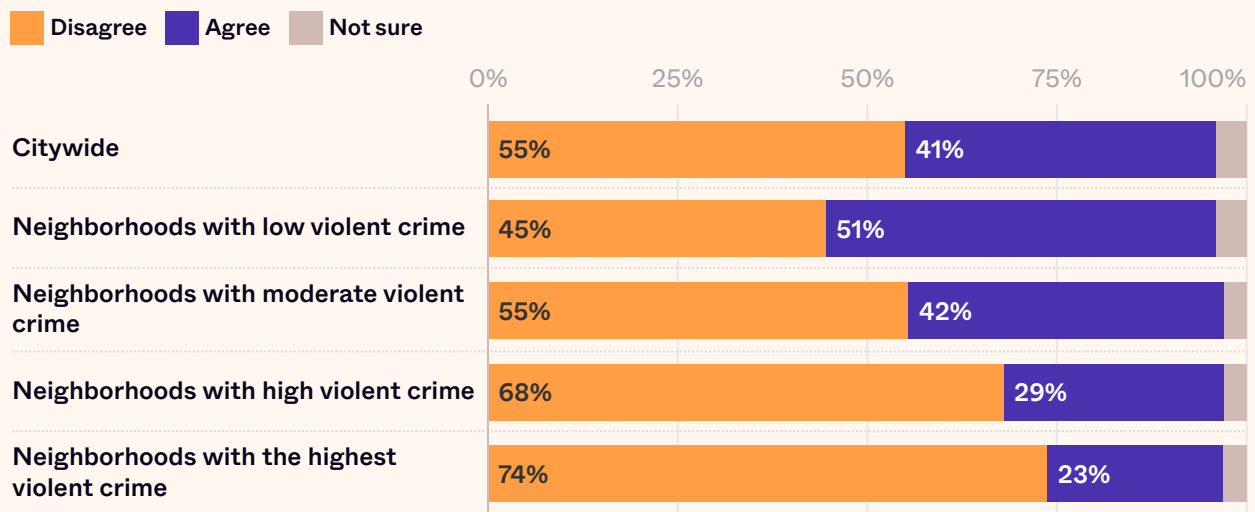
## **INSIST ON ACCOUNTABILITY TO IMPROVE CONFIDENCE IN POLICING.**

Officers who abuse their power or break the law violate the public's trust and, ultimately, undermine the NYPD's ability to do its job effectively. The police undoubtedly have a challenging job, but in 2024 alone, 10 people in New York City were killed by police and NYPD misconduct lawsuits cost city taxpayers a record \$205 million. Meanwhile, NYPD persistently declines discipline recommendations. While NYPD no longer conducts public favorability polling, a 2020–2021 survey found deep distrust among New Yorkers most affected by violent crime, a result that mirrors Black adults' greater distrust in the police nationally. The next mayor can support the police to do the difficult jobs they are tasked to do *and* hold them accountable if they abuse their power or break the law by:

- **Fully funding and staffing the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) and requiring adherence to its disciplinary recommendations.** The next mayor needs to deliver on police accountability by properly resourcing the CCRB—an independent agency that reviews complaints against the NYPD—and giving teeth to its disciplinary recommendations. The mayor should endorse pegging the CCRB's overall budget to 1 percent of the NYPD's annual adopted budget, as proposed recently in a city council hearing. Currently, the CCRB's budgeted head count is pegged to 0.65 percent of the NYPD's budgeted uniform head count—which leaves the CCRB under-resourced to properly investigate and resolve complaints. At minimum, the next mayor must commit to fully staffing the open positions on the current CCRB board. Finally, CCRB recommendations are meaningless if they are summarily rejected, as is increasingly the case. In 2024, the concurrence rate (where the NYPD imposes the CCRB-recommended level of discipline or higher) was only 30 percent. Requiring the NYPD commissioner to follow the CCRB's disciplinary recommendations is critical to demonstrating accountability and rebuilding trust with New Yorkers. In 2023, complaint filings increased by more than 50 percent from the previous year, and in 2024 there were “more than in any year since the end of the Stop & Frisk era in 2012.” Almost two-thirds (61 percent) of the complaints in 2024 were for officer abuse of authority, followed by use of force (27 percent).

- Seeking community input and feedback.** From 2018 to 2022, the city engaged the RAND Corporation to conduct a survey across various neighborhoods to understand residents’ perspectives on the police and their opinion on various important measures of policing. It has since abandoned similar efforts. These findings can help the city gauge in real time what is working and what needs improvement. For example, in the 2021 survey, despite a majority of New Yorkers (63 percent) reporting that the police do address problems that concern people in their neighborhood, 55 percent said they disagreed with the statement, “NYPD officers provide the same quality of service to everyone in the city.” The next mayor should revive the practice of seeking community input and feedback by, at a minimum, adding questions about policing to the existing annual Community Health Survey administered by the Department of Health & Mental Hygiene. This data should be publicly released with a commitment to addressing the findings.

**A 2021 RAND survey asked people to agree or disagree that “NYPD officers provide the same quality of service to everyone in the city.”**



Source: RAND Corporation Community Survey, May 2021, n=“more than 1,000 respondents.”

- Building trust by increasing NYPD data transparency.** New Yorkers deserve to know in real time how the NYPD is deploying officers, civilian staff, and other resources. Currently, the department publishes data every quarter on stops, searches, seizures, and calls for service, as well as weekly reports on crime statistics. The next mayor should build upon this foundation by publishing monthly data, by precinct and unit, about traffic stops, overtime spending, outcomes of disciplinary proceedings, and other information that provides the public with insight into the department’s activities.

### IDEA # 3

## Make the subways safer by comprehensively addressing the daily signs of crisis and neglect.



Subways are the lifeline of New York City, and all New Yorkers want a safe and peaceful subway ride. Yet, despite a recent increase in ridership as congestion pricing went into effect, the overall numbers remain well below pre-pandemic figures amid the shift to remote work and concerns about public safety. Several high-profile tragedies have fueled New Yorkers' perceptions about transit crime, and recent polls reflect their fear and desire to see a robust response. Rider surveys reveal that there has been too much neglect of the subway system—from infrastructure and maintenance to addressing the needs of people who ride or work on it.

Still, New York City's subway system is overall safe and getting safer—with a 5.4 percent drop in crime in 2024 compared to 2023. But nearly 20 percent of MTA riders surveyed say they would take the train more often if there were fewer people behaving erratically. According to the MTA, roughly 2,000 people are unhoused in the subway system at any given time.



Many transit systems across the country face similar challenges, but New York City lags behind in creative solutions to address crisis and disorder. For example, Philadelphia built a drop-in center within the subway system for people who are homeless to use the bathroom, take a shower, and do free laundry.

## **EXPAND THE SERVICES NEEDED TO RESPOND TO PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS AND/OR IN CRISIS.**

While the planned expansion of the Subway Co-Response Outreach Teams (SCOUT) to 10 teams by the end of 2025 is a positive step forward, we need to invest far more. The next mayor must take a comprehensive and collaborative approach to restore straphangers' confidence in the subways by:

- **Expanding street-based programs to the subway.** New York City has several effective street medicine programs that can be expanded to the subway. For example, the Street Health Outreach & Wellness (SHOW) mobile health teams, operated by NYC Health + Hospitals, bring medical and mental health care or referrals to people who are unlikely to access services otherwise. Other organizations like Janian, Breaking Ground, and Project Renewal provide similar medical and mental health services. Last year, the SHOW teams alone reached 13,000 people across New York City and, with more resources, SHOW and other organizations can expand their services to the MTA (currently BRC is the main provider of services in the subways to people who are unhoused or in crisis). New outreach teams dedicated to providing services on the subway should focus on MTA lines and stations where large numbers of people are living on the subway.
- **Creating drop-in centers at subway stations.** The state recently announced a plan to work with the city's Department of Homeless Services to expand 24/7 "welcome centers" at end-of-line stations. These drop-in centers should offer counseling, case management services, access to medical and mental health treatment, and referrals to housing.
- **Directing police to hand off situations to the right responder.** Police officers have daily interactions with people on the trains and platforms who are experiencing homelessness, mental illness, or crisis. Regardless of training or experience, armed police are not well situated to address the underlying needs or de-escalate these situations. Trained specialists and outreach teams should be stationed at each major transportation hub and should be able to respond within 15 minutes, offering appropriate medical and mental health treatment, among other services. This will also free officers to focus on addressing serious crime.

## To make the subway safer, New York City Democratic primary voters want to deploy trained experts.

### LET POLICE GET TOUGH ON CRIME

People are scared to come to New York City because there are daily reports of murders, muggings, shoplifting sprees, and knife attacks—especially on the subways. Soft-on-crime politicians have made New York more dangerous than ever—with bail reform and lax prosecutions that let violent criminals, like sex offenders and murderers, roam free. Law enforcement and community leaders understand we need to get tough on crime, let police do their job, and pass stricter sentences for criminals. It's time to put law-abiding citizens first.

33%

### DEPLOY TRAINED EXPERTS:

A safe subway system keeps New York going, but recent high-profile acts of violence have shaken the city's confidence in our transportation lifeline. We must deploy trained experts to get New Yorkers who are homeless or in crisis connected to help and install barriers to keep riders from falling or being pushed onto the tracks. Transit police should focus on serious crime instead of intrusive searches or idly standing around. It's time to act on real solutions that make our subways safer for all.

55%

Source: [Vera Action poll](#) conducted by Lake Research Partners, December 12-19, 2024, n=640 likely New York City Democratic primary voters.

## IMPROVE THE MTA INFRASTRUCTURE AND MAKE THE SUBWAY AFFORDABLE FOR ALL.

The physical condition of the subway—including outdated turnstiles, poor lighting, peeling paint and leaks, and a dangerous lack of barriers on the platform itself—contributes to the perception of disorder and a lack of safety in the subway. To maintain the system, the city and state needs to fund it properly and be able to rely on revenue from straphangers. Already, the state has committed [funding this year](#) to install modern turnstile gates in 40 stations by 2026 and upgrade to LED lighting. The next mayor can improve upon these initial investments by:

- **Upgrading platforms and entrances.** A safe subway requires investing in modern infrastructure to eliminate any potential sources of danger. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) should work with the city to install platform barriers so that no one ends up on the tracks, full-height barriers on turnstiles to prevent fare evasion, and improved [lighting](#) at subway entrances and on platforms.
- **Making the subway affordable for all New Yorkers.** We need all New Yorkers to pay their fair share to support the MTA, and we need to assist those who can't afford the price of a ride. The next mayor should increase investments in the [Fair Fares](#) program and expand eligibility to [200 percent](#) of the federal poverty level so that more New Yorkers can afford to ride the subway.

## IDEA # 4

# Improve the shopping experience for both workers and consumers.



Too many New Yorkers are frustrated by the experience of finding toothpaste and shampoo locked in plastic cases at their local pharmacy or seeing empty shelves in the grocery store. Organized operations reselling stolen goods online on sites like Amazon and eBay have driven this phenomenon. While overall rates of retail theft are beginning to decline in New York City from their peak in 2022, curbing retail theft and shoplifting remains a priority as district attorney offices continue to uncover large-scale fencing operations. Yet organized retail crime should not be conflated with crimes of desperation. The next mayor can improve the shopping experience for both workers and consumers by:

- **Curbing organized retail crime.** Much retail theft is driven by large-scale fencing operations that resell stolen goods online. Without a secondary black market, organized retail crime would happen much less. Large online marketplaces are already required by federal law to verify the identity of high-volume third-party

sellers on their platforms and to make it easier for consumers to report suspicious online sellers. The next mayor should build on this by supporting a law requiring online retailers to investigate and report the resale of stolen goods to prevent it from happening.

- **Working with businesses to reduce theft.** Major retailers with low levels of theft have attributed their success to basic measures like employee training and store layouts. The next mayor should launch a fund and work with business improvement districts on programs to increase employee safety and change store layouts to reduce theft.
- **Supporting our neighbors in need to prevent theft.** A recent study found that one in four city residents cannot afford essentials. Simply arresting people who are stealing out of desperation does nothing to break the cycle of crime. Even a day in jail is so destabilizing to a person's housing and employment situation that it increases the likelihood they will be arrested in the future. The next mayor should invest in community navigator programs to connect people who have been caught stealing to housing, treatment, and other stabilizing services. They should also expand the use of alternatives to incarceration for theft offenses. Court-based support programs, like the Manhattan Felony ATI program, have been proven to help people in the criminal court system manage unmet needs that all too often result in recidivism, such as securing employment, housing, and substance use treatment.

**A recent study found that one in four city residents cannot afford essentials.**

## IDEA # 5

# Close Rikers Island and implement a new approach to accountability and safely reducing the jail population.



Rikers Island has failed to keep New Yorkers safe and remains an unsalvageable stain on our city. The horrible conditions at the jail complex cause everyone to suffer—including incarcerated people and their families along with the correction officers working there. The lack of basic services, like educational programs or medical and mental health care, means people come out worse than they went in. Any deaths—let alone the current level—are unacceptable. And Rikers costs too much: \$507,000 a year just to lock one person up.

Nationally, the criminal justice system ranks among the country's least trusted institutions—and New York City's stubborn crime rates, dangerous jails, and high levels of racial disparities in arrests and incarceration do not suggest we should have confidence that our system is a positive outlier. A small number of people continue to be arrested again and again, and our failure to hold them accountable in ways that break the cycle of crime, deliver stability to their own lives, and ultimately keep them out of jail drives crime rates. Trust in the justice system is especially low among the city's survivors of violent crime:

nearly half say they did not report the most serious crime they experienced in the past decade.

### To address the situation at the Rikers Island jail complex, New York City Democratic primary voters want to close Rikers entirely.

#### RIKERS IS COSTLY AND INEFFECTIVE

Rikers Island has failed to keep New Yorkers safe. The horrible conditions at the jail complex cause everyone to suffer—including incarcerated people, their families, and the corrections officers working there. The lack of basic services, like educational programs or medical and mental health care, means people come out worse than when they went in. And it costs too much: \$507,000 a year just to lock one person up. We need to close Rikers once and for all and build four modern, cost-effective jails in the boroughs.

54%

#### KEEP RIKERS OPEN

The criminals at Rikers Island are there because they committed serious crimes, like murder and rape. They are already sheltered, fed, and given health care on the taxpayer's dime. We must be tough on crime and deter people from committing crimes and keep our officers and citizens, not criminals, safe. We should fix what needs fixing but otherwise leave well enough alone. Closing Rikers Island to build four new jails near people's homes just to make life more comfortable for criminals is dangerous and a waste of time and taxpayer money.

33%

Source: Vera Action poll conducted by Lake Research Partners, December 12-19, 2024, n=640 likely New York City Democratic primary voters.

To safely close Rikers Island and transition to the modern, borough-based jails, we must safely reduce the jail population from roughly 6,000 to no more than 4,160. This will not be successful without greater availability of alternatives to incarceration and community-based supports. Pretrial services and dedicated programs to address housing instability, mental illness, employment, and educational needs enable people to be successful in the community and avoid jail.

### HOLD EVERYDAY NEW YORKERS ACCOUNTABLE IN A WAY THAT PREVENTS CRIME.

Accountability means more than punishment. True accountability is acknowledging the harm committed and changing behavior to prevent future crime. While it may seem counterintuitive, using incarceration as the default response when someone breaks the law is a poor investment in safety. The simple fact of being in jail is so destabilizing—people lose their housing, employment, and access to consistent medical and mental health care—that it undermines community safety and stability. The next mayor can drive true accountability by:

- **Investing in restorative justice.** The next mayor should triple investments in [restorative justice](#) and other programs that turn people’s lives around. When everyday New Yorkers break the law, true accountability happens when they acknowledge wrongdoing and change their behavior. The Independent Rikers Commission and the Alliance for Safety and Justice recently released a [study](#) containing findings from a survey of nearly 1,300 New York City residents who were victims of crime or violence. The study found that while only 8 percent participated in restorative justice, another 31 percent wanted to but were never offered the chance. [Studies show](#) that participation in restorative justice leads to lower recidivism rates and greater satisfaction for harmed parties.
- **Prioritizing diversion when appropriate.** The next mayor should at least triple investments in diversion programs that hold people accountable without the traumatic and harmful impact of incarceration. These programs work: [one program](#) in Harris County, Texas (Houston), substantially decreased participants’ future convictions by 48 percent 10 years after participation and improved employment outcomes by 53 percent over the same period. Further, according to the recent [study](#) on survivors of crime and violence in New York City, 75 percent of survivors support expanding alternatives to incarceration like diversion, mental health and drug treatment, and restorative justice. Similarly, 86 percent of survivors surveyed supported treating people with mental illness or addiction issues in treatment facilities rather than jails.
- **Creating targeted programs for people repeatedly arrested.** To address [concerns](#) about people who are frequently arrested, the next mayor should establish dedicated, multidisciplinary teams that provide wraparound services to people who are detained at Rikers Island multiple times in six months. These teams—which should be led by a case manager who can make connections to housing, employment services, medical care, and mental health and substance use treatment—should automatically provide each person a minimum of 90 days of support. Their supervision should continue until the person remains jail-free for six months and the case manager deems them independently stable. This could be accomplished as a new program or by making the city’s [Intensive Case Management pilot program](#) more rigorous for this population, which is small but challenging to serve.

## **ADOPT A PLAN TO CLOSE RIKERS ISLAND THAT INCLUDES LEADERSHIP AND A TIMELINE.**

Since the city council voted in 2019 to close Rikers Island and replace it with four borough-based jails by 2026, progress has been halting. Just one year after committing to closing the jail complex, the city officially pushed the deadline to 2027. In the years since, Mayor Adams has repeatedly called for a “Plan B” despite his administration’s role in stalling progress. Although closing Rikers by 2027 is the law, it is unlikely that a subsequent administration will be able to meet that legal deadline, especially as some of the new jails are now projected for completion in the 2030s. The next mayor can work to close Rikers while also making the jail complex safer in the interim for the people incarcerated and the staff who work there by:

- **Appointing a Rikers czar.** Closing the sprawling, decades-old jail is a complex task. The next mayor must demonstrate their commitment to getting it done by appointing a Rikers czar to oversee the process. The czar should have the authority to implement improvements in collaboration with the court-appointed federal monitor and assemble a team to focus on all aspects of Rikers Island closure—including new jail construction, community engagement, safe jail population reduction, and culture and operations change within the Department of Correction.
- **Committing to an aggressive but achievable timeline for finishing the new jails.** Creating such a timeline will require collaboration between the city council, policy experts (including people with firsthand experience of Rikers Island), and the mayor. The next mayor should also speed up construction of the borough-based jails by starting work on the foundations and exteriors while the interior design is being finalized and shorten the current construction timelines—some of which end four to five years after the legal deadline to close Rikers.
- **Safely reducing the jail population to ~4,000.** The next mayor should safely drive down the jail population by ramping up the existing “population review teams,” which bring judges, prosecutors, the defense bar, and service providers together to identify people who can be safely released or moved into a diversion or alternative to incarceration program. The mayor should also use the 6-A program and the Local Conditional Release Commission to their fullest to safely release people serving sentenced time at Rikers (approximately 500 people on any given day). By the latest estimate, the borough-based jails replacing Rikers will have 4,160 beds, significantly more than the original plan of 3,300.



- **Improving immediate conditions at Rikers Island for everyone.** While Rikers cannot be salvaged, the next mayor must do everything in their power to at least make it safer in the interim before it closes. This includes expanding care for people with serious mental illness, increasing investment in the counseling and case management services that were cut during the current administration, and complying with the local law ending the use of solitary confinement.

## **SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE REQUIRE PROTECTING PROGRESS AND INVESTING IN WHAT TRULY WORKS.**

The recommendations in this report must be accompanied by meaningful criminal justice reform and protecting the progress that has made the criminal justice system fairer for all New Yorkers—regardless of race, age, wealth, or zip code.

To understand why this progress matters, we have to look at the facts. When the state’s bail reform law was first passed, it reduced the city’s jail population by 31 percent and overall led to less recidivism. An early estimate also found that the law saved families across New York \$104 million in bail payments as a result of eliminating money bail for many misdemeanor and nonviolent felony charges. Similar positive outcomes emerge from a close look at the state’s Raise the Age law, which saw arrests drop by double digits for 16-year-olds within the first year of the law’s passage without increasing crime. Implementation, however, has been a challenge: the state has yet to distribute most of the funds it set aside to connect young people with programming. Finally, discovery reform, which is under attack right now in Albany, brought transparency and fairness to the pretrial process. Instead of rolling back the discovery law, New York needs better implementation so that evidence is shared efficiently and in a timely manner between law enforcement, prosecutors, and the defense bar.

Too many New York politicians have falsely blamed these reforms for an increase in crime, despite the evidence to the contrary. Scapegoating and undermining criminal justice reform does a disservice to residents who deserve an honest debate—driven by facts and backed up by data. The next mayor has a unique opportunity to transform New York City and protect progress to strengthen safety, promote accountability, and deliver justice for all New Yorkers.

For more information about this report, contact Alana Sivin, director of Vera’s Greater Justice New York initiative, at [asivin@vera.org](mailto:asivin@vera.org).