

Rural And Small-Town Voters: Crime and Justice

The Rural Voter Institute's 2023 research (conducted summer of 2023) examined perceptions around three potential factors in the 2024 election: Trump's mishandling of classified information, Biden's economic record, and the public policy issue of crime and safety – a much hyped issue in the most recent mid-term election.

WHO WE INTERVIEWED

For purposes of the focus group, rural and small-town panelists came from communities between 200 and 27,000. The research was conducted June 28, 2023. Panelists were required to be registered voters who considered themselves ideologically conservative or moderate, self-identified as Republican or no-party-ID, and at least two participants had to self-identify as either Trump-Biden voters or Hillary-Trump voters. The focus group was required to be a mix of genders. Other panelist demographic data was collected and analyzed for purposes of this report.

The focus group included six male and three female voters from the states of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, all of whom voted for Trump in at least one of the two past Presidential elections. Three panelists resided in Michigan, two in Minnesota, and four in Wisconsin. Three panelists lived in communities of less than 1,000 residents. Three panelists were from communities between 5,000 and 10,000 residents. One panelist was from a community between 10,000 and 15,000 residents, another from between 15,000-20,000 and another from a community of just over 26,000 residents. All panelists self-identified as lean Republican, independent or without party identification except for one panelist who identified as a strong Republican. Ideologically, the panelists identified as moderate to conservative except for one who identified as very conservative.

TOPLINE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The issue of crime and justice did not resound with rural and small-town voters the way some media reports indicated it resounded for voters in 2022. Crime – including in urban areas rather than locally – was largely not on the radar of the panelists. However, the issue did resonate with them to a degree when introduced.

- Based on this focus group, Democrats need not fear Republican attacks, but instead should prepare policy discussions to support courts and the legal system that handle criminal cases.
- Crime was largely associated with more urban and suburban areas. If it was associated with small-town and rural communities, it was so loosely and more associated with minor property crimes and drug or alcohol-related violations. There was not significant concern that the crime perceived in more metropolitan areas would spill over to respondents' local communities.
- Stronger sentiments existed regarding a perceived need to address the criminal justice court system rather than policies for policing and violence prevention that did not resonate with these voters.
- Panelists were keenly interested in accountability for both property crime and violent crime and thought prosecutors and the criminal court system needed more support. When posed with policy proposals to fund more policing and policing innovations in communities with higher violent crime rates, panelists were sensitive to tax dollars going to subsidize increased policing, law enforcement, and the like in more metropolitan areas.

FINDINGS

Crime – including in urban areas rather than locally – was largely not on the radar of the panelists. However, the issue did resonate with them to a degree when introduced. As one respondent put it, “I think where I live right now, security is not a big issue. We live in a smaller community.” [female MN voter, 56, leans Republican, Trump-Biden voter]

Another respondent said, “I live in a community where crime isn’t necessarily an issue. Sure, there’s crime, there’s crime everywhere. Safety when I speak about it is, sure, the general security of our things and mainly my family and kids and my wife and whatever. Just safety in terms of what we’re building as a family. It is more- the focus of it is probably more economical than it is more like physical-harm type of crime concern, I guess I would say. – [male WI voter, 42, leans Republican, Clinton-Trump voter]

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“Grand Rapids [MI] has a murder in the news every other weekend. My community does not. But we have things like, you know, teenagers that go around and steal laptops out of the backseat of cars, provided that the car is unlocked. They don’t crack the window open or not. They go in the subdivision, take the computer outta the car or whatever, sporting goods. And just take it,” one respondent said. [male MI voter, 59, leans Republican, Trump-Trump voter]

One respondent described crime in his community as, “theft and drunk driving and drugs,” [male WI voter, 36, no party affiliation, Trump-Biden voter] and another spoke of high-school kids with drugs and DUIs. [male WI voter, 42, leans Republican, Clinton-Trump voter]

There was not significant concern that the crime perceived in more metropolitan areas would spill over to respondents’ local communities. A Wisconsin panelist referred to crime in a more metropolitan area, Madison, saying, “as a society, if you see it and there’s no accountability, there’s no repercussions for actions, that just, you know, tends to balloon across society as a whole, regardless of population.” [male WI voter, 42, leans Republican]

On whether addressing metropolitan crime would keep it from spreading to non-urban areas, one respondent said, “I sure think it would help. I mean, the less people, the less crime. I mean, that’s true everywhere in the United States, right? But if you don’t check it in those big cities, then I think it’s gonna flow over into the rural communities and the other communities.” – [male MN voter, 56, strong Republican, Trump-Trump voter]

However, stronger sentiments existed regarding a perceived need to address the criminal justice court system rather than policies for policing and violence prevention that did not resonate with these voters. Panelists were keenly interested in accountability for both property crime and violent crime and thought prosecutors and the criminal court system needed more support.

A panelist said, “The police can do their jobs all day long. If we can’t get the prosecutors and the judges to do their jobs and keep these people behind bars where they belong, all the money in the world for the police isn’t gonna change anything. And it seems that the prosecutors and the judges don’t wanna hold anybody accountable. The cops arrest them, and they’re literally back out on the street very shortly with no consequences. So I think it’s gotta be more focused on the people that have the responsibility to uphold the after the arrest than the actual arrest. ... But I’m still saying that it’s more the judges and the prosecutors that need to hold people accountable and they’re not doing it.” – [male WI voter, 65, no party affiliation, Trump-Trump voter]

“I would agree that it’s important to have more accountability and everything for criminals’,” another respondent said. [female MI voter, 36, leans Republican, Trump-Biden voter]

When posed with policy proposals to fund more policing and policing innovations in communities with higher violent crime rates, panelists were sensitive to tax dollars going to subsidize increased policing, law enforcement, and the like in more metropolitan areas.

“I don’t know how equitable that would be for everyone. So you’re gonna go based off of crime rates, and if my area has less crime rates than, say, one of the bigger cities, then they constantly have higher crime rates than I do.” [female MI voter, 36, leans Republican]

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