

A SAFETY AND JUSTICE PLAYBOOK:

Shaping local narratives through persuasion testing and digital ads



1235 Strategies

Daigneault Digital

Introduction



Public sentiment around crime and safety can pivot on a dime. The issues are deeply personal and emotional, making them highly prone to weaponization. People become particularly susceptible to fearmongering when communities experience or even perceive increases in crime rates or a decline in their quality of life. As a result, efforts to change local criminal justice systems—from alternatives to policing, diversion programs, and bail reform to reentry programs, housing solutions, and mental health services—often operate on the back foot.

This dynamic emerged in full force in the post-pandemic era, including during the 2022 and 2024 election cycles. A narrative of diminishing public safety took hold in cities and counties across the country, blaming criminal justice reform broadly—along with the elected officials connected to it—for increases in crime, violence, and disorder, whether real or perceived.

In response, extensive public opinion and message research has emerged from leaders in the justice field to [counter “tough-on-crime” rhetoric, talk affirmatively about safety, and foster ongoing support for criminal justice reforms](#). This playbook offers

a practical tool to translate available research into narrative execution at the local level. It is intended to inform local action where too many efforts to protect or advance changes to criminal justice systems and related non-carceral outcomes have been delayed or altogether lost.

WHY THIS PILOT AND PLAYBOOK

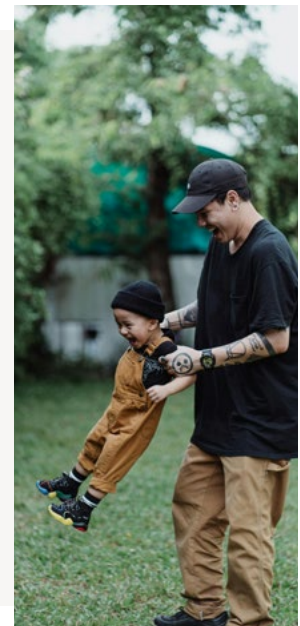
The new wave of shifting public opinion around crime and safety, along with the availability of associated messaging research, has surfaced two important narrative execution questions for those working to change criminal justice systems or advance non-carceral outcomes at the local level.

The first question is how local groups can use available opinion research on crime and safety to reframe changes to local criminal justice systems so they are understood as safety solutions, not problems. Without a clear pathway or starting point, many groups and their allies rely too heavily on statistical data about criminal justice reforms and racial disparities to shift narratives and advance change. But those data alone are not breaking through with the press and public.

The second question is how local groups and their allies can use digital ad strategies to proactively set narratives and shift sentiment about local changes to criminal justice systems and non-carceral outcomes before they take hold in the press or other organic channels. Political campaigns commonly—and aggressively—place digital ads on the same platforms that moveable audiences engage with for news, entertainment, and connection, repeating and saturating the same message to sway sentiment and shift attitudes about people and issues. Yet [nonprofits still largely use digital ads to drive immediate actions and donations](#) from their existing committed base. We sought to understand the viability of using digital ads to shift sentiments and persuade moveable audiences to support local criminal justice reforms.

With support from the Safety and Justice Challenge at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the pilot behind this playbook was designed to do two things:

1. Combine available national, statewide, or local opinion research with randomized control trial (RCT) message testing on the Swayable platform to identify the frames, messages, and creative that persuade moveable audiences to support changes to local criminal justice systems and related non-carceral outcomes.
2. Apply a page from the political playbook—an emphasis on message repetition and saturation through digital ads—to a 501(c)(3) narrative setting, testing whether moveable audiences engage with tested, persuasive creative about changes to local criminal justice systems on their preferred digital platforms (“in the wild”).



From July 2023 to July 2024, we worked in collaboration with local partners in two counties with very different reform climates:

- **St. Louis County, MO**, where storylines about increasing crime rates and tragic incidents involving individuals released from jail while awaiting trial had influenced the local narrative.
- **Multnomah County, OR**, where issues of crime and safety had been weaponized around several high-profile, pivotal moments for residents (e.g., a local DA election) and decision-makers (e.g., maintaining or repealing Oregon’s drug decriminalization law) to create a charged narrative climate.

Based on insights from RCT message testing and digital ads running in these two distinct counties, this playbook offers five key ideas to help groups on the ground, their funders, and their allies move opinion research toward narrative change execution. Each key idea is backed by examples, test results, and takeaways from the pilot.

SUMMARY OF KEY IDEAS

Key Idea #1: Frame changes to local criminal justice systems as safety solutions—not problems—by taking a pragmatic stance on doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety) and not doing the things we know don't work.

Key Idea #2: Prioritize the strategic use of digital ads to shift sentiment about local criminal justice reforms and related non-carceral outcomes upstream of narratives that appear in the press. Apply Key Idea #1—taking a pragmatic stance on doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety)—to inform creative.

Key Idea #3: In local efforts to shape narratives among moveable audiences, disregard preconceived assumptions about who is moveable. Far more people are persuadable about changes to local criminal justice systems than we realize, so begin your effort by counting people in—not out. Prioritize framing, messaging, and creative that are persuasive across demographics, and treat audience targeting decisions for execution separately.

Key Idea #4: Consider potential messengers who are most likely to strike the pragmatic stance in Key Idea #1: doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety) while reflecting local priorities and contexts.

Key Idea #5: Start playing the long game—consistently and proactively communicating persuasive messages around changes to local criminal justice systems. If your offensive posture is a pragmatic stance on doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety), you're in a better position to address threats to your priority reforms and outcomes head-on when they arise.



The pilot's local focus and rigorous approach

The pilot collaborated with local partners in each county to identify short- and long-term policy outcomes to measure persuadability.

St. Louis County	Multnomah County
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Speedier access to an attorney post-arrest2. Diversion programs (increased access to mental health and drug treatment)3. Bail reform4. Prevention-first approach to safety (over tough-on-crime)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Diversion (treatment over jails)2. Elements of Oregon's Measure 110, which decriminalized drugs, that local groups wanted to protect<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Continuum of care to address drug addiction– Drug treatment on demand3. Prevention-first approach to safety (over tough-on-crime)

With these outcomes in hand, the pilot continued to collaborate with local partners to run the two experiments, maintaining a testing mindset throughout.

- Reviewed relevant national, statewide, and local opinion research made available from the field, including the FrameWorks Institute, Vera Institute, Vera Action, and Leadership Conference.
- Conducted RCT message testing on Swayable, where the average sample size per piece of content was about 360 county residents.
 - St. Louis County: tested 21 pieces of content (messages, brands, creative) over seven rounds.
 - Multnomah County: tested nine pieces of content (messages, creative) over three rounds.
- Tested audiences and sentiments with Change Research.
 - Two local quantitative polls of 1K+ registered voters in each county to identify the most positive opinion shifters in each county—i.e., those who move the most in the right direction after engaging with our tested message and complementary content. Conducted in March 2024.
 - Sixteen qualitative in-depth interviews with plausible representatives of positive shifters in the two counties to further understand the messages that resonate and their persuadability or limitations. Conducted in June and July 2024.

The Swayable and Change Research results are referenced throughout the playbook.

KEY IDEA #1

Frame changes to local criminal justice systems as safety solutions—not problems—by taking a pragmatic stance on doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety) and not doing the things we know don't work.

This bigger framing move worked across both sites, although in slightly different ways, given the differences in narrative climates for changes to local criminal justice systems and other issues of crime and safety.

For example, in St. Louis County, the winning message was “Break the cycle”:

“Did you know that we put people in jail who are not a threat to public safety and before they're put on trial? They sit there for weeks, months, even years, and the things that drive crime get worse, like lost housing and jobs or mental health and addiction. When they leave jail, they're more likely to be rearrested, and the cycle of crime begins. But we can stop this from even starting. Instead, address the things that contributed to their arrest with mental health and drug treatment and other solutions. This makes them less likely to be arrested again and makes us safer. St. Louis County, let's break the cycle.”



In RCT message testing on Swayable, where the benchmark movement achieved in advocacy message testing is 0.7 point, this broad message significantly moved multiple audiences to support an investment in diversion programs:

- Black audiences moved **+3.9 points** while white respondents moved **+4.0 points**
- Urban audiences moved **+4.5 points** while suburban audiences moved **+3.4 points**
- Audiences 35-54 moved **+3.0 points** while audiences 55+ moved **+5.2 points**
- Audiences making under \$40K moved **+4.3 points** while those making \$40K-\$100K moved **+3.6 points**

When testing messages, we also looked for opinion shifts in the wrong direction—or “blowback”—for other priority local outcomes.

For example, we generated blowback on bail reform and a prevention-first over tough-on-crime approach to safety when we centered the same shared value (“We all want to be safe”) with broader solutions such as good schools, housing, jobs, and trusted relationships between communities and police. That kind of blowback disappeared with “Break the cycle,” which connected the shared value with three things: 1) an explanation of the harms created by being incarcerated while waiting for trial (e.g., lost jobs, lost housing, unchecked addiction); 2) how those harms can create a cycle of crime that increases the chance of rearrest; and 3) concrete solutions that alleviate those harms and secure the thing we all want (safety).

In Multnomah County, where issues of crime and safety were weaponized around several high-profile, pivotal moments for residents and decision-makers, the winning message was “Treatment, not jails”:



“Rather than throwing people in jail where they can’t get effective help, we need to build a better system—one that connects people with services and treatment in settings that actually work.”

This much narrower message significantly moved multiple Multnomah County audiences to support drug treatment on demand, a part of Measure 110 that groups on the ground hoped to maintain (again, the benchmark movement for advocacy messages on Swayable testing is 0.7 point):

- Black audiences moved **+4.2 points** while white audiences moved **+4.3 points**
- Audiences 18-34 moved **+4.7 points** while audiences 35-54 moved **+4.8 points**
- Audiences making under \$40K moved **+4.3 points**, \$40K-\$100K moved **+4.5 points**, and over \$100K moved **+4.5 points**
- Audiences without a college degree moved **+4.4 points**, college+ moved **+4.4 points**, and postgrad moved **+4.7 points**

Our messaging generated blowback for other local policy priorities when we attempted to broaden Multnomah County’s “Treatment, not jails” message with several other top-performing frames from statewide research, such as “we should not go back to a failed war on drugs” and “suffering on Oregon’s streets is unacceptable and we need to hold politicians accountable.” For example, this broadening moved men, people 55+, \$100K+ earners, and people with postgrad degrees to support a tough-on-crime approach to safety over prevention-first. That blowback disappeared when we stayed laser-focused on one simple message—“people in jail can’t get effective help for addiction”—which was the top-performing tested message in the statewide research.

In St. Louis County, where the crime and safety narratives were less politically charged, we could broaden the messages and avoid blowback for short- and long-term priorities among groups on the ground. In politically charged Multnomah County, we had a narrower path. And yet, the same pragmatic frame (do what works to improve outcomes we all care about) helped us break through with white, older, and more conservative audiences in both sites.





THE TAKEAWAYS

- You don't need to apply different framing strategies for changes to local criminal justice systems in various locations. Different, locally resonant messages can roll up into the same persuasive frame.
- To be persuasive with broad, potentially moveable local audiences across multiple policy outcomes, try a pragmatic frame grounded in shared values and concrete solutions for realizing them. For example:

Instead of	Emphasize
What doesn't work	What does work
Declarations about what's wrong	Explanations about the things we know make a difference
"Problem, problem, problem" to create a sense of crisis	A balanced presentation of urgency and efficacy
Othering frames that speak to "their problem"	Collective framing around shared values and the use of "we"

- If possible, assess potential blowback in RCT message testing and adopt a "do no harm" policy when choosing the winning message.

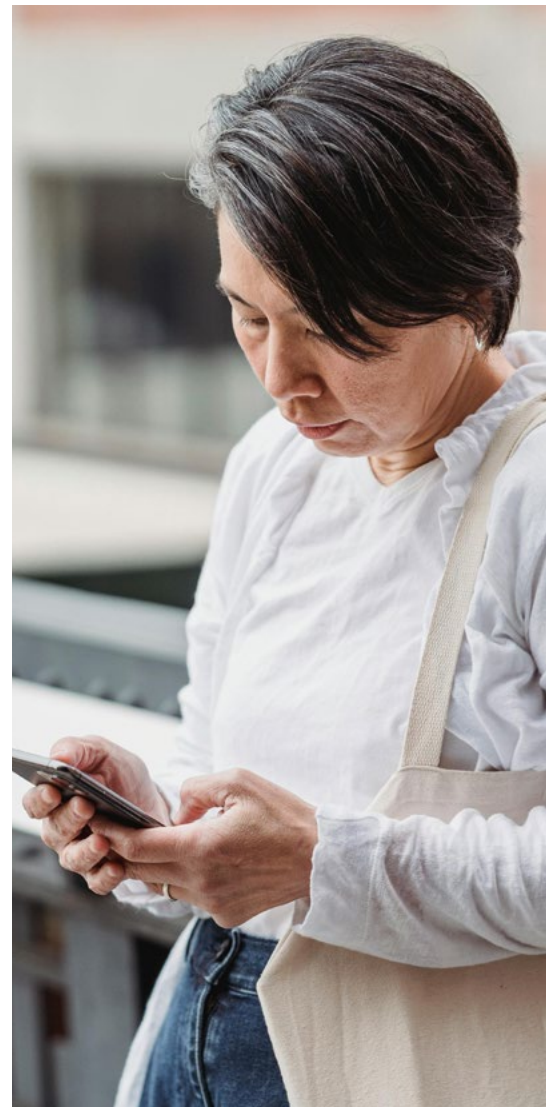
KEY IDEA #2

Prioritize the strategic use of digital ads to shift sentiment about local criminal justice reforms and related non-carceral outcomes upstream of narratives that appear in the press. Apply Key Idea #1—taking a pragmatic stance on doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety)—to inform creative.

While investment in digital ad campaigns is not feasible for every organization, for those organizations with resources, digital ads can effectively reach moveable audiences with persuasive messages upstream of narratives forming in the press and other organic channels. This is especially true for those who do not consume news as a hobby—most moveables. Digital ads offer an opportunity to clearly and proactively frame why changes to local criminal justice systems help achieve shared values (safety) and tee up discussions of the what and how of particular reforms or solutions in press, podcasts, and social influencer feeds.

Our winning ad creative reflected the realities of the pilot's two diverse communities and the issues at play in each county while rolling up into the same overarching, pragmatic frame discussed above in idea #1. The key to the ads' success was centering political-style concepts with easily understood images—versus novel or emotionally provocative concepts—to depict problems and solutions.

The result was simple yet persuasive creative, effecting even greater shifts in sentiment about priority outcomes in both sites, although in slightly different ways.



MOST PERSUASIVE ADS: ST. LOUIS COUNTY

We distilled the “Break the cycle” message into several ads, with “We all want” proving to be the most persuasive.



“We all want” ad copy: “We all want to be safe, but when we keep people in jail who aren't a threat, it starts a cycle of crime. They wait months, even years, for a trial, while the things that drive crime get worse. When they leave, they're more likely to be rearrested, but we can stop this cycle by addressing the things that contributed to their arrest, like providing mental health care, drug treatment, or housing solutions. This means fewer rearrests and makes us all safe. St. Louis County, let's break the cycle.”

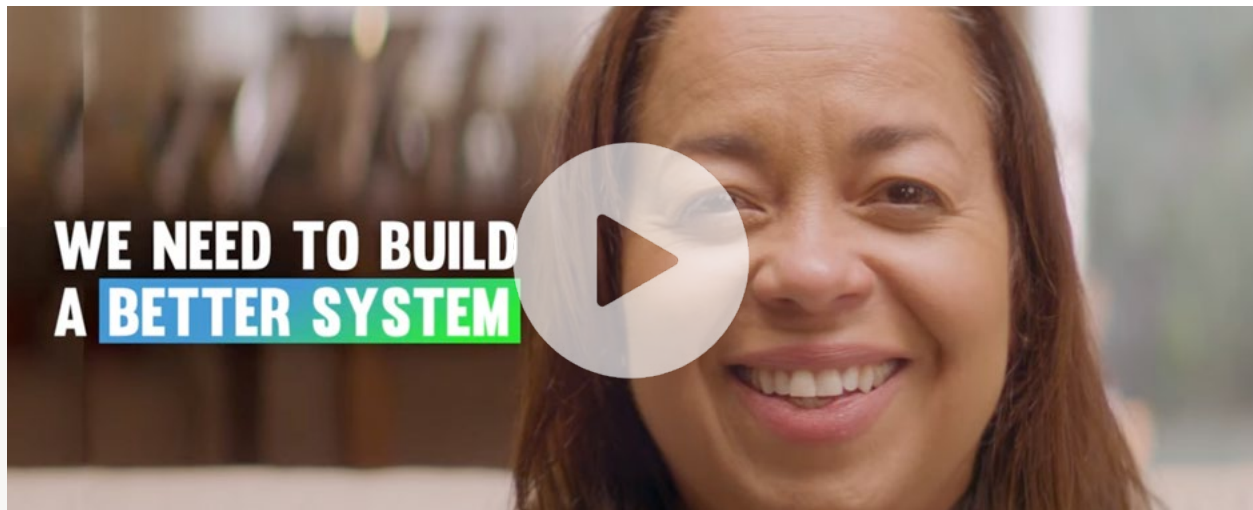
Based on RCT message testing on Swayable, this winning ad:

- Moved all audiences to support speedier post-arrest access to an attorney and increased investment in diversion
- Moved people 55+ and independent white women to support all policy outcomes (including a prevention-first approach over tough-on-crime and bail reform)
- Moved white, postgrad, and very conservative audiences—as well as registered Republicans—to support bail reform
- Generated huge movement for white Democrats 55+ to support a prevention-first over a tough-on-crime approach

[A second St. Louis County ad, “Better,”](#) moved all audiences to support a prevention-first approach over tough-on-crime, and it was especially effective with registered Republicans. (By contrast, “We all want” moved only very specific audiences, such as people 55+ and independent white women, to support prevention-first.) As a bonus, “Better” also moved liberal and white Democrats 55+ to support bail reform.

MOST PERSUASIVE ADS: MULTNOMAH COUNTY

We distilled the “Treatment, not jails” message into multiple ads, with “Recipe for change” proving to be the most persuasive.



“Recipe for change” ad copy: “A big part of making communities safer is making sure people who need mental health or addiction treatment get it. But that’s not what jails do. Right now, people who want help leave jail worse than before. That means more crises and more crime. Rather than just throwing people in jail, we need to build a better system so that people get the treatment they need in settings that actually work. That’s what will keep our communities safe.”

Based on RCT message testing on Swayable, this winning ad:

- Increased support across all audiences on diversion and providing a continuum of care to address addiction, another part of Measure 110 groups on the ground wanted to preserve
- Was especially effective with:
 - Urban audiences
 - People 55+
 - People making less than \$40K
 - People who leaned more conservative
 - People who regretted voting for Measure 110

[A second Multnomah County ad, “Monta,”](#) featuring a personal testimonial from a local ally, performed best with certain audiences on specific outcomes. For example, it was especially effective in moving suburban audiences and those who didn’t vote for Measure 110 to support providing a full continuum of care for people with addiction. It also moved conservatives to support a prevention-first over a tough-on-crime approach.

TESTING THE PERSUASIVE ADS OUT IN THE WILD

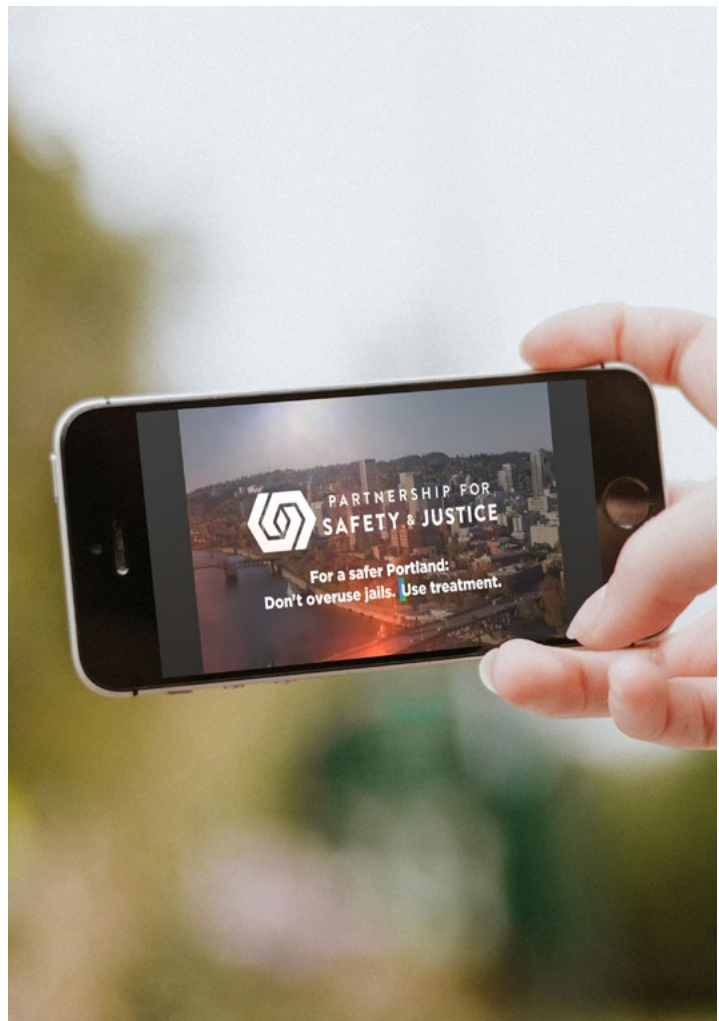
From Swayable testing, we knew that when audiences in St. Louis and Multnomah counties watched our full ads, we persuaded many of them to support changes to local criminal justice systems and related non-carceral outcomes. But would people watch the full 30-second ads when we put them into the market and they showed up on their devices?

In both counties, despite most of the video ads being skippable, we generated a 69% video completion rate, versus the industry’s 60% benchmark.

We also tracked engagement rates and saw exceptionally high responses. On social media, engagement rates measure the number of people who react to, comment on, or share a social media ad. While this wasn’t our key metric, engagement rates on our ads were four to six times higher than industry benchmarks. This is another proof point of issue salience and message resonance.

Social media engagement performance by county:

- In Multnomah County, **6.13%** vs. **1% benchmark** of our target audience engaged with the ad.
- In St. Louis County, **4.5% vs. 1% benchmark** of our target audience engaged with the ad.





THE TAKEAWAYS

- If resources are available, invest in digital ads to shape narratives and shift sentiment among local moveable audiences upstream of narratives that appear in the press. Use RCT message testing throughout the development process to identify the most persuasive creative for moveable audiences before investing ad dollars.
- Use the pragmatic frame (*do what works to improve outcomes we all care about*) and local dynamics to inform your creative.
- Center a straightforward style of ads often used by political campaigns: universally understood imagery and simple messages designed to persuade moveable audiences. Remember, the creative concepts needed to plant narratives and shift sentiments among moveables may not necessarily be what you'd apply to motivate a committed base.
- If possible, assess potential blowback in RCT message tests and adopt a “do no harm” policy when choosing the winning creative.

KEY IDEA #3

In local efforts to shape narratives among moveable audiences, disregard preconceived assumptions about who is moveable. Far more people are persuadable about changes to local criminal justice systems than we realize, so begin your effort by counting people in—not out. Prioritize framing, messaging, and creative that are persuasive across demographics, and treat audience targeting decisions for execution separately.

Adopting an audience-inclusive approach provides some insurance if your moveable audiences are surprisingly varied and nuanced, which we found to be true in St. Louis and Multnomah counties.

The most persuadable audiences in both pilot sites were more likely to be female, older, and less highly educated.

More female than male:

- St. Louis County: 71% female vs. 29% male
- Multnomah County: 79% female vs. 21% male

Older:

- St. Louis County: 71% over 65, 89% over 50
- Multnomah County: 84% over 65, 97% over 50

Less highly educated:

- St. Louis County: 65% had a two-year degree or less
- Multnomah County: 61% had a two-year degree or less

However, we reached this conclusion only after multiple rounds of testing.

For example, our RCT message testing on Swayable found that the right frame, message, and creative could move broad, sometimes surprising, audiences to a supportive position on local criminal justice reforms and related non-carceral outcomes—while avoiding blowback on others.

This finding prompted us to issue surveys in both counties to help us focus our media buy on the most moveable audiences for our in-the-wild test. Notably, those surveys actually found a surprisingly high baseline of existing support for changes to local criminal justice systems.



**In St. Louis County,
across all demographic groups:**

- 67% support “releasing people from jail while they wait for a trial if they are not a public threat”
- 78% support “reforms to give people faster access to an attorney after being arrested”
- 86% support “investing more money in mental health and substance abuse treatment programs for people charged with nonviolent crimes”

**In Multnomah County,
across all demographic groups:**

- 96% support ensuring “anyone struggling with addiction who wants treatment can get it without waiting”
- 87% support preventing “crime by investing in drug treatment services and housing solutions and strengthening relationships between police and behavioral health specialists”
- 86% support diverting “people arrested for nonviolent offenses into drug treatment or mental health care, if that was a factor in their arrest, instead of locking them up in jail”

According to a Change Research survey of 1,069 registered voters conducted in late February 2024.

According to a Change Research survey of 1,037 registered voters conducted in early March 2024.



THE TAKEAWAYS

- Surprising majorities may support changes to local criminal justice systems or may be moved to support them.
- Start by prioritizing framing, messaging, and creative that work with a broad range of potentially moveable audiences without creating significant backlash. This inclusive approach provides insurance if your moveable audiences prove to be varied and nuanced.
- Broad support can create targeting challenges. If you're investing in narrative-based ad campaigns, consider data modeling to identify the most moveable audiences, which will help ensure you saturate the right people. If modeling is not possible, use demographic and geographic filters to create a representative cross-section of your city or county.



OVERCOMING CEILING EFFECTS TO TARGET THOSE MOST MOVEABLE

If there's already a high baseline of support for changes to local criminal justice systems, the question becomes: How do you identify and target your execution on those who nonetheless remain the most moveable?

To answer this question, we developed a data model that used our winning message to measure opinions within each county. We scored respondents and identified top positive shifters—i.e., those who moved the most in the right direction after engaging with the creative and complementary content—which allowed us to precisely target ads based on a highly nuanced picture of these individuals.

We found:

- The most persuadable audiences in both sites were more likely to be female, older, and less highly educated.
- In Multnomah County, persuadable audiences fell along different racial and ethnic lines than the remaining population.
- In St. Louis County, persuadable audiences were more racially and ethnically similar to the remaining population.
- In Multnomah County, persuadable audiences were more likely to have voted for Biden in 2020. However, in St. Louis County, persuadable audiences were more likely to have voted for Trump in 2020.

To target only the most persuadable with our test ads, we took a quality-over-quantity approach to our media buy. That required greater investment to follow and reach our modeled audience, no matter where they show up digitally and online. We used modern advertising marketplaces to selectively purchase 30-second video ad inventory in addition to some display and social media placements.

This quality-over-quantity approach helped the pilot beat key metrics in our in-the-wild test. Although most video ads were skippable, our video completion rates neared 70%, above industry benchmarks. Similarly, engagement on social media was exceptionally high, far surpassing benchmarks.

KEY IDEA #4

Consider potential messengers who are most likely to strike the pragmatic stance in Key Idea #1: doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety) while reflecting local priorities



Our testing found that the specific messengers delivering your message can impact audience persuadability in both significant and subtle ways.

In St. Louis County, two strong yet very different organizations could serve as the brand delivering the ads: St. Louis Integrated Health Network (IHN) and The Bail Project. We tested their strengths in generating positive cause-and-effect or negative blowback for the priority policies identified by local partners in St. Louis County.

Each brand had unique, persuasive strengths. For example, we tested the winning “Break the cycle” message on Swayable with the IHN and Bail Project logos attached. This resulted in two different causes and effects.

IHN	The Bail Project
+3.8 support for increased access to mental health and drug treatment	+3.7 support for speedier access to an attorney post-arrest

Swayable benchmark movement achieved in advocacy message testing is 0.7 point.

Also, while not statistically significant, both brands generated positive movement for bail reform and a prevention-first over a tough-on-crime approach to safety. Neither brand generated backlash for any of the local policy priorities.

Ultimately, we selected IHN, the partner that also generated a positive cause-and-effect on investment in diversion programs, a top local priority in the short term.

Notably, IHN is a local service provider, not an advocacy organization. Even if Swayable respondents weren't familiar with the organization, "St. Louis health network" in the name suggested to St. Louis County residents that IHN is in their community and connected to trusted health care providers.

THE TAKEAWAYS

- If you have a choice of lead partners, use RCT message testing on a platform like Swayable to guide your selection if possible. If more than one partner brand performs well in the testing, choose the partner that generates the highest positive effect on the policy or outcome you most want to prioritize in the short term without causing backlash for your long-term objectives.
- If testing is not possible, let the pragmatic stance in Key Idea #1, combined with local priorities and context, guide your selection of messengers. The key is selecting messengers that can credibly frame the changes and outcomes you seek as doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety) and thereby boost the persuadability of your message among a potentially diverse pool of moveable audiences.

KEY IDEA #5

Start playing the long game—consistently and proactively communicating persuasive messages around changes to local criminal justice systems. If your offensive posture is a pragmatic stance on doing what works to improve the thing we all want (safety), you're in a better position to address threats to your priority reforms and outcomes head-on when they arise.

Once a crime and safety narrative becomes politically charged, your ability to frame changes to local criminal justice systems as safety solutions—not problems—becomes limited, at best. Repetition and saturation of persuasive messages over time are what shape narratives and influence sentiments. Laying this groundwork also helps you ride out volatility in the landscape. That is why it's important to play the long game rather than ceding it to proponents of tough-on-crime narratives and policies.



In Multnomah County, a hotly contested political fight was, on its surface, about changes to local criminal justice systems. A well-organized tough-on-crime campaign launched in 2021, calling on local officials to do more to address crime and safety in the county. The campaign invested heavily in advertising (digital, billboard, etc.) that laid much of the blame on then-District Attorney (DA) Mike Schmidt and policies that resulted in “empty jail beds.” For the next three years, the campaign kept up the attacks—e.g., “Portland is a Schmidt-show”—relentlessly in both paid and organic media until DA Schmidt ultimately lost his primary in May 2024.

However, in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted in June and July 2024 with plausible representatives of our moveable audience (i.e., more likely to be female, older, and less highly educated) revealed that local residents’ susceptibility to the politically charged tough-on-crime narrative was driven by frustration with the way the government had implemented different but aligned policies (e.g., Measure 110)—not reforms to the local criminal justice system, per se.

To that point, IDI participants enthusiastically embraced the solutions in the winning “Recipe for change” ad for Multnomah County. Their concerns mostly centered on implementation, with several expressing frustration about prior attempts and failures to implement similar solutions.

*“I think it’s excellent, and that’s what everybody thinks we should do. But I think anybody watching that who’s lived in Portland for a while will say, well, yeah, all that’s all well and good, but how are they going to do that? Why haven’t they done it? **There should be something in that ad that tells how they’re going to do it, because we’ve heard that a million times.**”*

– 65+ WOMAN, PORTLAND, DEMOCRAT

Further insights were offered through a conversation in the IDIs about whether respondents support “treatment, housing, and stronger ties between police and behavioral health specialists as solutions for safety.” Many participants wholly embraced this idea in principle, with some expressing, “How could that not be a good idea?” However, they reiterated frustrations with the government’s implementation of similar-sounding solutions.

As we saw in the pilot’s Swayable message testing, the audience survey, and ad run test in Multnomah County—all of which took place at the time the attacks were still running against then-DA Mike Schmidt—moveable audiences across demographics are responsive to an affirmative message on changes to local criminal justice systems. However, when a specific issue (e.g., frustration with the government’s implementation of seemingly aligned policies, such as Measure 110) is politically charged to a crisis point, it “boxes in” your short-term ability to persuade moveable audiences that those changes and the people aligned with them can address their immediate concerns.

“It just needs to be run efficiently and competently. Um, and have the money go to where it’s due.”

– 65+ WOMAN, PORTLAND, DEMOCRAT

*“We keep passing bond measures. I vote for all this stuff...they’ve got tons of money sitting there, **and they don’t know how to use it.** That just seems really frustrating.”*

– 65+ WOMAN, PORTLAND, DEMOCRAT

In other words, the time to start framing changes to Multnomah County’s justice system as pragmatic solutions aligned with residents’ values of safety was not in 2024, after years of negative messaging that tapped into residents’ frustrations with local officials associated with those changes. It was when the reforms were first launched or planned. With that groundwork laid, from 2021 onward, local groups likely would have been in a better position to pivot to driving a complementary narrative about the specific solutions that were being implemented well in Multnomah County and to what affirmative end.



THE TAKEAWAYS

- Don't wait to shift sentiments and frame changes to local criminal justice systems as pragmatic solutions for safety. Because public sentiment around crime and safety can pivot on a dime, the longer you wait to lay this important groundwork, the more narrative ground you're ceding to current and future opposition.
- While an offensive posture to shaping narratives and influencing sentiments won't stop opposition from emerging, it will put you in a stronger position to address threats to your priority reforms or outcomes head-on while staying focused on your affirmative vision for real safety solutions.
- When it comes to achieving and sustaining your long-term goals, the key is investing in the kind of disciplined offense often embraced by successful political campaigns: proactively repeating and saturating the same message from beginning to end, even when riding out volatility in the landscape.

Conclusion: A word on our findings and the post-election climate

This playbook was completed the week of the 2024 election. What those election results will mean for us as individuals, communities, or a nation in the weeks, months, and years ahead is yet to be understood. However, what is clear at this moment is that many people—whether we believe them to be aligned with, or in opposition to, our broader worldview or specific policy positions—are far more moveable than we may realize.

This playbook underscores the positive takeaways from that realization. With persuasive framing and messaging, we can move audiences across demographics to support the policy outcomes we seek to achieve. With persuasive creative, we can reach and engage people on these issues on the same digital platforms they turn to for news, entertainment, and connection.

Finally, the practical guidance in this playbook can be used by local groups, their partners, and their funders to frame changes to local criminal justice systems as safety solutions, improve related non-carceral outcomes, and positively shift local sentiment and conversations about both. The recommendations made here can also be effectively applied as part of a robust, integrated narrative campaign model that includes opinion research and organic strategies, from press to social media to stakeholder outreach.

Ultimately, the key to changing the narrative around local criminal justice system reforms is to cast a wide net with a pragmatic stance and a commitment to playing the long game—starting now.

ABOUT THE SAFETY AND JUSTICE PLAYBOOK: SHAPING LOCAL NARRATIVES THROUGH PERSUASION TESTING AND DIGITAL ADS

This playbook and the pilot on which it was based were created with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over-incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

The pilot was housed at the [FrameWorks Institute](#), a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues.

The pilot's lead partners were [1235 Strategies](#) and [Daigneault Digital](#), two modern social change consultancies for mission-driven ventures.

We'd like to thank our additional pilot partners, including [Yosemite Consulting](#), [76 Words](#), [Nikc Miller](#), and [Change Research](#).

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