NATIONAL ATTITUDES ON PUBLIC SAFETY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1
There is overwhelming public support to use funds currently allocated to the police for a wide range of public safety proposals. Investing in professionals trained to de-escalate conflict without force or weapons (81% support), community violence prevention and bystander intervention training (74%) and reducing dependence on locking people up in jail (67%) garner wide-spread and intense support.

2
What people recognize is missing from public safety is community improvements – not more police. People say high-quality public schools, jobs with livable wages, and affordable after-school activities for young people are as important to public safety as the police, but fewer than half of adults have access to them, while most everyone reports having a local police presence.

3
While perceptions differ widely by race, there is still overwhelming agreement that more accountability is critical. While Black adults find it much more important than their White counterparts that police are filmed by bystanders, *all* adults consider if very important that police are trained in de-escalation and their interactions recorded by body cameras.
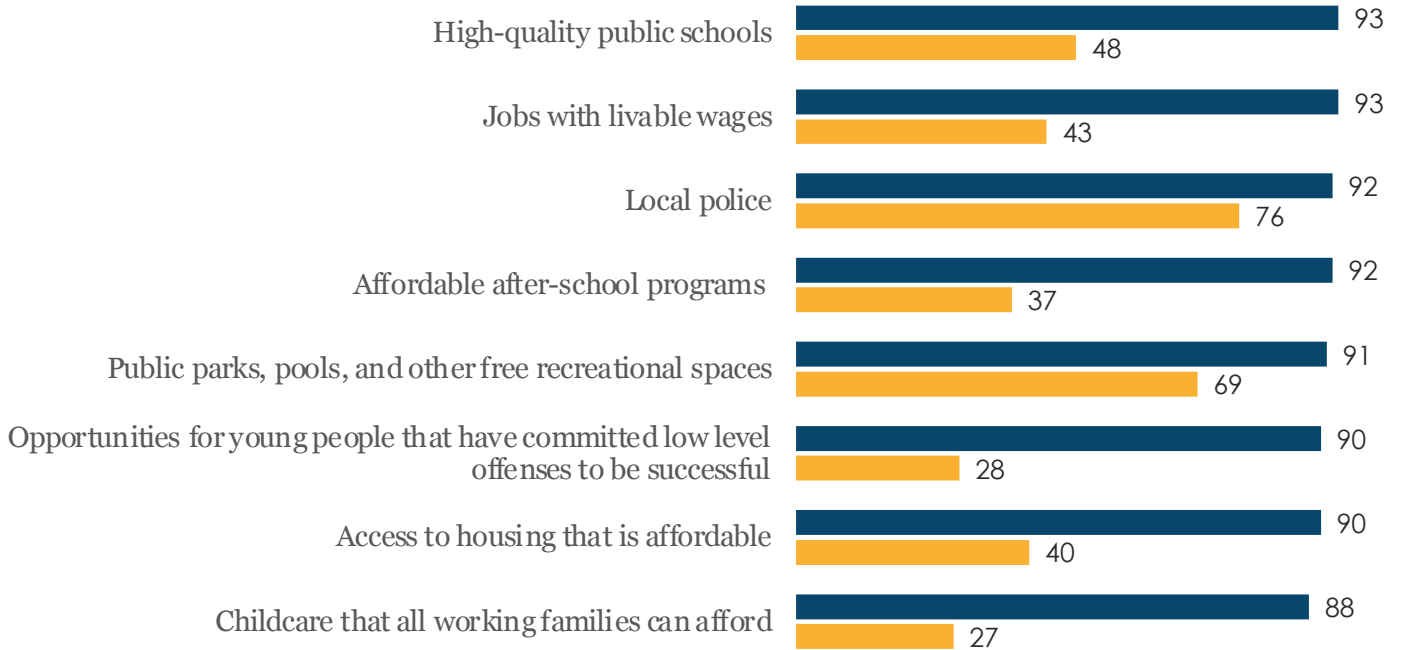
4
Law enforcement on television and in media shape perceptions of the police *and* influence individual behavior. Frequent watchers of police shows were 16 points more likely to have called the police (62%), than those who do not watch shows about law enforcement.
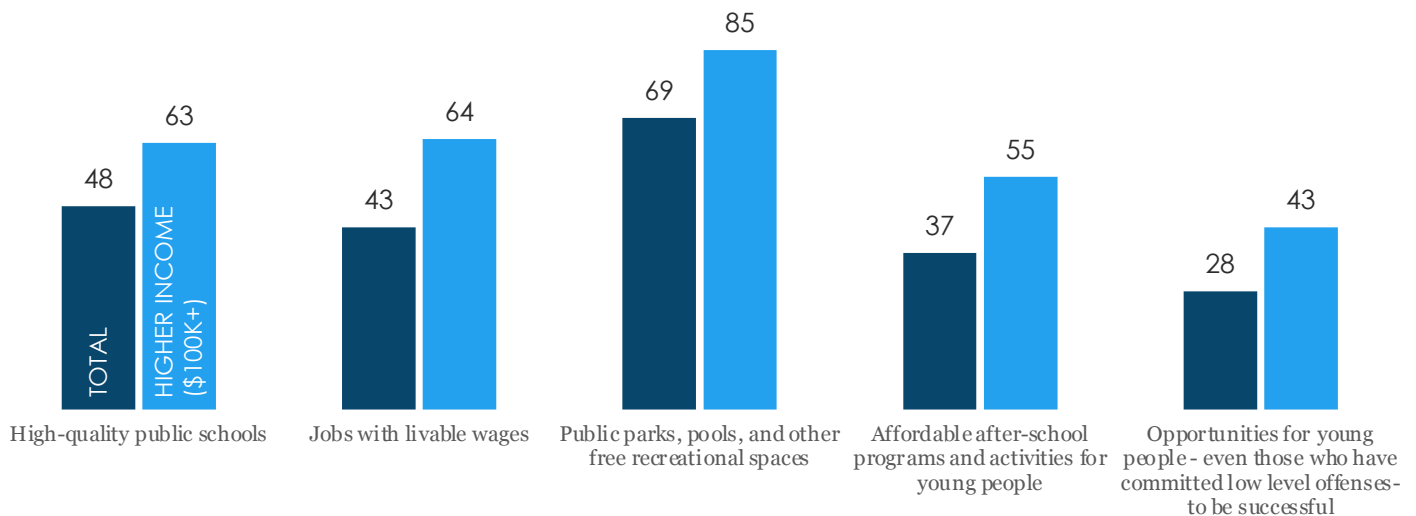
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Americans recognize good schools and jobs are critical to public safety but not readily available in their communities.

Fewer than half of adults say they have high quality schools, affordable housing or livable wages in their community – while most have local police presence.

? **How much do you think each of the following contributes to public safety?** *(Showing A lot + A little)*
And, which of these do you have where you live?

High-quality public schools	93 / 48
Jobs with livable wages	93 / 43
Local police	92 / 76
Affordable after-school programs	92 / 37
Public parks, pools, and other free recreational spaces	91 / 69
Opportunities for young people that have committed low level offenses to be successful	90 / 28
Access to housing that is affordable	90 / 40
Childcare that all working families can afford	88 / 27

Though the importance of access to quality public schools, jobs with livable wages or after-school activities is shared among all adults, high-income households in suburbs are the few people that readily have access to them. They also consider their communities much safer—93% say their neighborhood is "safe" or "very safe", compared to only 65% of households making less than $30K.

	TOTAL	HIGHER INCOME ($100K+)
High-quality public schools	48	63
Jobs with livable wages	43	64
Public parks, pools, and other free recreational spaces	69	85
Affordable after-school programs and activities for young people	37	55
Opportunities for young people - even those who have committed low level offenses - to be successful	28	43

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Americans support redirection of police funds for investments in healthcare, schools, and community-based public safety.

There is widespread and intense support for overhauling the existing tenants of our public safety apparatus. It is unsurprising that proposals to invest in kids, teachers, and childcare garner majority support, but even less well-trodden ideas, such as reducing jail dependence and limiting retirement payments to offending police officers have intense support.
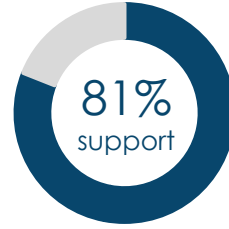
? **Now you're going to see some new ideas that people have to improve public safety in your community. Assume all proposals would be financed through a reallocation of part of the city's police budget.**

82% support
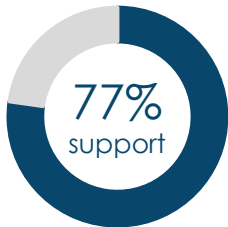
Invest in care not cops

Youth Recreation
Invest in youth recreational sports and activities that promote learning, safety, wellness, and community care

81% support

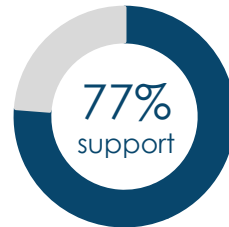Invest in community self-governance

De-Escalation over Weaponization
Equip trained professionals with the knowledge and resources to de-escalate and resolve conflicts without the use of force or lethal weapons

77% support

Invest in care not cops

More Teachers & Counselors
Invest in more teachers and school counselors, and give them the training, education and resources they need to provide for their students
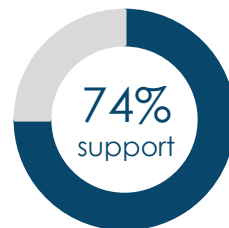
77% support

Invest in care not cops

Local Childcare
Invest in high-quality neighborhood childcare that supports all kinds of families

75% support

Invest in care not cops

Neighborhood Health Centers
Allocate more funds towards healthcare infrastructure such as neighborhood-based centers offering mental health and trauma services, drug and alcohol treatment services, et. al.

74% support

Invest in community self-governance
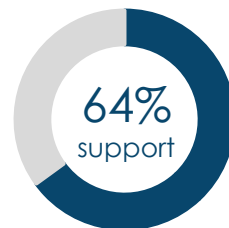
Community-Based Public Safety
Invest in community-based public safety approaches, including violence prevention and intervention programs and skills-based bystander intervention training

67% support

Seek alternatives to incarceration

Reduce Jail Dependence
Invest in other forms of rehabilitation and reduce dependence on locking people up in jails

64% support

Reduce power of police unions

No Retirement to Offending Officers
Do not pay retirement benefits and pensions to officers found guilty of using excessive force

53% support

Provide safe housing for everyone

Remove Police from Shelters
Remove police from all homeless shelter institutions and re-entry programs and replace them with trained, unarmed conflict resolution professionals
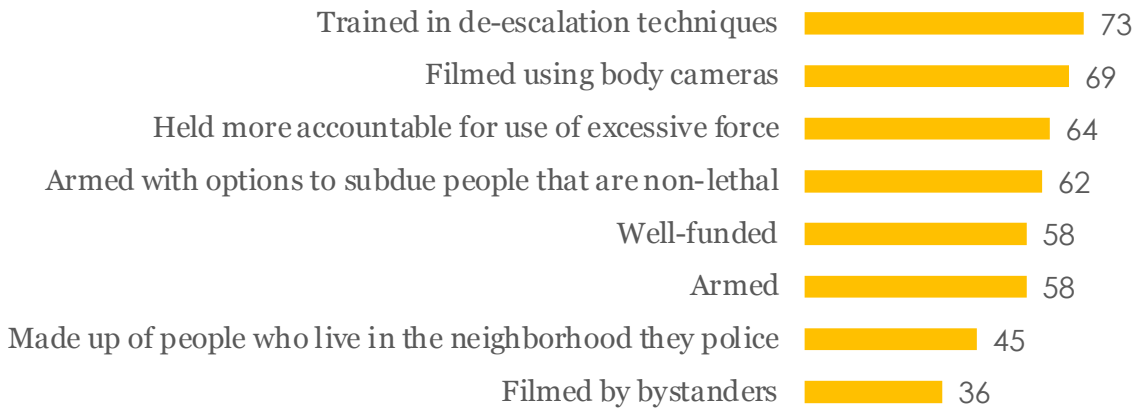
8 of 9 proposals garner majority support across the partisan spectrum (including Republicans)
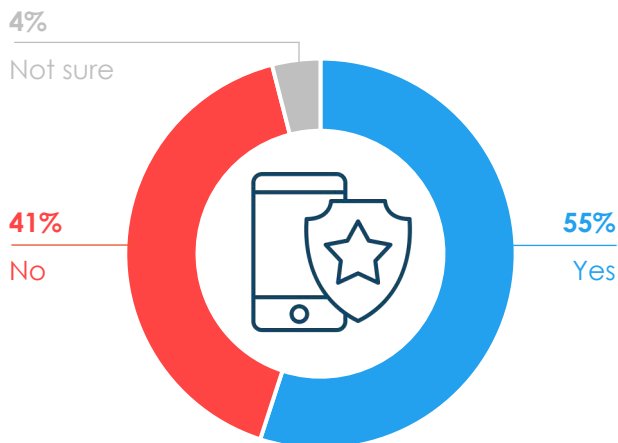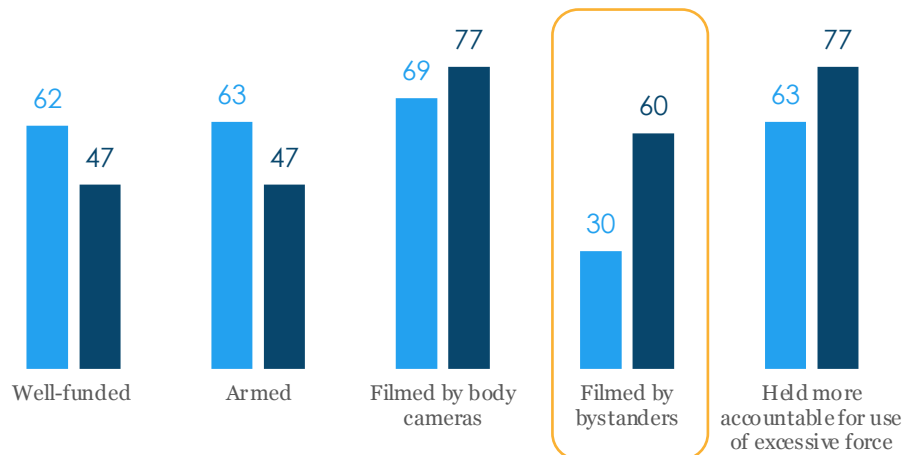
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POLICING IN MIND

Adults prioritize police being equipped to non-violently settle conflicts and held accountable for their actions more than being well-funded or armed. Funding is outranked in terms of importance by both methods of harm reduction (non-lethal weapons) or harm prevention (training in de-escalation).

? **In your opinion, how important is it that police are…** *(Showing Very Important)*

Trained in de-escalation techniques	73
Filmed using body cameras	69
Held more accountable for use of excessive force	64
Armed with options to subdue people that are non-lethal	62
Well-funded	58
Armed	58
Made up of people who live in the neighborhood they police	45
Filmed by bystanders	36

The starkest divides are along racial lines, and White and Black Americans have opposite priorities.

Black adults are twice as likely as their **White counterparts** to think it "very important" that police are filmed by bystanders.

	Well-funded	Armed	Filmed by body cameras	Filmed by bystanders	Held more accountable for use of excessive force
	62	63	69	30	63
	47	47	77	60	77

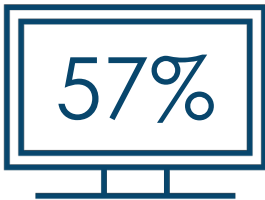**4%**
Not sure

41%
No

55%
Yes

Only slightly over half of all adults recall having ever called the police…

But this differs by race: **59% of White adults** have called the police, compared to **49% of People of Color.**

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POLICE IN MEDIA

To paraphrase Naomi Murakawa, police do not only station themselves in our communities but in our minds. In 2020, The USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center and Color for Change renewed the discussion on the ways film and media portray the social function of police with their report *Normalizing Injustice*, investigating TV's "scripted crime" genre and how it misrepresents and miseducates viewers about the criminal justice system and depicts "racial justice as acceptable." Beyond that, much of media portrayal of police is at odds with the reality that only a sliver of officers' time is devoted to solving violent crimes—in general, less than 4 percent. Using a modified list of the shows analyzed by Color for Change/USC, we asked respondents which of the shows they watched, and asked those who had called the police to select from a list the reason for their call(s).

57% Those who **watch TV shows featuring law enforcement** are more likely (57%) to have called than those who do not (46%).

…with frequent watchers much more likely to have called

Watches police shows **daily**	70%
Watches police shows **a few times a week**	62%

	Watches police shows	Does not watch police shows
Proactive Policing	41	29
Any on list	86	80
Something Else	20	33

The function of police is informed at least in part by what people see on television.
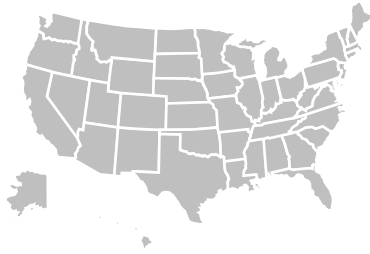
People who do not watch any law enforcement-centric shows are less likely to make calls within the frequent types, compared to those that do.

Playing police:

More frequent watchers are more likely act as an extension of the police in their own communities, making calls as the result of vigilante surveillance: that is, self-described "proactive policing" or the reporting of a "suspicious" person or activity.

	Watches police shows **daily**	Watches police shows **a few times a week**	**Rarely or never** watches police shows
Proactive Policing	44	42	29
Any on list	94	90	83
Something Else	16	16	33

METHODOLOGY

N=1,400

FEBRUARY 2021						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28						

Benenson Strategy Group conducted interviews with 1400 adults nationally from February 11 to February 23, 2021.

All interviews were conducted by online panel. The sample was weighted to ensure it was proportionately representative. Surveys with an online component do not have a margin of error, but based on the n-size, margin of sampling error is ± 1.6% for 1400.

Because of rounding, not all charts will sum to 100.

Cover art an original work by Sophie Holin.

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