

April 2008

**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Jim Kessler, VP for Policy and Rachel Laser, Director of the Culture Program  
**RE:** Getting Ahead of the Crime Wave

In recent years, the issue of crime has fallen to the bottom of the political charts. Rarely mentioned in Congress, many political leaders in Washington are treating the crime issue like polio—something that was once a problem in the United States but that now is basically solved.

But crime is on its way back. As Third Way and the Center for Innovative Policy document in our new report, *The Impending Crime Wave*, over the next five years, a record 3.5 million inmates will be released from prison owning few skills beyond those needed to commit more crime. That is just one of the four major sociological trends that will, if left unchecked, endanger American communities in the coming decade. The other trends include the lengthening shadow of crime surrounding illegal immigration, the sprawling parentless neighborhood of the internet, and the surging youth population—a population statistically more prone to commit crime.

In this memo, we argue that progressives must prepare for an upturn in crime and devise strategies to deal with it. We learned from our polling that though the public may not be aware of the causes driving a new crime wave, they believe crime is a resurgent threat. We found that Americans are supportive of an active government role in preventing crime. At the same time, they reject the old ideological approaches to crime as impractical. In tackling crime, we offer progressives three broad pieces of advice, which we discuss in depth below:<sup>1</sup>

- I. Alert the nation to the impending crime wave.
- II. Articulate a new, non-ideological “*Responsibility*” framework.
- III. Offer a modern policy agenda.

## **II. Alert the Nation to the Impending Crime Wave**

Progressives have an opportunity to get ahead of an issue that is certain to be resurgent both substantively and politically in the years ahead. Progressives should lay the groundwork for a new agenda and crime-fighting strategy by alerting the nation to the impending wave and the trends driving it.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the advice in this memo comes from the new report referenced above which offers over 100 anti-crime policies states can adopt and a national survey conducted by Cooper and Secrest that tested attitudes of Americans on crime (December 15-19, 2007, 1,139 sample size, with an oversample of African Americans).

## 1. The crime problem is real

As documented in our report *The Impending Crime Wave*, there will be an explosion of prisoners returning to their homes—prisoners who during their stay attained little education and skills and instead fell further behind. This surge of returning prisoners is unprecedented in American history. Over the next five years, returning prisoners are expected to commit nearly 10 million crimes if past trends hold true.

In addition, three other sociological trends are coming together that portend new crime.

- » The sheer number of illegal immigrants living in the shadows has created an often-hidden crime dynamic – though often not of their making—in states and communities across America.
- » The internet has exposed children to lurid, dangerous and coarse influences unlike any that children have experienced in previous generations.
- » A rising youth population that holds great promise, but is statistically far more prone to commit crimes is coming of age.

## 2. Americans are waking up to the crime problem

While crime does not rival the economy or Iraq in the national consciousness, our public opinion research shows clearly that Americans are once again becoming concerned about the issue.

By a five-to-one margin, they believe there is more crime in America than one year ago. Fifty-seven percent rate crime as a “very serious” issue. Seventy-eight percent say that children are more vulnerable to the dangers of crime than ten years ago. And by a margin of 69-19%, Americans feel that crime is more of a threat to their own safety than terrorism.

## 3. The issue is up for grabs

When asked who would do a better job of “working to reduce crime,” 33% chose Democrats, 31% chose Republicans, and 36% volunteered “not sure” or “neither party.” Compared to the 1970s and 80s, when the country trusted only conservatives to combat crime, our polling indicates that there has been a significant shift in public opinion towards parity.

Among most of our poll subsets, the margins are thin:

- Suburban Americans favor Republicans 39-26%; city Americans favor Democrats 35-29%.
- Whites favor Republicans 35-30%; African-Americans favor Democrats 56-6%.
- Southerners (33-31%) and Mountain/Plains State residents (36-24%) favor Republicans; Midwesterners (33-28%) and Northeast residents (40-26%) favor Democrats.
- Independents are split 20-19%; Moderates favor Democrats 34-19%.

Progressives have a new opportunity because the Bush Administration has fallen far behind the curve. Federal crime-fighting money to states, federal prosecutions of key types of crime, and federal enforcement of immigration laws have all plummeted under President Bush.

## **II. Articulate a New “Responsibility” Framework**

Over the past several decades, the prevailing progressive stance on crime held that societal circumstances like poverty, broken homes, and poor performing schools were the root causes of crime. Progressive crime solutions favored an active government role aimed at curing these underlying social ills.

Conservatives blamed crime on individual personal behavior and makeup. Conservatives considered an active government role a waste of money and believed solutions should focus on punishment and a “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” mentality.

We suggest a new framework based on personal responsibility.

On the politics, a majority of Americans support an activist government and robust anti-crime initiatives as long as they believe they will achieve actual results. Most importantly, they believe that initiatives that embody the concept of *personal responsibility* and focus on changing individual behavior are much more likely to achieve the desired results than broad programs targeting societal ills.

On the substance, in our crime report we found well over 100 proven policy ideas to achieve positive results on crime. Nearly all of these ideas had a single thread running through them – personal responsibility. For example, in places where parole was changed from a system designed to catch parole violators to one designed to turn parolees into responsible taxpayers – recidivism dropped. In cities that judged police performance based not on the number of arrests per officer, but on the reduction of neighborhood crime – crime dropped.

We offer four broad proof points on the advantages of this new Responsibility framework.

### **1. The traditional progressive framework doesn’t adequately address the new crime trends**

Many of today’s impending crime problems are new in nature and don’t easily fit in the ideological paradigms that have marked previous crime debates. It is no doubt true that better public schools would have a salutary effect on crime. But it is equally so that better schools will have absolutely no impact on the 3.5 million inmates due to return to their communities, the vast network of illegal immigrant smuggling operations, or sexual predation on the internet.

### **2. Americans are practical, not ideological, on crime**

We posed a series of questions about people’s views on the nature of criminality, whether government intervention could change criminals’ behavior, and whether spending taxpayer dollars on intervention was worth the effort or

throwing good money after bad.

We identified three distinct groups. The largest and most important represents the 55% of Americans who expressed both support for, and skepticism toward, government-sponsored anti-crime programs aimed at changing criminal behavior. We call them **“Solve-the-Problem”** Americans. They are non-ideological pragmatists who are open to a very active government role in crime prevention and intervention if properly designed and framed to emphasize personal responsibility.

*Solve-the-Problem* Americans are:

- 78% White, 10% African-American, and 9% Hispanic.
- 37% Democrats, 22% Independents, and 39% Republicans.
- 51% from rural areas and small towns; 49% from suburbs and cities.
- Equally represented in all regions of the country.

We also identified two other subsets of Americans: **“Throw-the-Book”** Americans, who oppose any efforts at changing criminal behavior beyond enforcement and prison, and **“Read-a-Book”** Americans, who believe wholeheartedly in rehabilitation.

The Throw-the-Book American is conspicuous in its absence. They represent a small minority of the electorate who are overwhelmingly conservative, live mostly in the South and Midwest, and favor a decidedly “punitive” approach to crime. Read-a-Book Americans constitute a significant minority and are over-represented in Northeast and Mountain/Plains states. They are far more likely to be liberal than the general population, but they have some support among moderates and even some conservatives. They favor a “fair” and “accountable” approach to crime.

### **3. The Responsibility framework dramatically boosts support for anti-crime initiatives and is seen as non-ideological**

Prisoner rehabilitation powerfully illustrates this point.

Americans support rehabilitation programs for prisoners, but their support is based less on what they view as a moral obligation for the prison population than what they think would result in reduced crime. For example, support for prison rehabilitation programs jumps 35-points (from 55% to 90%) when rehabilitation is defined as a *requirement of the prison population*, as opposed to a *benefit for the prison population*.

- By a margin of 90-6%, Americans said they were more likely to support a candidate who said: *“Prisoners should be forced to work, get an education, and learn skills because they need to be productive when they get out.”*

Among Solve-the-Problem Americans, support jumped 60-points (from 28% to 88%) after responsibility was added to the description.

Very few Americans could ascertain whether this was something a Republican or Democratic would propose. Only 29% associated that statement with Democrats and 17% with Republicans. This practical, non-ideological approach is universally appealing and not claimed by either political party.

#### 4. The Responsibility framework addresses a remaining progressive deficit and provides an effective contrast with conservatives

While the parties are at parity on crime, our research uncovered a lingering progressive hangover when it comes to personal responsibility.

Democrats are seen as blaming criminal behavior on *family and societal conditions*. This preconception is pervasive and unpopular with all but the most liberal Americans. Republicans, by contrast, are viewed as believing that people are accountable for their own actions.

- **Democratic Preconception—Circumstances Lead to Crime:** By a 33-point margin, Americans say Democrats believe “criminals aren’t bad people; they’re usually forced into crime because of family or economic circumstances.”
  - » By a 15-point margin, Americans are *less likely* to support a candidate who feels this way.
  - » Among “Solve-the-Problem” Americans, the *deficit* is 37-points.
- **Republican Preconception – Criminals Are Responsible for their Choices:** On the other hand, by a 26-point margin, Americans say Republicans believe “people are responsible for their own actions, even if they had a bad upbringing.”
  - » By a 53-point margin, Americans are *more likely* to support a candidate who feels this way.
  - » Among Solve-the-Problem Americans, the margin is 59-points.
  - » By a 38-point margin, however, Americans also associate Republicans with a strictly punitive approach, which is broadly unpopular.

Ultimately, Americans have a strong moral lens when it comes to crime. They believe that committing a crime is a bad individual choice—no matter the person’s background or circumstances. Even the liberal-leaning Read-a-Book American strongly supports a candidate who says criminals are responsible for their own actions (67-26% margin). When it comes to crime, progressives must focus on cultivating individual responsibility and accountability – not on broader societal problems. The Responsibility framework allows progressives to propose and fight for a very active agenda (a progressive ideal) with a responsibility architecture (arguably, a conservative ideal).

Additionally, this framework provides an effective contrast with conservatives.

- » The progressive approach is to make people responsible for becoming productive members of society.
- » The conservative approach is to assume that people cannot change and to resort to punitive measures only – a broadly unpopular approach.

### III. Offer a Modern Policy Agenda

Americans believe that underlying factors - like poverty, broken homes, and poor performing schools—*do* have an effect on crime. But in terms of solutions and approaches, it fails their results test. Americans see these problems as long-term and intractable as compared to solutions that focus on personal responsibility. When progressives frame the crime problem as one of societal circumstances, Americans view this as an excuse for crime, not an answer to it.

This is especially true if the four converging crime trends go unaddressed and lead to a major crime wave in America. In the face of these dangers, Americans will have little patience with sweeping plans to fix societal ills that have little or no nexus to the unprecedented returning inmate problem, the record number of illegal immigrants in the country, or a frightening new set of internet crimes aimed at kids.

In this section, we illustrate how to use this memo's recommended approach as applied to each of the four converging crime trends. For each trend area, we 1) alert the nation to the impending crime wave, 2) articulate an approach that embodies the Responsibility framework, and 3) identify a policy idea as a model. This section is not meant to be comprehensive, but illustrative. Each section of our report, *The Impending Crime Wave*, contains dozens of policies that fit the Responsibility framework.

#### 1. Containing the reentry explosion

Alert the Nation: Over the next five years, an unprecedented 3.5 million prisoners will be released into the general population. If unaddressed, they will commit 10 million new crimes by 2013.

Set the Frame: Replace idleness in prison with productivity to end the expensive and perpetual cycle of prison and release.

Offer an Agenda: Establish a 40-hour work week for prisoners in which they must improve themselves through work, education, counseling, drug abuse treatment, anger management, and skills training.

As noted above, this was the most popular initiative, supported by 91% of Americans who deemed this program very effective (61%) or somewhat effective (30%) in reducing crime.

#### 2. Protecting people and communities from the lengthening shadow of crime surrounding illegal immigration

Alert the Nation: The failure to address our immigration crisis and the Bush Administration's failure to enforce immigration laws has created a shadow world of crime.

Set the Frame: Embrace new strategies to enforce local laws and to protect the communities in which we live.

Offer an Agenda: Create an illegal immigration strike force to crack down on those who encourage and assist in illegal immigration, including those who create false identification, engage in human trafficking, and provide phony immigration legal services.

Americans' views on the illegal immigration issue are complex. In a previous Third Way poll, even among those who supported the idea of mass deportations of illegal immigrants, 80% thought the idea was impractical. In our recent crime poll, Americans overwhelmingly rejected the idea that illegal immigrants are more likely to commit crime than the general population. But there was very little patience for those who do commit crimes.

The policy above was supported by 84% of Americans who deemed it very effective (60%) or somewhat effective (24%) in reducing crime. The majority of Solve-the-Problem Americans, Hispanics, and Independents found the policy very effective.

### **3. Policing the sprawling parentless neighborhood of the internet**

Alert the Nation: Because of technology, children have never been more vulnerable to sexual predators and strangers.

Set the Frame: Insert a responsible adult presence in the vast, parentless, neighborhood of the internet.

Offer an Agenda: Make it illegal for an adult to impersonate a minor on the internet.

By a 78-3% margin, Americans say children are more vulnerable to the dangers of crime than they were 10 years ago. This agenda item is supported by a margin of 83-15%.

### **4. Establishing a continuum of attention to address the at-risk youth population**

Alert the Nation: We have a coming surge in the youth population which means both tremendous promise and hope but also the potential for 2 million new crimes if they simply behave like past teenagers.

Set the Frame: Establish a continuum of attention that reaches youth before they commit crimes, intervenes aggressively once they are in the criminal justice system, and provides supervision and support when they return home.

Offer an Agenda: Set up incentives for low-income kids to get a college scholarship only if they stay off drugs, have a clean rap sheet, and graduate from high school with good grades.

Americans are much more inclined to support aggressive prevention programs for teens. But like other areas, they were most inclined to support ideas that promote responsible behavior. This policy was supported by 90% of Americans who deemed it very effective (61%) or somewhat effective (29%) in reducing crime.