

# For Safety and Justice, Enact Policies to Limit Non-Safety-Related Traffic Stops

Nationally, police stop more than 20 million motorists a year for alleged traffic violations.<sup>1</sup> A large portion of these stops—estimates range from a third to nearly half—are for minor violations that do not affect public safety, such as driving with a single broken taillight, expired or defective vehicle registrations, a missing inspection sticker, or window tint.<sup>2</sup> Addressing these non-safety-related stops is emerging as a key solution to the physical, psychological, and economic harms of traffic stops in the United States, as well as high traffic fatalities nationwide.<sup>3</sup>

Backed by the evidence, cities from Philadelphia to Memphis and states from Virginia to Oregon have enacted policies that remove police from enforcement of some or all minor traffic infractions. Extensive research shows that these policies provide four key benefits:

1. **They improve traffic safety.** Limiting these stops frees officers to focus enforcement on unsafe driving behavior. A major study showed that by virtually eliminating low-level stops, one jurisdiction in North Carolina was able to increase the number of stops for dangerous driving.<sup>4</sup> This reduced traffic accidents and racial disparities in overall stops—with no impact on non-traffic related crime.<sup>5</sup>
2. **They improve public safety and community trust.** The frequency of these stops and their disparate impact on communities of color compound distrust in government institutions, such as police departments and prosecutors' offices, which depend on the public's cooperation to solve crimes.<sup>6</sup>
3. **They spare drivers the dangers of traffic stops.** More than 1,100 people are killed by police each year, and roughly 10 percent of these deaths involve traffic stops.<sup>7</sup> Further, the social costs of police interactions like traffic stops include harms to health, educational development, and economic security.<sup>8</sup>
4. **They reduce harmful racial disparities.** The harms of traffic stops are not equally felt. More than a quarter of people killed in traffic stops are Black, despite Black people making up only 12 percent of the population.<sup>9</sup> And although racial disparities abound throughout traffic enforcement, studies find greater disparities in non-safety-related stops than in safety-related stops.<sup>10</sup> Limiting these stops works: after Philadelphia instituted its policy on non-safety-related stops, traffic stops involving Black men for the infractions included in the policy went down 54 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Opponents of these policies tend to rely on two demonstrably false arguments:

**Myth #1: These stops are necessary to get guns off the street.** In fact, non-safety-related traffic stops very rarely result in the recovery of guns or other contraband.<sup>12</sup> A 2018 study of non-moving violation traffic stops in Nashville found that less than one-tenth of 1 percent of such stops resulted in police citing or arresting someone for possessing a weapon.<sup>13</sup> It also found that when traffic stops went down, crime did not go up. In general, research shows that traffic stops are not an effective crime fighting tool.<sup>14</sup> For example, the largest eight California police departments confiscate firearms in only about 0.5 percent of all traffic stops.<sup>15</sup>

**Myth #2: These stops are necessary to get dangerous drivers off the road.** Eliminating non-safety-related stops does not prevent police from stopping drivers for more serious equipment violations, like two missing headlights or anything causing visibly reckless driving. Additionally, a Connecticut analysis found that the equipment violations enforced in non-safety-related stops do not contribute to accidents. For example, defective lighting accounted for 9.4 percent of all Connecticut traffic stops, but only 0.1 percent of crashes between 2015 and 2019.<sup>16</sup>

Recent polling found that **69 percent of all voters support these policies**, with support from 81 percent of Democrats and 59 percent of Republicans.<sup>17</sup> Everyone in the United States deserves to be safe behind the wheel—these policies are a crucial step in that direction.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Stanford Open Policing Project, “Findings,” 2021, [perma.cc/6BYX-XWF4](https://perma.cc/6BYX-XWF4).
- <sup>2</sup> Vera’s recent report on Suffolk County, Massachusetts (Boston and environs), found that over the past decade, nearly a third of traffic stops (155,210 out of 493,181 total) were for minor violations, such as driving with a single broken taillight, expired or defective vehicle registrations, a missing inspection sticker, or window tint. Seleeke Flingai, Mona Sahaf, Nicole Battle, and Savannah Castenada, *An Analysis of Racial Disparities in Police Traffic Stops in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, from 2010 to 2019* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), 8, [perma.cc/26EN-F7S7](https://perma.cc/26EN-F7S7). Another study of more than 20 million traffic stops in North Carolina found that more than 46 percent were unrelated to safety. Frank R. Baumgartner, Derek A. Epp, and Kelsey Shoub, *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us About Policing and Race* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- <sup>3</sup> See Sarah Holder, “These Cities Are Limiting Traffic Stops for Minor Offenses,” Bloomberg CityLab + Equality, February 2, 2023, [perma.cc/AJW7-ZMFY](https://perma.cc/AJW7-ZMFY). For more on the physical harms of traffic stops, see Sam Levin, “US Police Have Killed Nearly 600 People in Traffic Stops Since 2017, Data Shows,” Guardian, April 21, 2022, [perma.cc/YS2U-SZD4](https://perma.cc/YS2U-SZD4); for psychological harms, see Rheana Murray, “The Conversation Black Parents Have With Their Kids About Cops,” ABC News, December 8, 2014, [perma.cc/J7ZZ-HVAW](https://perma.cc/J7ZZ-HVAW); for economic harm, see German Lopez, “The Tyranny of a Traffic Ticket,” Vox, August 10, 2016, [perma.cc/K6E5-3BGU](https://perma.cc/K6E5-3BGU); for high traffic fatalities in the United States, see Jonathan Adkins, “U.S. Traffic Deaths Remain Unacceptably High Despite Minor Decrease,” press release (Washington, DC: Governors Highway Safety Association, January 9, 2023), [perma.cc/9ZGK-HPSX](https://perma.cc/9ZGK-HPSX).
- <sup>4</sup> Mike Dolan Fliss, Frank Baumgartner, and Paul Delamater, et al., “Re-Prioritizing Traffic Stops to Reduce Motor Vehicle Crash Outcomes and Racial Disparities,” *Injury Epidemiology* 7, no. 3 (2020), [perma.cc/S75L-HMUE](https://perma.cc/S75L-HMUE).
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> Libby Doyle and Susan Nembhard, “Police Traffic Stops Have Little to Do with Public Safety,” Urban Institute, April 16, 2021, [perma.cc/UG9K-Z7X2](https://perma.cc/UG9K-Z7X2); and Simone Weichselbaum, Emily R. Siegel, and Andrew Blankstein, “Police Face a ‘Crisis of Trust’ with Black Motorists. One State’s Surprising Policy May Help.” NBC News, October 7, 2021, [perma.cc/T2FX-WW4H](https://perma.cc/T2FX-WW4H).
- <sup>7</sup> Levin, “US Police Have Killed,” 2022. In 2022, the number of killings resulting from traffic stops was closer to 8 percent, though estimates vary. See Sam Levin, “‘It Never Stops’: Killings by US Police Reach Record High in 2022,” Guardian, January 6, 2023, [perma.cc/Z4P7-HVXQ](https://perma.cc/Z4P7-HVXQ); and Mapping Police Violence, “2022 Police Violence Report,” accessed April 4, 2023, [policeviolencereport.org](https://policeviolencereport.org).
- <sup>8</sup> Aaron Stagoff-Belfort, Daniel Bodah, Daniela Gilbert, *The Social Costs of Policing* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), <https://www.vera.org/publications/the-social-costs-of-policing>.
- <sup>9</sup> Levin, “US Police Have Killed,” 2022. See also, Mapping Police Violence, “2022 Police Violence Report,” 2023.
- <sup>10</sup> For racial disparities in all traffic enforcement, see Emma Pierson, Camelia Simoiu, Jan Overgoor, et al., “A Large-Scale Analysis of Racial Disparities in Police Stops Across the United States,” *Nature* 4 (2020), 736-745, [perma.cc/3LR6-ZBDF](https://perma.cc/3LR6-ZBDF). For racial disparities in low-level stops, see Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub, *Suspect Citizens*, 2018.
- <sup>11</sup> Sammy Caiola, “Data Shows Philly Traffic Stops Involving Black Men are Down 54%” WHYY, March 6, 2023, [perma.cc/LMJ3-FFSH](https://perma.cc/LMJ3-FFSH).
- <sup>12</sup> Vera’s Suffolk County study found that “an overwhelming majority of those stops did not result in guns being found.” See Flingai, Sahaf, Battle, and Castenada, *Police Traffic Stops in Suffolk County, 2022*, 34.
- <sup>13</sup> The study found that the Nashville police cited or arrested someone on a weapon possession charge in 0.8 out of every 1,000 traffic stops. Alex Chohlas-Wood, Sharad Goel, Amy Shoemaker, and Ravi Shroff, *An Analysis of the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department’s Traffic Stop Practices* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Computational Policy Lab, 2018), 7, [perma.cc/N47B-VYZ4](https://perma.cc/N47B-VYZ4).
- <sup>14</sup> Geoff Pearson and Mike Rowe, “Gone Fishing: The Operation of Police Vehicle Stops in England and Wales,” *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 2023, [doi.org/10.1177/17488958231155275](https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958231155275).
- <sup>15</sup> Deepak Premkumar, Andrew Skelton, and Magnus Lofstrom, “How Often Are Firearms Confiscated During Traffic Stops?” Public Policy Institute of California, February 16, 2023, [perma.cc/92WP-RHWJ](https://perma.cc/92WP-RHWJ).
- <sup>16</sup> Memorandum from Connecticut Racial Profiling Prohibition Advisory Board to Logistics Subcommittee, Police Transparency and Accountability Task Force, re: “Evaluation and Recommendations of a Primary and Secondary Traffic Enforcement System,” February 4, 2021, [perma.cc/9DLL-H98G](https://perma.cc/9DLL-H98G).
- <sup>17</sup> Matt Ferner, “New Polling On The Role Of Police In Traffic Stops,” Safer Cities Research, March 5, 2023, [perma.cc/FY93-N5WF](https://perma.cc/FY93-N5WF).