

Messaging Guidelines for Policies to Limit Non-Safety-Related Traffic Stops

Across the United States, policies to eliminate traffic stops for non-safety-related infractions—like expired registration, a single broken taillight, or an air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror—are emerging as a key solution to the physical, psychological, and economic harms of traffic stops, as well as high traffic fatalities nationwide. These stops do not directly contribute to public safety or road safety; in fact, evidence demonstrates that eliminating them can *improve* road safety and public safety and reduce harmful racial disparities in traffic enforcement without leading to increased crime. A compelling message draws on these facts. Vera conducted message testing and developed a persuasive message framework to help pass these policies.

Key takeaways from the research:

- **Support is widespread:** A majority of voters across political parties, geographic regions, and urban/rural divides supports a policy to eliminate these stops. A majority also believes that traffic stops by armed police officers are not the right response for these infractions.
- **Road safety matters:** A similarly diverse majority of voters also believes that the most important reason to enforce traffic laws is to keep the roads safe for pedestrians and cars, opening the way to a message that explains the safety benefits of limiting non-safety-related stops.
- **There's a smarter way to employ police for safety:** Voters understand that a safer stops policy benefits police by taking enforcement of non-safety-related traffic infractions off their plate—thereby freeing up police resources to focus on dangerous driving.

Five lessons for building a narrative that wins bipartisan support:

1. **Frame the policy around road safety.** When presented with four different names for the policy, voters overwhelmingly preferred “The Safe Traffic Stops Act” over names based on racial bias or dangerous driving. Additionally, they were slightly more likely to support policies addressing “non-safety-related” violations than “minor,” “administrative,” or “technical” violations.
2. **Be explicit about the role of police.** This policy removes the burden of non-safety-related infractions from police, but they will still enforce more serious violations. Support among voters is high for evidence-backed messages like: “Police are far more likely to make our streets safer when they are given the freedom to focus exclusively on the most serious traffic offenses.”
3. **Counter “soft-on-crime” attacks by redirecting the focus to road safety.** Opposition attacks that “there must be consequences for breaking the law” or that non-safety-related traffic stops are needed to deter dangerous driving can be neutralized by reminding people that police should focus on serious crime and dangerous driving, not non-safety-related infractions.
4. **Do not shy away from talking about justice and a more equitable approach to traffic stops.** Safety and equity matter to voters. Voters respond well to messages like, “Pulling over someone because they can’t afford to fix a broken taillight does more to punish the poor than help keep our roads safe, and traffic stops for minor violations are disproportionately conducted on Black motorists.” This is true among voters across diverse geographies as well as Independent voters.
5. **Voters are open to hearing from a diverse array of messengers.** Some of the most effective messengers in support of a policy limiting non-safety-related stops (in descending order) include a traffic safety expert from the local department of transportation, the police chief, and a community

member who has experienced the harms of these stops, followed by the American Automobile Association (AAA), a criminal justice reform organization like Vera, and a criminal law professor from the state's flagship law school. A positive message from any one of these sources has more impact than opposition from sources like community members concerned about crime, a police chief, the police union, homeowner's associations, and faith leaders.

By leading with the shared value of road safety, acknowledging that enforcing every traffic infraction with a police stop is not creating safety, and pivoting to evidence-backed solutions like eliminating non-safety-related traffic stops, proponents can craft a message that builds broad support for a smarter, more equitable approach to road safety.

Source:

GR Strategies online poll commissioned by the Vera Institute of Justice of 2,402 likely voters to better understand public perception about police enforcement and traffic stops. The survey included a sample of national voters across the political spectrum, with an oversample of voters in Harris County, TX, and the cities of Denver, CO, and Seattle, WA. GR Strategies conducted the survey online between June 10 and 16, 2023, and it carries a confidence interval/margin of error of ± 2.3 percent. Researchers calculated weights based on the following datasets from the U.S. Census Bureau: the 2021 and 2022 Current Population Survey, the 2021 and 2022 American Community Survey, and the 2020 Census.