

Evidence Supports Limiting Non-Safety-Related Traffic Stops

This guide references evidence showing that limiting the enforcement of non-safety-related traffic infractions can improve roadway safety and reduce racial inequities, without increasing crime.*

1. Limiting non-safety-related traffic stops can improve traffic safety.

Adoption of a policy by the Fayetteville, North Carolina, police department to deprioritize stops for minor equipment and administrative infractions and focus instead on moving violations resulted in large decreases in traffic crashes and decreases in racially disparate outcomes of traffic enforcement, with no associated rise in crime.

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), <http://perma.cc/S75L-HMUE>.

An anti-drunk-driving unit of the Newington, Connecticut, police used stops for minor lighting infractions to unsuccessfully seek intoxicated drivers. Shifting to a focus on moving violations instead helped police achieve a 250 percent increase in DUI arrests along with a substantial decrease in racial disparities.

Tom Condon, “After a Poor Start, CT’s Anti-Racial Profiling Effort Is Making Progress,” *Connecticut Mirror*, January 30, 2022, <https://perma.cc/5JKB-HF2Z>.

Non-safety-related traffic enforcement wastes police resources.

In 2019, traffic stops that ended without arrest, citation, or a warning in California’s 15 largest law enforcement agencies accounted for more than 80,000 hours of officer time. More than half of these stops stemmed from minor non-safety-related infractions.

Magnus Lofstrom, Joseph Hayes, Brandon Martin, and Deepak Premkumar, *Racial Disparities in Traffic Stops* (San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, 2022), <https://perma.cc/JQ53-6S4A>.

In 2019, individual counties in California spent tens of millions of dollars conducting stops for equipment and administrative traffic infractions. Just two counties, Sacramento and San Diego, together spent about \$80 million on non-safety-related stops, which took up more than 5,000 hours of law enforcement time. Meanwhile, traffic fatalities in California increased 37 percent from 2011 to 2020.

Chauncey Smith, Elycia Mulholland Graves, Jacky Guerrero, et al., *Reimagining Community Safety in California: From Deadly and Expensive Sheriffs to Equity and Care-Centered Wellbeing*, (Los Angeles: Catalyst California and ACLU of Southern California, 2022), <https://perma.cc/63E6-XLKV>.

Traffic stops were the most common (43 percent) tactic used to generate drug arrests in Orange County, Florida. Given their negative impact on community relations and the availability of tactics that are more

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likely to lead to a prosecution, the benefits of using traffic stops for drug enforcement did not outweigh the drawbacks.

Nicholas Paul, “An Examination of Street-Level Drug Enforcement Tactics and Court Outcomes,” PhD diss., University of Central Florida, 2022, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2425&context=etd2020>.

Metropolitan Nashville Police Department (MNP) concentrated traffic stops in high-crime areas and pulled over Black drivers at a rate 44 percent higher than white drivers. This disparity in rates was even greater for non-moving violations like burnt-out lights or expired registrations. Non-moving violation traffic stops, most of which were conducted by a small portion of MNP officers, had no impact on serious crime, rarely led to recovery of contraband, and accounted for a substantial amount of the racial disparities in MNP’s traffic enforcement.

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), <https://perma.cc/RV3T-YEFD>.

From 2010 to 2019, police in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, (Boston area) stopped Black drivers at 2.3 times the rate of white drivers for non-safety-related infractions, such as improperly displayed license plates or a single broken taillight. Just 15 non-safety-related infractions accounted for nearly half of the racial disparity.

Seleeke Flingai, Mona Sahaf, Nicole Battle, and Savannah Castaneda, *An Analysis of Racial Disparities in Police Traffic Stops in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, from 2010 to 2019* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), <https://www.vera.org/publications/analysis-of-racial-disparities-police-traffic-stops-suffolk-county-ma>.

Non-safety-related enforcement does not improve traffic safety outcomes.

Black drivers in Connecticut are stopped at almost twice the rate of white drivers for non-safety-related infractions. While the equipment infractions enforced by police—such as lighting defects or improperly affixed license plates—do not contribute to accidents.

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, <http://perma.cc/9DLL-H98G>.

2. Enforcing non-safety infractions is an ineffective way to uncover serious crime, and crime does not rise when police shift to enforcing moving violations instead

After Philadelphia adopted an ordinance removing eight non-safety-related infractions from police enforcement, stops for those offenses declined significantly while stops for moving violations increased. The top reason for a car stop shifted from a broken taillight to running a red light, and Black drivers saw a 54 percent decrease in stops of the type targeted by the ordinance, though racial disparities persisted.

Sammy Caiola, “Data Shows Philly Traffic Stops Involving Black Men Are Down 54 percent,” *WHYY NPR*, March 6, 2023, <https://perma.cc/6T8B-XN65>.

Sam Raim, “Police Are Stopping Fewer Drivers — and It’s Increasing Safety,” Vera Institute of Justice, January 11, 2024, <https://www.vera.org/news/police-are-stopping-fewer-drivers-and-its-increasing-safety>.

A study of the eight largest California police departments revealed that they confiscate firearms in only about 0.5 percent of traffic stops.

Deepak Premkumar, Andrew Skelton, and Magnus Lofstrum, “How Often Are Firearms Confiscated During Traffic Stops?” Public Policy Institute of California, February 16, 2023, <https://perma.cc/92WP-RHWJ>.

In Washington, DC, police recovered a gun in only 0.6 percent of traffic and pedestrian stops in the second half of 2019.

ACLU-DC and ACLU Analytics, *Racial Disparities in Stops by the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department: Review of Five Months of Data* (Washington, DC: ACLU, 2020), <https://perma.cc/N4B8-AA86>.

An analysis revealed that contraband was discovered in only 0.27 percent of traffic stops by the Washington State Patrol and 0.11 percent of traffic stops by the Tacoma Police Department.

ACLU of Washington and Vera Institute of Justice, “Traffic Safety for All—Equitable Solutions to Rising Traffic Fatalities in Washington (HB 1513),” <https://perma.cc/W5S6-PHH2>.

An ethnographic study of 200 traffic stops in England found that they were ineffective as a crime fighting tool and encouraged racially disparate outcomes.

Geoff Pearson and Mike Rowe, “Gone Fishing: The Operation of Police Vehicle Stops in England and Wales,” *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, February 25, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958231155275>.

Policies reducing non-safety-related traffic stops do not lead to more crime.

A study in Ramsey County, Minnesota, demonstrated that crime did not rise when prosecutors and police stopped enforcing non-safety-related traffic infractions.

Rory Pulvino, Jess Sorensen, JJ Naddeo, and Jared Fishman, “Traffic Stop Policy in Ramsey County, MN,” Justice Innovation Lab, June 7, 2023, <https://perma.cc/8W2L-W4LS>.

Adoption of a policy by the Fayetteville, North Carolina, police department to deprioritize stops for minor equipment infractions and focus instead on moving violations resulted in large decreases in traffic crashes and decreases in racially disparate outcomes of traffic enforcement, with no associated rise in crime.

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), <http://perma.cc/S75L-HMUE>.

Less than one-tenth of one percent (0.8 out of every 1,000) of traffic stops by the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department (MNPd) for non-safety-related infractions resulted in weapon possession charges, and traffic stops had no impact on serious crime.

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), <https://perma.cc/RV3T-YEFD>.

In 2022—the year Philadelphia implemented a law removing eight non-safety-related infractions from police enforcement—police conducted 70 percent fewer traffic stops than in 2019 but still seized more guns.

Sam Raim, “Police Are Stopping Fewer Drivers — and It’s Increasing Safety,” Vera Institute of Justice, January 11, 2024, <https://www.vera.org/news/police-are-stopping-fewer-drivers-and-its-increasing-safety>

3. Shifting away from police stops for non-safety-related infractions can reduce racially disparate outcomes.

Data from all 20 million traffic stops in North Carolina from 2002 to 2017 show that Black drivers were about 63 percent more likely to be stopped and more than twice as likely to be searched as white drivers. Vehicle stops were extremely inefficient at uncovering crime but created distrust of the police in the most impacted communities.

Frank R. Baumgartner, Derek A. Epp and Kelsey Shoub, *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us About Policing and Race* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

In 2021, the Ramsey County, Minnesota, County Attorney ceased prosecuting cases arising from non-safety-related traffic enforcement or based on evidence found in suspicionless consent searches. At about the same time, four local police departments adopted policies shifting their traffic enforcement focus to moving violations rather than non-safety-related infractions. As a result, Ramsey County saw reductions in non-safety-related stops and in racial disparities in stops and searches, with no associated increase in crime.

Rory Pulvino, Jess Sorensen, JJ Naddeo, and Jared Fishman, “Traffic Stop Policy in Ramsey County, MN,” Justice Innovation Lab, June 7, 2023, <https://perma.cc/8W2L-W4LS>.

Laws banning racial profiling, such as those adopted in California, Texas, and Connecticut, have not eliminated racially inequitable outcomes..

Rebecca Yin, “Bans with No Bite: Why Racial Profiling Bans Are Unable to Create Racial Justice in Policing,” *Cardozo Law Review* 43, no. 4 (2022), <https://perma.cc/S5FJ-H74S>.

Data from almost 100 million traffic stops across the United States show that Black drivers are less likely to be stopped at night than during the day because darkness hides drivers’ race, suggesting racial bias plays a part in stop decisions. Once they initiated a stop, police were approximately twice as likely to search Black and Latinx drivers as white drivers, despite Black and Latinx drivers being less likely than white drivers to have contraband.

Emma Pierson, Camelia Simoiu, Jan Overgoor, et al., “A Large-Scale Analysis of Racial Disparities in Police Stops Across the United States,” *Nature Human Behavior* 4 (2020), <https://perma.cc/3LR6-ZBDF>.

A study of traffic stops in Kansas City, Missouri, found that Black drivers were 2.7 times more likely to be stopped by police than white drivers for non-safety-related infractions and that they received more intrusive, threatening, and rude treatment from police when stopped.

Charles R. Epp, Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald P. Haider-Markel, *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

In Montgomery County, Maryland, police stopped Black and Latinx drivers disproportionately, and these disparities persisted or worsened when overall stop rates declined. Racial disparities were concentrated in administrative (license and insurance) and equipment infractions, and lowest among moving violations.

Natalia Carrizosa, Memorandum from Montgomery County (MD) Office of Legislative Oversight to County Council, OLO Memorandum Report 2022-12, re: “Analysis of data Montgomery Traffic Violations Dataset,” October 25, 2022, <http://perma.cc/DQG6-VNXN>.

Calculating racial disparities in traffic enforcement requires a benchmark to compare against the race of stopped drivers. In areas with dense populations, comparing race of drivers against census data is a valid method. Other benchmarks may be needed for sparsely populated places or those where disparities are slight.

Frank R. Baumgartner, *Benchmarking Traffic Stop Data: Examining Patterns in North Carolina and the City of Raleigh* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2022), working paper, <https://perma.cc/GUD5-QD2Y>.

An analysis of moment-to-moment geolocation data from Florida rideshare drivers showed that despite no significant differences in speeding, crashes, or repeat traffic infractions, nonwhite drivers were between 24 and 33 percent more likely to be stopped for speeding than white drivers and paid 23 to 34 percent more in fines.

Pradhi Aggarwal, Alec Brandon, Ariel Goldszmidt, et al., *High-frequency Location Data Shows that Race Affects the Likelihood of Being Stopped and Fined for Speeding* (Chicago: Becker Friedman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago, 2022), working paper, <https://perma.cc/D3MA-WZPA>.

The California Racial and Identity Profiling Advisory (RIPA) Board conducts annual analyses of all California traffic stops and has consistently found that Black and Latinx drivers are disproportionately stopped and searched despite being less likely than white drivers to be found in possession of contraband.

California Office of the Attorney General, “RIPA Board Reports,” <https://oag.ca.gov/ab953/board/reports>.

Racial disparities in police stops are harmful.

When police stop, search, or arrest people, the encounters can negatively impact the physical and psychological health, educational attainment, economic security, and civic participation of individual people and entire communities. The harms increase as policing interactions become more intrusive and persistent.

Aaron Stagoff-Belfort, Daniel Bodah, and Daniela Gilbert, *The Social Costs of Policing* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), <https://www.vera.org/publications/the-social-costs-of-policing>.

Persistent racial disparities in traffic stops, searches, and use of force by police can hurt individual drivers, community perceptions of safety, and community trust in law enforcement. These impacts are felt most in Black communities.

Libby Doyle and Susan Nembhard, “Police Traffic Stops Have Little to Do with Public Safety,” Urban Institute, April 26, 2021, <https://perma.cc/UG9K-Z7X2>.

An analysis of data from 2012 to 2018 from Hillsborough County, Florida, showed that traffic stops depressed voting turnout by 1.5 percentage points. The effect was smaller but still significant for Black drivers and was largest for midterm elections.

Jonathan Ben-Menachem and Kevin T. Morris, “Ticketing and Turnout: The Participatory Consequences of Low-Level Police Contact,” *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 3 (2023), <https://perma.cc/7S3E-UJPS>.