

Implementation Guide for Policies Limiting Non-Safety-Related Traffic Stops

For any jurisdiction large or small, adopting a policy limiting traffic stops for non-safety-related infractions is a victory. Regardless of whether change arrives via a new section in the local police operations manual, a municipal ordinance, or a decision by the local prosecutor not to go forward with cases arising from such stops, it is a step forward for safety and justice.

However, a policy is only as effective as its implementation. This guide describes key actions government leaders can take to ensure the new policy succeeds.

Ensuring that a policy is properly implemented requires three key steps:

1. **educate** stakeholders about the policy;
2. **ensure compliance** with the new procedures; and
3. **evaluate** the impact of the changes.

Step One: Educate stakeholders about the policy.

An effective education campaign will ensure that the policy is implemented properly and without significant resistance from law enforcement or community members.

Whether the policy comes from a legislative body, law enforcement, or a prosecutor's office, the main priority must be educating law enforcement officers, as they will be executing the policy. If the policy comes from law enforcement, law enforcement leaders need to familiarize their officers with the new approach, explain the rationale for it, and provide clear training on what is expected of officers when they enforce traffic infractions.

For example, when Harold Medlock, chief of the Fayetteville, North Carolina, police department successfully implemented the first iteration of such a policy in 2013, he knew that ensuring buy-in from his officers was paramount. To do so, Medlock communicated directly with his officers about how he believed the policy would improve road safety and reduce harmful racial disparities in traffic enforcement, encouraging the officers to ask candid questions and continually returning to the data to explain his new approach. According to Medlock, he attempted to meet with every officer on his staff individually, knowing that while perhaps he could discipline officers into implementing the policy, it would not achieve the goals of improving road safety and improving relationships with the community; instead, it was necessary for officers to understand what he was attempting to do and pursue those goals alongside him. Medlock's deputy chief, Anthony Kelly, notes that while he and many of the officers were resistant to what they perceived as a major shift in the way they did their jobs, under Medlock's persistent guidance they came to embrace the policy and its benefits.¹

If the policy is passed into law by a city council, county commission, or state legislature, provisions must be included to help educate law enforcement. This will inevitably be an easier process if law enforcement have been included in the process of drafting the policy, such that they are already on board and have been able to make recommendations that will help integrate it into existing department practices. For example, in Minnesota, Ramsey County Attorney John Choi stopped prosecuting charges stemming from non-safety-related stops in coordination with several police departments.²

To educate law enforcement effectively, first and foremost, the law itself should include an implementation and training period, as was done with Philadelphia's Driving Equality ordinance (in this case, 120 days).³ In addition, lawmakers should reach out to law enforcement leadership to make sure they fully understand the new policy and have a chance to raise any questions about how to implement it. As part of this process,

lawmakers can work with law enforcement to develop training for their frontline supervisors and officers about how to enforce traffic infractions within the new framework, and to review the training developed by law enforcement to ensure it is complete and accurate.

It is also crucial to educate the public about the new policy. According to Philadelphia Councilmember Isaiah Thomas, sponsor of the city's Driving Equality ordinance, education involves two different components: 1) educating the public about why current traffic enforcement practices are a problem by sharing the experiences of people stopped for non-safety-related infractions and 2) educating people about what the new law does (and does not do). Thomas and his team held town halls in each precinct to answer questions from people who were confused or concerned about the new law. They also printed out and circulated cards that explained which stops were prohibited under the ordinance.⁴ Engaging with questions from the public is an important way to head off misunderstandings and address any fears that may be circulating.

It can also be effective to engage with the public indirectly. Outreach to local media will encourage accurate and thorough reporting on the policy. Working with community-based organizations can make sure the message gets out, accompanied by the credibility those organizations have built. This work begins with reaching out to organizations that work with the communities most impacted by prior traffic enforcement policies and letting them know what to expect. Groups that organized to support passage of an ordinance are an excellent first call, as they already recognize the importance of the policy and will want to support it. Other appropriate groups might include neighborhood associations, immigrants' rights coalitions, racial justice organizations, traffic safety organizations, commuter advocates, bicycling groups, and pedestrian safety organizations.

Step two: Ensure compliance with the new procedures.

Change doesn't happen overnight; but without monitoring, it may never happen at all. Police leadership should regularly review records of traffic stops and tickets. These records can identify whether certain police units are struggling with the new framework and whether there are deficiencies in the training or misunderstandings of the policy. In addition to police leadership, legislative leaders and community members should review stops records through publicly available dashboards or regular release of stop data. In Philadelphia, joint review of stop data by the Philadelphia Police Department and Councilmember Thomas's office, along with the Philadelphia Defender's Association, has been a key means of identifying how to increase compliance with the ordinance.⁵ The data should show that stops for infractions covered by the new policy are decreasing over time; if the data reveals that they are not, identifying this fact to police leadership can help them correct course through management and training.

All this, of course, rests on the availability of data. If this data was not already being collected and released prior to implementation, the policy should ideally be accompanied by a data collection mandate to help monitor compliance and effectiveness. Policymakers should identify any barriers to gathering necessary information. For example, if the race of drivers is not being collected in traffic stop records, policymakers and law enforcement should determine whether there is a reason it cannot be collected (such as a missing field in the software used for reports) or officers should be given additional training to inform them that they are expected to collect it and how to do so.

Step three: Evaluate the impact of the changes.

Policies to limit enforcement of non-safety-related traffic infractions should reduce racial disparities and increase roadway safety without resulting in increases in crime. Although meaningful changes in stop rates and racial disparities can arise within the first year, it is possible that improvements will take longer.⁶ Scheduling annual reporting about the prior year's outcomes under the new policy, as Virginia did, is an excellent way to see if progress is being made or if anything is not working as intended.⁷ Examining outcomes before and after the new policy allows leadership to identify and correct gaps in implementation.

For example, after the Seattle Police Department adopted a revised traffic enforcement policy, the Office of Inspector General for Public Safety reviewed the new policy and issued recommendations for further modifications.⁸ In Philadelphia, an evaluation noted a steep increase in stops for tinted windows, a minor infraction not in the ordinance, raising the possibility tinted windows were becoming more commonly used as a pretext for stops.⁹ When these issues are visible to lawmakers, law enforcement, advocates, and the public, jurisdictions can modify their policy to address them.

Equally important is identifying the successes of the policy. For example, in Ramsey County, Minnesota, an evaluation demonstrated that collaboration between the prosecutor and Saint Paul Police Department, was effective in virtually eliminating stops for covered infractions and reducing racial disparities. The evaluation also determined that the new policy had no negative impact on traffic safety or crime.¹⁰

Endnotes

- ¹ 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>; Andrew Barksdale, “Fayetteville police making fewer traffic stops,” *Fayetteville Observer*, August 7, 2014, <https://perma.cc/ES6J-CZ3H>; Ahmed Jallow, “Taking cops out of traffic stops: Would it make a difference? North Carolina examples offer a clue,” *Columbus Dispatch*, March 22, 2021, <https://perma.cc/YJH4-YOPD>; YWCA Central Carolinas, “Traffic Stop Disparities: A Conversation with Harold Medlock, retired Fayetteville Chief of Police,” YouTube video, November 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pb-bNdRzRl8>; Harold Medlock, presentation to the Vera Institute of Justice’s Sensible Traffic Ordinances for Public Safety (STOPS) cohort, June 13, 2023 (for more information, contact Daniel Bodah at dbodah@vera.org).
- ² Ramsey County Law Enforcement Leaders, “Non-Public Safety Traffic Stops,” Press release, September 7, 2021, <https://perma.cc/4LW3-H9QL>; and Roseville Police Department, “Non-Public Safety Traffic Stops,” Press release, September 8, 2021, <https://www.cityofroseville.com/DocumentCenter/View/32579/2021-09-08-Traffic-Policy>.
- ³ Philadelphia City Council, Bill No. 210636-A (“Driving Equality”), October 14, 2021, <https://phila.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5007830&GUID=065348E0-F4F6-4B6A-A088-DF5358E73CD&Options=ID%7cText%7c&Search=210636>.
- ⁴ Councilmember Isaiah Thomas, presentation to the Vera Institute of Justice’s Sensible Traffic Ordinances for Public Safety (STOPS) cohort, April 11, 2023. For more information, contact Daniel Bodah at dbodah@vera.org.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Rory Pulvino, Jess Sorensen, JJ Naddeo, and Jared Fishman, “Traffic Stop Policy in Ramsey County, MN,” Justice Innovation Lab, June 7, 2023, <https://knowledgehub.justiceinnovationlab.org/reports/traffic-stop-policy-ramsey-county>. See also 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>.
- ⁷ Virginia State Legislature, “HB 1250 Virginia Community Policing Act; data collection and reporting requirement.” 2020 Special Session, <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?201+sum+HB1250>.
- ⁸ Seattle Police Department, *Policy Manual*, “16.232 – Traffic Stops,” effective July 1, 2023, <https://public.powerdms.com/Sea4550/tree/documents/2570427>; and Seattle Office of Inspector General, *Safer Traffic Enforcement Workgroup: Phase II Memorandum and Recommendations* (Seattle, WA: Office of Inspector General, 2023), <https://perma.cc/8EMX-6TGV>.
- ⁹ Raim, “Police are Stopping Fewer Drivers,” 2024; and Sammy Caiola, “Data Shows Philly Traffic Stops Involving Black Men Are Down 54%” WHYY, March 6, 2023, <https://perma.cc/6T8B-XN65>.
- ¹⁰ Pulvino et al., “Ramsey County, MN,” 2023.