

The Problem

When police make low-level traffic stops, it's not always to promote traffic safety. Officers often pull drives over for minor rule violations – like hanging an air freshener on a rearview mirror – as a pretext to go fishing for evidence of other crimes.

There is strong evidence, however, that low-level traffic stops rarely yield useful crime-solving information and do not effectively decrease serious crime. Instead, these stops often create flashpoints of confrontation that are dangerous for officers and drivers alike.

In the last five years, over 400 people have been killed during traffic stops, including 86 people in 2022 alone. The burden and dangers of pretextual stops fall most heavily on Black people and communities of color: in 2020, Black drivers were 20 percent more likely to be stopped than white drivers.

What the Data Says

LOW-LEVEL TRAFFIC STOPS CAN BE SAFELY LIMITED

Reducing low -level traffic stops does not mean increasing crime. Data shows that low-level stops very rarely produce evidence of serious crimes. Furthermore, the low-level violations for which drivers are being stopped – like having a small part of their license plate covered – do not reduce public safety.

- Our study of traffic stops in Nashville found that the local police department's policy of making large numbers of stops in high-crime neighborhoods did not reduce crime. It found that fewer than 1% of stops for non-moving violations resulted in arrests for serious crimes.
- An analysis of 3.4 million traffic stops conducted by California's 15 largest law enforcement agencies revealed that during those stops, offices confiscated a total of 905 firearms. That's one confiscation for every 3,700 stops, or a yield rate of just .02% .

REDUCING STOPS CAN IMPROVE PUBLIC SAFETY

In fact, making fewer traffic stops can actually improve public safety. Focusing resources on low-level traffic stops diverts resources from actual crime-fighting and public safety activities while sewing distrust between police and communities.

- In Fayetteville, North Carolina, when equipment stops were cut by 80 percent, genuine safety stops increased and traffic accidents fell. There was no increase in violent or property crime.
- An analysis of 3.5 million traffic stops by law enforcement agencies in Connecticut found that when agencies deprioritized low-level stops, arrests for DUIs increased, suggesting that officers' time was being used more effectively.

A NUMBER OF AGENCIES HAVE VOLUNTARILY REDUCED STOPS

- In response to our [report](#), the Nashville Police Department instructed officers to stop making thousands of low-level stops, and to focus traffic enforcement on serious traffic issues. Stops fell by roughly 90 percent as a result.
- The Los Angeles Police Commission unanimously approved a [policy](#) requiring officers to have articulable information regarding a serious crime in addition to a traffic violation before conducting a traffic stop. As a result, the share of stops for minor violations [dropped by more than 40%](#).
- Fayetteville, NC [deprioritized](#) equipment stops, allowing the department to focus on moving violations.

REDUCING STOPS CAN REDUCE RACIAL DISPARITIES

Pretextual traffic stops disproportionately affect people of color – in fact, “driving while Black” has become a part of everyday vernacular. Reducing low-level stops can significantly reduce the impact of biased policing on communities.

- In Fayetteville, Black drivers were searched [50 percent less often](#) when policy limiting pretextual stops was in place compared to the previous four years.
- In Connecticut, policy changes that reduced stops resulted in a two-thirds reduction in the number of police departments disproportionately stopping Black drivers from [2013 to 2020](#).

LIMITING CONSENT SEARCHES

To minimize the use of traffic stops as fishing expeditions for evidence of other crimes, the authority of police officers to conduct consent searches absent reasonable suspicion or probable cause should be limited.

- Several states have required reasonable suspicion for consent searches as a matter of constitutional law, including [Minnesota](#) and [New Jersey](#). Many police departments have done so voluntarily, including in Austin, Milwaukee, and Portland.
- In 2011, shortly before the city of Austin's requirement went into effect, officers [conducted 694 consent searches](#) (40% of those searched were Black). By 2015, that number fell to 69 per year.