

SAFE PASSAGE:

TRAFFIC SAFETY AND CIVIL RIGHTS 2024 UPDATE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to show my gratitude and appreciation to all of those who made this report possible. A special thanks to Alyssah Gonzalez from the University of Texas, Sociological PhD Program-UTConnect Fellow, who helped with converting the data into a presentable form. Alyssah also helped with creating the graphics, drafting, editing, and moral support. Without her work this report wouldn't have been as extensive and well produced.

A very special thanks to Jenny Hixon who helped produce the original Safe Passage report which was released in 2023. Jenny was instrumental in the writing of the report and helped with the public health analysis and guidance.

Shout out to Travis Fife, Molly Petchenik, Chris Harris, Alycia Castillo, and the entire Criminal Legal Team at the Texas Civil Rights Project. They have been supportive of this work and provided affirmations, wisdom, and countless suggestions along the way. You are the best team to work with!

I would also like to thank the RISE Coalition who have supported our work. Without you, we would not be able to keep this work going. The coalition members provide the inspiration to speak out and make sure we produce the evidence to show that there are better ways to keep our roads safe without policing.

This report is dedicated to all those who lost their lives during a police non-safety traffic stop.

In solidarity,

Christopher Rivera

Texas Civil Rights Project

Outreach Coordinator

Safe Passage Report and Campaign Manager

Safe Passage Report

Executive Summary

The Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP) is focused on addressing civil rights issues related to traffic enforcement in Texas, emphasizing that civil rights and public safety can coexist. This report examines racial disparities in traffic stops, specifically analyzing four Texas cities and the impact of non-safety traffic stops, also known as vehicle violations such as broken tail lights, dark tinted windows, and expired registrations that do not directly relate to road safety.

In 2023, Texas law enforcement agencies conducted over 2 million non-safety traffic stops, an increase of 177,000 from the previous year. Racial disparities associated with these stops have also risen, disproportionately affecting Black, brown, and low-income communities. The report highlights that many stops are often pretextual, allowing police to conduct further investigations based on minor vehicle violations.

The report highlights that motor vehicle crashes (MVCs) are a leading cause of road injuries, with over 4,200 fatalities in Texas in 2023. However, non-safety traffic stops do not address the root causes of traffic fatalities, which are primarily linked to speeding, DWI, and unsafe driving behaviors.

The notion that traffic stops are effective in removing contraband is critically examined. Data shows a minimal recovery rate for contraband during non-safety stops, with many stops resulting in citations, arrests, and use of force for minor traffic infractions rather than significant public safety outcomes.

The report connects systemic racial and economic inequalities to traffic enforcement practices, noting that low-income drivers are often unfairly targeted for non-safety violations. High-profile cases of police violence during traffic stops demonstrate the dangers associated with these practices.

TCRP advocates for policies that prioritize genuine traffic safety issues—such as reckless driving and speeding—over minor traffic violations that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Policy suggestions include passing an ordinance or state law that ends non-safety traffic stops, redesigning roads to deter dangerous driving behaviors, and reallocating police resources away from non-safety stops.

The report argues for a reimagined approach to traffic enforcement that enhances public safety while protecting civil rights. By focusing on serious traffic violations and addressing systemic biases, Texas can create a more equitable and safe environment for all drivers.

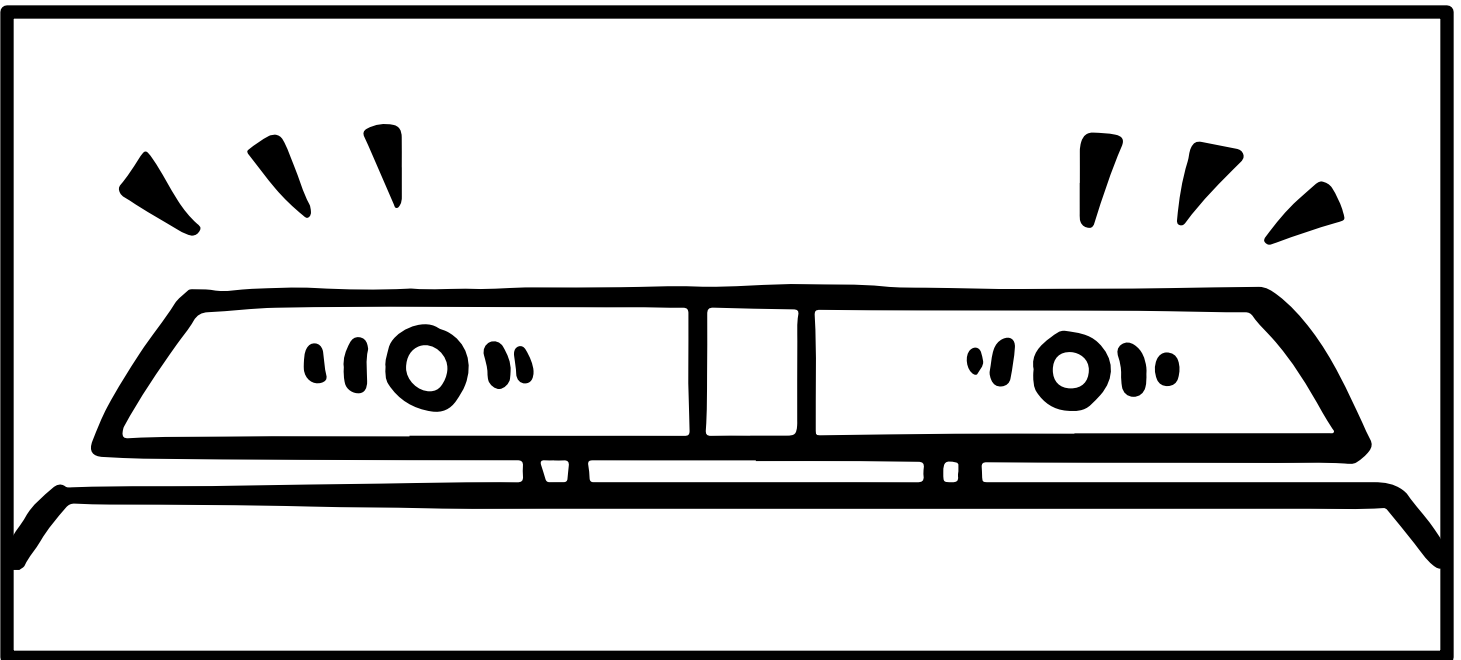
Introduction

The Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP) remains dedicated to protecting and promoting the civil rights of all Texans, including their interactions with law enforcement. Traffic stops mark the most frequent type of interaction with law enforcement. Most traffic stops are not for public safety-related reasons like driving under the influence or speeding. A majority of stops are “non-safety traffic stops,” commonly known as vehicle violations, such as a broken taillight, expired registration, dark tinted windows, or items hanging from a rearview mirror.

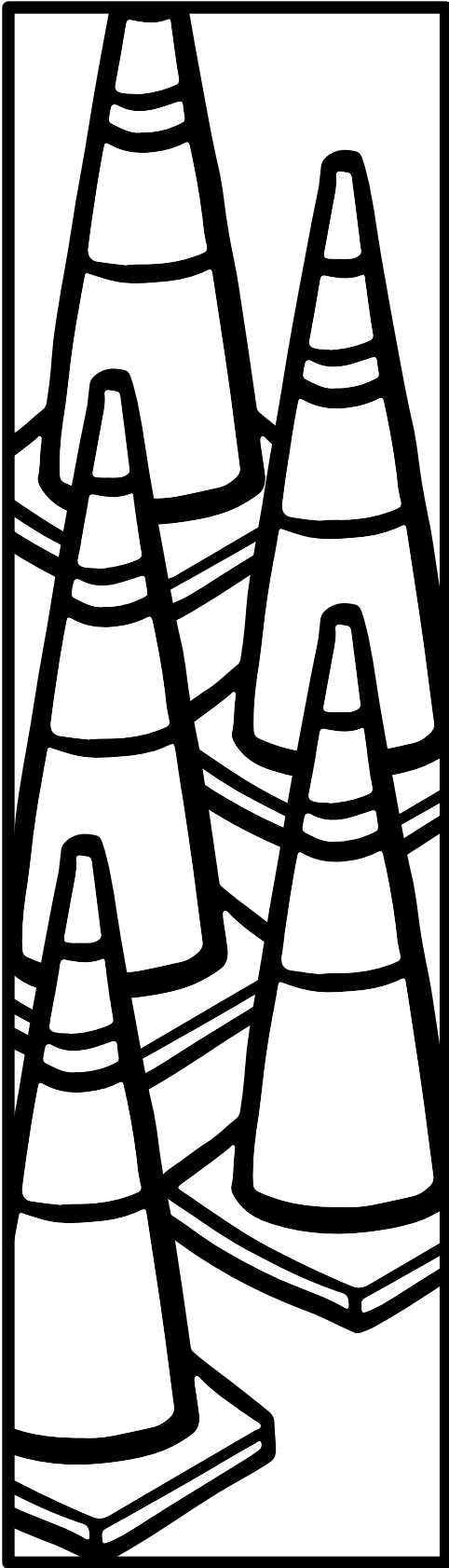
Non-safety traffic offenses are not commonly associated with traffic safety. Traffic stops for these offenses, while not conducted to prevent imminent threats to people or property, may still result in searches, arrests, and uses of force, including lethal force. Furthermore, previous analysis of both Texas and national data point to persistent racial disparities in traffic stops more broadly, making them regular sites of potential civil rights violations.

Following the high-profile death of Sandra Bland in 2015 in a Waller County, TX jail following her arrest at a non-safety traffic stop for failure to use a turn signal, the Texas legislature passed a bill requiring most law enforcement agencies across the state to submit annual reports regarding their traffic stops. This report examines publicly available data reported by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) to understand how similar traffic stops for non-safety related offenses continue to be conducted in Texas, and whether they contribute to other measures of safety sufficiently enough to remain a worthwhile intervention despite the risks they pose to the civil rights of Texans.

Specifically, in this report, TCRP examines 5 years of traffic stop data to determine the impact of non-safety traffic stops on four Texas cities. We review the arrest, search, use of force, citation, and contraband data associated with these stops, the reported racial make-up of those stopped, and the available evidence about whether these stops help make our roads or communities safer. We also analyze the fines and fees collected when police patrol for non-safety traffic stops and the impacts on people and communities most often subjected to these stops. Finally, the report offers policies that could help better protect civil rights and improve road safety. We hope it contributes meaningfully to protecting everyone’s right to safe passage across Texas roads.



1. *Low-Level Traffic Stops Too Often Turn Deadly. Some Places Are Trying To Change That.* Vera Institute of Justice <https://www.vera.org/news/low-level-traffic-stops-too-often-turn-deadly-some-places-are-trying-to-change-that>



The Danger of Texas Roads

Motor vehicle crashes (MVC) are a leading cause of unintentional injury in the United States. In 2023, 4,283 Texans were killed in MVCs - one person every two hours. There were 15,219 serious injury crashes, with 18,752 people sustaining serious injuries - one person every two minutes and six seconds². Promoting traffic safety is an essential public service and in the community's interest.

There are real challenges to making Texas roadways safe. According to the Texas Department of Transportation, the top contributing factors to traffic deaths and collisions are speeding, disobeying traffic signs and signals, pedestrians failing to yield the right of way, failure to drive in a single lane, and unsafe driving maneuvers. In 2023, 1,090 people were killed by a driver under the influence of alcohol, which accounted for 25% of all traffic deaths³. Single-vehicle, run-off the road crashes resulted in 32% of road fatalities⁴.

Studies concerned with minimizing traffic deaths and the role of law enforcement yield differing results. In analyzing their enforcement priorities, the police department of [Fayette, North Carolina](#), participated in a study that found re-prioritizing traffic stops so that officers no longer patrol for busted tail lights, but instead focus on speeding or reckless driving, has positive impacts on reducing road injuries, racial disparities, and has little to no impact on non-traffic crime⁵.

However, other studies have found no association between police traffic stops and reduced traffic fatalities and injuries. [The Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery](#) published a paper examining police traffic stops and road collisions, reviewing traffic stop data from 33 state highway patrols. The paper found no correlation between traffic stops and road fatalities.

While prioritizing enforcement of laws related to speeding, DUIs, and unsafe driving may make Texas a safer place to drive, at minimum, the available data suggests that road safety does not improve through non-safety traffic stops. Furthermore, improving road safety surely requires measures that reduce overall speed and reckless driving, which may include keeping law enforcement officers visible to drivers, it does not appear to include stopping people over broken tail lights, expired registration, or other vehicle violations. Our analysis produces similar findings.

².Texas Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Facts Calendar Year 2023

<https://www.txdot.gov/content/dam/docs/trf/crash-reports-records/2023/01.pdf>

³.Texas Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Facts Calendar Year 2023

⁴.Texas Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Facts Calendar Year 2023

⁵.Fliss, M.D., Baumgartner, F., Delamater, P. et al. Re-prioritizing traffic stops to reduce motor vehicle crash outcomes and racial disparities. *Inj. Epidemiol.* 7, 3 (2020).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-019-0227-6>

The Danger of Traffic Stops

Traffic stops are the most common interaction most people will have with police. Nationally, about 50,000 traffic stops occur daily and there are an estimated 20 million traffic stops conducted annually.⁶ In 2023, there were 2,063,246 non-safety traffic stops in Texas, an increase of 177,534 stops over the previous year. This made up 28% of the total traffic stops in Texas. Since 2020, non-safety traffic stops in Texas have increased by 68%.⁷

While these traffic stops overwhelmingly end without incident, many result in search, arrest, use of force, or even death. During 2023, we found that 366,865 non-safety traffic stops resulted in a search of the vehicle. During that same time-frame, 119,023 non-safety traffic stops resulted in arrests.

According to the 2023 Police Violence Report, 109 people were killed by police during a traffic stop across the country last year, up from 87 people the previous year.⁸ Black, brown, or low-income people are disproportionately killed in these interactions.⁹ While some of those killed at traffic stops, like Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, and Tyre Nichols become well-known, most die in relative anonymity. Texas had 9,298 use-of-force cases in 2023. TCOLE does not report how many deaths occur at the hands of the police during a traffic stop.



Sandra Bland



Philando Castile



Patrick Lyoya



Tyre Nichols

Sandra Bland was stopped for a minor traffic violation by a Texas State Trooper. The Trooper arrested Ms. Bland after a verbal exchange and took her to Waller County Jail. Three days later, Sandra Bland was found unresponsive in her cell. Officials believe the cause of death was suicide. Ms. Bland would be alive today if police focused on dangerous traffic violations like speeding or driving on the wrong side of the road instead of the minor technical violations that landed her in jail. And while tragic, Ms. Bland's experience was far from unique. In 2016, Philando Castile was shot seven times by Minnesota's St. Anthony's Police Department. In 2022, Patrick Lyoya was shot in the back of the head by Michigan's Grand Rapids Police Department during a traffic stop. In 2023 in Memphis, Tennessee, Tyre Nichols was beaten to death during a traffic stop. He died after three days in the hospital.

6. *A large-scale analysis of racial disparities in police stops across the United States. (2020, July)* Natural Human Behavior <https://5harad.com/papers/100M-stops.pdf>

7. *Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Racial Profiling Reports* <https://www.tcole.texas.gov/content/racial-profiling-reports>

8. *2023 Police Violence Report* <https://policeviolencereport.org/>

9. *2023 Police Violence Report*



Traffic stops both highlight and magnify racial and economic inequalities. We found that the race of the driver is a major factor in whether an officer will cite, search, arrest, or use force on the individual. Violations for expired registration, unpaid tolls, or broken taillights are frequent proxies for low-income drivers, which also disproportionately impacts drivers of color. Once a person is stopped, officers typically make assumptions about whether the driver shows signs of intoxication or appears dangerous. Those judgments may be informed by the type of car a person is driving, the neighborhood in which the stop is occurring, or more blatantly, the perceived race and class of the driver. In short, racial and economic biases can converge to make traffic stops more dangerous, harmful, and deadly for Black and brown drivers.

Furthermore, non-safety traffic stops are often "pretextual" in nature, meaning that officers made the stop as a pretext to question the driver and potentially investigate for other possible infractions about which the officer does not possess reasonable suspicion. This practice often reflects that officers have made assumptions about the driver before the stop has taken place. These pretextual stops have been shown to target drivers of color disproportionately, increase community distrust in police, and not contribute meaningfully to public safety.¹⁰

Do Non-Safety Traffic Stops Make Us Safer?


If non-safety traffic stops do not contribute to overall road safety, are there other ways that they help keep the public safe? Police will often claim that pretext and non-safety traffic stops more broadly help officers find and seize illegal goods or contraband that helps them prevent larger offenses and find evidence of more harmful violations being committed or planned. In this report, we examine how much contraband is found in each of the four jurisdictions and the state.

However, evidence from other jurisdictions suggests police rarely find contraband when conducting traffic stops. [Nashville](#) had similar outcomes in their own study. There, researchers found that only 1.6% of traffic stops resulted in an arrest, and police only found contraband 0.6% of the time when conducting traffic stops. Other research demonstrates that 98% of the time police are not finding contraband.¹¹ A [Ramsey County](#), Minnesota study also found no connection between curbing traffic stops and violent crimes. Ramsey County no longer prosecutes cases solely based on a non-safety traffic stop.¹² Our research similarly finds that traffic stops more broadly and non-safety traffic stops in particular rarely result in the discovery of contraband.

10. An Assessment of Traffic Stops and Policing Strategies in Nashville
<https://www.policingproject.org/nashville-traffic-stops>

11. Chohlas-Wood, A., Goel, S., Shoemaker, A., Shroff, R., & Stanford Computational Policy Lab. (2018). *An analysis of the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department's traffic stop practices.*
https://www.law.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/upload_documents/Shroff_nashville-traffic-stops.pdf

12. *Traffic stop policy in Ramsey County, MN* — Knowledge Hub — Justice Innovation Lab. (n.d.).
Justice Innovation Lab. <https://knowledgehub.justiceinnovationlab.org/reports/traffic-stop-policy-ramsey-county>

A large, faint watermark of the Houston Police Department badge is centered on the page. The badge features a five-pointed star in the center, with the word "POLICE" written across it. Above the star is a banner with "H.P.D." and below it is another banner with "HOUSTON". The entire badge is surrounded by a decorative border.

H.P.D.
HOUSTON
POLICE DEPARTMENT'S
TRAFFIC STOP DATA

HPD conducted over 250,000 stops in 2022. This year there was an increase of about 27%, to over 339,715 traffic stops.¹³ Of those stops, 126,622, or over 1/3, were non-safety traffic stops. These non-safety traffic stops increased by 49% from 2022 reporting. HPD traffic stop involvement has gone up across the board from stops to arrests. Men are most likely to be stopped accounting for 68% of all stops.

When reviewing the number of traffic stops and the racial disparities associated with them we note that Black drivers are stopped at higher rates than any other racial group. Black drivers were also stopped at higher rates representing 38% of non-safety traffic stops. The second most likely to be stopped for a vehicle violation are Latino drivers who were stopped 31% of the time. White drivers were stopped the third most frequently despite being one of the larger racial populations in Houston.

Use of force during HPD traffic stops also increased in 2023: there were 3,358 cases of force, a 17% increase from the previous year. Black drivers suffered the most physical force, representing 1,764 incidents, or 52% of all use of force reporting. Latino drivers are the second most abused on the road, with 787 cases accounting for 23% of the total. White drivers are third most likely to experience police violence during a traffic stop with 741 people, representing 22% of all cases. 57 Asian drivers contributed to the total reported number with Indigenous drivers reporting nine cases of use of force by HPD.

The total number of citations HPD issued to Houston drivers was 134,751, a 10% increase from 2022. White drivers were cited the most, with 50,601 tickets. That number jumped by 43% from the previous year. Black drivers were issued the second most tickets, with 39,981 citations, an increase of 11%. The third most cited drivers were Latinos, who received 36,930 tickets—a 16% decrease in citations from 2022. Asian drivers were ticketed 6,767 times and had a 6% increase in citations. Indigenous drivers received 472 tickets and saw a decrease of 0.63%.

Racial disparities are also prevalent in rates of arrest arising out of non-safety traffic stops. There were 9,175 arrests in 2023 by HPD, an uptick of 6% from the previous year. Black drivers not only face the brunt of use of force but they also are arrested at higher rates than other groups. The level of arrest of Black drivers is similar to last year's rate, amounting to 49% of all arrests related to non-safety traffic stops. One thing to note is Black residents represent 22% of Houston's population but account for nearly half of all arrest and use of force cases.¹⁴ Latinos had the second-highest number of arrests, representing 27% of all traffic stop arrests. White drivers were third, with 23% of the arrests, while Asian drivers presented the fourth highest and Indigenous drivers were the least likely to be arrested. The pattern for each section reveals that Black and brown people are most likely to be stopped for a traffic stop.

In 2023, HPD conducted 19,020 searches during traffic stops. Black drivers were most likely to be searched by the police, representing 55% of all searches conducted by police in the previous year. Latinos came second, with 23% of all searches and White drivers were third most likely to be searched, with 21%. Asian drivers are the fourth most likely to be searched and Indigenous drivers were the least likely to be searched.

Police claim that when they conduct non-safety traffic stops they promote road safety by reducing the movement of contraband. As stated earlier, studies have disproven the efficacy of this police tactic. Research has shown that overall traffic stop searches for contraband result in 2% of arrests and often acquire little to no contraband. The data suggests that these stops have little to do with promoting public safety and more to do with racial profiling, citations, and arrests. The data for HPD verifies this notion. In 2023, HPD conducted 126,622 non-safety traffic stops and only found contraband 5% of the time. This means that most of the time police find nothing during non-safety traffic stops, undermining the argument that non-traffic stops deter crime or help curb the movement of contraband. The percentage of contraband arrests for non-safety traffic stops was 3%, further disproving the police's belief that conducting non-safety traffic stops deters crime, improves road conditions, or fosters public safety.

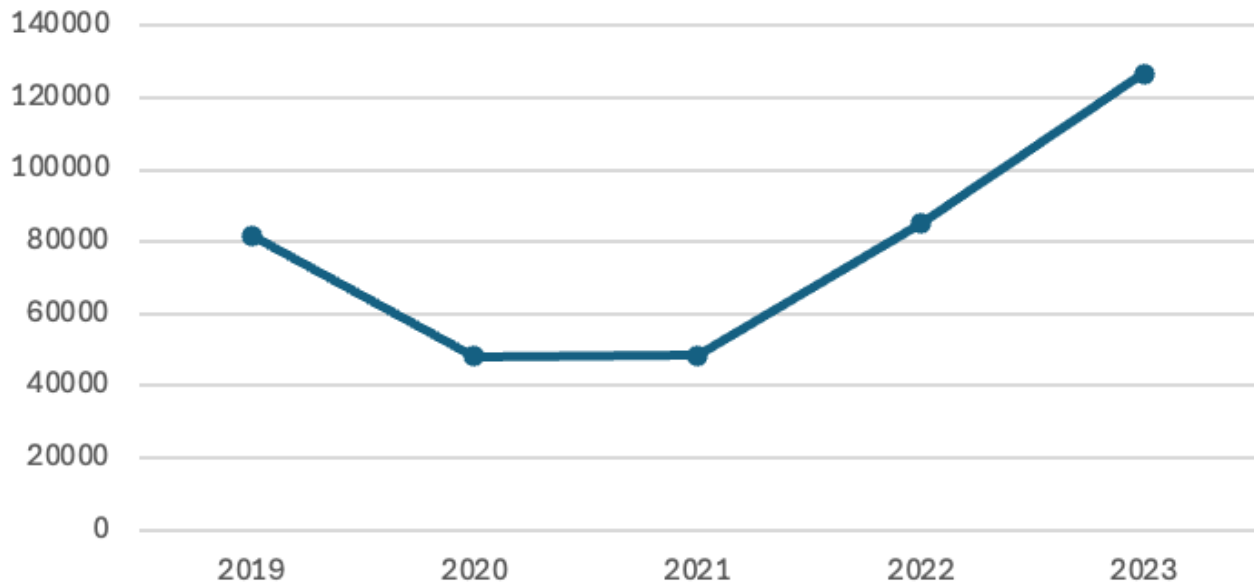
Additionally, Houstonians who are undocumented face additional risks. Since 2002, Houston has deported over 2,600 people after they were pulled over during a traffic stop.¹⁵ Many families have been ripped apart and destroyed because of the unnecessary enforcement of non-safety traffic stops. New laws like SB4 authorize police officers to arrest individuals who they believe crossed the border illegally. It legitimizes the police's ability to racially profile individuals who have Latin American features, although there are no distinct physical attributes that would identify an undocumented individual. Non-safety traffic stops are not only dangerous for black and brown drivers but can rip families apart with predatory laws.

¹³. Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Agency Racial Profiling Report
<https://www.tcole.texas.gov/content/racial-profiling-reports>

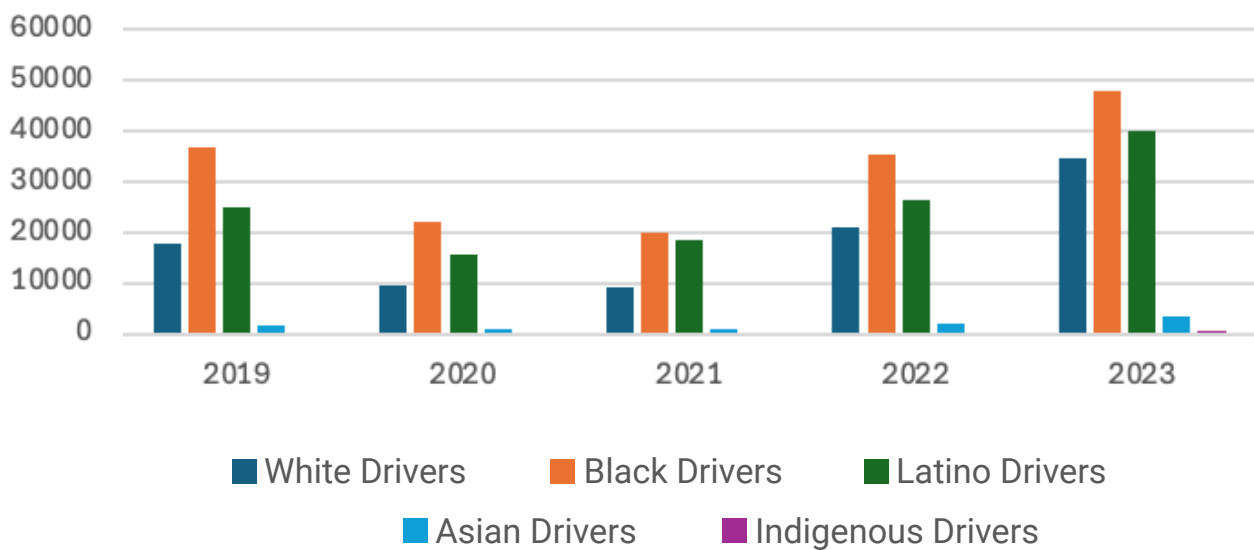
¹⁴. Data USA: Houston, TX (2024) <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/houston-tx>

¹⁵. Latest Data: Immigration and Customs Enforcement Removals. (2021) Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse
<https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/remove/>

Houston Police Department - Total Non-Safety Traffic Stops



Houston Police Department - Total Non-Safety Traffic Stops by Race/Ethnicity





S.A.P.D.

**SAN ANTONIO
POLICE DEPARTMENT'S
TRAFFIC STOP DATA**

Continuing our analysis, we focus on the San Antonio Police Department (SAPD) to review for any racial disparities found in their traffic enforcement data. In 2023 there were 138,509 traffic stops, a 5% drop from the previous year. In regards to non-safety traffic stops, there was an increase of 38% resulting in 7,707 vehicle violation stops. Reviewing the racial demographics, Latinos were the most likely to be stopped for a non-safety traffic stop, followed by White, Black, Asian, and Indigenous drivers.

Examining the use of force by SAPD, there was an increase of 11% from the previous year. Latinos were the most likely to experience the use of force, representing 74% of cases. White drivers were the second most likely to be assaulted, amounting to 18% of cases. Black drivers amounted to 8% of use-of-force cases, and Asian and Indigenous drivers had no reported physical force cases.

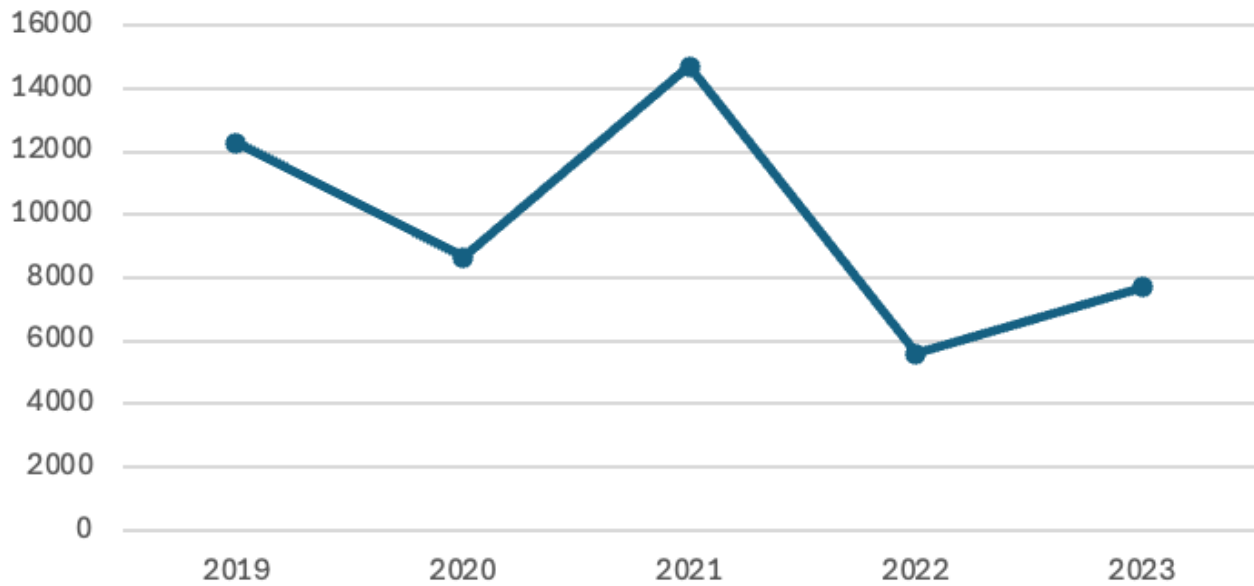
SAPD issued more than 73,000 tickets for traffic violations in 2023, a minor increase (0.8%) of a few hundred from the previous year. Latino drivers were the most likely to be issued a ticket during a traffic stop, accounting for nearly half (49%) of citations. White drivers represented 38% of tickets received, while Black drivers received 11% of traffic stop tickets. The remaining groups to receive a ticket for a non-safety traffic stop were Asian and Indigenous drivers.

SAPD had a 15% decline in arrests made during traffic stops. Latino drivers were most likely to be arrested during these stops, representing 70% of arrests. White drivers were arrested 18% of the time, followed by Black drivers, accounting for 10% of traffic stop arrests. Asian and Indigenous drivers represented the remaining 2% of arrests.

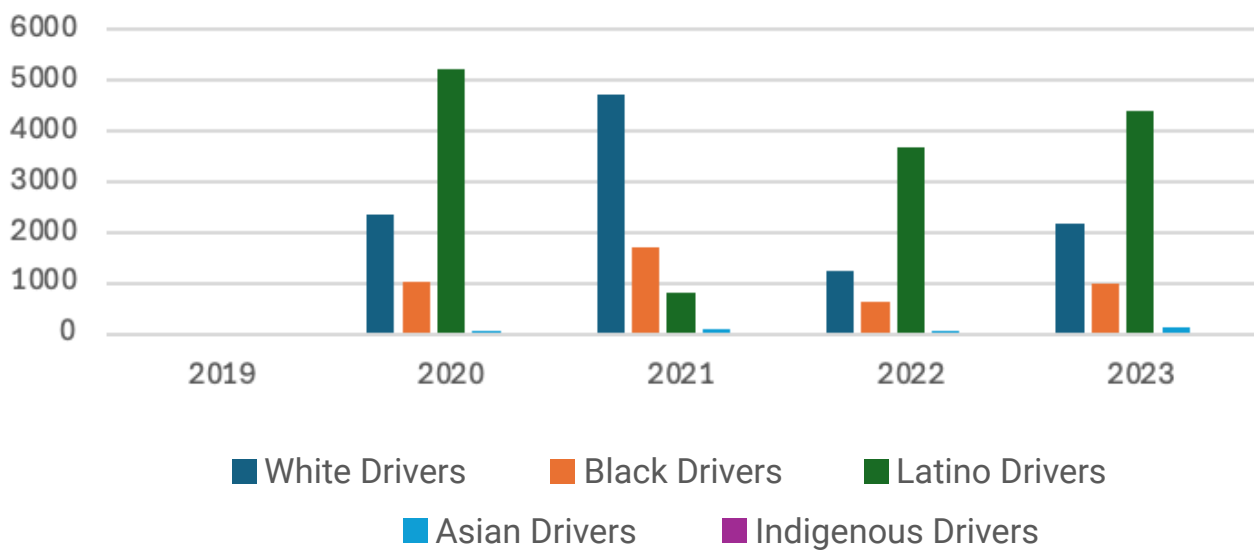
SAPD had a decrease in traffic stop searches by 8.5%. Here too, Latino drivers were searched at the highest rate, accounting for 70% of searches. White drivers were the second most likely to be searched, at 18% of searches. Black drivers accounted for 11% of searches, followed by Asian and Indigenous drivers.

The removal of contraband is the most controversial aspect of non-safety traffic stops. Most police departments claim to use traffic stops to deter crime but studies show that non-safety traffic stops produce little to no contraband, and do not effectively reduce crime or make our roads safer. According to SAPD, there was a decrease of 11% in total contraband found during all traffic stops. When contraband was found from overall traffic stops it amounted to about 3%. Similar to other jurisdictions, little contraband is recovered during traffic stops. The majority of stops can be tied to minor vehicle infractions, such as having a busted tail light or dark tinted windows. When operated based on a pattern of racial profiling, this enforcement leads to grave racial disparities in citations, uses of force, and incarceration.

San Antonio Police Department - Total Non-Safety Traffic Stops



San Antonio Police Department - Total Non-Safety Traffic Stops by Race/Ethnicity



There was no data provided for 2019.



D.P.D.
DALLAS
POLICE DEPARTMENT'S
TRAFFIC STOP DATA

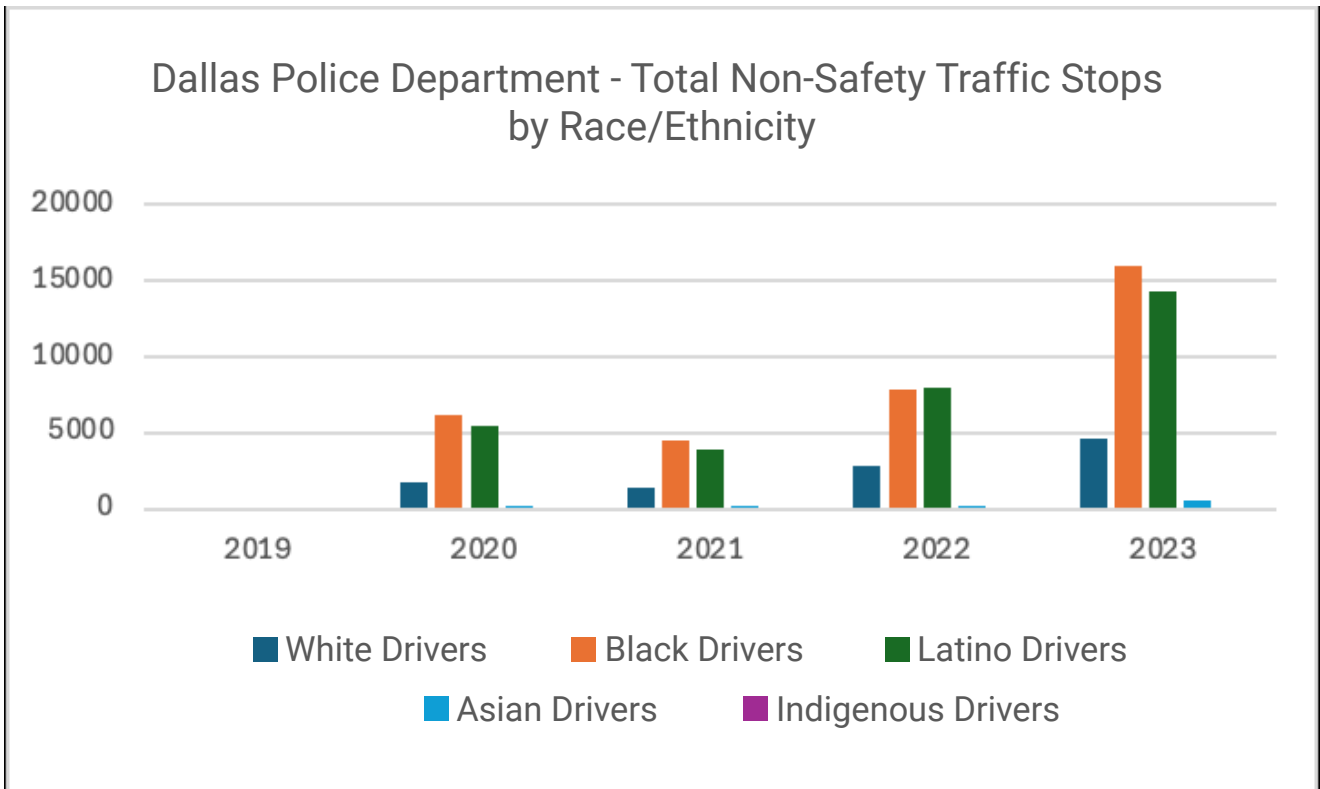
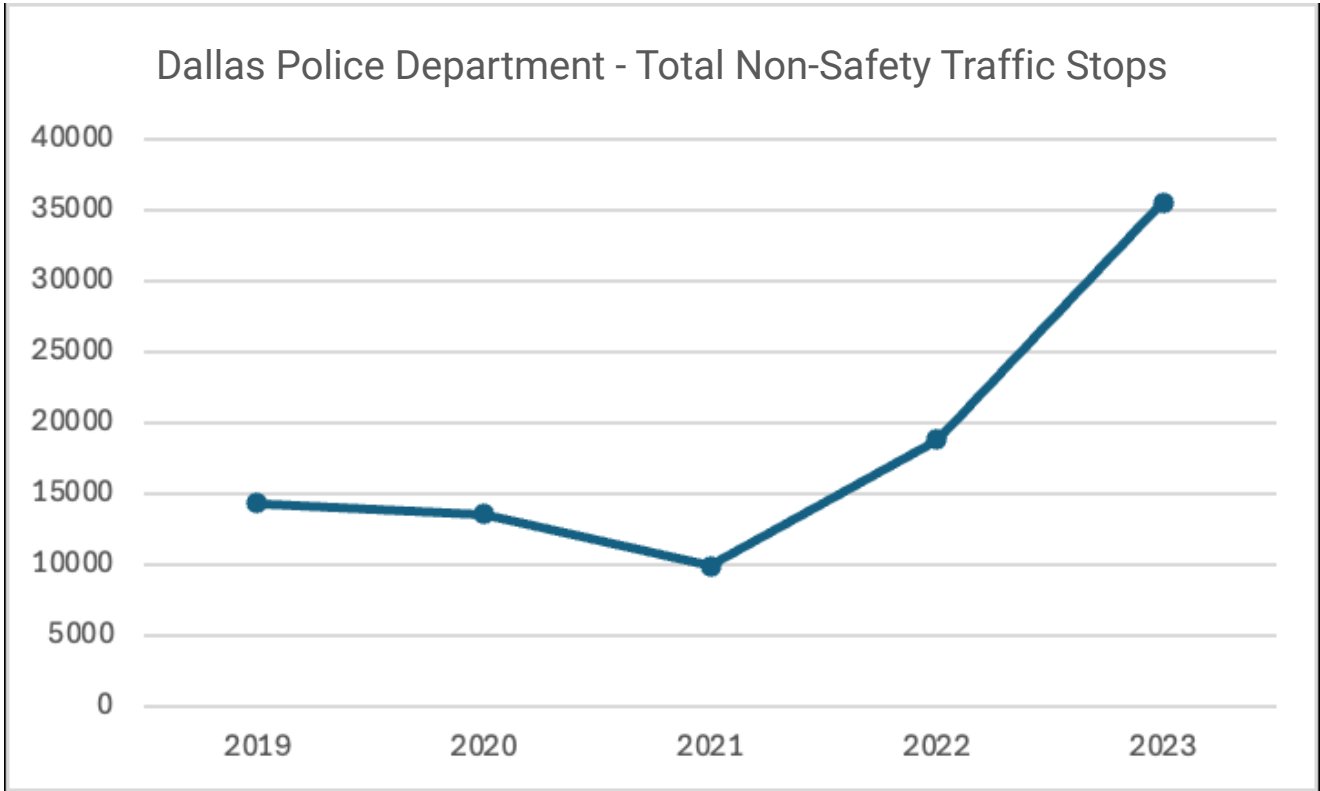
The Dallas Police Department (DPD) had the highest increase in all traffic stops when compared to the previous cities examined. DPD saw a 54% increase in traffic stops from 2022 to 2023. Non-safety traffic stops by DPD increased by 89% in 2023. For both of these types of stops, Black and Latino, drivers were the most likely to be stopped. The racial disparities found in other police departments are also present in Dallas.

There was also a 9% increase in use of force cases by DPD. Black drivers were the most likely to be assaulted by police, at a rate of 38%, followed by Latinos, who made up 37% of cases. White drivers amounted to 20% of use of force incidents. Asian and Indigenous drivers were the two groups least likely to be assaulted by DPD. It is worth noting that 24% of Dallas's population is Black—a far smaller share than the disproportionately high share of use of force incidents would suggest. These trends show racial disparities in DPD's traffic stops similar to those observed in Houston. Traffic stop citations issued by DPD increased by 22% in 2023. The two groups most likely to be issued a citation were Latino (42%) and Black drivers (35%). White drivers represented 21% of stops, followed by Asian and Indigenous groups. The data again reveals an overrepresentation of Black and Latino drivers in DPD's traffic stops.


When examining traffic stop arrest data, we note racial disparities similar to those found in other metrics. First, the number of traffic stop arrests increased by a shocking 168%, from 2,152 stops in 2022, to 5,761 stops in 2023. This was the largest increase in any of the jurisdictions we analyzed. Black drivers accounted for 56% of all traffic stop arrests, followed by Latinos at 32%. There was a steep dropoff to White drivers, who accounted for 11% of arrests. The remaining groups least likely to be arrested were Asian and Indigenous drivers. The skyrocketing numbers of traffic stop arrests are tied to the high number of searches Black and Latino drivers face.

In 2023, there was also a 165% increase in traffic stop searches conducted by the Dallas Police Department. Examining the racial disparities, Black drivers made up the majority of searches, at 54%. The second most searched racial group was Latinos, who made up 35% of searches. White drivers made up 10% of searches. The least likely to be searched by DPD were Asian and Indigenous drivers.

DPD only recovered contraband in 3% of searches. When comparing contraband found during a non-safety traffic stop it amounts to 12%. Reviewing non-safety traffic stops DPD arrested 7% of drivers with contraband. The amount of contraband found is relatively low compared to the high levels of racial disparities associated with non-safety traffic stops.



There was no data provided for 2019.



M.P.D.
MCALLEN
POLICE DEPARTMENT'S
TRAFFIC STOP DATA

Rounding out the analysis, we reviewed data from the McAllen Police Department (MPD) in South Texas. According to 2023 data, there has been an increase in overall traffic stops in McAllen by 17% compared to 2022. There is a similar trend in non-safety stops, with a rise of 20%. The majority of the stops were conducted on Latino males.

There were 30% fewer use-of-force cases where drivers reported injury compared to the previous year. The most common racial group to experience the use of force by MPD were Latino drivers, who represented 71% of cases. The remaining 29% of cases were White drivers. There were no reported use of physical force cases on Black, Asian, or Indigenous drivers.

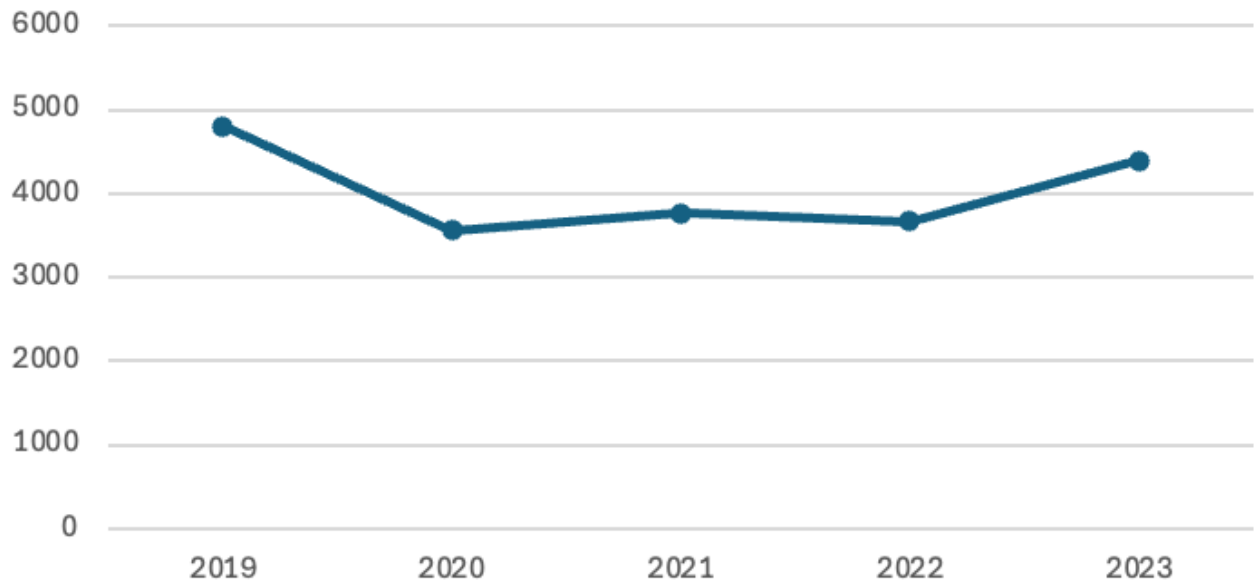
The number of traffic stop citations issued by McAllen Police was 6,489, an increase of 11% from the previous year. Examining the racial demographics, Latino drivers were the most likely to be cited, representing 65% of citations, followed by White drivers, who accounted for 34% of citations during traffic stops. The remaining 1% of citations were issued to Black, Asian, and Indigenous drivers.

MPD's arrest rate associated with traffic stops declined by 18% from 2022 to 2023. Latino drivers were overwhelmingly arrested at a rate of 97%. White drivers represented only 2% of traffic stop arrests. Black, Asian, and Indigenous drivers accounted for the remaining 1% of arrests. Although these disparities are stark, Latinos make up a majority of the population in McAllen. This is a concerning dynamic, as SB 4 and other laws targeting individuals who have crossed the border could escalate the number of arrests that lead to deportation. SB 4 designates police officers to act as ICE agents and target Latino drivers as potential undocumented residents, likely increasing the number of non-safety traffic stops that can lead to unnecessary involvement in the criminal legal system and deportation.

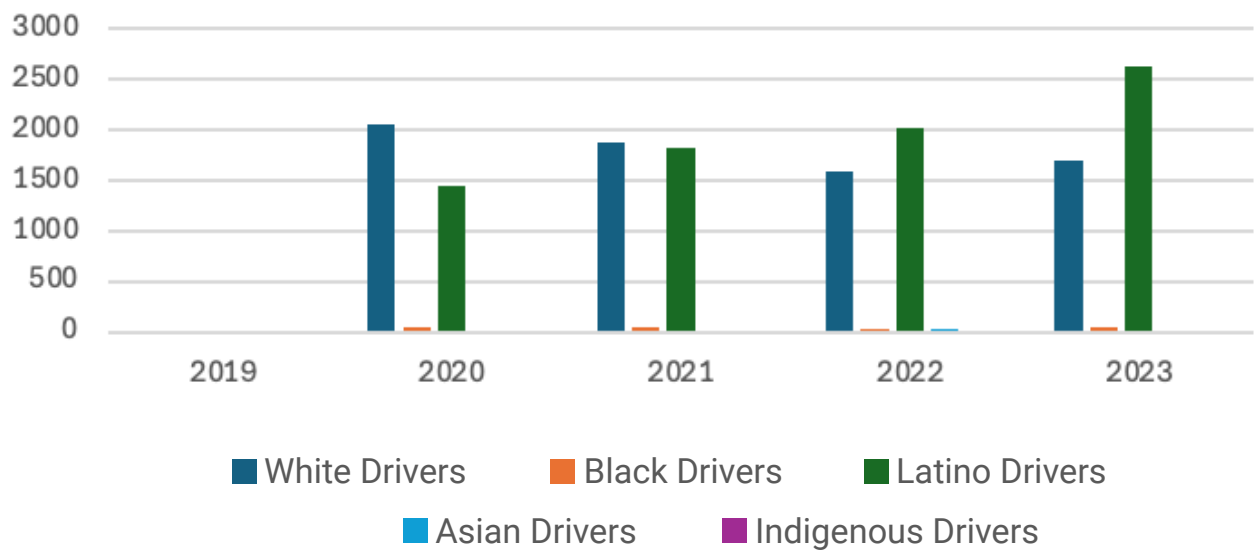
From 2022 to 2023 the number of traffic stop searches by MPD declined by 18%. Latinos made up 89% of individuals searched. The second most likely to be searched were White drivers, at 9% of searches. Black drivers were the third most likely to be searched, then Asian and Indigenous drivers.

There was a decrease in contraband found during traffic stops by 13% from the previous year. When reviewing contraband found during all traffic stops there was 0.29% of contraband found in 2023. Specifically reviewing non-safety traffic stops, police only found 1.6% of contraband in 2023. This data further disproves the myth that traffic stops help promote public safety and prevent crime.

McAllen Police Department - Total Non-Safety Traffic Stops



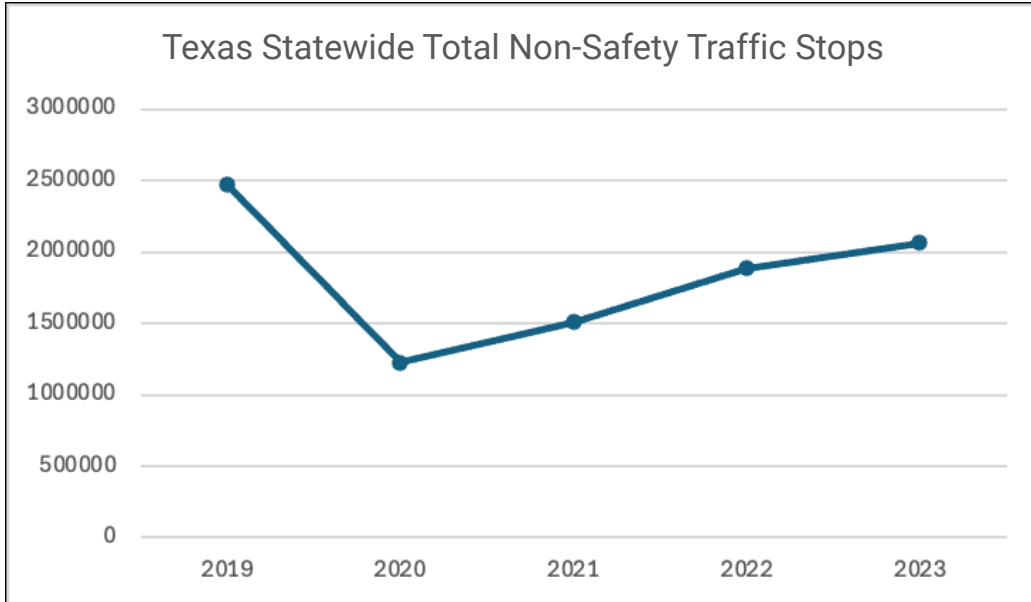
McAllen Police Department - Total Non-Safety Traffic Stops by Race/Ethnicity



There was no data provided for 2019.

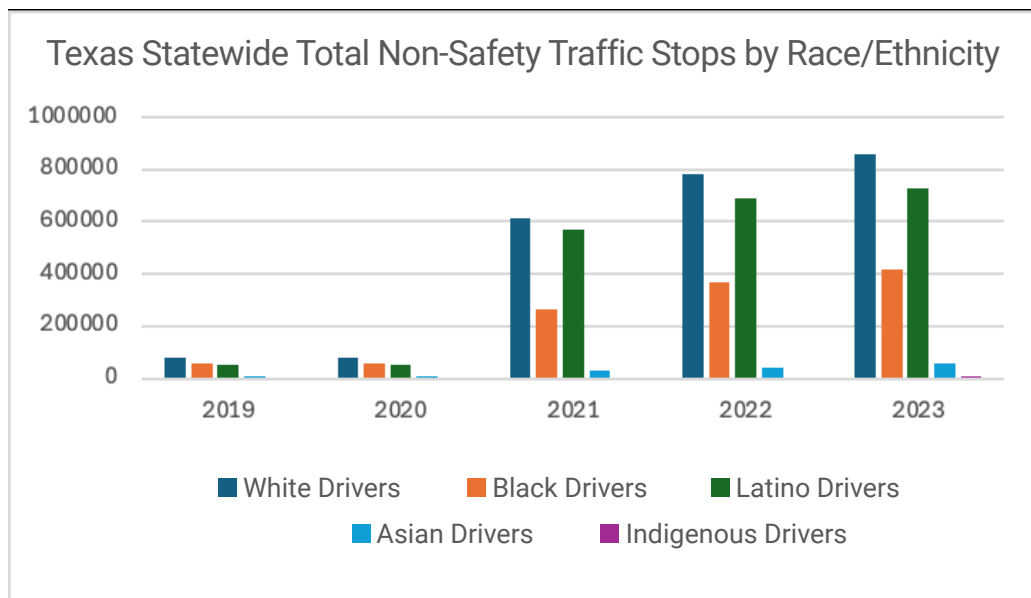
Statewide 5-Year Analysis

Finally, we also examined statewide data for Texas. These numbers include the four jurisdictions above, as well as smaller cities and rural communities. Overall, Texas experienced significant fluctuations in traffic stops over the past five years. A peak of 9,589,160 traffic stops in 2019, followed by a sharp decline in 2020 primarily attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, a gradual upward trend has emerged. A similar pattern is observed in total vehicle violations, with a high of 2,474,330 cases in 2019.



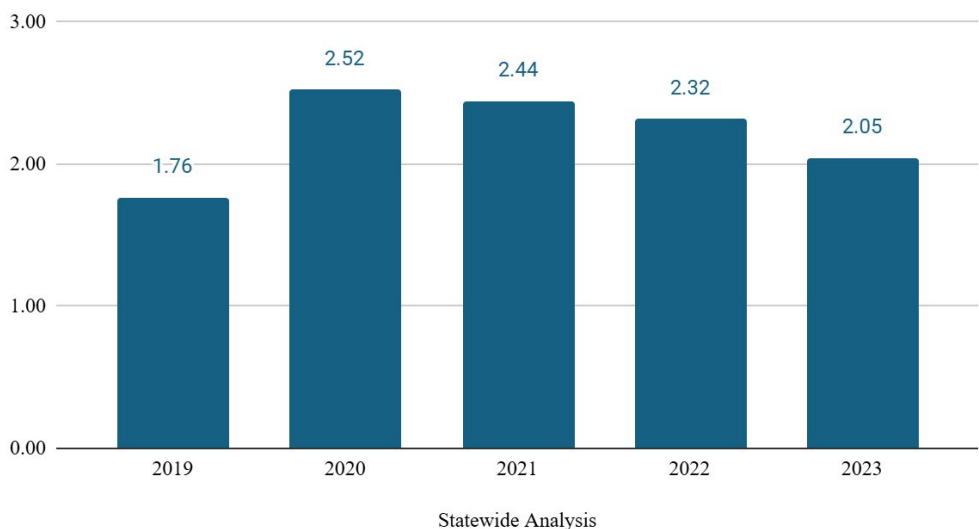
The outcomes of these traffic stops reveal a sharp decline in both citations issued and arrests made following the peak year of 2019, with the most significant drop occurring in 2020, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that males are significantly more likely to be stopped by police compared to females. A closer examination of racial and ethnic breakdowns reveals further disparities when it comes to arrests. White and Latino males are disproportionately represented in traffic stops compared to other racial and ethnic groups. This pattern persists when analyzing female drivers, although the magnitude of these disparities varies.



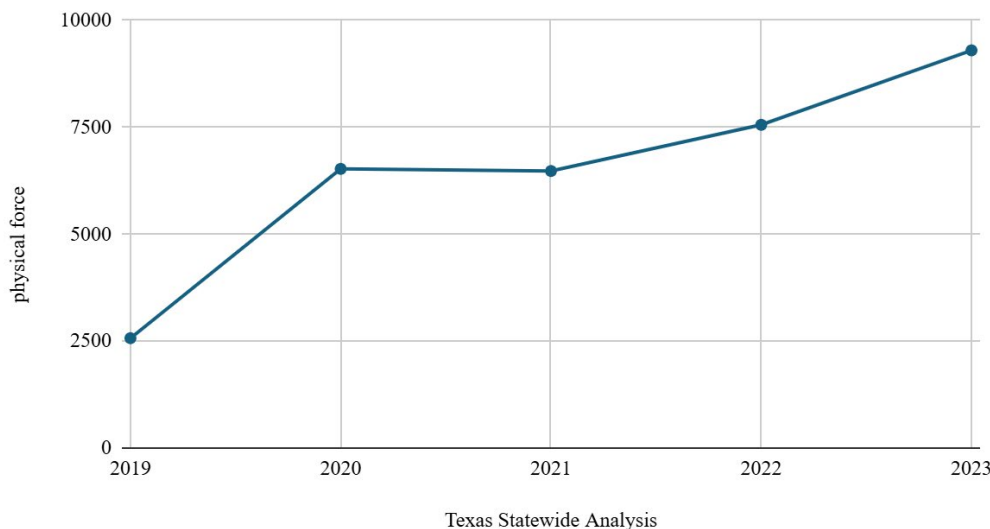
Paradoxically, while the number of traffic stops, citations, and arrests has decreased statewide since 2019, the use of physical force has dramatically increased. A contrast emerges when comparing the 2019 low of 2,568 physical force incidents to the 2023 peak of 9,298 cases. Significant fluctuations in the racial and ethnic distribution of individuals subjected to use of force. Black individuals were disproportionately affected in 2019, while Latinos experienced a similar overrepresentation in 2020. White individuals became the primary target of use of force in 2021, followed by a shift back towards Latino individuals in 2023. These shifting patterns highlight the complex and evolving nature of racial disparities in law enforcement interactions.

Percentage of Contraband Found in Comparison to Total Traffic Stops



The discovery of contraband during non-safety traffic stops is evidently low. When stopped, drivers are more likely to be found without contraband than with it. The amount of contraband found by police during a non-safety traffic stop is very low and has been lowering yearly.

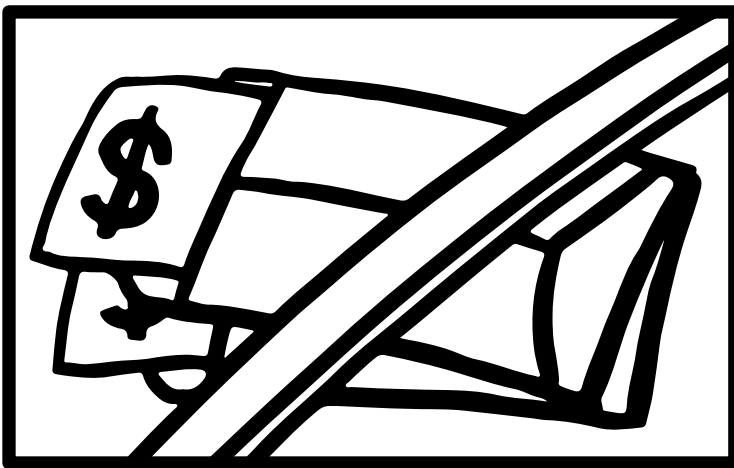
Texas Statewide Physical Force Used



Traffic Stops Puts Both The Driver & Officers at Risk

While routine traffic stops should not end in violence, law enforcement is trained to view every traffic stop as a potentially dangerous interaction. According to a report examining officer fatalities by the US Department of Justice, "Making It Safer,"¹⁶ traffic stops were the most common self-initiated incident that led to officer fatalities.

Any injury or death in a traffic stop, including law enforcement officers and drivers, is a tragedy. The heightened sense of risk by community members and law enforcement officers increases the likelihood that a simple stop ends in force. Reducing the number of unnecessary interactions between law enforcement officers and drivers can improve safety for all drivers, Black and Brown drivers who are disproportionately stopped, and law enforcement officers who stop them.



Punishing Poverty

The data paints a clear picture: traffic stops are not merely a minor inconvenience for many Black and Latino drivers. It could end in arrest, violence, and even death more often than for White drivers. Black and Latino drivers are much more likely to be stopped for vehicle traffic violations—violations that are not connected to long-term safety for the community but with collecting fines and fees.

Poverty is the root cause of many non-moving violations, like expired tags or inspection stickers. These types of violations are not tied to public safety but more so

connected to collecting fines and fees. For some drivers, it is difficult to stay up-to-date on these requirements, let alone afford the upkeep of an automobile. It can make a significant difference for low-income drivers when they are cited for an infraction that has little to do with public safety, and all to do with siphoning wealth from the poor. Fines and fees accumulated during a traffic stop often push people further from compliance and place more economic burdens on struggling people.

According to Houston Municipal Court data, the city issued \$2,261,375.92 in fines and fees for non-safety traffic stops in 2023. The fines stem from citations issued by police, and the fees from court assessments following a stop. The top three non-safety traffic stop violations were missing license plates/no front or back plates, dark window tints, and defective equipment, also known as busted tail lights.

In San Antonio, the city issued \$838,834 in fines and fees in 2023. The three most common bases for fines were failure to display valid registration, failure to display valid license plates, and glass-coated windows, also known as dark-tinted windows.

The McAllen Municipal Court issued \$1,692,641.48 worth of fines and fees. Their top three violations were the following expired registration, operating a motor vehicle without a license, and defective tail lights.

We were not able to gather the court data for Dallas Municipal Court due to our public information request being denied.

Fines and fees related to non-safety traffic stops penalize individuals who cannot afford to comply with procedural requirements under the current laws. These drivers are often those commuting to work simply to make ends meet. Ending the practice of non-safety traffic stops would make our roads safer and spare struggling community members the burden of senseless fines and fees. There is a better, safer way to manage traffic and driver safety.

¹⁶. *Making it safer: A study of law enforcement fatalities between 2010-2016.* (2017, December) The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)
<https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/ric/Publications/cops-w0858-pub.pdf>

Conclusion

However, current traffic enforcement practices in Texas are missing an opportunity to address dangerous crashes. If we reimagined traffic safety in a way where our roads are designed to deter speeding or reckless driving, we could move away from the current racial profiling model of traffic enforcement and move to one that best serves our communities.

For Black, Brown, and low-income drivers, nothing about a traffic stop is low stakes.

From our analysis, we see that traffic stops have been on the rise since 2020 and the racial disparities associated with them are also increasing.

The majority of the time police are citing drivers for low level offenses and using traffic stops to racial profile Black and brown communities.

To end the violence, family separations, extraction of wealth, and incarceration caused by unnecessary traffic enforcement, each jurisdiction should adopt an ordinance or state law that prohibits police from conducting non-safety traffic stops. Here are some recommendations:

- ◆ Several cities and states, including [Virginia¹⁷](#) and [Nevada¹⁸](#), have limited police enforcement by passing laws prohibiting non-safety traffic stops. A state-wide law would remove the need for every city to adopt an ordinance to eliminate these types of stops. Virginia's SB 5029 provides that no law enforcement officer may lawfully stop a driver for the following reasons: operating a vehicle without a license plate light, defective equipment meaning a missing bumper or other vehicle issues, driving without brake lights, stopping individuals for having a loud exhaust system, dark tinted windows, or having certain objects hanging over rearview mirrors. To read the full legislative text [follow this link¹⁹](#)
- ◆ San Antonio²⁰ and Baton Rouge²¹ have implemented the "Lights On" program, where police issue a voucher instead of a citation for drivers with a busted tail light. Although this program is a step in the right direction, it still does not end the police's ability to stop an individual for a pretextual reason. While it does help alleviate the burden of fines and fees, it does not address the root cause of over-policing and the racial disparities associated with traffic stops. For more information regarding the "[Lights On](#)" program [click this link²²](#)
- ◆ Other jurisdictions have taken promising steps that address root causes. San Francisco's Police Commission recently voted to end pretextual traffic stops to address racial disparities felt in the community.²³ The San Francisco Chief of Police passed a Police General Order that prohibits police officers from stopping or detaining drivers for nine types of violations. Those include driving with expired registration tags, busted tail lights/brake lights, failing to use turn signals, or sleeping in one's vehicle. To read the [General Order please follow this link²⁴](#)

17. Success story: Many policing "pretexts" eliminated in Virginia. Justice Forward Virginia <https://justiceforwardva.com/pretextual-policing>

18. Press release: New Nevada law decriminalizing minor traffic violations takes effect January 1. (2022, December 27) Fines & Fees Justice Center

<https://finesandfeesjusticecenter.org/2022/12/27/january-1-new-nevada-law-decriminalizing-minor-traffic-violations-takes-effect/>

19. Virginia_HB5058_TrafficStops_Bill.pdf <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qgRTC05Xr4cY513-iYnj2H2HFF4sYMYV/view>

20. San Antonio drivers with broken tail lights will receive replacement vouchers instead of citation. (2023, January 18) San Antonio Current <https://www.sacurrent.com/news/san-antonio-drivers-with-broken-lights-will-receive-replacements-vouchers-instead-of-citations-30834887>

21. Traffic stops used to punitive. Now, in Baton Rouge, they're becoming supportive. (2023, January 30) The Advocate https://www.nola.com/louisiana_inspired/police-issue-vouchers-at-traffic-stops-with-lights-on/article_2f67d70e-9784-11ed-aa78-9fbf47e86256.html

22. <https://lightsonus.org/>

23. S.F. Police Commission bans pretextual traffic stops to reduce racial bias. (2023, January 12) San Francisco Chronicle <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/s-f-police-commission-bans-pretextual-traffic-17712630.php>

24. SFPD General Order 9.07.01 Pretext StopsFinal.pdf <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fef086HEDFEMyWuUlgogO2v7lfmrN8He/view>

- ◆ Berkeley is working to divert the enforcement of traffic stops to an unarmed civilian department.²⁵
- ◆ Ramsey County, Minnesota no longer prosecutes cases solely based on a non-safety traffic stop. We recommend county attorneys no longer accept or prosecute these types of offenses. Ramsey County Attorney John Choi implemented a policy for his staff to no longer accept criminal charges initiated during a non-safety traffic stop. We recommended [County Attorneys adopt his policy which can be read here](#).²⁶
- ◆ Philadelphia passed the "Driving Equality Act" that limits police from stopping drivers for non-safety traffic stops.²⁷ Since the law's enactment, traffic stops involving Black drivers have been curbed by 54%.²⁸ Specific traffic violations, such as windshield obstructions and inspection violations, are down by 90%. Overall, traffic stops are down in Philadelphia by 11%. We believe the "Driving Equality Act" is an excellent model, but Texas can go further to protect our commuters. To read the ["Driving Equality Act" please click here](#).²⁹

25. Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Agency Racial Profiling Report
<https://www.tcole.texas.gov/content/racial-profiling-reports>

26. Charging Policy Regarding Non-Public-Safety Traffic Stops 9.8.21_RamseyCo.pdf
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JjOfD66vXoZdDx7LX_21Xg7CfSDQa04u/view?usp=sharing

27. 8 common traffic violations no longer warrant a police stop in Philly. (2022, March 3) The Philadelphia Inquirer
<https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/philadelphia-police-wont-stop-drivers-minor-offenses-20220303.html>

28. Data shows Philly traffic stops involving Black men are down 54%. (2023, March 6) Why
<https://whyy.org/articles/philadelphiadriving-equality-act-data-traffic-stops-black-men-reduction/>

29. Driving Equality Bill_Phillly_City.pdf
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J9MLxZKQ3Yp4qU5rJ2x_NPYfRoTwYeJg/view

Redesigning The Roads To Improve Public Safety

Traffic stops do not address traffic safety issues, if cities and the state want to address the harms of non-safety traffic stops they can rethink how the roads themselves are designed. According to the [Safe System Consortium](#), if city and state officials invested in our infrastructure, we could reduce the number of road injuries and fatalities, while decreasing our need for police to patrol for traffic safety.³⁰ Recommendations include:

- ◆ **Reducing four-lane undivided roads to two thru lanes plus a center turning lane**
- ◆ **Increasing the driver's awareness of pedestrians crossing mid-block or at intersections without signals or signage.**
- ◆ **Building roundabouts that slow traffic through dangerous intersections and prevent deadly side impacts.**
- ◆ **Building median barriers.**
- ◆ **All of these recommendations have increased public safety, reduced the number of car accidents, and saved many cyclists and pedestrians's lives. There are plenty of policy recommendations that improve road safety that are not tied to increased policing and mass incarceration.**

Steps Towards A Safer Texas

We believe that one simple solution can safeguard the civil rights of Black and Brown drivers and make our streets safer for everyone. We propose prioritizing traffic stops for violations that are related to traffic safety, like speeding, running red lights, driving on the wrong side of the road, driving while intoxicated, intoxicated manslaughter, intoxicated assault, reckless driving, and racing on the highway. These driving violations are linked to actual harm, and reducing them will keep our community safe.

The secondary, vehicle traffic violations that are the focus of this report should not be patrolled. These violations include but are not limited to expired driver's licenses, dark tinted windows, registration violations, busted tail lights, vehicle equipment, etc. In a safer world, these violations would no longer be the primary reason for stopping drivers at all.

To bring this idea to fruition, Texas would need to pass a law, similar to what was passed in Virginia or Nevada, prohibiting police from conducting non-safety traffic stops. Cities can also adopt ordinances. In its best form, such an ordinance would specifically list primary violations, such as speeding, which are enforced to ensure the public remains safe on the road. A model ordinance would not explicitly list secondary violations but rather require that police refrain from stops when safety is not the primary concern. The idea is to have a law or ordinance be open-ended so police cannot single out drivers for certain vehicle violations and begin pulling people over for offenses not specifically listed as deprioritized in the ordinance. This will refocus the police on violations that make our roads dangerous while preventing stops that do not improve safety but often lead to harmful outcomes for drivers.

Texas would not be the first state to end non-safety traffic stops, but it would be the most impactful to all Black, Brown, and low-income drivers. Taking this important step would limit the police violence experienced by communities that are often over-policed and address the racial disparities found in a majority of Texas police practices. When we end the policing of vehicle traffic violations unrelated to safety, we will make our roads safe for all drivers, regardless of race or class, while lowering our reliance on mass incarceration as a solution for poverty.

^{30.} *Recommendations of the Safe System Consortium. (2021, Spring) The Center for Injury Research and Policy at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health*
<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-03/recommendations-of-the-safe-system-consortium.pdf>

How Can I Help?

It's easy to feel like your voice is too small to make an impact. But it only takes the participation of 3.5% of the population to make social change.³¹ Meaning that a small number of dedicated advocates and community members can enact these kinds of changes. That is why we are asking for your help in building a safer Texas. If you would like to get involved:

◆ Call your state or local city/county officials

Contact your State Representative, Mayor, City Councilmembers, Police Chief, and departments related to traffic and public safety to tell them your concerns.

◆ Share this Report

Talk about and share this report with friends, family, and state/local officials. Share with people who might not know about the racial disparity in traffic stops.

◆ Sign Up for Updates

There is a QR code at the bottom of this report that you can scan to sign up for updates and stay involved in our efforts to end non-safety traffic stops. Please reach out to us if you have questions or ideas. For further information visit our website at <https://www.txcivilrights.org/programs-criminal-injustice>

If we all come together to demand the end of non-safety traffic stops, we can make the roads safe for everyone.

³¹ The '3.5%': How a small minority can change the world. (2019, May 13). BBC
<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world>



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