

REDUCING RACIALLY DISPARATE POLICE STOPS AROUND THE NATION

December 2023

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Traffic stops are the most common interaction Americans have with law enforcement. Some of the most tragic instances of police violence against Black or Latine people in this country have started with a police stop for a minor traffic offense and escalated to drivers or passengers being harmed or killed.

The U.S. Supreme Court has found that police officers can follow any person until they violate a traffic law and then use that traffic infraction to stop the person and “fish” for signs of a criminal violation. This is called a pretextual stop. Yet, troubling data across the country shows that this practice often results in stops that disproportionately target communities and drivers of color and that lack any public or traffic safety benefits.

Recognizing the alarming racial disparities seen in stop data, the risks for serious harm, the drain on police resources, and a lack of corresponding increase in public or traffic safety, policymakers, lawmakers, and law enforcement leaders across the country are taking innovative approaches to traffic safety enforcement with the goals of reducing racial disparities in traffic, bike, and/or pedestrian stops and increasing safety. This case study profiles nine of these jurisdictions, describing what motivated the change, the resulting policy, and what outcomes the policy achieved.



Creating an equitable system
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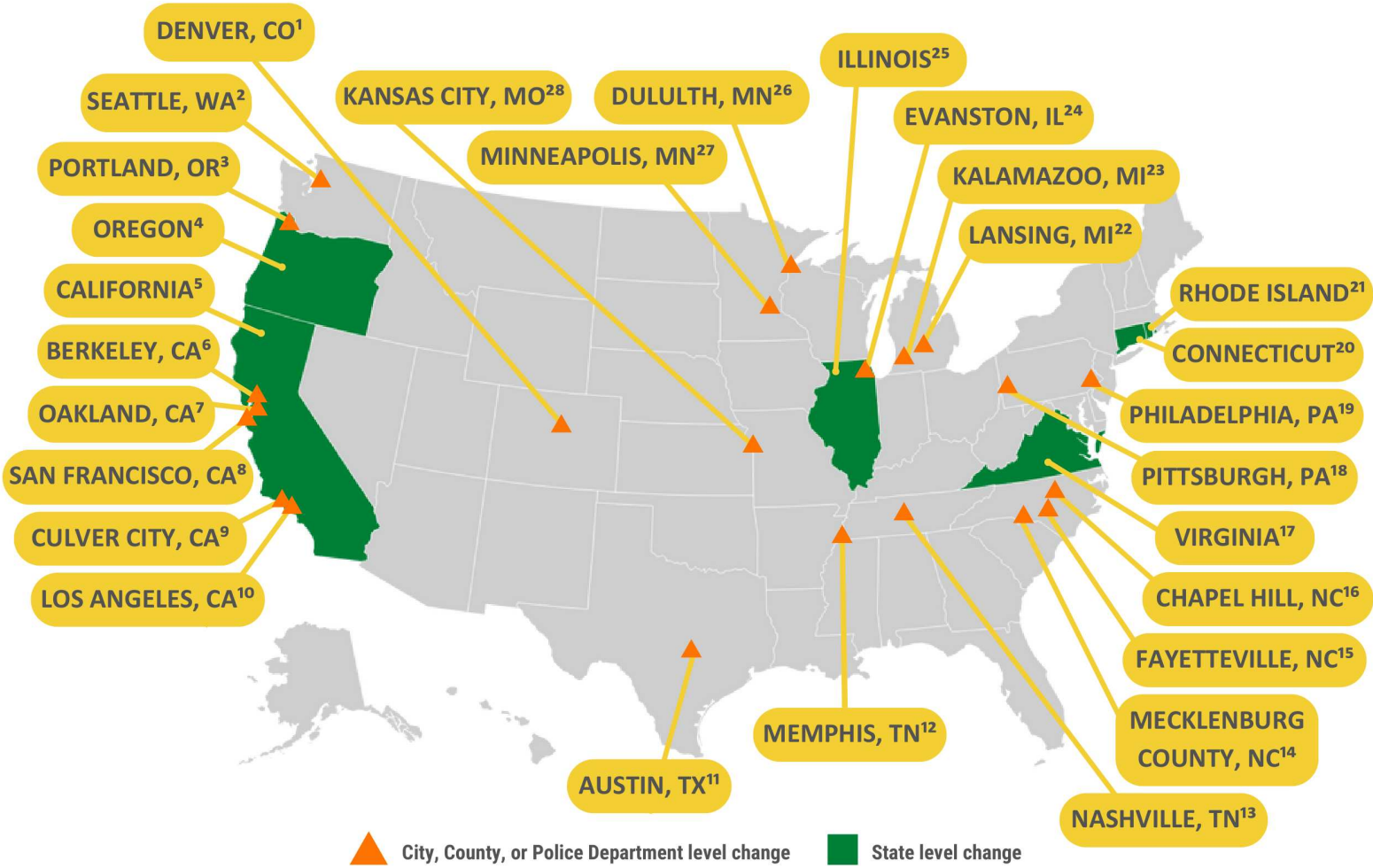
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NATIONAL OVERVIEW

Although the document below details the work in nine particular jurisdictions, changes like this are happening all across the country. This map shows a range of these jurisdictions, including state legislatures, local municipalities, and police departments, that are taking on law or policy changes in traffic safety enforcement.



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STATE LEVEL CHANGES

Virginia



After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, a group of public defenders and advocates in Virginia, motivated by the racially disparate and harmful policing practices their clients had experienced, came together to pass meaningful police reform legislation.²⁹ Bradley Haywood, founder of the organization that led those efforts, Justice Forward, said their intention was “[i]f you reduce unnecessary interactions between police and citizens, you are necessarily going to reduce excessive force and deaths at the hands of police.” Together the public defenders sought to limit low-level vehicle and pedestrian stops. They focused on the offenses that “were the most frequently abused pretexts,” which were “almost all [] disproportionately, if not exclusively, enforced against people of color.”

Policy: In 2020 the General Assembly of Virginia passed legislation³⁰ that prevents officers from stopping drivers for:

- odor of marijuana
- violations of vehicle operating, curfew, and occupant restrictions on drivers under 18
- expired registration if expired within three months
- smoking in a vehicle with a minor present
- defective and unsafe equipment
- taillight and license plate light violations
- having only one brake light or only one headlight
- window tint violations
- suspending objects from a mirror or other substantial driver obstructions
- violations of seatbelt laws
- failure to have vehicle inspection sticker, if expired within 3 months
- jaywalking

Any evidence obtained because of a stop that was conducted in violation of the law, including evidence subsequently obtained in a consent search, is inadmissible at a trial.

Outcome: In the first year after the law’s passage, traffic stops decreased by 7.5%, and the percentage of Black drivers stopped and searched decreased from 5.2% to 2.8%.³¹ Unfortunately, racial disparities in overall stops persist. Haywood says he views this legislation as just the first step toward ending racially disparate, pretextual policing. However, this first step was important because it ended the stops that were most likely to engender distrust of the police and forced more attention on regulating actual dangerous driving behavior. Next, advocates intend to address other incentives to make pretextual stops that result in racial disparities, such as consent searches.

SPOTLIGHT ON ILLINOIS

Lawmakers and law enforcement officials here in Illinois have also begun to think differently about police stops in an effort to reduce racial disparities.



Statewide. In 2023, a bill³² initiated by Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias that would prohibit police from stopping or searching drivers or passengers solely based on a violation of the law prohibiting objects hanging in the vehicle windshield was passed by the Illinois General Assembly³³ and signed into law by Governor J.B. Pritzker.

Evanston. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing shortages, and shifts in priorities in the wake of rapid changes in the law enforcement landscape following the death of George Floyd, Evanston Police Department traffic stops have declined by 70% and citations have declined by 63% since 2019.³⁴ Although traffic stop data shows racial disparities persist, Evanston police leadership are hoping to build on the shift by deprioritizing non-safety related stops and citations that result in burdensome fines and fees. Evanston police are reviewing the Illinois traffic code to select violations to emphasize and deemphasize for enforcement. They anticipate that violations that could be emphasized include distracted driving, speeding, and other unsafe moving violations that contribute to crashes; those likely to be deemphasized are equipment violations like broken tail lights.³⁵



Connecticut

In 2020, Connecticut passed sweeping police reform legislation,³⁶ motivated by a desire to address systemic discrimination in policing and the criminal legal system.³⁷ Part of the legislation included a focus on traffic stops. Research in Connecticut³⁸ showed that Black and Latine drivers were stopped at a greater overall rate, especially with respect to equipment violations and administrative violations (e.g., expired registration), despite there being no evidence that these drivers of color commit these offenses more frequently. These stops were seen as instances of pretextual policing.³⁹

Policy: In an attempt to stem the racially disparate, pretextual traffic stops, provisions of the reform package barred officers from asking a driver for consent to search of their car during a stop made solely for a traffic violation. Searches must now be based on probable cause or on unsolicited consent that has been documented in written form or on a police camera.

Outcome: Kenneth Barone, the Project Manager of the Connecticut Racial Profiling Prohibition Project and associate director of the University of Connecticut's Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy, said that he anticipated "the new policy will reduce racial disparities in traffic stops, because consent searches are a major driver of disparities."⁴⁰ A preliminary analysis of Connecticut's 2022 statewide traffic stops data indicated that the consent search reform has led to decreasing disparities in search data and a decline in searches overall, with a rise in rates of contraband recovery.⁴¹ Building on this important change, last term a subsequent bill was introduced⁴² in the Connecticut legislature that would limit police stops for minor traffic violations.



Oregon

In 2022, legislators in Oregon introduced a bill to address aspects of police stops that result in disproportionate harm to drivers of color in the state. Concerned about minor stops that can escalate into harm, advocates sought to advance legislation that would prevent stops that traumatize and harm Black people, indigenous people, and people of color. Proponents said "[t]he overall intent...is helping communities disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system to avoid future interactions with police."⁴³

Policy: The advocacy efforts resulted in a broad criminal legal reform bill, which included provisions related to traffic stops.⁴⁴ These provisions:

- Required that officers requesting consent to search a person during a traffic stop first inform the person that the person has the right to refuse the request, and then if consent is obtained, the officer must make sure there is a written, video, or audio record of the consent to search.
- Restricts police officers from stopping a person for:
 - headlight, taillight, or brake light violations when one of two lights is still operative; and
 - license plate light violations.

These particular low-level offenses became the focus of the bill because evidence showed that these types of stops for minor infractions are those that people of color are targeted for and that carry a risk of escalating. In March 2022, the bill was signed by the Governor and has now taken effect.

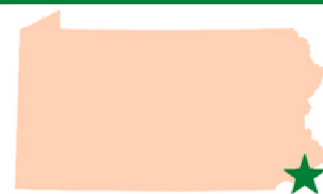
Related Development: Independently, in 2019 the Oregon Supreme Court held that its state constitution's restriction on unreasonable searches or seizures barred officers from making investigatory inquiries during a traffic stop that were unrelated to the purpose for the stop.⁴⁵ This includes requests for consent to search that are unrelated to the initial purpose of the stop and are unsupported by an independent constitutional justification. The court reasoned that the "near necessity

of driving today” means it is not uncommon for drivers to be stopped for minor traffic violations. If the law were to allow officers to then probe for unrelated criminal activity for which they lack reasonable suspicion, “an officer will have less of an incentive to develop the requisite reasonable suspicion of that crime which ordinarily would be required to stop the individual for a temporary criminal investigation.” Supporters of the ruling see it as an important step forward toward preventing traffic stops from being used as opportunities for fishing expeditions that often disproportionately impact drivers of color.⁴⁶

Outcome: Since the Oregon Supreme Court decision, Portland Police Department’s rate of searches and consent searches have dropped, with 2021 traffic stop data showing the lowest rate of consent searches performed on record.⁴⁷ Because the Oregon traffic stops legislation went into effect in January 2023, there is not yet publicly available statewide data to assess the law’s impact. The Oregon Criminal Justice Commission is expected to publish its annual statewide traffic stops study in December 2023, which will include stop trends through June 30, 2023.

MUNICIPAL LEVEL CHANGES

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



In 2020, Philadelphia Councilmember Isaiah Thomas led efforts to bring a group of lawmakers, government officials, public defenders, and police officers together to develop a plan to address racially disparate and pretextual traffic stops. As he describes, Philadelphia’s traffic stop data showed that “disproportionately [police] were stopping people of color while simultaneously not putting a dent in crime at all.”⁴⁸ From October 2020 through October 2021, Black people were only 72% of people stopped by Philadelphia police in traffic stops despite representing only 43% of the city’s population. Firearms were found in less than 1% of traffic stops.⁴⁹ People born and raised in Philadelphia talked about getting pulled over by police as a “rite of passage—something that was pretty much a norm as you transition from childhood to adulthood.”⁵⁰ Councilmember Thomas launched this collaborative effort to not only address the issues with pretextual policing but also improve the relationship between communities of color and law enforcement.

Policy: The resulting Driving Equality ordinance⁵¹ targeted eight vehicle code violations that the group determined were often used as a pretext for discrimination but would not have a negative impact on public safety:

- Expired registration (within 60 days)
- Relocation of temporary registration (must still be visible)
- Hanging license plate (must still be visible and fastened)
- Missing single headlight or taillight
- Items hanging from rearview mirror
- Minor bumper damage
- Driving with an expired or missing inspection sticker or emission sticker

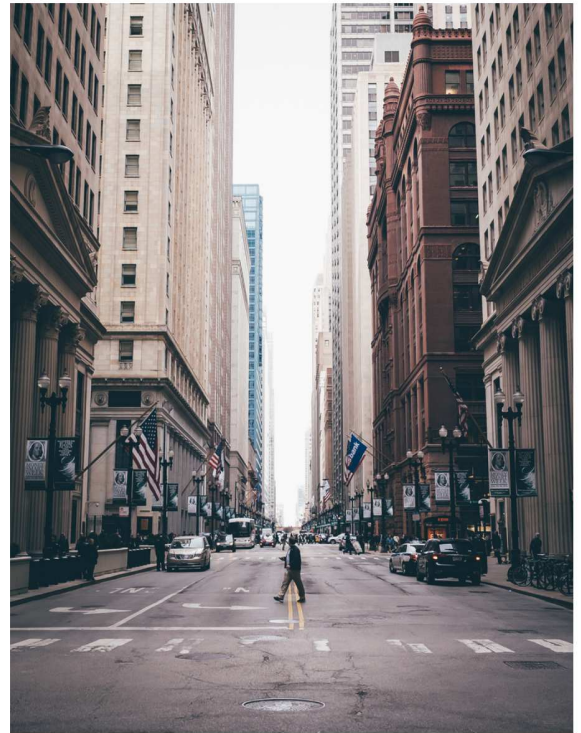
The ordinance classifies these violations as “secondary violations” and prohibits law enforcement from making stops that are solely justified by a secondary violation.

Outcome: The proposed city ordinance passed in October 2021 and went into effect in March 2022. Preliminary data shows that total traffic stops are down around 11%.⁵² Stops for the enumerated offenses are down 54%, with stops for violations like windshield obstructions and inspection stickers down over 90%. Stops of Black drivers also declined by 54% and stops of Latine drivers declined 45%. By shifting officers’ focus away from stops that are based on unfocused fishing expeditions, the data shows contraband recovery has gone up. In 2019, Philadelphia officers recovered 318 guns from 215,000 traffic stops, but after the Driving Equality Law, police recovered 346 guns from 64,000 traffic stops.⁵³ Philadelphia has put in place a Driving Equality oversight team that meets monthly to monitor data and ensure stops are decreasing. After the legislation was passed, the City faced a lawsuit⁵⁴ from the local police union, arguing that the legislation was preempted by the state motor vehicle code; the Philadelphia court overruled these objections and dismissed the union’s claim in March 2023.⁵⁵



Kansas City, Missouri

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the Mayor of Kansas City, Missouri, was motivated to begin an evaluation⁵⁶ of the municipal code to identify provisions that led to over policing or unnecessary interactions with police. To that end, a coalition of community and advocacy organizations led by BikeWalkKC came together to address the racialized criminalization of basic activities like biking and walking in Kansas City. The efforts were rooted in a desire to prevent law enforcement from using low-level violations to regulate people's movement and over-police Black and Latine travelers. The coalition first analyzed the traffic laws on the books in Kansas City, and then gathered quantitative and qualitative data on the enforcement of those laws to understand any racialized impact.⁵⁷ The process led them to scrutinize three offenses in the municipal code: jaywalking and regulations regarding dirty bicycle wheels and bike inspections. The coalition found that these laws did not make streets safer and they enabled possible racial profiling of pedestrians and bikers.



Policy: In 2021, the Mayor of Kansas City introduced legislation that would repeal jaywalking, dirty bicycle offenses, and bike inspection offenses from the municipal code, and the City Council subsequently passed the policy.⁵⁸

Outcome: In the wake of this success, BikeWalkKC and Safe Routes Partnership have since published a how-to guide for decriminalizing mobility⁵⁹ and are working with advocates across the country to begin similar efforts in their jurisdictions.⁶⁰

Memphis, Tennessee



In January 2023, Tyre Nichols was killed by police after a traffic stop by the Memphis Police Department. Galvanized by his tragic death, in April 2023 the Memphis City Council unanimously passed an ordinance titled the Achieving Driver Equality Act.⁶¹ The Act attempted to limit overuse of low-level traffic stops that too often lead to drivers like Tyre losing their lives at the hands of police.

Policy: Modeled after the Philadelphia ordinance, Memphis' Driving Equality Act similarly classifies certain low-level traffic violations as "secondary."⁶² Officers may not initiate a traffic stop solely for a secondary violation. Drivers can still be stopped for a secondary offense where law enforcement also observes a "primary offense," which is any other non-secondary traffic offense. The secondary offenses are:

- Expiration of vehicle registration (within 60 days of expiration date)
- Improper location of temporary registration permit, where permit is still clearly displayed
- Improper fastening of license plate, where the plate is still otherwise clearly displayed
- Out head light, brake light, or running light, where the violation is only for a single bulb
- Loosely secured bumpers or missing bumpers

Outcome: The ordinance has been effective since April 2023. The sponsor of the ordinance, Councilmember Michalyn Easter-Thomas, hopes the bill will limit pretextual stops, which drain resources and prevent police from engaging in activities that meaningfully address crime and assist citizens.

POLICE DEPARTMENT LEVEL CHANGES



Los Angeles Police Department

In 2020, the Office of the Inspector General for the Los Angeles Police Commission issued a report reviewing Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD's) vehicle, pedestrian, and bicycle stops.⁶³ The report found that Black residents were overrepresented in stop numbers and traffic stops of Black drivers were more likely to be based on equipment or regulatory violations, such as an expired vehicle registration. Black and Latine men were more likely to be subject to post-stop activities, including removal from

the vehicle, searches, handcuffing. The report concluded that the racial disparities, particularly in stops for traffic or other minor violations, "were the result of strategies designed to use these violations as a pretext to identify or suppress more serious crime" but that the strategies were "of limited effectiveness" in achieving those ends. It recommended that LAPD "refocus its crime fighting strategies away from the use of pretextual stops – particularly those pretextual stops based on minor equipment or regulatory violations, which more heavily impact low-income communities." The report led the Los Angeles Police Commission to request the LAPD to change its stop practices.⁶⁴

Policy: The LAPD's Office of Constitutional Policing and Policy drafted a new policy in light of the report's recommendations that was intended to shift focus away from addressing crime through pretextual stops.⁶⁵ In March 2022, the Los Angeles Police Commission approved a policy to limit pretextual traffic or pedestrian stops. The policy,⁶⁶ *Section 1/240.06, Policy – Limitation on Use of Pretextual Stops*:

- Limited officers' ability to make stops for "minor equipment violations or other infractions" to circumstances "when the officer believes that such a violation or infraction significantly interferes with public safety[.]" The public safety reason must be articulated on a body-worn camera.
- Barred officers from conducting a pretextual stop unless officers are acting on articulable information (in addition to the traffic violation) regarding a serious crime—i.e., a crime with potential for great bodily injury or death. "Serious crimes" include specified violent crimes, driving under the influence, reckless driving, or street racing. The reason for all pretext stops must be articulated on body-worn cameras, and failure to do so will result in progressive officer discipline.
- Required all actions during a stop, including questioning, to be limited to the original legal basis for the stop, unless additional reasonable suspicion of criminal activity arises.

Outcome: LAPD Chief Michael Moore was supportive of the change, emphasizing the potential for the policy to reduce arbitrary traffic stops, result in more focused investigation, and to build community trust in police.⁶⁷

A preliminary analysis of stop data showed promising results from the first five months of the policy's implementation.⁶⁸ The share of total stops that were made for minor violations fell by 40%. Low-level non-moving and equipment violations, like expired registration or objects hanging from the mirror, dropped to 12% of all stops as compared to 21% during the same time period in 2021. Minor stops that resulted in searches showed greater rates of recovering contraband, and officers became less likely to rely on consent from drivers to conduct searches, with 24% of all searches being based on consent as compared to 30% during the same period in 2021. Although racial disparities in the data still exist, stops of Black drivers for minor equipment and non-moving violations fell by 10 percentage points.

San Francisco Police Department



In 2022, the San Francisco Police Commission began developing a policy that would change the way officers conduct traffic stops. The policy was heavily informed by both data and community input. On the data side, the numbers showed there were a cluster of low-level traffic stops that were not producing a public safety or road safety benefit. These stops were being performed at racially disparate rates, weren't explained by factors like deployment patterns, and were regularly leading to disciplinary action against officers for use of force and Fourth Amendment violations. After reviewing that data, the Police Commission sought public feedback by soliciting public comment on an early draft of a policy, convening a working group of 15-20 subject matter experts from law enforcement, community organizations, and legal organizations; convening community listening townhalls across the city; administering an online survey; and hosting closed-door townhall sessions with police officers that did not include department leadership.

Policy: The exhaustive process led to the creation of a two-pronged policy to restrict pretextual stops.⁶⁹ First, the new police department policy bars officers from performing a traffic stop based on one or more low level violations including:

- Failure to have two license plates or have improperly mounted plates, so long as vehicle has rear plate with number clearly visible
- Failure to display registration tags or expired registration tags, if expired within one year
- Failure to illuminate rear license plate
- Broken rear tail lights, unless there are no functioning tail lights and it is dark outside
- Broken rear brake lights, unless there are no functioning brake lights
- Objects hanging from the mirror, unless it obstructs the driver's vision such that it creates a condition that substantially increases the likelihood of a crash
- Failure to activate turn signal for 100 feet before turning
- Person sleeping in the vehicle

Police also are not permitted to stop pedestrians for an infraction of the state or local traffic code unless there is an immediate danger that the pedestrian will crash with a moving car or bike.

Second, the department policy seeks to disincentivize making pretextual stops by limiting the use of certain investigatory tactics where the officer has no basis to suspect criminal activity. During any stop for a traffic infraction, officers cannot ask for consent to search unless they have reasonable suspicion of a non-traffic-related crime, and they cannot ask investigatory questions related to criminal activity unless reasonable suspicion of criminal activity arises during the stop.

Outcome: The policy was approved by the Police Commission in 2023, and the local police union is currently reviewing the policy before it is implemented.



Fayetteville Police Department

In 2013, newly-appointed Chief Harold Medlock of Fayetteville Police Department in Fayetteville, North Carolina, requested a review of department practices and policies by the U.S. Department of Justice.⁷⁰ He made the request in response to low levels of community trust in law enforcement resulting from disproportionate stops of Black residents as well as high rates of motor vehicle crashes. The resulting report evidenced significant racial disparities in Fayetteville traffic stops, with Black drivers comprising 58% of traffic stops but only 42% of local 18+ residents.

Policy: As a result of the data and report, Chief Medlock developed guidance for the Department’s officers to prioritize traffic safety stops in high-crash areas in an effort to improve traffic safety and to de-prioritize pretextual investigatory traffic stops intended to uncover criminal activity. The city of Fayetteville also passed a law requiring officers to obtain written consent to search during a traffic stop.⁷¹

Outcome: During the three years of Chief Medlock’s tenure, from 2013-2016, this police department guidance led to a large decrease in stops for non-moving violations and investigative stops and an increase in stops for speeding. A study of the results showed this policy change led to fewer vehicle crashes and reduced racial disparities in traffic stops by 21% without leading to an increase in crime.⁷² Chief Medlock also found that during this time period, uses of force, injuries to both residents and officers, and complaints against officers all decreased.⁷³ The results in Fayetteville are often cited as “proof of concept” for the feasibility of making significant changes to traffic enforcement that will reduce racial disparities in stops without risks to public or traffic safety.⁷⁴



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