Center For
POLICING EQUITY

REDESIGNING PUBLIC SAFETY

Traffic Safety
RECOMMENDATIONS

ABOUT THIS SERIES

All communities deserve to have the resources and tools they need to feel safe. Across the United States, communities are working to redesign public safety systems to center racial equity, public health, and community power rather than surveillance and punishment. A growing body of evidence confirms what Black and Brown communities have always known: Safety and equity are dependent on each other, and public safety systems must center equity in order to be effective. The Redesigning Public Safety Resource Series highlights evidence-informed practices and community innovations that support this vision of public safety. For each set of recommendations in this series, a companion publication provides detailed information and evidence.

ABOUT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

Persistent racial disparities in traffic enforcement are a serious ongoing public safety threat for Black drivers. The most common reason for contact with the police in the United States is being the driver in a traffic stop. Black drivers are more likely to be stopped by police, more likely to be **searched** once stopped, more likely to have **force** used against them, and more likely to be **killed** by police, especially when unarmed. Disinvestment in road safety infrastructure and the legacy of racist federal transportation policies have created racial disparities in traffic crashes, as well: Black and Indigenous people are significantly more likely than White people to be struck and killed while **walking**. Redesigning traffic safety means investing in evidence-informed strategies to create a world where all people can drive and walk without fear of traffic crashes, racial profiling, or police violence. The following recommendations promote this vision of traffic safety.



End Pretextual Stops

Pretextual stops occur when police pull someone over for a minor traffic violation so that they can investigate a serious crime for which they lack reasonable suspicion. Pretextual stops disproportionately burden Black drivers and do not advance road safety.

1. **Ban police stops for low-level violations not related to traffic safety.** Virginia and Philadelphia have both implemented this reform.

2. **Prohibit officers from using traffic stops as a pretext for criminal investigation.** Policymakers and police departments should prohibit officers from asking questions that go beyond the scope of the initial reason for the stop.

3. **Prohibit searches based on the driver's consent** unless officers have independent cause for search.

4. **Document and regularly analyze all recorded reasons for stops and searches.** Police departments should require officers to record a narrative description of the justification for each stop and search they conduct. These reports should be analyzed on a daily basis (e.g., by supervisors) to make sure that stops are supported by reasonable suspicion or probable cause and are consistent with department policy.



Invest in Public Health Approaches to Road Safety

Public health strategies for road safety focus on creating environments that lead to safe behavior. A strong body of evidence shows that these approaches can reduce traffic crashes.

5. **Invest in equitable infrastructure to reduce traffic crashes,** such as traffic calming devices, longer yellow lights, road friction management programs, additional turning lanes, additional walking bridges, integration of livable spaces with parks and sidewalks, and improved road conditions. Infrastructure plans should prioritize historically disinvested neighborhoods.

6. **Expand access to new safety technology to reduce traffic crashes,** such as by encouraging the widespread adoption of affordable advanced driver assistance features and supporting the development of accurate technology to prevent drunk driving.



Limit Use of Fines and Fees

Fines and fees for traffic violations disproportionately burden low-income, Black, and Brown people, often trapping people who are unable to make initial payments in cycles of punishment and debt. In some communities, revenue from traffic tickets is used to fund city government and police departments themselves, creating an incentive to issue tickets in order to generate revenue rather than protect road safety.

7. **End financial conflicts of interest in traffic enforcement.** No money collected from fines, fees, or property seized during traffic stops should go to law enforcement agencies, police certification bodies, or basic government operating costs.

8. **End debt-based driver's license suspensions for debt or failure to appear in court** through changes to state law as well as local driver's license restoration programs.

9. **Address financial barriers to meeting equipment and paperwork requirements.** Imposing financial penalties on people who cannot afford required registration fees or equipment repairs deepens patterns of inequity and does nothing to improve road safety. State and local policymakers should instead explore opportunities to help people correct equipment and paperwork issues.

10. **Adopt income-based repayment for traffic tickets.** Traffic courts should have the power to waive fines and fees entirely when a person cannot pay. In addition, states should allow people to request reduction of traffic ticket fines either in person or online.

Pilot Alternatives to Armed Enforcement

As communities reconsider the role of police in traffic stops, they are developing new, unarmed options for traffic enforcement, including non-police response systems for low-level traffic violations that do not threaten road safety.

11. **Pilot non-police alternatives for low-level traffic offenses that do not threaten road safety.** Berkeley, California, and Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, for example, are developing traffic enforcement alternatives for these situations. Cities should require data collection on all traffic enforcement, whether done by police or not, and should regularly analyze these data to ensure that racial disparities are not replicated or worsened in non-police systems.

Are automated traffic enforcement systems good alternatives to police enforcement?

Hundreds of communities in the United States use red-light cameras or speed cameras to automatically enforce traffic laws. These cameras capture the license plates of cars speeding or running red lights, and a ticket is mailed to the owner of each photographed car at a later date.

Red-light camera programs are not a promising alternative to police enforcement, and they should end. Studies have found that red-light camera enforcement and red-light camera ticket debt disproportionately burden Black drivers. Evidence of a public safety benefit is weak: Crashes resulting from running a red light account for less than 3% of traffic fatalities. Studies on red-light-running crashes have had mixed results: Some have found that cameras increase crashes, while others show decreases or no significant effect.

Evidence suggests that speed cameras do reduce road traffic collisions. A review of research showed that speeding cameras are consistently associated with fewer crashes resulting in death or serious injury, with most studies reporting reductions of 30% to 40%. However, speed cameras also pose significant concerns related to racial equity and due process. As a result, **use of speed cameras should be considered only in the context of a holistic, racial-justice-focused redesign of traffic enforcement.** At a minimum, speed camera programs should:

- place cameras only at locations with crash histories and with community consent;
- notify drivers of the presence of speed cameras using clearly visible signs;
- be operated by a government agency rather than police or private contractors, to prevent conflicts of interest;
- have strong due process protections, including effective appeals processes and requirements that tickets be issued within a certain timeframe;
- prohibit sharing of traffic camera data and license plate reader data with police or immigration officials; and
- have a scaled fine structure, with warning letters or a low fine for first-time offenses.

Improve Data Collection and Transparency

Efforts to redesign public safety should always include data analysis. Data can deepen understanding of the problems that affect a community, help make sure that any new policy is achieving its goal of improved equity and safety, and build evidence for changes not yet made.

12. **Report all traffic stops and searches,** whether conducted by sworn or non-sworn officers. All stop records should include the location of the stop, demographic information about the stopped person, the reason for the stop, the outcome of the stop, whether any searches were conducted, and the outcome of any searches.

13. **Ensure traffic-stop data are linkable to calls for service data** through a unique ID number. Analysis of these data together can identify the types of traffic stops that are least aligned with public safety needs and the areas that have the highest number of these stops—a first step towards reducing them.

14. **Create data quality assurance procedures** to ensure stop data are recorded completely and consistently.

15. **Document any strategic shifts or changes in traffic enforcement** (such as a "click-it or ticket" initiative) and analyze effects of strategic shifts on equity.

16. **Collect data, including demographic data, to assess the impact of fines, fees, and related suspensions** (such as driver's license suspensions).

This brief and the companion report are available at policingequity.org/traffic-safety.