Right-Sizing the Role of Traffic Enforcement

Prioritizing Effective, Cost-Efficient and Equitable Improvements to Road Safety

VISION ZERO NETWORK

POLICING PROJECT
NYU SCHOOL OF LAW

Contents

Acknowledgements & Contributions

These recommendations were shaped by a working group comprised of transportation practitioners, researchers, criminal justice leaders, public health professionals, law enforcement officers, and community advocates who met over several sessions. These recommendations are an interpretation of the discussions that took place during these meetings and do not necessarily represent the express views of all contributors or reviewers or of their organizations.

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This work builds on the longtime efforts of many others focused on addressing safety disparities and injustices in our transportation system. We are grateful for the many individuals, organizations, communities and advocates whose work we learned from and some of which we feature as examples and inspiration here.

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Right-Sizing the Role of Traffic Enforcement:
Prioritizing Effective, Cost-Efficient and Equitable Improvements to Road Safety
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Learn more at visionzeronetwork.org

Introduction

The status quo approach to road safety is killing us. Every day in the United States, an average of 116 people are killed and thousands more are severely injured in traffic crashes. This is the equivalent of a midsize passenger plane going down every day – something that deserves a more urgent response than the drip, drip, drip complacency about traffic crashes, a leading cause of deaths and life-debilitating injuries, especially for young people.

It doesn't have to be this way. Most traffic deaths and severe injuries are predictable and preventable. Within the past few decades, road safety has declined dramatically in the U.S. while it has improved significantly in other nations. The U.S. has the *worst traffic death rate* among 28 high-income countries. For example, the traffic death rate in Canada is 61% lower than in the U.S., and Australia is 67% lower, while both countries have similar levels of vehicle use as the U.S.

Evidence shows that road safety efforts in the U.S. can deliver better results. Proven strategies include leading with a *Safe System approach*: a framework that aims for zero traffic deaths and serious injuries by acknowledging that humans make mistakes, designing a forgiving system where crashes are less likely or less severe, and sharing responsibility among all parties, including road designers, manufacturers, policymakers and users. The U.S. Department of Transportation and a fast-growing number of states and municipalities across the nation support the Safe System approach, as does the National Safety Council, Institute of Transportation Engineers, and other influential safety organizations.

Strategies that lead to a more "forgiving" transportation system include the following:

- Designing roads with safety-first measures, such as physical traffic calming elements that encourage safer driving behavior;
- Prioritizing safety over speed when setting speed limits;
- Leveraging technologies such as Intelligent Speed Assistance to deter dangerous driving, especially among repeat super-speeders; and
- Advancing a range of mode options, including public transit, walking and biking.

Substantively improving road safety also requires modernizing the role of traffic enforcement to be effective, cost-efficient and equitable. As with every type of strategy, we need to ask if the status quo approach best fits today's road safety needs. We need to assess the financial and *social costs* of the status quo. And we need to set realistic expectations in today's environment. Although reassessing long-standing strategies such as enforcement can require sustained effort and may prompt difficult conversations, the scale and urgency of the nation's traffic safety crisis demand that we do so.

About these recommendations

These recommendations were developed to help U.S. communities assess and right-size the role of traffic enforcement to better meet their public safety needs. This includes identifying the strengths and shortcomings of the status quo approach to traffic enforcement, learning from successful models, and recognizing the need to modernize safety efforts given the changing transportation environment. Communities across the country are grappling with reductions in police staffing levels and difficulties in hiring, even as many people, including some decision-makers, hold unrealistic expectations for what limited enforcement resources can deliver. The recommendations offer short- and long-term practical actions that leaders can take to prioritize strategies proven to deliver the greatest safety benefits at the lowest social and financial costs, particularly for vulnerable communities.

Right-sizing traffic enforcement as part of a shift to a more effective Safe System approach does not necessarily call for changing the size of law enforcement's role, but rather evaluating which efforts are most effective, cost-efficient and equitable to meet the goals of safe mobility. This means strategically matching police and other resources with our communities' greatest road safety needs. This requires diligently assessing safety outcomes and also accounting for evidence of the broader social costs associated with enforcement-centered approaches.

Enforcement agencies are under constant pressure to do more with less. Between constrained budgets, staffing shortages, recruitment challenges and evolving community expectations of enforcement – as well as the urgency to address the country's road safety crisis – it is critical that organizations evaluate their approach and course-correct as needed.

Traffic calming projects in Washington, D.C. are making walking, biking and driving safer across the city.
Source: Vision Zero Network

The primary audience for these recommendations are people – perhaps like you and your colleagues – who are working every day, often behind the scenes, to help us all get where we want to go safely. You may be transportation planners, engineers, policymakers, public health professionals, law enforcement officers and community advocates. While not all of these road safety stakeholders consider enforcement to be in their realm of responsibility, there is a role for all of us in making sure we get it right.

All road safety stakeholders can play a part in assessing current strategies and outcomes, including enforcement, and exploring questions such as these:

- How can we prioritize the most effective strategies to keep people safe when moving about their communities?
- How can we best use our community's scarce resources, including limited police capacity?
- What steps can help ensure that traffic enforcement improves public safety without exacerbating unintended harms for people living in disinvested communities?
- What changes beyond our control may point us toward adopting new road safety strategies? And how can we leverage these toward positive outcomes?

No simple roadmap can address the complexities of today's road safety crisis. Still, we are encouraged by and eager to share the growing body of research and on-the-ground examples that can help advance our shared goal of safety for all.

The following sections include:

We recognize that shifting away from long-standing practices can be difficult, but the need to improve our road safety practices is increasingly urgent. We hope this is a helpful tool to assess and, where needed, adjust enforcement strategies in your communities to be more effective, cost-efficient and equitable.

Section 1

Understanding a Safe System Approach to Road Safety

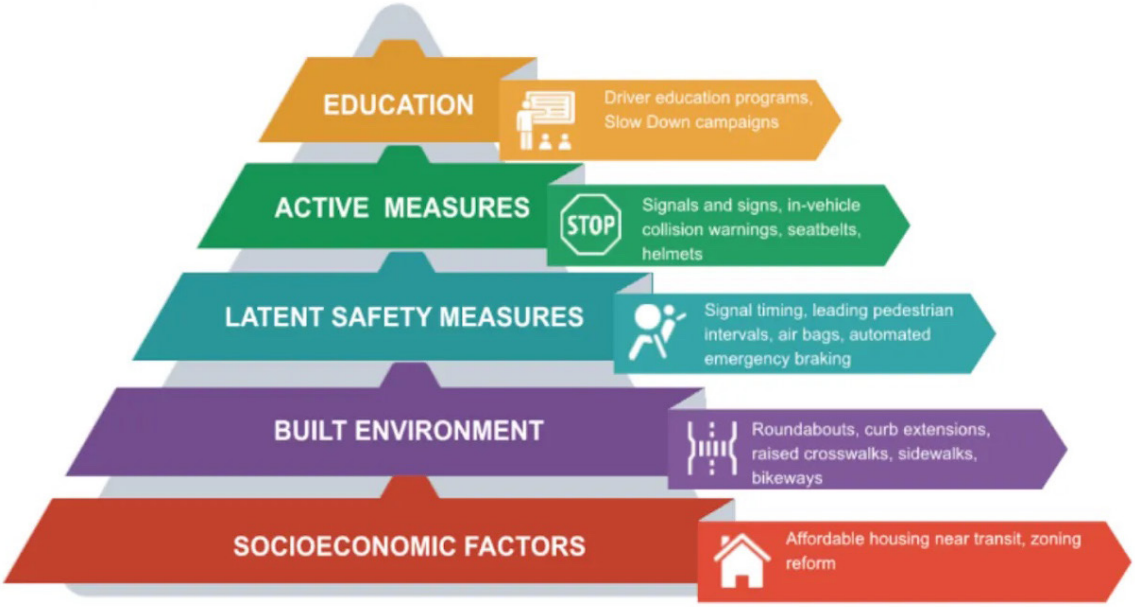
Many nations can point to their commitment to the Safe System approach as a significant factor in improving road safety in the past few decades. And in recent years, hundreds of U.S. communities, along with the U.S. Department of Transportation, have adopted this approach, which offers opportunities to make substantial safety progress.

A Safe System approach focuses on designing a system where traffic crashes are less likely to occur and, when they do happen, are less severe. Recognizing that human error is inevitable, this approach prioritizes road infrastructure, policies and vehicle designs to protect people from serious harm. It also focuses on designing environments and systems that help make safe behaviors the default, or easiest, options for people.

It prioritizes "upstream" safety strategies that prevent traffic crashes and lessen the severity of crashes when they do happen. Such strategies include *designing roads to be more self-enforcing* by physically encouraging safer speeds, which are a top factor in the occurrence and severity of crashes. For example, designing (or redesigning) a street with narrower travel lanes, with traffic circles instead of stop signs, and with speed humps are all ways to physically encourage safer driving speeds. Built-in design features to improve safety for people walking and biking — such as well-marked, well-positioned crosswalks and bikeways, ample time to cross a street on foot, and sufficient lighting at night — benefit everyone on the roads, including significant portions of the population who cannot drive, such as kids and some seniors. An example in a rural environment is adding median barriers to two-lane roads to prevent head-on crashes and lessen the severity of collisions that occur.

Similarly, certain vehicle designs help prevent serious crashes or lessen their severity. Systems enabling lane departure warnings and automated emergency-breaking reduce the likelihood and seriousness of crashes. Technologies can also deter repeat unsafe driving behaviors. Alcohol-interlock systems prevent a vehicle from starting if the driver has been drinking, and Intelligent Speed Assistance helps drivers stay within legal speed limits by limiting acceleration. When crashes do occur, in-vehicle systems such as seat belts and air bags help reduce the impact for people in the vehicles. (See more examples and effectiveness rates in the Federal Highway Administration's *Proven Safety Countermeasures*.)

By investing in safe systems – including the built environment and vehicles – the number and severity of crashes are reduced, safety is improved, and the need for enforcement is lessened.



The Safe System Pyramid is a framework that visually depicts the potential impact of different types of safety interventions. Source: A Framework for Public Health Action: The Health Impact Pyramid

How enforcement fits into a Safe System Approach

A Safe System approach includes enforcement strategies but uses them more selectively and in ways that are more effective, cost-efficient and equitable.

Traffic Stops and Speed Safety Cameras

A Safe System approach recognizes that not all enforcement tools carry the same costs, risks and limitations. Officer-led traffic stops and speed safety cameras play distinct roles within roadway safety efforts.

Enforcement via officer-led traffic stops relies on in-person, discretionary decision-making by police. In some situations, stopping a driver who is speeding or driving dangerously can interrupt unsafe behavior in real time. But this approach is inherently resource-intensive, requires significant staffing, and exposes officers and road users to safety risks during traffic stops. Because officers can be present only in a limited number of locations at a time, officer-led enforcement reaches just a small share of unsafe driving behavior and often intervenes after risk has already been introduced.

Speed safety cameras operate differently. They can be deployed continuously at high-risk locations, allowing communities to address speeding – a leading contributor to traffic injuries and deaths – more consistently. Speed cameras do not require officers to be physically present to be effective, making them less dependent on limited law enforcement capacity and therefore less likely to result in unsafe or inequitable traffic stops. Speed cameras do not provide immediate intervention and are still more reactive and punitive than many strategies. As a result, speed safety cameras should be understood as a targeted, short-term tool focused on reducing speeding, rather than a comprehensive, long-term solution.

Read more

Fair Warnings: Recommendations to Promote Equity in Speed Safety Camera Programs

Our behaviors on the road are significantly shaped by the environments we move in. For instance, wide roads designed for high speeds, speed limits set too high and vehicles capable of extreme acceleration are likely to encourage unsafe driving behaviors. But what if we focus on shaping those environments, as well as policies, systems and cultural expectations, in ways that effectively encourage safer behavior on the roads? And in ways that cost less and benefit communities more equitably?

> *"The police officers we work with want to reduce crime in their cities. No one wants to see their efforts undone after a short period of time. If we have proven methods of calming traffic that produce long-term effects, why should we keep asking fully-trained officers to write the same tickets over and over?"*
>
> *- Josh Rowan, Director, Oakland, CA Department of Transportation*

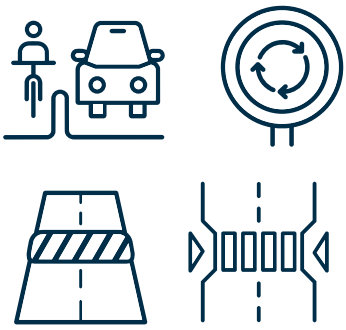
Maximizing effectiveness and reducing costs

Prioritizing proactive, preventive safety measures can be more effective for long-term behavior change and cost less than trying to chase dangerous road behavior with limited police staff. The cost to local communities for in-person traffic stops extends beyond officer salaries and benefits; it includes training, vehicle maintenance, insurance, and often-expensive lawsuits – as well as the costs of the broader criminal justice system, including courts, prosecutors, and jails.

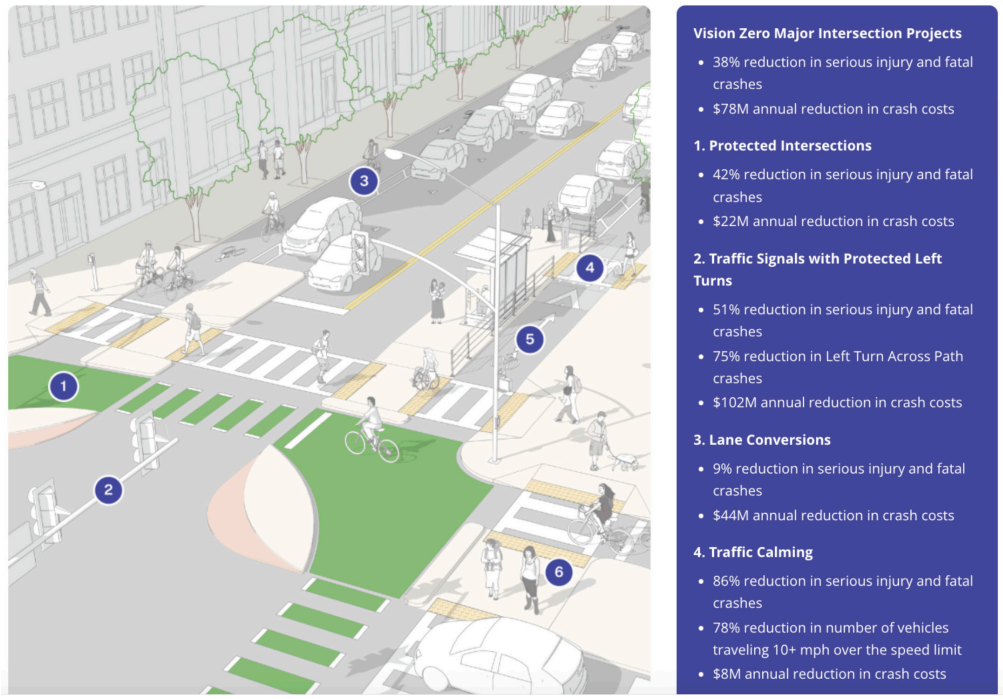
Communities should consider the full lifetime costs and benefits of upstream infrastructure investments, such as road redesigns and traffic calming, that have lasting, around-the-clock safety safety impacts, relative to over-reliance on the more fleeting and resource-constrained effects of traffic stops.

Examples of upstream speed management approaches include the following:

- Designing (or redesigning) streets with traffic calming measures to physically discourage people from speeding; these are onetime, upfront investments that can prevent unwanted behavior among most drivers at all hours.
- Using speed safety cameras which offer 24/7 attention to curb speeding and cost less than in-person traffic stops. (More on important considerations in using cameras on *p. 24*.)
- Leveraging in-vehicle speed management systems, such as Intelligent Speed Assistance (ISA), particularly for the outsized harms caused by repeat super-speeders.



By contrast, relying on police-led traffic stops to catch dangerous speeders requires higher, ongoing costs – with a workforce that is often stretched thin – and is possible only in a handful of locations for limited hours each day. This results in reduced and fleeting safety benefits at higher costs to the municipality.



Safe System investments such as protected intersections, traffic calming, and safer signal designs can significantly reduce crashes while generating substantial cost savings, as demonstrated by Austin, Texas saving tens of millions of dollars annually. Source: Austin Vision Zero

Given the costs and challenges of hiring, retaining and deploying law enforcement officers, making up-front investments in road designs can generate more effective public safety benefits at lower costs in the long run. The City of Austin estimates that its upstream Safe Systems investments have led to a *$78 million a year* reduction in crash costs, including reduced medical expenses, emergency services, legal and administration costs and fewer congestion delays. (Read more about assessing *comprehensive traffic crash costs*.) Examples of these upfront safety investments include installing pedestrian crossing islands, traffic signals with protected left turns and various traffic calming measures. The cost savings resulting from these investments can be redirected toward other needs, from improving schools and investing in safer road designs to other enforcement priorities within the community.

Lowering speed limits makes Seattle streets safer

In 2016, Seattle lowered default speed limits from 30 mph to 25 mph on arterial roads and from 25 mph to 20 mph on smaller, mostly residential streets. To support the change, the City increased the density of speed limit signs to improve driver awareness of the new limits without increasing enforcement. Research shows that Seattle's speed management efforts were associated with a statistically significant *17% drop in the odds of an injury crash* downtown and a 7% drop outside the city center; and on arterial roads, the odds of an injury crash downtown were reduced by a statistically significant 20% (less outside the city center). These are relatively low-cost and durable safety improvements that can reduce the drain on police time and expenses.

Comparing short-term enforcement with long-term strategies

From 2016 to 2017, San Francisco implemented *Safe Speeds SF*, a high-visibility speed enforcement campaign on 11 high-injury corridors. During the yearlong effort, police issued approximately 1,800 speeding citations on these targeted streets. While enforcement was active, the campaign achieved an average 5% reduction in 85th-percentile vehicle speeds on those corridors. But the city's own evaluation found that these speed reductions were temporary. Within one week after targeted enforcement ended, speeds began increasing, and within one month there was no detectable lasting effect on speeding.

By contrast, investments that permanently change street design have shown durable, measurable safety benefits. The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency's 2023 *Safe Streets Evaluation Program Annual Report* analyzed 28 traffic-calming projects using at least three years of post-implementation data. Across these projects, vehicle speeds declined and remained lower over time, with typical reductions in 85th-percentile speeds ranging from roughly 5% to more than 15%. These sustained speed reductions were accompanied by an average 16% reduction in total crashes, including a 35% reduction in pedestrian-related crashes and a 25% reduction in bicycle-related crashes.

More recently, San Francisco's 2025 *pilot of speed safety cameras* on high-speed corridors has led to a 72% reduction in speeding at camera locations, demonstrating how automated enforcement can provide more consistent, sustained speed compliance than relying on police making traffic stops.

Using *speed safety cameras* and investing in safer street designs to deter dangerous speeds are strategies that are longer lasting, more cost-efficient and ultimately more effective at improving safety for community members.

8th Street in San Francisco after being treated with a protected bike lane coupled with a passenger loading island. Source: SFMTA

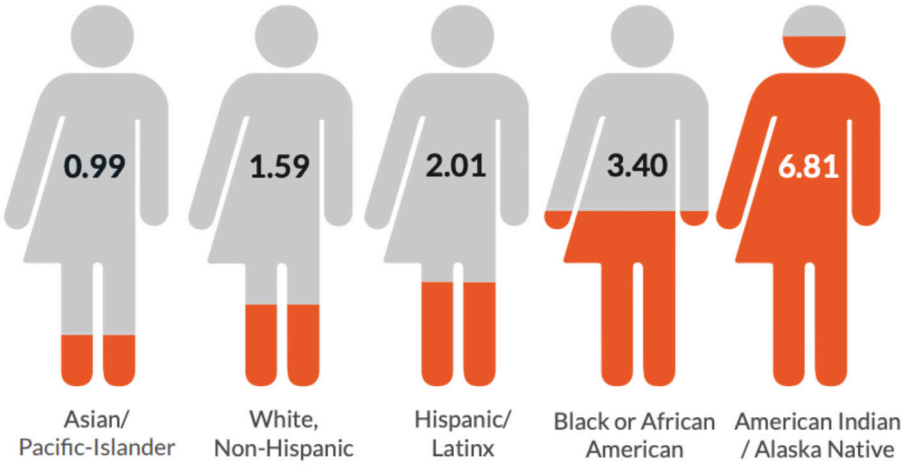
To be sure, studies suggest that police-led enforcement can have a positive impact on traffic safety. For instance, a 2011 *study* in Massachusetts found that every 100 additional traffic tickets was associated with 6.7 fewer crash injuries. A 2014 *study* in Oregon found that a 35% reduction in state highway troopers led to fewer traffic citations issued and an increase in crashes, suggesting a correlation between traffic stops and crashes. In particular, research shows that when implemented properly, enforcement efforts that target specific locations and specific dangerous behaviors, such as *high-visibility enforcement campaigns*, can have positive impacts on crashes and, in particular, help increase compliance with *seat belt laws* and *reduce drunk driving*.

However, the effects of these enforcement efforts are often *short-lived*. This *study* of a large U.S. suburban jurisdiction found that routine traffic patrols produce only short-term reductions in crashes at the most serious hot spots, with less benefits at other locations. And importantly, traditional enforcement generates a variety of social and financial costs that must be taken into account when assessing its benefits.

It is also worth distinguishing between types of police-led enforcement. *Research shows* that non-safety traffic stops – for low-level equipment and administrative violations – do very little to improve roadway safety, compared to safety-focused traffic stops focused on deterring the most dangerous behaviors, including speeding, reckless driving and drunk driving. (Read about safety vs. non-safety traffic stops in *Section 2*.)

Maximizing safety and reducing inequities

A Safe System approach can also support more equitable outcomes. Black drivers are *more likely* to be stopped by police while driving, *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. Black drivers are also more likely to anticipate an escalated or punitive outcome during traffic stops, based in part on how officers initiate encounters. When people anticipate escalation during routine traffic stops, the encounter itself can become a source of stress and fear, regardless of whether a citation or arrest ultimately occurs. Over time, these repeated experiences contribute to broader *psychological and community-level harms*, including collective trauma, chronic stress, and erosion of trust in policing, particularly in communities subject to disproportionate enforcement.



Pedestrian deaths per 100,000 people by race and ethnicity between 2018 and 2022.
Source: Dangerous By Design 2024

The nation's regressive, flat-fee traffic fine system also contributes to *disparate and unjust financial burdens* for low-income people. This can include debilitating debt, driver's license suspensions that limit livelihoods, lost employment and other long-lasting impacts for people with less ability to pay. The role of money in traffic enforcement systems can create *perverse financial incentives* for local governments, leading to vicious cycles of prioritizing revenue generation over safety. Levying fines and fees, including *via traffic stops*, is a major revenue-raising option for some local governments, especially in *smaller communities*. Such a system can incentivize municipalities to rely on traffic ticket revenue to fund basic services, conflicting with goals to improve road safety outcomes by changing behavior.

While people of color and low-income people are disproportionately impacted by an overreliance on traditional traffic enforcement measures, their communities are also most at risk of road safety hazards. When exposure and travel mode are taken into account, disparities for Black road users are even more pronounced: Black people face an approximately *80% higher risk of death* as occupants in light-duty vehicles, more than *twice the risk* as pedestrians, and *roughly 4.5 times the risk* while biking compared to white road users. American Indian and Alaska Native people are also severely affected, with per-capita traffic fatality rates *more than double* those for the total U.S. population. People living in low-income areas *are 35% more likely to be hit* and killed while walking compared to the total population.

> ***"Historically, inequitable transportation planning and development patterns have led to the social cost of traffic crashes being [borne] unequally by Black and Indigenous road users or populations in marginalized communities."***
>
> — *Safe System Approach for Speed Management, U.S. Department of Transportation, 2023*

Spurred by decades of unjust policies — such as *redlining*, exclusionary zoning, destructive *highway construction*, chronic underfunding of public transit, and investments that prioritize suburbanization — road safety disparities continue to play out with racialized harms.

Today, many high-speed, high-volume roadways, including those *located near highways*, are concentrated in communities of color and low-income communities, disproportionately *burdening these neighborhoods* with traffic risks. Many of these areas have less safety infrastructure, such as fewer adequate crosswalks and well-connected sidewalks and less functioning street lights.

In areas with fundamental street design needs, the most effective and equitable approach is to invest in systemic and lasting infrastructure improvements to help fill longtime safety gaps in enduring ways. Examples include redesigning roads to be safer, expanding access to public transit, and making sure that walking and biking conditions meet people's needs.

By prioritizing an upstream Safe System approach, we can help break the vicious cycle of disinvestments that lead to poor health and safety outcomes and community distrust, and instead invest in lasting safety improvements that benefit all people.

Risks and inequities of enforcement of walking and biking

The dangers of "driving while Black" extend to "*walking while Black*" and "*biking while Black*." *Analysis* shows that police are more likely to issue jaywalking tickets in low-income and predominantly Black neighborhoods. These areas are less likely to have safe, sufficient and well-designed crossings – all of which are conditions that make jaywalking a rational and often inevitable response to inadequate infrastructure. (Read about the telling origins of the word *jaywalking*.)

In places without safe crossing options, jaywalking is a logical response to poor infrastructure. However, enforcement of jaywalking penalizes this response instead of addressing the root cause — an environment that needs to be made safe. Source: Northcoast Environmental Center

Enforcement of minor pedestrian and bicyclist offenses too often leads to *escalation* and use of force, in some instances with deadly consequences. Such stops are frequently used for *unrelated investigatory, or pretextual, purposes*, raising additional concerns about safety, civil liberties and the appropriate scope of traffic enforcement.

Traffic stops for walking and biking offenses also disproportionately affect people who are unhoused, for whom public space is unavoidable. In Washington State, nearly half of the people ticketed for jaywalking were homeless at the time, and similar patterns have been documented in *enforcement of bicycle regulations* such as helmet laws. These findings underscore how pedestrian and bicyclist enforcement can amplify existing vulnerabilities, penalize people for conditions created by poor street design and expose marginalized populations to heightened risk of harm.

Section 2

Prioritizing Safety Stops over Non-Safety Stops

To improve road safety, U.S. jurisdictions are increasingly limiting non-safety-related traffic stops, such as low-level administrative and equipment violations, which are not directly correlated to injury crashes. Among other benefits, this allows police to focus their limited resources on genuine safety threats, including safety-related traffic stops. In line with the Safe System approach, enforcement is just one piece of the puzzle. The greatest focus, overall, should be on upstream safety strategies that are most likely to prevent severe crashes before they happen, such as redesigning roads, lowering speed limits, using safety technology and improving vehicle safety, as outlined in Section 1.

What are safety- vs. non-safety traffic stops?

Safety-focused traffic stops are highly correlated to dangerous road behaviors that lead to traffic injuries and deaths. These include *speeding*, which is a factor in about 30% of all traffic deaths in the U.S., *impaired driving*, also involved in about 30% of traffic deaths, and *reckless and dangerous driving*, which are also common factors, though the figures are more difficult to track. There is widespread agreement that these risky behaviors should be prioritized.

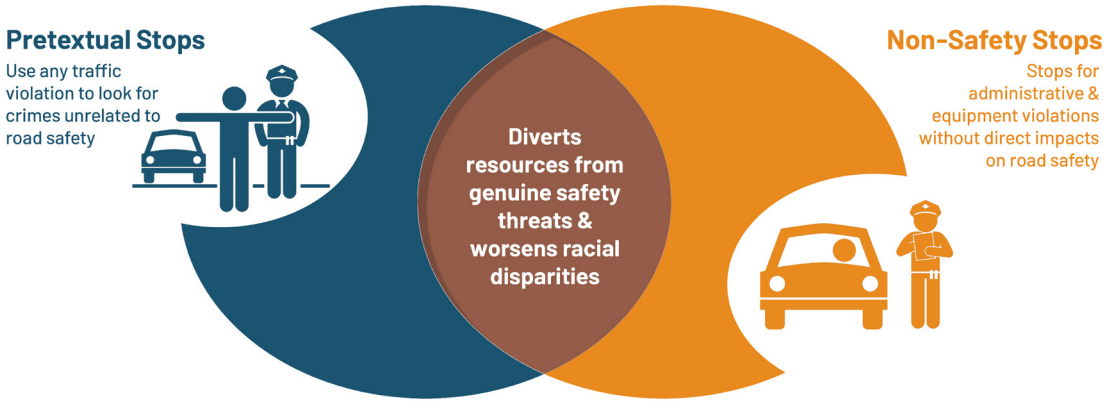
Non-safety traffic stops are not directly related to crashes that result in serious injuries and deaths. These are most often *low-level equipment* and administrative issues. There is *strong evidence* that these low-level, non-safety traffic stops do not correlate to serious dangers, *very rarely* prevent or detect serious crimes, and *rarely yield useful* crime-solving information. Instead, these stops can create unnecessary flashpoints of confrontation and siphon resources that can be better spent on genuine safety threats.

Examples of Safety-Focused Stops	Examples of Non-Safety Stops
» Speeding » Impaired driving » Reckless driving » Distracted driving	» Expired or invalid vehicle registration » Expired or invalid vehicle inspection » Lowrider vehicles » Lighting violations, such as a single broken head or taillight » Minor vehicle defects, such as a missing bumper » Loud exhaust » Cracked windshield » Items hanging on a rearview mirror » Improper license plate or registration display

Why restrict non-safety traffic stops?

While some non-safety violations merit attention, they do not rise to the level of serious road safety hazards and should not divert police resources that can be better used.

Police use low-level traffic offenses to make *"pretextual" traffic stops* to investigate criminal activity unrelated to road safety. More broadly, non-safety stops — including routine administrative and equipment violations — are often justified in the name of safety but do not meaningfully improve road safety outcomes. *Research* shows that these pretext traffic stops rarely yield useful crime-solving information or decrease crime. Yet they can have harmful consequences, such as facilitating racial profiling, creating flashpoints of confrontation that endanger officers and road users, and distracting police from more meaningful safety threats.



This figure shows the overlap of pretextual stops and non-safety related stops, both of which are associated with strong racial disparities. Source: Center for Policing Equity

In Fayetteville, North Carolina, the police department began reprioritizing its traffic enforcement efforts in 2013, limiting non-safety stops in order to focus on higher priority road safety risks and reduce racial disparities. The department reduced traffic stops related to non-safety vehicle equipment violations by 80%, while increasing genuine safety stops. *Analysis* showed that Fayetteville's re-prioritization of traffic stop types resulted in fewer overall crashes, fewer injury crashes, and fewer traffic fatalities. Racial disparities in traffic stops were reduced. And, the relative de-prioritization of investigatory, or pretext, stops was not associated with an increase in non-traffic crime outcomes, which were reduced or unchanged.

A study in Nashville, Tennessee examined the local police department's policy of conducting large numbers of traffic stops in high-crime neighborhoods. The study found that this policy did not reduce crime. Notably, fewer than 1% of stops for non-safety violations led to arrests for serious crimes.

Analysis of national crash data shows that low-level infractions, such as mirror or windshield issues, are implicated in just 0.2% of fatal crashes nationwide.

Read more: Factsheet: Which Stops Impact Serious Crashes?

> *"The evidence is hard to ignore. Non-safety traffic stops don't make our roads safer, they don't reduce crime, and they fall disproportionately on communities of color. That's not a trade-off that serves the public. Effective policing will require concentrating resources on the behaviors that actually kill people like speeding, impaired driving, reckless driving, instead of chasing equipment violations."*
>
> – *Chris Burbank, Chief (Ret.) Chris Burbank, Salt Lake City (UT) Police Department*

Analysis of 3.4 million traffic stops conducted by **California's 15 largest law enforcement agencies** revealed that during those stops, officers confiscated a total of 905 firearms – one confiscation for every 3,700 stops, or a yield rate of just .02%. Other *studies* have found no adverse effect on crashes following pretext stop reforms.

Instead of improving road safety or serving some other crime-solving priorities, these non-safety traffic stops present new risks for both civilians and officers. *Research* shows that police use of force was more than twice as likely to occur during non-safety traffic stops than those related to safety-related stops. *Additional research shows* that violence against police officers is less common when officers execute stops solely for traffic enforcement purposes instead of broader criminal investigations.

Some law enforcement agencies encourage non-safety stops, despite the lack of a clear relationship to injury crashes. This is often reinforced by *longstanding federal reporting structures* tied to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) grants that prioritize high volumes of stops and citations as indicators of activity, rather than focusing on measuring reductions in serious traffic injuries and fatalities.

In part, this may stem from the fact that society places unrealistic expectations on the role that traffic stops can have in curbing the road safety crisis. Right-sizing the role of traffic enforcement by limiting non-safety stops, while adopting upstream Safe System strategies as outlined in Section 1, has the following benefits:

- More efficient and cost-effective use of limited police resources
- More effective and long-lasting strategies, such as safely designed streets
- Improved community trust
- Less disparate negative financial and racial impacts

The public supports right-sizing traffic enforcement. According to a 2023 Vera Institute of Justice poll, 69% of voters across the political spectrum support limiting police enforcement of non-safety stops.

Section 3

Integrating Enforcement into a Safe System Approach

Where to start? **This question can seem overwhelming, but we have models of what works to prioritize safe and equitable mobility in our communities.**

There are a range of strategies leaders can draw on to identify and use the most effective, cost-efficient and equitable road safety approaches, including taking a data-informed approach to right-size the role of enforcement in their work.

1. Use planning processes to align enforcement with road safety objectives

A community's road safety planning process offers opportunities to set and communicate intentions and align goals and strategies with a Safe System approach. Road safety and Vision Zero plans should explicitly commit to using all strategies, including enforcement, in the most effective, cost-efficient and equitable ways possible. These are public statements of purpose that can be tracked and measured over time to promote transparency, trust and progress.

Yet too often, traffic stops are listed in road safety plans in generalized, routine ways without specifics about how they should be used most effectively, analyzed to ensure they are meeting clear goals, or revised when needed. A common but flawed assumption in road safety plans is that all types of traffic stops are equally beneficial in improving safety (See *Section 2*).

Communities that have reconsidered general enforcement strategies offer replicable models for more thoughtful safety planning. They do this by specifying which enforcement tactics serve their community's safety goals and by deprioritizing those that do not. **Following are examples:**

The Minneapolis Vision Zero Action Plan *(2023–2025) commits* "that our actions support equity and do not exacerbate other existing inequities, including addressing inequities related to traffic safety enforcement." The City prioritizes enforcing a limited number of traffic infractions, which are the five primary behaviors leading to severe crashes, based on their data, including: impaired driving, distracted driving, speeding, red light running and unsafe turning. The Minneapolis plan explains that police should focus on "moving violations, given their connection to injuries and deaths" (compared to non-moving violations). The plan also ties various elements of a Safe System approach together, stating: "The City is working to design and implement self-enforcing streets and to support education and other efforts to reduce the long-term need for traffic enforcement."

The Oklahoma City Vision Zero Action Plan highlights the city's efforts to prioritize infrastructure over enforcement in disadvantaged communities. Source: Oklahoma City Vision Zero Action Plan

The Oklahoma City Vision Zero Action Plan (2025) *states* that "Enforcement should be focused on unsafe behaviors causing serious and fatal collisions in Oklahoma City, as there is a risk of over policing in these places along which many disadvantaged community members face a challenge of poor infrastructure." The plan highlights the importance of balancing enforcement with long-term investments in the built environment, noting that while short-term enforcement may be used in high-injury areas, it should not replace efforts to address underlying roadway conditions that contribute to such risk.

The Tacoma Vision Zero Action Plan *(2022) deprioritizes* traffic stops and citations for infractions that do not pose safety risks, such as expired registrations and objects hanging from mirrors. It focuses on violations that have major impacts on safety, based on the city's data, including: speeding, red-light running, impairment, distraction, obstructing crosswalk visibility and/or not yielding the right-of-way. The plan states: "Our conception of road safety should be expanded to include the inherent danger resulting from traffic stops with armed police officers."

The Kansas City Vision Zero Action Plan (2022) includes a focus on *Safe and Equitable Law Enforcement*, underscoring the city's commitment to a data-driven, performance-based and equitable approach to traffic enforcement that supports safety outcomes. The plan identifies enforcement priorities aimed at deterring speeding and aggressive driving because they are the primary dangers on the roads.

The Lancaster Vision Zero Action Plan (2020) *states* that the goal "is not increased traffic fines or interactions with law enforcement. The goal of Vision Zero is safer streets and a successful Vision Zero project would reduce speeds and other dangerous actions along the [High Injury Network] without increasing traffic violations."

2. Engage stakeholders to shape the role of traffic enforcement

Vision Zero task forces and various working groups offer valuable forums to regularly examine enforcement practices and safety outcomes and to adjust efforts if needed. Establishing a consistent, dedicated space for open dialogue among stakeholders – ideally including transportation staff, police, policymakers, and community members – helps assess what is working and what can be improved.

These multiagency meetings should include regular evaluation of traffic stop data alongside crash, injury, and speed data to assess safety impacts, including whether safety benefits are sustained or fleeting over time. An example is San Francisco's experience (see *p. 10*) showing that speed safety cameras and physical road redesigns are more effective and long-lasting in curbing dangerous speeds than short-lived traffic stop campaigns.

Key traffic enforcement questions to monitor include the following:

- Are specific enforcement efforts being monitored and are they achieving clear road safety goals?
- Are any communities bearing a burden of unintended inequitable consequences?
- Are alternative, nonpunitive safety measures being prioritized and used equitably (such as road redesigns, traffic calming measures and other proactive safety strategies)?

In addition to data, the lived experiences of community members should be prioritized, particularly in neighborhoods where trust in law enforcement has been strained or eroded over time. By acknowledging past harms, we can build or strengthen relationships with community members who have been negatively impacted by past planning and policymaking efforts. This creates an opportunity to incorporate their needs, desires, and lived experiences into future planning. Read more in *Prioritizing Health Equity in Vision Zero Planning*.

3. Make data-informed traffic enforcement decisions

Bringing a data-informed approach to road safety efforts is a well-understood best practice. When it comes to enforcement strategies, though, there has been less rigor and transparency around assessing impacts of traffic stops. As has been described prior, the status quo approach often assumes all enforcement efforts are equally effective because they have been maintained over time. **Following are ways to more thoroughly track and evaluate the effectiveness of enforcement efforts:**

Collect, share, and use traffic stop data to understand safety needs and enforcement impacts

Beyond just crash data, traffic stop data should also be available to road safety stakeholders for regular assessment and evaluation. The data should include the stated reason for the stop, specific violation or violation category, time and location, and actions taken during the stop.

> *"With limited staffing, we must be strategic. This means focusing on the highest-risk locations and behaviors, listening to community-voiced concerns, and working closely with our partners at the public works department to ensure we're using every tool — whether it's data, enforcement, or design — to save lives and prevent tragedy."*
>
> – *Sgt. Jason Haag, El Paso County, Colorado Sheriff's Office Traffic Unit Supervisor*

Collecting information on travel mode (such as driving, walking or bicycling) is also critical for understanding how enforcement and its impacts vary across modes. Whenever possible, this data should also include officer-perceived race and objective demographic information to help assess potential disparities. These types of information can be compared to a community's leading road safety risks to assess whether enforcement activity is aligned with top needs across modes and whether it is avoiding unintended negative impacts.

Best practices on data transparency are still evolving and gaps and inconsistencies are common. For instance, traffic stop data can be difficult to access, may lack important details and, in some cases, *may not be collected at all*. (More about *why policing data matters to safety and equity*.) For agencies with limited staff or technical capacity, partnerships with academic institutions can provide valuable support for data collection, analysis and evaluation.

As of this writing, only about half of states mandate policing data collection, and many do not require public reporting (in contrast to *Maryland*, which does). States such as *California* and *Connecticut* have successfully developed programs for capturing traffic stop data in all police departments and are using it to inform policy changes, as described in Section 2. These efforts can be supported by a federal grant program, *Section 1906*, which supports states' efforts to collect and analyze traffic stop data and develop programs to reduce racial profiling in response to data findings. (This *model statute* outlines comprehensive data collection and transparency requirements for law enforcement agencies.)

Philadelphia law requires the collection and publication of data on traffic stops, including information about the demographics of the drivers and their passengers, the stated reasons for conducting the traffic stops, the time and location of the stops and the police actions taken during them.

Regularly assess how enforcement activities align with safety goals & results

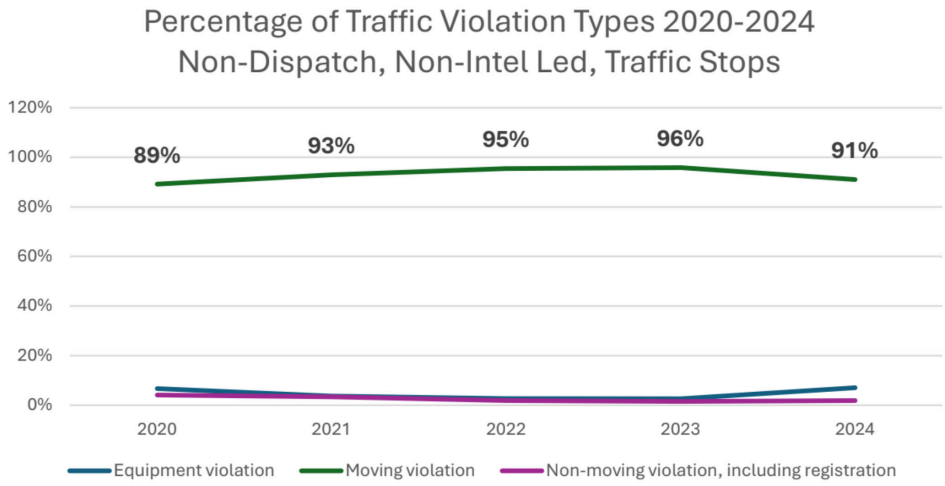
Communities should routinely monitor their enforcement activities to verify that they address and improve on the most serious road safety risks (which may change over time), while also guarding against disproportionate racial, economic or other unintended negative impacts.

Read more

» *A Guide for Collecting and Analyzing Data Related to Traffic and Road Safety, Vera Institute of Justice*

» *Collecting, Analyzing, and Responding to Stop Data: A Guidebook for Law Enforcement Agencies, Government, and Communities, Policing Project*

Oakland, CA *conducts ongoing analyses* of its traffic stop data to gauge whether enforcement activity is prioritizing high-injury areas and addressing behaviors most correlated with serious and fatal crashes, while also monitoring for racial disparities. The city's analysis shows that the vast majority – *74% of severe and fatal crashes* – are related to just a few dangerous driving behaviors, including speeding, failure to yield, unsafe turning, and disobeying signs and signals. So, officers are directed to focus their attention on these safety priorities.



In Oakland, California, more than 90% of traffic stops are for moving violations, with equipment and non-moving violations making up only a small share, reflecting the Oakland Department of Transportation's partnership with the police department to focus enforcement on behaviors most likely to lead to severe and fatal crashes.
Source: Oakland Department of Transportation

Data should also help you understand whether your community's road safety strategies – including traffic stops – are delivering their intended benefits, and whether those efforts are as effective and long-lasting as other, well-documented approaches. And as described prior, multiple stakeholders should regularly review and assess whether the right tools are being used to address safety hazards.

For example, a series of serious injury crashes involving high-speed driving on a given street segment may elicit public demand for more police issuing more speeding tickets. But maintaining long-term, 24/7 police presence in any location is unlikely. And the safety benefits of targeted enforcement tend to taper off over time.

While a police presence may help in the near-term, stakeholders should work together to consider long-term, lasting solutions beyond extra policing. Community members living in the area, who probably know it best, can help advise transportation planners, engineers, police, and other government officials in developing effective, upstream safety strategies. Together, stakeholders should consider the following questions:

- **Road Design:** Is this street designed in a way that unintentionally encourages high speeds, such as wide, straight travel lanes without many stopping points? If so, should the design be changed to physically deter high speeds? This may be possible by narrowing or reducing the number of travel lanes, or adding traffic calming measures.
- **Speed limits & signage:** Is the speed limit set too high? Lowering the speed limit and incorporating dynamic feedback signs and additional signage can increase awareness of safe speeds.
- **Interim Measures:** If street design is not possible in the near-term, could speed safety cameras play a role in deterring dangerous speeding while working toward a longer-term design solution?

4. Limit non-safety traffic stops

There are compelling reasons why many U.S. cities are taking steps to limit non-safety traffic stops, including administrative violations (exs: expired tags or registration) and equipment issues (exs: tinted windows, a single broken light, or an object dangling from a rearview mirror). Stops for these low-level violations are proven to be less effective in improving road safety, more likely to cause new risks for officers and civilians, as well as distract police from more appropriate work. See more in Section 2, *p. 15*.

Minneapolis has adopted and is *implementing a range of policing reforms* following a *2022 investigation* by the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, which found that Black and Indigenous residents were disproportionately stopped by police. As part of a court-enforceable agreement, the City is working to shift traffic enforcement practices, including limiting low-level, non-safety stops such as those for expired tags or minor equipment violations. These changes are intended to reduce racial disparities while focusing enforcement on behaviors that most directly impact safety.

Following are a range of policy options communities are using, or considering, to limit non-safety traffic stops:

Adopting policies to designate certain offenses as secondary violations: Under such a policy, specific non-safety-related offenses are redefined as "secondary," or non-primary, violations, though they remain violations under the traffic code. In these cases, police cannot pull drivers over if a secondary violation is the sole basis of the stop, though officers may still cite for such violations if the driver is stopped for a different, safety-related, primary violation.

As of early 2026, *dozens of states and local governments* have passed legislation or ordinances to restrict police enforcement of at least one category of non-safety-related offenses. An example is Philadelphia's *Achieving Driving Equality Act*, which passed in 2022 and reclassified eight non-safety traffic violations as "non-primary." These include the following: expired registration, temporary permit misplacement, hanging license plate, single broken headlight or taillight, objects hanging from mirror/dashboard, minor bumper damage, and expired inspection or emission stickers. Officers are prohibited from initiating stops solely for these violations.

Source: WalkBikeBerkeley

Other recent examples of communities designating certain offenses as secondary violations include the states of *California*, *Illinois*, *New York*, *Oregon*, and *Virginia*; and cities include *Ann Arbor, Michigan*; *Chapel Hill, North Carolina*; *Pittsburgh*; *Shaker Heights, Ohio*; and *West Hollywood, California*.

Change police and prosecutor policies: In some places, police departments and prosecutors' offices are *issuing policies and directives* that limit non-safety-related stops and curb tactics such as searches that enable pretextual policing. Jurisdictions with collaborative police departments might consider this approach, which has the benefit of being quicker to advance and implement. A drawback is that such policies can be more easily reversed by changes in agency leadership, which has happened in some places. Communities that have taken this approach include *Fayetteville, North Carolina*; *Nashville, Tennessee*; *Los Angeles* and *West Hollywood, California*; *several Connecticut jurisdictions*; *St. Paul, Minnesota*; *Lansing, Michigan*; *Burlington, Vermont*; and *Seattle, Washington*.

Limit enforcement of all non-moving stops: Under this approach, any non-moving administrative or equipment violation must represent a demonstrable and immediate road safety threat for an officer to initiate a stop for that violation. Instead of covering a fixed list of specific violations, this relies on officers' discretion to identify safety risks. In 2025, a *bill* introduced in Washington State (which did not pass) would have required officers to identify a specific, articulable threat to public safety before initiating a traffic stop for technical or minor infractions. Otherwise, officers would issue mailed warnings for non-moving violations.

> ***"Enforcement shouldn't happen just for the sake of enforcement. Enforcement should be evaluated based on its impact on safety and guided by data, clearly aligning with broader strategies like engineering and system design."***
>
> *– Assistant Chief Nicole Jones, San Francisco Police Department*

Update the vehicle code: This clarifies the language in the vehicle code for offenses that are not deemed as safety-aligned or eliminates some offenses as violations altogether. For example, in 2025 Connecticut *updated its vehicle code* (see sections 1-3) to clarify the infraction of failing to illuminate a vehicle's rear registration plate, which was deemed a non-safety, technical infraction. Some local jurisdictions – including *Kansas City* and *Denver* – have revised jaywalking laws to remove or narrowly redraw this type of discretionary enforcement, which had been applied inconsistently and produced racial disparities. (See *page 13* for more about pedestrian and bike violations.)

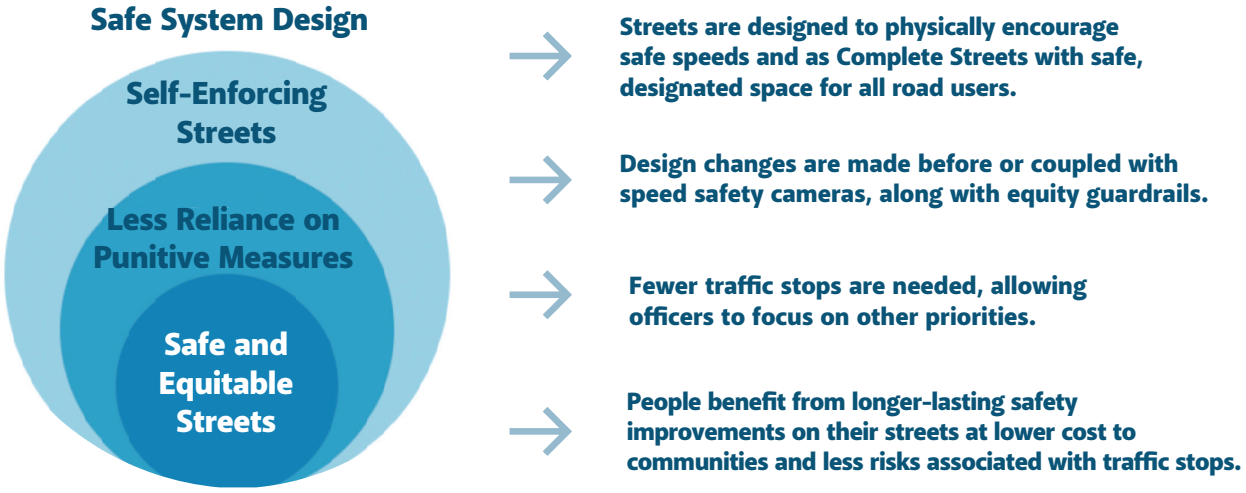
Read more

Limiting Pretextual and Non-Safety Traffic Stops: A Guide to Bill Drafting, Traffic Safety for All Coalition

5. Prioritize upstream, non-punitive strategies wherever possible

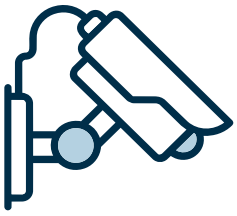
As detailed in this report, prioritizing upstream safety strategies – including improving the built environment, relevant policies, and vehicle design – helps reduce the number and severity of crashes, improve safety and lessen reliance on enforcement.

Where enforcement interventions are needed, they should be focused on the highest road risks, such as speeding and drunk driving. And where possible, non-punitive – or less punitive – enforcement alternatives can serve the same, or sometimes even better, purposes than traditional traffic stops and fines.



As part of a Safe System approach, we design streets to be safer and slower, accommodating different types of road users. These designs physically deter most dangerous, high speeds and are considered inherently self-enforcing, reducing the need for enforcement. Source: Vision Zero Network

Consider technology-based solutions, such as speed safety cameras and Intelligent Speed Assistance, which both provide 24/7 benefits and reduce the need for in-person police stops.



Speed safety cameras: When carefully designed, operated and monitored, speed safety cameras can be effective at deterring people from speeding, thereby reducing crashes overall and lessening the severity of injuries when crashes do still occur. And they offer benefits over traffic stops by providing around-the-clock deterrence against dangerous behavior while using fewer resources.

The U.S. Department of Transportation recommends speed safety cameras as one of its *Proven Safety Countermeasures* and cites studies showing a 20% to 37% reduction in roadway fatalities and injuries when used. Read more in the *USDOT's Speed Safety Camera Program Planning and Operations Guide*.

Speed safety cameras, on their own, do not address the underlying roadway design conditions that often enable high-speed driving in the first place. And, where and how speed safety cameras are deployed, how fines and fees are structured and whether they are paired with equitable reinvestment in safety infrastructure all require careful attention. Speed safety camera programs should be deployed thoughtfully to avoid disproportionately burdening low-income people and to ensure they remain aligned with their intended purpose of curbing dangerous speeds rather than revenue generation.

Camera programs can and should be designed with income equity protections. For example, Minnesota's program provides a warning for a first offense with no fine, and a second offense is eligible for diversion, including a free traffic safety course, also without a fine; only subsequent offenses result in a $40 penalty. Similarly, California's pilot speed camera program includes tiered fines that are generally lower than traditional speeding tickets and offers diversion options, such as allowing low-income individuals to complete community service in lieu of paying a fine. **(Read more in *Fair Warnings: Recommendations to Advance Equity in Speed Safety Camera Programs*.)**

Many communities across the U.S. have shown that using speed safety cameras can be a more fair and effective approach to managing speeds than traditional traffic stops alone. Still, it is important to consider them one piece of a fuller speed management strategy and best used as a relatively short-term tool, particularly in locations where unsafe, high-speed roadway designs persist and where road re-redesign is more appropriate. In the end, speed safety cameras should be viewed as a stopgap measure, with the broader goal of investing in long-term infrastructure changes that address the root causes of dangerous speeding.

Intelligent Speed Assistance (ISA) is another helpful tool to deter dangerously high speeding. While most drivers occasionally exceed the speed limit, a small, high-risk group of repeat offenders poses the greatest safety threats on our roads. These "super speeders" are also more likely to engage in other risky behaviors, such as driving while impaired. Yet, traditional penalties, such as license suspension, may fail to deter these individuals who often continue driving – in some cases because they may have no other options to get to work or bring kids to school. ISA can be a more effective solution for reducing speeding while preserving people's mobility options.

Intelligent Speed Assistance (ISA) devices can deter dangerously high speeding, particularly useful for repeat Super-Speeders. Source: IIHS

As of this writing, *Virginia*, *Washington State*, *Maryland*, and *Washington, D.C.* have passed legislation allowing installation of ISA devices in vehicles of the most dangerous repeat speeding offenders, or Super Speeders, as an alternative to license suspension, and *dozens of additional states* are considering similar policies. This targeted approach is comparable to the use of alcohol ignition interlock devices on repeat drunk drivers, an approach used in more than 30 states and lauded by safety professionals, police and community members as an effective, upstream approach to a persistent and grave danger. ISA for Super Speeders operates on the same principle by using technology to deter dangerous behavior among a defined, high-risk population.

ISA is not punitive in the same way as traditional traffic fines and it proactively prevents drivers who have repeatedly exhibited dangerous behaviors from operating vehicles at illegal speeds. By adopting a targeted ISA program, states can reduce speeding, promote fair and effective enforcement, and save lives.

> ***"Our partners in the police department have hard jobs. So much of crime prevention is an intricate art. Slowing cars is straightforward, and we have an abundance of data showing how to design safer streets. We can tackle this as transportation professionals, so officers can get back to what they actually specialize in — solving crimes."***
>
> *– Jasmine Pomar, Chief of Staff, City of Oakland, CA Department of Transportation*

Issue repair vouchers for non-urgent equipment violations: Jurisdictions have options to address some traffic infractions without issuing tickets while still addressing legitimate safety concerns. For example, a "fix-it" voucher issued to someone with lighting violations (such as one broken car taillight or a missing bike light) encourages people to correct the issue rather than simply pay a fine. Fines can disproportionately burden low-income road users and may discourage people from addressing the underlying safety issues.

Lights On!, a program launched by Twin Cities-based nonprofit MicroGrants, offers a compelling model. Launched after the fatal police shooting of Philando Castile during a traffic stop in 2016, the program replaces traffic tickets with vouchers that help drivers get their vehicles repaired at no cost. Since launching in 2017, nearly 14,000 vouchers have been redeemed across partnerships with more than 150 police departments and 430 auto shops in 23 states. One in five recipients surveyed said they would have been unlikely or very unlikely to make the repair without a voucher. Police have also *viewed the program positively*, seeing it as a way to build community relationships while advancing safety. These programs can also expand beyond equipment violations to address affordability-related issues more broadly, such as issuing vouchers for car seats rather than citations, advancing children's safety without punitive measures.

6. Engage officers as "eyes and ears" for road safety hazards

Police, as well as parking enforcement officers, can be valuable "eyes and ears" on the street, observing road conditions, identifying hazards, and flagging dangerous locations to their transportation agency partners. Because crash reporting and analysis lags significantly behind real-world conditions, officers' observations can serve as early warning systems.

> *"Law enforcement plays a critical role in this process, not only through traditional enforcement but also as 'eyes and ears' on the roadway, helping identify patterns, behaviors and environmental factors that may not be captured in data alone. This insight supports more proactive, upstream strategies, including roadway design changes, policy adjustments, and targeted interventions aimed at preventing crashes before they occur."*
>
> *– Anna Piper, Franklin County Safe Roads Program Manager, Columbus Public Health*

Tacoma's *Vision Zero Plan* highlights the role that police officers can play in an upstream approach to road safety by "identifying areas with repeated minor traffic violations and where traffic calming measures could be warranted to achieve higher compliance." The plan prioritizes enforcement of behaviors that have the greatest impact on safety, while reducing in-person enforcement for non-safety-related violations. It also incorporates education-based strategies, including developing materials for officers to use so that they can focus on violations that put vulnerable road users at risk.

Sharing information across agencies and engaging in collaborative problem-solving serve communities' road safety goals. When law enforcement, public works, and road safety practitioners establish regular, ongoing communications through recurrent meetings and shared data and on-the-ground observations, they are better positioned to determine whether problems call for engineering, policy, or enforcement solutions, or some combination. This kind of coordination also allows agencies to direct resources more efficiently and cost-effectively.

Sustaining this collaboration depends on leaders (within agencies and jurisdictions) who support a culture that values cross-agency relationship building and encourages thinking beyond traditional siloes.

Franklin County, Ohio, offers a strong model through its Traffic Fatality Review Board, facilitated by the public health agency with active involvement from law enforcement, health professionals and city, county, and state transportation staff, as well as the City Attorney, County Coroner, hospital trauma center, EMS providers, researchers and others. The group meets monthly to review each fatal crash in the county within 12 months of its occurrence. The goal is not to assign blame or point fingers but to assess and learn from each incident and identify what can be changed to prevent future crashes from having such severe outcomes. According to Franklin County Safe Roads Program Manager Anna Piper, the involvement of stakeholders from around the county with different perspectives is key to the program's success, allowing the group to go much deeper in its analysis, recommendations and actions than would be possible with transportation staff working in isolation.

No agency – whether police officers or transportation planners – should have to work in isolation toward such an important and shared goal of public safety. Underscoring law enforcement's experience and insights – beyond issuing traffic tickets – will enhance safety benefits far better than any single agency can accomplish alone.

Source: Denver Streets Partnership

Conclusion

We can advance safe mobility for all by thoughtfully and regularly assessing which strategies work best and adjusting when they fall short. We have the evidence, tools and opportunities to improve on the status quo and prioritize proven, proactive safety measures.

This includes evaluating and, where needed, right-sizing the role of traffic enforcement to ensure the strategies we use are most effective, cost-efficient and equitable.

We do not suggest simply reducing police-led traffic enforcement or all traffic stops across-the-board. Rather, it is important to intentionally value and use strategies that best align with a proactive, preventative Safe System approach and that lessen burdens and unrealistic expectations on law enforcement partners.

We encourage using these recommendations as conversation starters and a framework for collaboration toward a shared vision in which safe behavior on our roads is the default, not the exception.

Road safety leaders across the country operate within different legal, political and institutional contexts, and communities are at different stages of this work. As such, we offer not one-size-fits-all solutions but starting points for discussion and actions that can be adapted to local needs and contexts.

Achieving lasting road safety will require leadership, sustained commitment, collaboration and shared responsibility across disciplines, including transportation, public health, law enforcement, policymakers and advocates. By thoughtfully right-sizing the role of traffic enforcement, we can advance effective, equitable and lasting safety solutions; reduce costs; lessen the burdens on police; and build greater trust with communities.

Now is the time to start where you are, with intention and action. By prioritizing lasting, systemic improvements, we can build a future where safety – truly and equitably – belongs to everyone on our roads, sidewalks and bikeways.