

An illustration of a multi-lane highway from a top-down perspective. The road is divided into several lanes by white lines. Numerous cars are depicted in various lanes, some in motion. A central lane is highlighted with a vibrant red glow, and a car within this lane is also highlighted with a red and purple gradient. The background is a mix of light and dark red tones, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall style is graphic and illustrative.

**SAFE PASSAGE:  
TRAFFIC SAFETY  
& CIVIL RIGHTS**



TEXAS  
CIVIL RIGHTS  
PROJECT

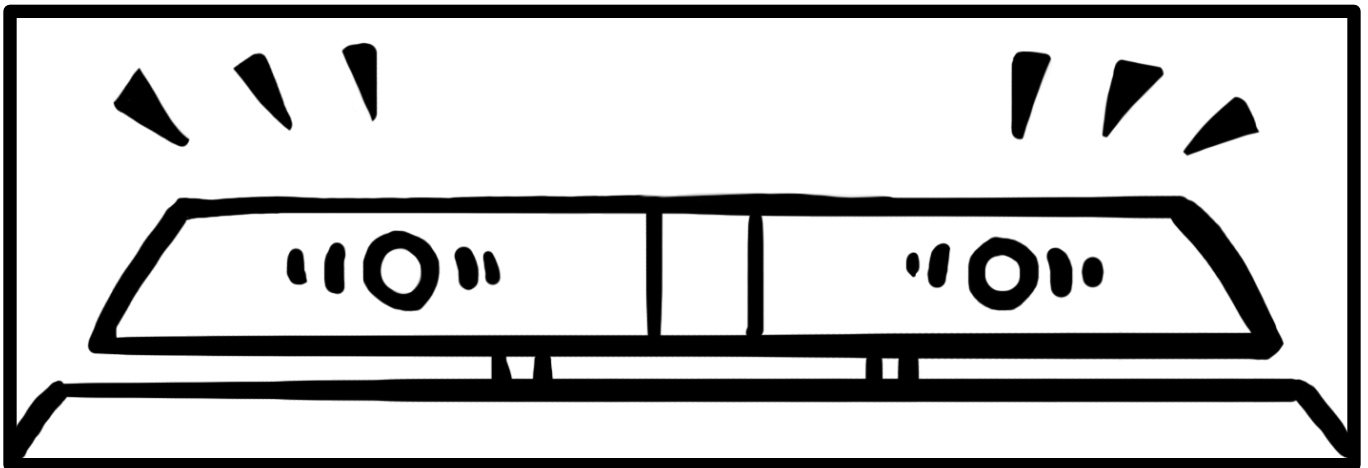
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# Traffic Stops: Do They Make Us Safer?

The Texas Civil Rights Project remains dedicated to protecting and promoting the civil rights of all Texans. Civil rights and public safety are not in opposition. In this report, TCRP examined the current racial disparities in Houston traffic enforcement and provides policy solutions to make all Houstonians safer on the roadways. We outline the most common collisions and fatalities on the road, how much fines and fees are collected from the public when police patrol for non-safety traffic stops, policies that end the patrol for non-safety traffic violations, and solutions that ease our reliance on policing and mass incarceration to address road safety.

Motor vehicle crashes (MVC) are a leading cause of unintentional injury in the United States. In 2022, 4,481 Texans were killed in MVCs. There were 15,299 serious injury crashes, with 18,880 people sustaining serious injuries. Promoting traffic safety is an essential public service and in the community's interest. However, current traffic enforcement practices in Harris County do very little to address dangerous crashes. Instead, they further racial disparities and expose Black and Brown Houstonians to senseless violence.



## Are Traffic Stops a Civil Rights Issue?

As the data below demonstrates, the race of the driver is one of the greatest predictors of whether a stop will be routine or life-altering. Every traffic stop is the product of systems and policies that magnify racial and economic inequalities. For example, having expired registration, unpaid tolls, or a broken tail light are frequently proxies for poverty. Even once a person is stopped, an officer inevitably makes choices about whether the driver shows signs of intoxication or appears dangerous. Those judgments are frequently informed by racial biases, the type of car a person is driving, or the neighborhood where the stop occurs. In short, racial and economic disparities converge to make traffic stops more deadly, harmful, and impactful on Black and Brown drivers.

Traffic stops seem routine, but in many situations can escalate to serious violence and even death. Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP) began investigating traffic stops in response to a slew of deadly traffic stops across the country. On July 10, 2015, a Texas Trooper stopped Sandra Bland for a minor traffic violation. Rather than simply ticketing Ms. Bland, the Trooper arrested her after a verbal exchange and took her to Waller County Jail. Three days later, Sandra Bland was found unresponsive

in her cell. Officials classified her death as a suicide, but Ms. Bland would be alive today if police were not empowered to stop and arrest people for minor traffic violations. In 2016, a Minnesota St. Anthony's Police Department officer shot Philando Castile seven times in front of his four-year-old daughter just seconds after stopping him for a broken tail light. In 2022, a Michigan's Grand Rapids Police Department officer shot Patrick Lyoya in the back of the head after stopping him for a license plate issue. Most recently, five officers of the Memphis Police Department brutally beat Tyre Nichols to death during a traffic stop. He died after three days in the hospital.

We have seen this terrifying pattern here in Houston with the senseless killings of **Jermaine Sonnier** and **David Salinas**, both in 2021. Jermaine Sonnier was just 19 when he died after HPD tased him during a traffic stop in 2021, while he was in the midst of a medical crisis. Also in 2021, HPD fatally shot 32-year-old David Salinas during a traffic stop.

Traffic stops are the most common interaction most people will have with the police. Most of us have been stopped at least once while driving. Nationally 50,000 traffic stops occur daily. There are an estimated 20 million traffic stops conducted annually.<sup>1</sup> And while traffic stops can be routine, everyday events, many traffic stops end in arrest, assault, or even death.



## Safety on Texas Roads

Previous studies have found no association between police traffic stops and reduced traffic fatalities and injuries.<sup>2</sup> Minor traffic stops do not protect people from any of the top contributing factors<sup>3</sup> to traffic deaths<sup>4</sup> and collisions in Houston, such as speeding, disobeying traffic signs and signals, pedestrians failing to yield the right of way, failure to drive in a single lane, and unsafe driving maneuvers. Improving roadway safety requires structural solutions that reduce overall speed and reckless driving, increase access to public transportation and car repairs, and improve roadway conditions through traffic lights, speed bumps, and sidewalks.

There are real challenges to making Texas roadways safe. Indeed, Houston leads the nation in traffic fatalities. However, none of these challenges are addressed by stopping people over broken tail lights and expired registration. A 2016 analysis by the Houston Chronicle found that Houston leads the nation in traffic fatalities and had the worst record for the number of driving fatalities per capita of any major city.<sup>5</sup> In 2021 on Texas roadways, 1 person was killed every 1 hour 57 minutes, and 1 person was injured every 2 minutes 9 seconds. In 2022, 1,163 people were killed in Texas in motor vehicle traffic crashes where a driver was under the influence of alcohol. Each region of Texas is responsible for creating a plan to improve roadway safety. For the Houston region, the Houston-Galveston Area Council adopted a new plan in 2018 to reduce traffic crashes and fatalities. According to the 2020 update, intersection and pedestrian-related accidents lead to fatal traffic crashes.

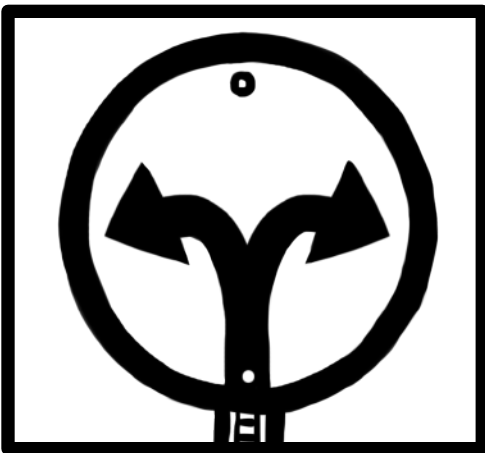
Houston Police Department (“HPD”) similarly shows that since 2020, the top contributing factors to traffic deaths and collisions in Houston are speeding, disobeying traffic signs and signals, pedestrians failing to yield the right of way, failure to drive in a single lane, and unsafe driving maneuvers.<sup>6</sup> Speed is the leading factor in 30% of serious injuries and fatal crashes. Public Health researchers analyzed more than 160,000,000 traffic stops across 33 jurisdictions have found no association between police traffic stops and reduced traffic fatalities, and injuries.<sup>7</sup>

Most traffic stops are not for serious safety concerns like driving under the influence or reckless driving. Most traffic stops are for minor code violations that have little or no impact on roadway safety, such as having a broken tail light, expired registration, dark tinted windows, or items hanging from a rearview mirror. These violations are often used as pretexts to subject Black, Brown, and low-income drivers to heightened surveillance. For Black, Brown, and low-income drivers, nothing about a traffic stop is low stakes.

Crash Type	Percentage of Fatalities
Intersection-related	26%
Pedestrian	25%
Unrestrained	24%
Impaired Driving (DUI)	21%
Speeding	15%
Motorcycles	12%

Table: Top Traffic Crash Types by Percentage of Fatalities

## HPD’s Traffic Stop Data: Racial Disparities & Use of Force



Non-safety traffic stops are often used as a pretext for racial profiling, which creates opportunities for police to exercise violence over Black and Brown people. In 2022, HPD conducted over 250,000 traffic stops.<sup>8</sup> Of those stops, 81,026 were vehicle traffic violations, not moving traffic violations. Black Houston drivers are 3 times more likely than white drivers to be stopped for a non-moving violation. Black drivers are also 6 times more likely to be arrested than white drivers and 7 times more likely to have their vehicles searched. According to the Houston Chronicle, Houston is home to five out of twenty Texas law enforcement agencies most likely to use violence during a traffic stop.<sup>9</sup>

	Black	Latino	White	Other	Total
<b>All Vehicle Traffic Violations</b>	33,786 (41.70%)	24,962 (30.81%)	20,075 (24.78%)	2,203 (2.72%)	81,026
Risk Ratio	<b>RR: 3</b>	<b>RR: 1</b>	<b>RR: 1</b>		
<b>Vehicle Traffic Arrests</b>	1,635 (59.82%)	544 (19.90%)	526 (19.25%)	28 (1.02%)	2,733
Risk Ratio	<b>RR: 6</b>	<b>RR: 1</b>	<b>RR: 1</b>		
<b>Vehicle Searched</b>	4,695 (64.54%)	3,218 (44.23%)	1,289 (17.72%)	-	7,275
Risk Ratio	<b>RR: 7</b>	<b>RR: 3</b>	<b>RR: 1</b>		

According to HPD's own data, HPD resorted to violence in 4,428 traffic stops in 2022. In 903 of those cases, HPD reported injuring the driver. Looking at this data—which likely undercounts the problem—Black drivers are 29 times more likely to be subjected to police violence during a traffic stop than white drivers. In 58% of traffic stops where HPD reported the “use of force”, the driver was Black—despite the fact that only 23 percent of Houston's population is Black.<sup>10</sup> Latinos represented 33% of those assaulted by police during a traffic stop. Of the 903 “use-of-force” incidents where HPD reported an injury to the driver or passengers, Black drivers were 26 times more likely to have suffered an injury. In 21 cases, HPD reported inflicting a serious bodily injury. Of those 21 drivers who suffered the most serious violence, 15 were Latino, 5 were Black, and 1 was White. Tragically, HPD reported killing two drivers during what was assumed to be a routine interaction; both drivers were Black. Nationally, police killed at least 87 people during a traffic stop in 2022 alone.<sup>11</sup>

The data paints a clear picture: traffic stops are not routine for many Black drivers and end in arrest, violence, and even death. Black drivers are also much more likely to be stopped for non-moving violations, violations that are not connected to long-term safety for the community. There is a better, safer way to manage traffic and driver safety.

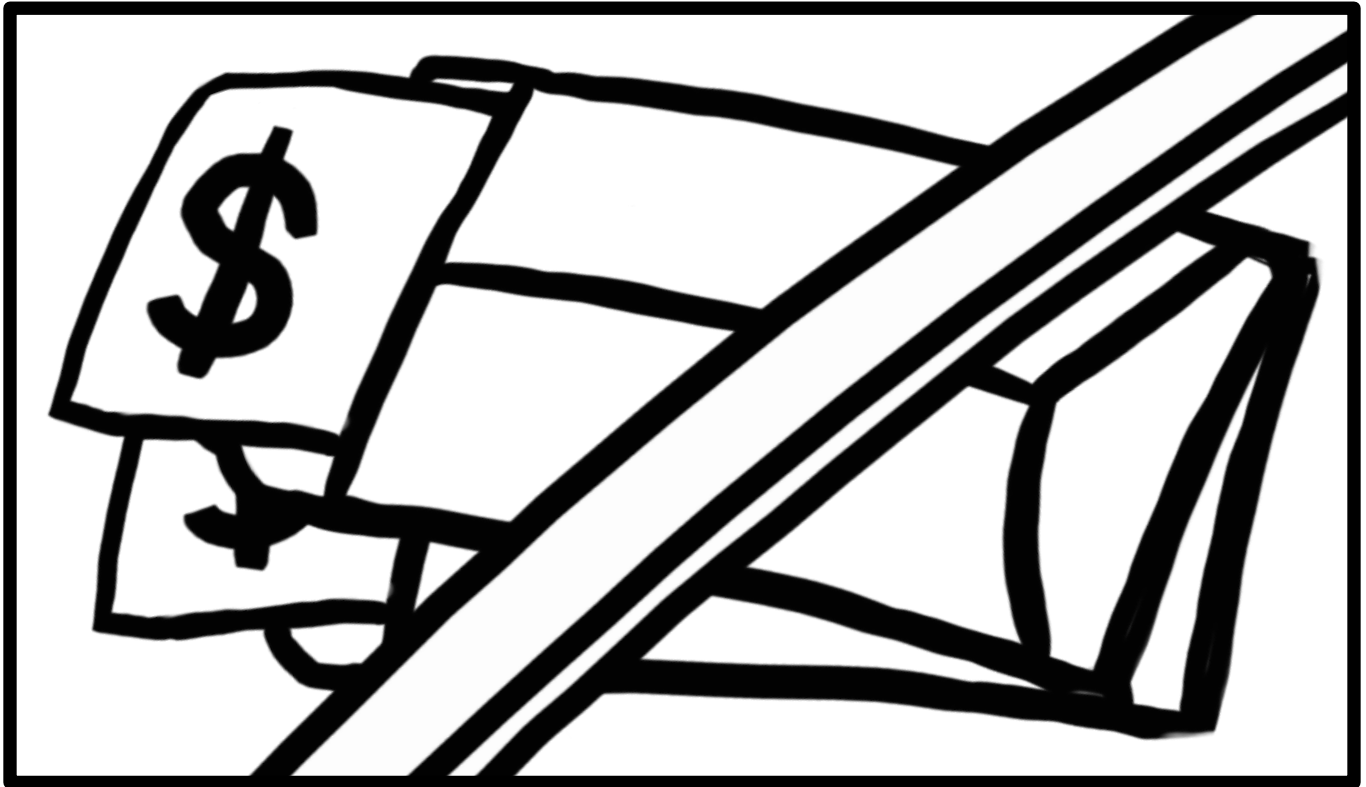
	<b>Black</b>	<b>Latino</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Use of Force ALL</b>	2,600 (46.16%)	1,400 (24.85%)	186 (3.30%)	127	5633
Risk Ratio	<b>RR: 29</b>	<b>RR: 8</b>	<b>RR: 1</b>		
<b>Serious Bodily Injury</b>	5 (23.81%)	15 (71.43%)	1 (4.76%)		21

Additionally, Houstonians who are undocumented face additional risks. Since 2002, Houston has deported over 2,600 people after they were pulled over during a traffic stop.<sup>12</sup> Many families have been ripped apart and destroyed because of the unnecessary enforcement of non-safety traffic stops. Others have seen their loved ones killed through a dangerous policy called Operation Lone Star (OLS), designed to flood Texas border communities with officers who use traffic stops as pretext to profile Latino drivers and question them about their immigration status. In the first 16 months of Operation Lone Star, at least 30 people were killed and more than twice as many injured.<sup>13</sup>

While routine traffic stops need not and should not end in violence, law enforcement are trained to view every traffic stop as a potentially dangerous interaction. According to the report examining officer fatalities by the US Department of Justice, “Making It Safer,”<sup>14</sup> traffic stops were the most common self-initiated incident that led to officer fatalities.

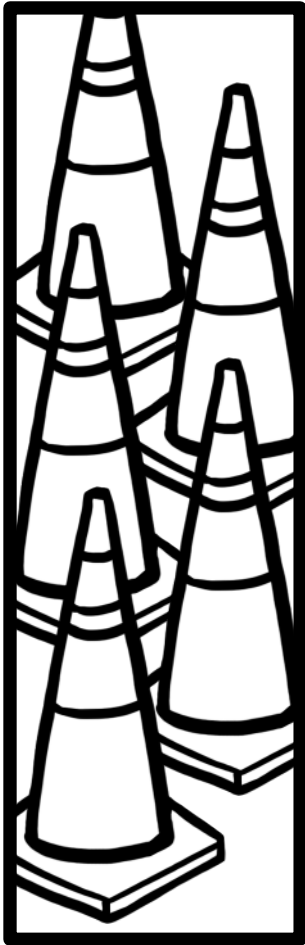
Any time someone is injured or killed in a traffic stop, it is a tragedy. The heightened sense of risk by community members and law enforcement officers increases the likelihood that a routine stop ends in violence. Reducing the number of unnecessary interactions between law enforcement officers and drivers can improve safety for all drivers, particularly Black and Brown drivers who are at the greatest risk for violence during a traffic stop, as well as for law enforcement officers.

# Punishing Poverty



Poverty is the root cause of many non-moving violations, like expired tags or inspection stickers. For some drivers it is difficult to stay up-to-date, let alone afford the upkeep of an automobile. It can make a significant difference for low-income drivers when they are cited for an infraction that has little to do with public safety, and all to do with siphoning wealth from the poor. Fines and fees accumulated during a traffic stop often push people further from compliance and place more economic burdens on struggling people.

According to Houston Municipal Court data, all vehicle traffic violations for 2022 amounted to over 19 million dollars in fines and fees.<sup>15</sup> The most collected fine was for the failure to display motor vehicle registration tags, resulting in the payment of over \$500,000 in fines and fees.<sup>16</sup> Operating a motor vehicle without a license was the second most collected fine, extracting over \$130,000 from poor drivers. The failure to display front, rear, or back license plates cost drivers over \$74,000, and dark-tinted windows cost drivers nearly \$35,000. Fines and fees related to non-safety traffic stops are siphoning wealth from those who cannot afford to maintain their car operating under the current laws. These drivers are commuting to work simply to make ends meet. If we end the enforcement of non-safety traffic stops, we would make our roads safer and alleviate our struggling community members from unaffordable fines and fees.



## Ending Minor Traffic Stops: A Solution To Traffic Stop Violence

To end the senseless violence, family separations, wealth extraction, and incarceration caused by HPD's traffic enforcement, Houston must pass an ordinance that prohibits police from conducting non-safety traffic stops and must implement a voucher program to help low-income drivers get their vehicles up to code. States like Virginia<sup>17</sup> and Nevada<sup>18</sup> have limited police enforcement of minor traffic stops. San Antonio<sup>19</sup> and Baton Rouge<sup>20</sup> have implemented the "Lights On" program, where police issue a voucher instead of a citation for drivers with a busted tail light. San Francisco's Police Commission recently voted to end pretextual traffic stops to address racial disparities in traffic enforcement.<sup>21</sup> Berkeley is working to divert the enforcement of traffic stops to an unarmed civilian department.<sup>22</sup> Philadelphia passed the "Driving Equality Act" that limits police from stopping drivers for non-safety traffic stops.<sup>23</sup> Since the law's enactment, traffic stops of Black drivers have been curbed by 54%<sup>24</sup>. Specific minor traffic violations, such as windshield obstructions and inspection violations, are down by 90%. Overall, traffic stops are down in Philadelphia by 11%. We know that more traffic stops do not translate to safer roadways: an analysis of more than 160,000,000 traffic stops across 33 jurisdictions has found that police traffic stops do not reduce traffic fatalities.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, by and large, most traffic enforcement simply punishes poor drivers for their poverty and singles out Black and Brown drivers for racialized harassment and violence.

Houston has an opportunity to build on the successes in other jurisdictions with progressive legislation designed to minimize unnecessary police interactions and thereby make the roadways safer for everyone. That's why TCRP has partnered with RISE Houston, a coalition of local and national organizations, including the Houston Abolitionist Collective, Pure Justice, and Civil Rights Corps, to develop a traffic enforcement policy that would prioritize roadway safety while safeguarding the civil rights of all Houstonians. Under such a policy, tax dollars would no longer be spent on pretextual traffic stops that endanger Black and Brown drivers and trap them in vicious cycles of poverty, debt, and criminalization. Police would still be authorized to stop drivers for serious safety violations like driving while intoxicated, reckless driving, and drag racing. However, they would be prohibited from making stops for the minor violations that currently make up the bulk of traffic enforcement in Houston and have led to the senseless killings of Black and Brown drivers across the country.

Houston's policy would not be the first to end non-safety traffic stops, but it would be the most impactful so far to all Black, Brown, and low-income drivers. It would limit the police violence inflicted upon communities that are often over-policed. When we end traffic stops, we will make our roads safe for all drivers, regardless of race or class, while lowering our reliance on policing and mass incarceration to solve poverty and roadway hazards.



# How Can I Help?

Houston is a big city, and it's easy to feel like your voice is too small to make an impact. But it only takes the participation of 3.5% of the population to make social change.<sup>26</sup> We need you to help us build a safer Houston. If you would like to get involved:

## Call your local city officials

such as the Mayor, City Councilmembers, Police Chief, and departments related to traffic and public safety.

## Testify at City Council and Committee Meetings

City Council committees such as the Quality of Life and Public Safety and Homeland Security Committee are smaller venues where residents can share their opinions and concerns.

**(Here is a sample testimony you can use to call, email, and testify in front of city council.)**

## Share this Report

Talk about and share this report with friends, family, and local city officials. Share with people who might not know about how traffic stop disparities fuel violence and devastation in marginalized communities.

## Sign Up for Updates

There is a QR code at the bottom of this report that you can scan to sign up for updates and stay involved in our efforts to end non-safety traffic stops. Please reach out to us if you have questions or ideas.

For further information visit our website at

**<https://www.txcivilrights.org/programs-criminal-injustice>**

## Attend the RISE Coalition meetings

The Re-Imagining Safety for Everyone (RISE) coalition is working to address several public safety issues, including non-safety traffic stops, ending the ShotSpotter surveillance program, and freezing the police budget.

Find out more about the coalition by clicking on this link. **<https://risehouston.org/about-us>**

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

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