



A New Vehicle for “Stop & Frisk” Executive Summary

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Chicago police are making hundreds of thousands of unnecessary traffic stops each year. These stops target and harm Black and Latine motorists and fail to keep Chicago's roads or communities safer.

Traffic stops are the most common interaction that most Americans have with the police. In Chicago, this interaction has become much more common; the number of traffic stops conducted by the Chicago Police Department (CPD) has skyrocketed. In 2015, CPD made about 86,000 traffic stops. By 2019, that number had risen nearly sevenfold to about 600,000 stops. After a dip in traffic stops during the height of the pandemic, the frequency of traffic stops is rising again, with more than 375,000 traffic stops made in 2021.

An analysis of Chicago traffic stops paints a picture of a broad, racially disparate practice that does not meaningfully contribute to roadway safety or public safety, but instead creates significant burdens overwhelmingly borne by the city's Black and Latine residents. This data suggests that CPD's use of traffic stops as a crime-fighting strategy – using the justification of minor traffic infractions to fish for criminal activity in the form of “pretextual” stops – is both racially discriminatory and ineffective.

Why are these stops happening?

OVER 50% OF DRIVERS ARE STOPPED FOR JUST TWO REASONS: UNLIT OR BROKEN HEADLIGHT/ TAILLIGHT OR IMPROPER DISPLAY OF REGISTRATION/ TAGS. SPEEDING, RECKLESS DRIVING, AND DUI ONLY MAKE UP ABOUT 2% OF ALL STOPS.

The reason provided by CPD for the vast majority of traffic stops are minor traffic violations. In 2021, 39% of traffic stops were for defects in vehicles, called equipment violations. Chicago drivers were stopped more than 400,000 times from 2019 to 2021 – representing nearly one-third (31.13%) of all traffic stops that period – with the justification of unlit or broken head or tail light. The second-most common reason for traffic stops from 2019 to 2021 was failure to have valid or properly displayed registration plates or tags, constituting nearly one-quarter (22.98%) of all stops made that period.

Moving violations commonly associated with roadway safety are a vanishingly small reason for CPD traffic stops. Moving violations like speeding (1.76%) and reckless driving or DUI (0.19%) combined represented less than 2% of all traffic stops from 2019 to 2021.

Indeed, the vast majority of traffic stops do not result in any citation against the driver. Only 4.26% of traffic stops resulted in a citation in 2021. This low percentage is a striking departure from other large cities, where a much higher percentage of stops rise to the level of citation. For example, 77% of traffic stops in New York City resulted in citation in 2022, and 52% of Houston stops in 2021 resulted in tickets.

Racial and geographic disparities

The burden of traffic stops is not distributed equally across the city. Black and Latine residents are targeted by CPD traffic stop practices. From 2015 to 2021, the average Black Chicago driver was six times more likely to be stopped than the average white driver. Latine drivers were twice as likely to be stopped as white drivers. During that time period, white drivers represented 36% of the driving population, but were only 14% of the traffic stops made by CPD.

Traffic stops are also concentrated in the South and West sides of Chicago. Almost 20% of all traffic stops between 2015-2021 took place in only two of CPD's 22 police districts. Those two districts – District 7, including Englewood and West Englewood, and District 11, including neighborhoods between Humboldt Park and North Lawndale – represent less than 5% of the city's population, and both have majority-Black populations.

Across the city, Black drivers are more likely to be stopped than white drivers. Black drivers are at least twice as likely to be stopped in over 72% of police districts as compared to white drivers. In North Side police districts including the neighborhoods of Lincoln Park, Logan Square, Portage Park, and O'Hare, which contain some of the lowest percentages of Black residents, Black drivers were six to ten times more likely to be stopped than white drivers.

Time of day distinctions

Since 2017, racial disparities in traffic stops are more common in daylight, when officers can more clearly see a driver's face. Comparing outcomes in months that have daylight during evening hours to outcomes in months with darkness at the same time of day reveal that CPD officers were less likely to stop Black and Latine drivers (compared to white drivers) during times of darkness than in daylight.

Likelihood of significant harm

Black and Latine drivers are also more likely to experience the significant harms of traffic stops. Too often, traffic stops escalate and result in the use of force, and nearly all instances of uses of force following a traffic stop were used against Black or Latine people. Black people were subjected to 85% and Latine people to 11% of uses of force stemming from a traffic stop from 2018 to 2021. In addition, the threat of deadly force when an officer points their firearm at a person occurred more commonly during traffic stops than in any other category of encounter recorded by CPD. In 2021, more than 800 firearm pointing incidents – representing 27.3% of the Department's total – occurred in conjunction with a traffic stop compared to the next-highest category, "person with a gun," which represented more than 500 incidents or 17.4% of the total.

CPD OFFICERS POINT THEIR FIREARMS MORE OFTEN DURING TRAFFIC STOPS THAN ANY OTHER ACTIVITY.

Subjected to search

While the vast majority of traffic stops do not lead to physical harm, Black and Latine drivers are also disproportionately subjected to searches, even when officers have little to no reason to suspect criminality. Black drivers make up 28% of the driving population, but they are involved in 61% of all traffic stops and 65% of all traffic-related searches by CPD. An increasing number of searches by Chicago police rely not on a warrant, reasonable suspicion, or probable cause of criminal activity, but instead on requests to drivers to consent to a search. In 2020, over half of searches were made based on the consent of the driver, nearly double the percentage (27%) in 2016. Requests to consent to searches are disproportionately made of Black and Latine drivers. From 2015 to 2021, 73% of consent search requests were made to Black drivers, 22% were made to Latine drivers, but less than 4% were made to white drivers.

Ineffective public safety tool

The psychological harm, and the damage done to police-community relations of traffic stops is great. Among people of color, and Black individuals in particular, involuntary police contact is associated with stigma, trauma, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

In addition to these significant harms, traffic stops not only do not commonly relate to traffic safety, they also are not effective tools for larger public safety goals. In 2021, only 2.25% of traffic stops resulted in arrest. From 2016 to 2021, 67-72% of the arrests were of Black persons, Latine people represented 21-25% of arrests, and white individuals represented 5-7% of arrests. Most of the arrests were for non-violent crime and traffic violations, with “operating a vehicle without insurance” and “driving on a suspended license” representing the most common charges.

Traffic stops also rarely lead to contraband recovery. In 2021, one-half of one percent of traffic stops resulted in recovery of drugs or drug paraphernalia, with 20% of drug recoveries limited to cannabis. Alcohol was inventoried in .04% of stops or a total of 137 times that year. Although discrepancies in data sources make a precise calculation of firearms recovery impossible, no more than 0.7% of traffic stops in 2021 led to recovery of a firearm.

IN 2021, LESS THAN 1% OF TRAFFIC STOPS RESULTED IN RECOVERY OF WEAPONS, DRUGS, OR ALCOHOL AND UNDER 5% IN A TRAFFIC CITATION.

Conclusion

With CPD having conducted some 600,000 traffic stops in one recent year, most in Black and Latine communities, and with few producing any tangible public safety benefit, a different approach to traffic stops could result in very substantial harm reduction. This data presents an opportunity to assess the use of traffic stops by Chicago police and whether there are more fitting alternatives to address public safety concerns.