

# Why Police Need to Enforce Traffic Laws

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## Introduction

In the race to reform policing, a few advocates and politicians have recommended that New York City police be removed from traffic enforcement. State Attorney General Letitia James, for example, concluded that the NYPD should cease conducting noncriminal traffic enforcement in her review of the department's handling of the George Floyd protests.<sup>1</sup> Brad Lander, a member of the city council and erstwhile safe-streets advocate, proposed "removing NYPD officers from routine traffic stops" for infractions such as speeding. He suggested that they "only enforce driving behavior that visibly and immediately endangers public safety (e.g., drag-racing, visibly erratic, aggressive, intoxicated, or road-rage driving)."<sup>2</sup> Others have recommended assigning the traffic-enforcement function to a new, unarmed enforcement agency,<sup>3</sup> or have suggested increasing the use of automated enforcement tools like speed cameras to replace police.<sup>4</sup>

These ideas are ill-considered and dangerous. Police traffic enforcement saves lives, reduces street disorder, and plays an important role in criminal investigations. The events of 2020, which disrupted the NYPD's traffic enforcement, laid these facts bare.

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## Traffic Enforcement by Police Makes Roads Safer

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The primary purpose of the NYPD in enforcing the traffic laws is to reduce crash-related injuries and fatalities. Before the pandemic, the department held regular "TrafficStat" meetings to ensure that its 77 precincts focused on this goal. These meetings, modeled after the department's CompStat management accountability system, required precinct executives to meet with department leaders at police headquarters and explain their precincts' responses to traffic safety problems. At these meetings, department bureau heads asked pointed questions to precinct executives about their enforcement at collision-prone locations, drunk-driving arrests, and approach to safety education and outreach. This forum ensured that officers enforce the right violations in the right places while focusing on the overarching goal of the department's traffic strategy: injury reduction on the roads.

This process has been effective in focusing enforcement on violations that endanger road safety. In 2019, the department wrote 747,343 tickets for moving violations. Of those, 90.4% were for “hazardous violations”—offenses such as speeding, texting, and failing to yield to pedestrians. These are the violations that elevate the risk of crashes and injuries, according to department data. Equipment violations, which reformers often argue function as pretexts for police harassment,<sup>5</sup> accounted for just 3.1% of the tickets issued. These violations include minor infractions such as nonfunctioning lights. Given limited time and resources for traffic enforcement, it’s a department priority to concentrate its efforts on offenses that will reduce injuries.

This focus matters. There is considerable evidence that police traffic enforcement reduces crash injuries and fatalities. When the City of Fresno Police Department increased the staffing of its traffic division from 20 to 84 officers in 2003, officers wrote 229% more traffic citations between 2002 and 2004. Injuries from collisions dropped 9.3%, and fatal collisions fell 42%. In the surrounding county, enforcement dropped 6%, while rates of injury collisions and fatal collisions did not change.<sup>6</sup> Research published in *The Lancet* showed that traffic convictions reduce drivers’ relative risk of a crash in the period following their conviction.<sup>7</sup> Another study showed that after 35% of the Oregon State Police were laid off in 2003, the subsequent drop in enforcement led to 11% and 17% increases in injury and fatality crashes, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

This is consistent with recent experience in New York City. In March 2020, the department shifted resources after the onset of the pandemic. A substantial percentage of officers also fell ill to Covid-19. Traffic enforcement plummeted. In April, officers wrote 14,290 tickets for moving violations, 85.2% fewer tickets than the 96,559 tickets they wrote in April 2019. In May, the department redeployed officers as a result of the protests following the murder of George Floyd. The agency did not return to regular levels of enforcement for the rest of the year.

From March 12 to December 31, 2020, the NYPD wrote 52.9% fewer tickets than it did during the same period in 2019. During that same period, fatal crashes spiked 16%, resulting in 31 more traffic deaths, compared with the previous year. In the first quarter of 2021, traffic enforcement was down 37.2%, when compared with the same period the previous year—and fatal crashes were up 9.7%, compared with the first quarter of the previous year. The change in traffic dynamics, however, confounds any analysis of this correlation. Mode share (travel by public transportation, automobiles, bicycles, and ferries) changed,<sup>9</sup> vehicle miles traveled fell, and motor vehicle speeds increased.<sup>10</sup> The increase in fatal crashes argues for more enforcement of dangerous driving behavior, not less.

The contemporaneous increase in street disorder in NYC reinforces this point. There have been several anecdotal reports of increased reckless driving and other road incivilities.<sup>11</sup> Complaints of drag racing, in particular, increased during this period. After March 12, 2020, 911 and 311 complaints involving drag racing spiked 226%, with 8,450 total complaints for the rest of the year, versus 2,587 during the same period in 2019. All these behaviors demand police traffic enforcement.

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#### CONTACTS

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## The Limits of Automated Enforcement

New York State Senator Brad Hoylman has proposed combating these problems through legislation to lengthen the hours that speed cameras operate.<sup>12</sup> Currently, speed cameras operate between 6 A.M. and 10 P.M. within school speed zones. While this change may help lower speeds within camera zones, it alone is insufficient to stop reckless driving and drag racing. Automated enforcement systems cannot act on intelligence, go to car meet-ups, and prevent drag racing ahead of time. They cannot take dangerous motorists off the road; and sanctions are delivered

in the mail, weeks after the infraction. Lastly, motivated traffic offenders (such as those who drag race or ride ATVs on public streets) easily avoid these cameras by removing their plates or affixing fraudulent plates. Absent a valid license-plate image, cameras are useless.

Halfway through 2020, the NYPD noticed a sharp increase in temporary plates on the road.<sup>13</sup> Officers discovered that a substantial number of these “paper plates” were fraudulent. The proliferation of fake plates was a predictable consequence of DMV closures and the loosening of temporary tag rules.<sup>14</sup> Fake plates allow motorists to avoid registration and insurance requirements; they also defeat traffic-enforcement cameras and police license-plate readers. Even if the technology can read the plate, the plate number does not lead back to a car. Since forged plates require special training and experience to detect, it was difficult to determine the scale and scope of this problem based solely on field observations.

To understand the fake plate trend, the NYPD’s analytics team used various department data sources to find license-plate numbers that showed up on multiple cars. They excluded New York plate numbers, approximately 2.3% of the results, to ensure that they were not measuring legitimate registration transfers to new cars. This analysis identified 5,247 distinct out-of-state plate numbers that were fraudulent and that showed up on multiple cars—a conservative, lower-bound estimate because it required that the fake plate number was used on multiple cars, all of which had some type of police contact. Consistent with observations from the field, the team found that 81.3% of the fake tag numbers were from New Jersey and Texas. Among them, the department identified several plate numbers that were each connected to more than 20 distinct vehicles. One New Jersey plate number showed up on 46 cars and was connected to 29 arrests.

When the department’s traffic enforcement plummeted, the problem grew by an order of magnitude. From March 12, 2020, to December 31, 2020, the department wrote 29,320 parking tickets to cars with fraudulent plates. In the same period of 2019, the department wrote 2,309 parking tickets to cars bearing these fake plates.

Some police-reform advocates consider expired and fake temporary tags a minor offense; but motorists who use them are involved in a significant number of traffic problems. Since 2019, cars with fake plates identified by the NYPD were connected to 562 crashes and 710 moving violations and were tagged with almost 60,000 parking tickets. Again, these numbers are lower-bound estimates, as they account for only those plates that we have identified as fraudulent. Fraudulent plates provide cover for a substantial number of “low-order” traffic violators.

Traffic violations are not the only problem. From January 1, 2019, to June 6, 2021, these fake plates were connected to 1,504 arrests, including arrests for illegal guns, stolen cars, drunk driving, and leaving the scene of an accident. In the first quarter of 2021, officers made at least 48 gun arrests from cars that they identified with fake plates. These plates have also been seen on cars involved in at least 93 incidents of gun violence.<sup>15</sup>

The paper plate problem should temper expectations about automated traffic enforcement. It may change the behavior of most drivers, but data show that a substantial number of high-risk drivers will attempt to avoid camera detection. Lastly, those who plan to use their cars in furtherance of more serious crimes will try to avoid the cameras, highlighting the necessity of police enforcement.

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## The Overlap of Traffic Violators and More Serious Offenders

One popular idea among some advocates of reform is to remove armed police officers from traffic enforcement and leave the task to unarmed personnel. The argument here is that, among other things, the risks to nonpolice traffic-enforcement personnel would be low, citing the fact that just one in every 6,959 stops results in an assault on an officer and that an officer sustaining serious injury or death from a traffic stop is even rarer.<sup>16</sup> While these numbers are technically accurate, they fail to account for the uneven distribution of the enforcement burden.

A few officers conduct the majority of stops, and they conduct several stops per day. In 2019, approximately 1% of NYPD officers wrote 49.1% of the department's traffic tickets. Over the course of a career, these stops add up. A department that writes three-quarters of a million traffic summonses per year will have several officers assaulted every year. Indeed, in 2020, motorists used force against 481 officers during stops. Reformers' arguments fail to weigh the costs of enduring an assault into their calculations.

Absent from the risk tally is an acknowledgment of the dangers averted by the presence of trained, armed officers. The NYPD made 1,791 illegal gun arrests during vehicle stops in 2020. This accounts for 42.3% of all gun arrests made in 2020. These are just the guns that were detected. That the majority of these arrests were made without incident is a credit to the tactics and restraint of the cops making them.

While it is true that most traffic enforcement involves noncriminal conduct, cars are common instruments and objects of crime. Reports of auto theft spiked 66.7% in 2020, compared with 2019, and at least six fatal crashes involved stolen cars in 2020. The NYPD saw more people stealing cars to joyride and commit other crimes. Department investigative units picked up on patterns where offenders were stealing cars in Queens to commit shootings in Brooklyn. Investigators also saw offenders switch plates on cars to stymie investigations. At any given time, the NYPD is investigating multiple crime patterns involving vehicles.

Vehicles have become a big part of gun violence investigations in the city. A three-month analysis at the end of 2020 revealed a spike in vehicle-involved shootings. In Brooklyn, there were 50 vehicle-involved shootings from September through November, compared with 13 during the same period in 2019. In the Bronx, there were 20 vehicle-involved shootings during that period, compared with five the previous year. In southern Queens, there were 14 vehicle-involved shootings, versus five the previous year. In every borough, vehicle-involved shootings constituted a higher percentage of total shootings than in previous years. Almost half the shootings in southern Brooklyn were vehicle-related. These shooting cases require investigations into the vehicles and their associated owners, operators, and occupants. Detectives share this information with the patrol forces. This information gives officers on patrol operational awareness of the hazards they might face at a car stop. It also alerts them about suitable investigative targets to be on the lookout for.

Bridging the gap between investigations and patrol to focus enforcement efforts is a core element of the department's "precision policing" strategy, a strategy that has been successful in terms of traffic enforcement. Focused enforcement involves developing and using information to ensure that enforcement is purposeful and directed to a specific crime or traffic problem. One of the objectives is to minimize the collateral consequences of policing that arise from unfocused "fishing" expeditions or blanket-pretext stop strategies. *The New York Times* featured a

concrete example of the focused approach.<sup>17</sup> On February 11, 2020, NYPD intelligence officers observed known gang members on social media, posing with firearms while riding a party bus. After a brief investigation, they located the bus, stopped it, and arrested 14 people for criminal possession of a weapon. Eight guns were recovered.

The NYPD routinely uses intelligence and data to inform its precision policing strategy. The strategy yielded a record number of gun arrests in 2020: the 1,791 of them that were made during a car stop involved 1,751 distinct offenders, 497 of whom collectively had involvement in 805 combined incidents of gun violence.

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## Conclusion

The NYPD has effectively connected its traffic enforcement to crime suppression while pursuing its broader public safety goals. Experience during the pandemic has revealed that removing police from traffic enforcement leads to more dangerous streets, more disorder, and more crime. Policing reforms need to be approached thoughtfully and carefully, always keeping public safety and neighborhood concerns in mind. Unfortunately, some reform proposals fail to do so; they ignore community demands and disregard officer safety. Public safety policy decisions and legislation must be informed by data and made with eyes wide open to their consequences. Otherwise, we will be left with bad policy that further endangers New Yorkers and their trust in public institutions.

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## Endnotes

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