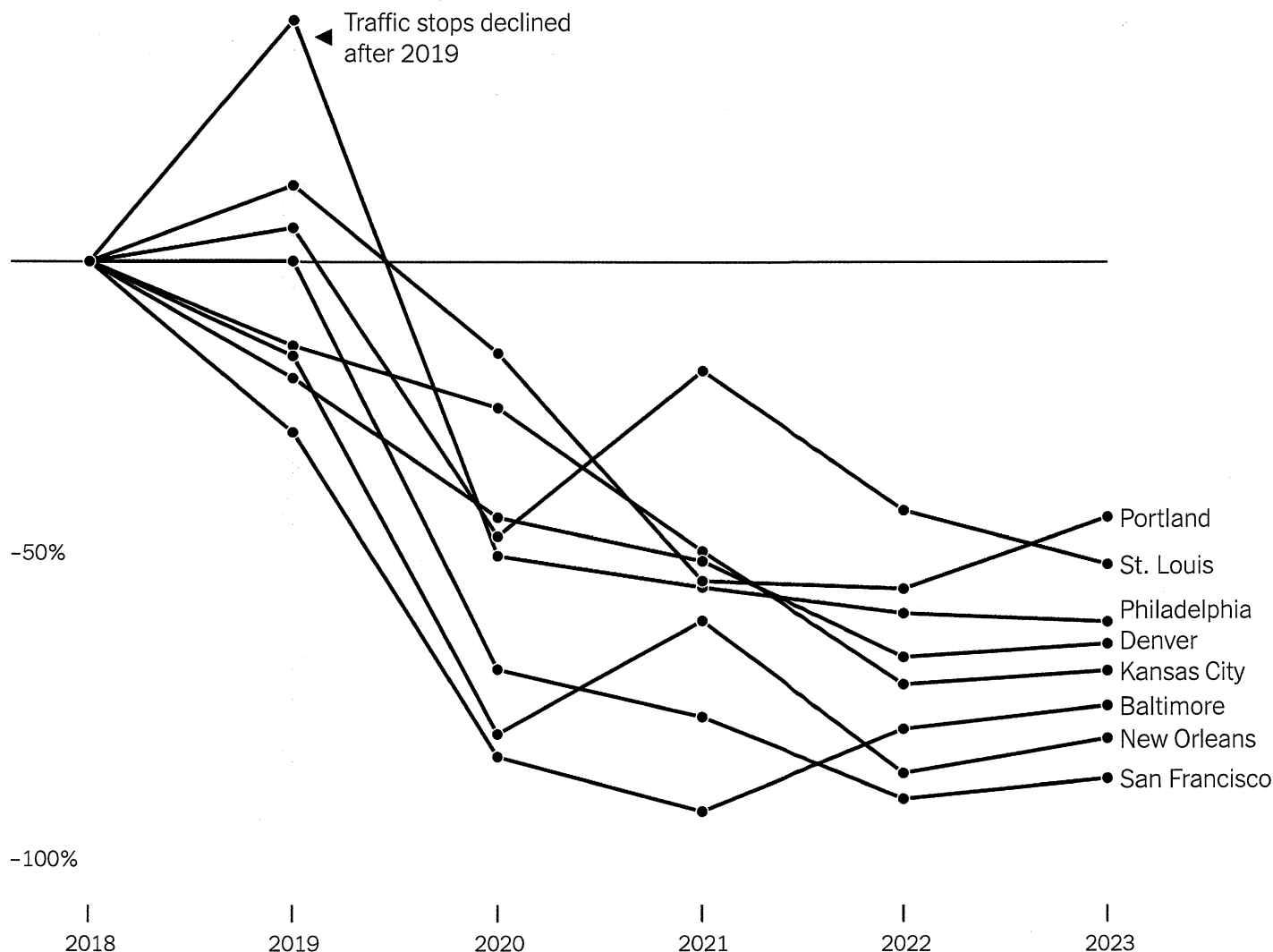


Change in traffic stop volume in major cities

+50%



Data covers the municipal police department in each city.

• TheUpshot

Traffic Enforcement Dwindled in the Pandemic. In Many Places, It Hasn't Come Back.

The retreat has happened as road deaths have risen.

By Emily Badger and Ben Blatt

Ben Blatt and Emily Badger spent months compiling police data and interviewing police officials, safety advocates and other experts.

July 29, 2024

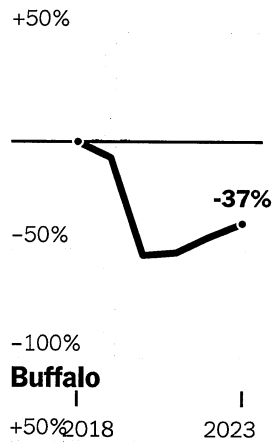
In the early days of the pandemic in 2020, traffic stops by the police plummeted around the country, as fewer cars were on the road and as agencies instructed officers to avoid nonessential contact with the public.

But in the months and years that followed, a distinct pattern formed in many cities: The cars came back in full force, but the traffic enforcement didn't.

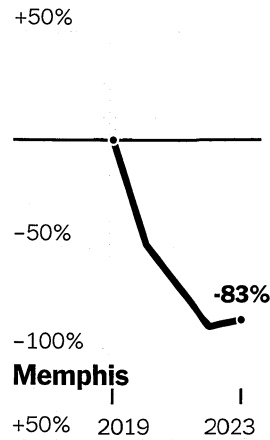
By the end of 2023, the police in Baltimore, New Orleans and San Francisco were making fewer than half the traffic stops they did prepandemic. In other police departments that don't publicly track stops, like in Seattle and New York, the citations given during stops dropped off, too. The downturn appears even among some state agencies that monitor road safety on highways, like the Texas Highway Patrol and Connecticut State Police.

Change in traffic citations

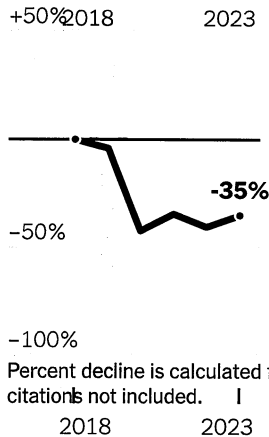
New York



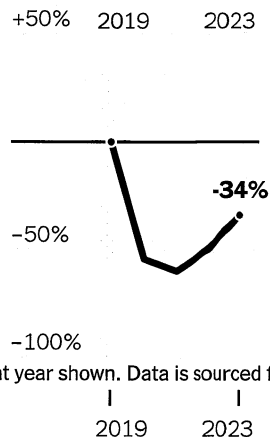
Seattle



Buffalo



Memphis



Percent decline is calculated from the earliest to the most recent year shown. Data is sourced from each agency. Camera citations not included.

This decline, seen in an Upshot analysis of local law enforcement data, accelerated a shift that began in many places before the pandemic, suggesting that the police have pulled back from a part of their job that has drawn especially sharp criticism. To many communities, traffic stops have led to racial discrimination, burdensome fines and deadly encounters — not road safety.

But the retreat of law enforcement from American roadways has also occurred against the backdrop of a rise in road fatalities.

Change in road deaths in the 30 largest U.S. cities, 2019-2022

Memphis	+74%	Houston	+26%
Philadelphia	+58%	Columbus	+26%
Phoenix	+55%	Dallas	+25%
Las Vegas	+55%	Fort Worth	+23%
Milwaukee	+55%	Denver	+21%
Seattle	+39%	Boston	+20%
Washington	+39%	Nashville	+15%
Chicago	+36%	New York	+11%
San Antonio	+34%	San Francisco	+8%

San Diego	+33%	Oklahoma City	+6%
Austin	+31%	Detroit	+5%
Indianapolis	+31%	El Paso	+3%
Los Angeles	+28%	Jacksonville, Fla.	-
Charlotte, N.C.	+27%	Baltimore	-10%
Portland, Ore.	+27%	San Jose, Calif.	-24%

Total traffic fatalities per city based on Federal Fatality Analysis Reporting System. Deaths include non-motorists like pedestrians. 2023 data not yet available.

It's hard to draw a straight line from the decline of enforcement to the rise of road deaths, but their likely connection has unsettled researchers, safety advocates and police officials.

"I cannot ignore that," said Charles T. Brown, whose firm Equitable Cities has worked with communities on police reform and road safety. "That does not mean, however, that the traditional form of enforcement is necessary to reverse that trend."

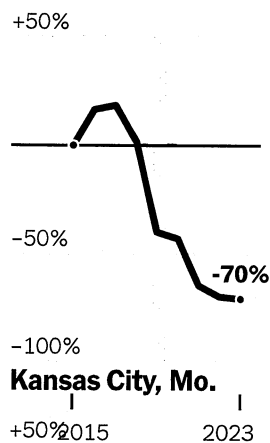
If traffic stops and road fatalities were falling in tandem — because roads were becoming safer overall, or because officers were giving fewer equipment citations while pursuing dangerous drivers instead — that would be a very different scenario.

Today's picture suggests, rather, that as the police have responded to both the pandemic and cries for reform after the 2020 murder of George Floyd, they have also withdrawn from their role pulling over speeding cars and reckless drivers.

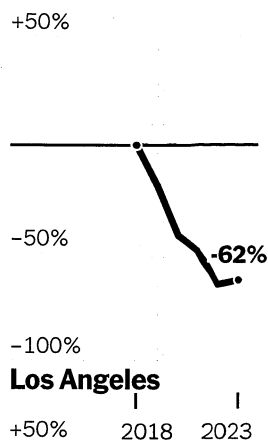
"When I talk to police, I say, 'Fine, don't focus on the paperwork issues,'" like giving tickets for expired registrations, said Ken Barone, who manages the Connecticut Racial Profiling Prohibition Project. "But that should free you up to have more time to focus on the things that are killing people. And I'm not seeing that."

Change in traffic stops

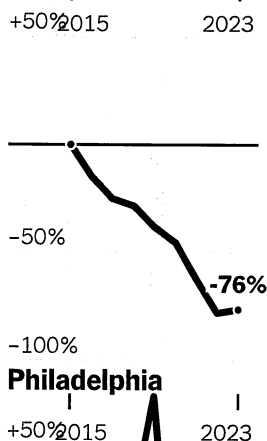
Austin, Texas



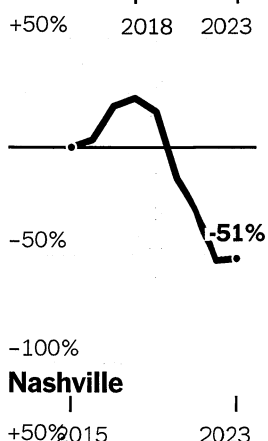
Denver



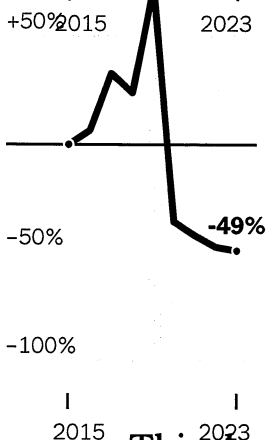
Kansas City, Mo.



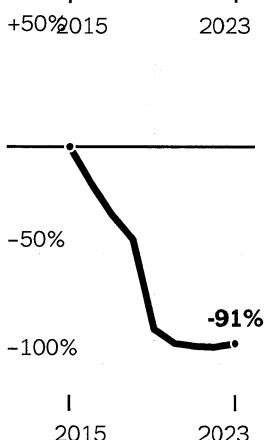
Los Angeles



Philadelphia



Nashville

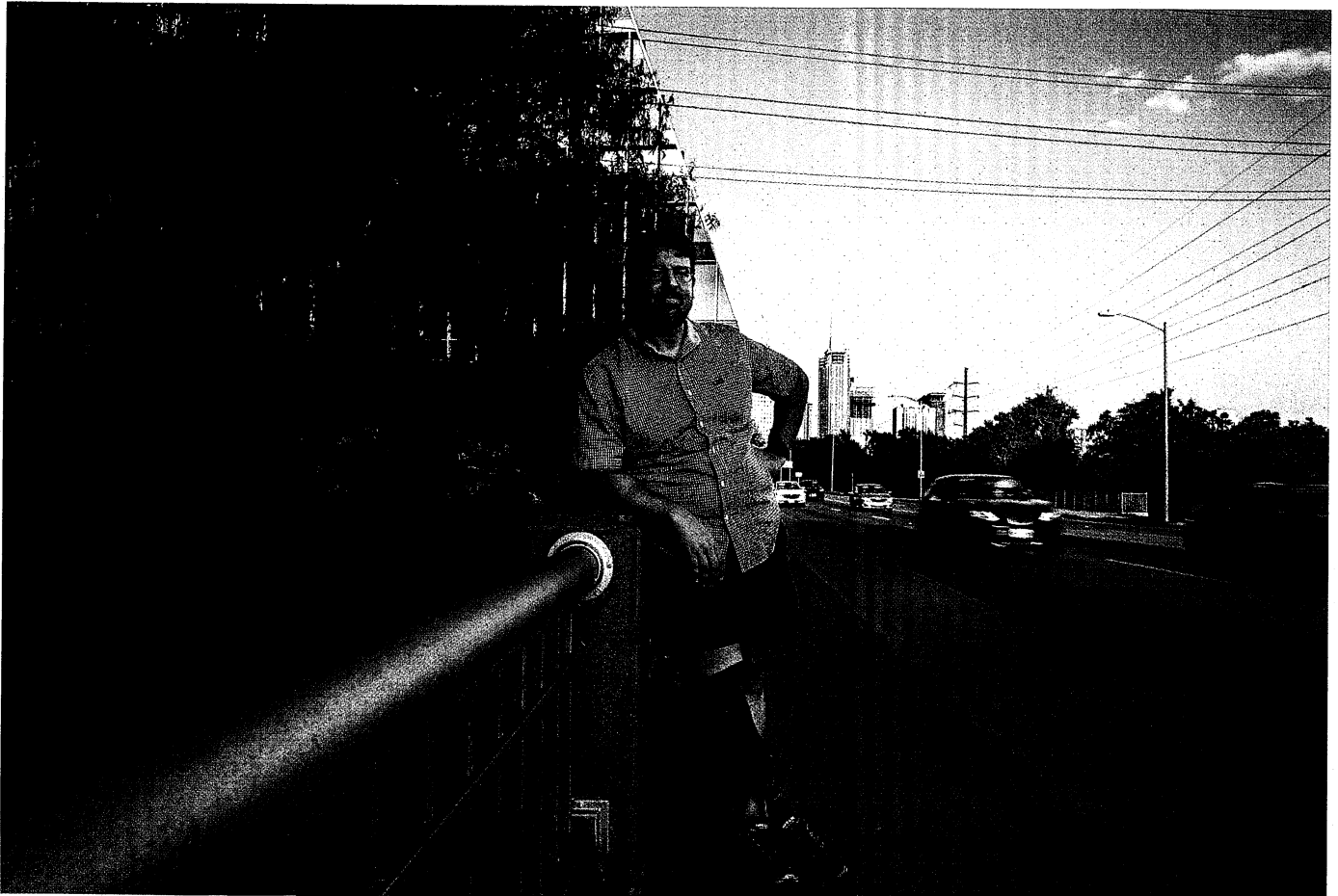


This decline isn't universal. But it recurs across communities that differ in notable ways. Police work on traffic safety is down in Denver, which has a camera enforcement program, but also in Austin, Texas, where traffic cameras are banned by state law. It's down in Seattle, where a severe police staffing shortage lingers, but also in Nashville, where staffing levels have been more stable.

It's down in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, where new policies have curtailed the kinds of stops officers can make. But it's also down in Kansas City, Mo., where there's been no change in policy.

As American roads have grown more deadly, many people interviewed for this article blamed a breakdown in the social contract — the basic expectation that drivers will follow the rules. But reversing that will be difficult when the chief enforcement mechanism of road safety for decades in America — the traffic stop — has been a recurring scene of police misconduct.

“There’s been a lot of injustice. But there’s also an injustice when people die because of speeding drivers,” said Damian Kevitt, who founded Streets Are for Everyone, a Los Angeles road safety advocacy group, after he was pinned under a speeding car while biking in 2013. His right leg was ripped off. The driver was never caught.



Damian Kevitt blames the retreat of law enforcement for rising road deaths in Los Angeles: “It’s not like we suddenly designed more dangerous roads. Like, what changed?” Montinique Monroe for The New York Times

Today, he is certain of this: “People are dying because there is at this point relatively no enforcement of traffic laws in the city of Los Angeles.”

Prepandemic, the Los Angeles police were making more than 500,000 traffic stops a year. In 2023, they made fewer than 220,000.

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A broad retreat

The downward pressure on traffic enforcement has come from every direction — the public and the police themselves, reformers and critics of reform.

“There is a kind of Right narrative and a Left narrative, and they actually converge, which is that there’s just less political support for traffic enforcement,” said Greg Shill, a law professor at the University of Iowa. “You can see that as: ‘Cops need to get home safe, and they’re afraid of being wrongly labeled as abusive or racist.’ Or you can see it as: ‘Civilians have asserted more control over police departments.’”

This dynamic has roots well before the pandemic.



The police have become less visible on roads in many cities. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

Public data tracking traffic stops, often mandated locally by laws meant to identify racial bias, covers only recent years in many places. And many cities and states publish no information.

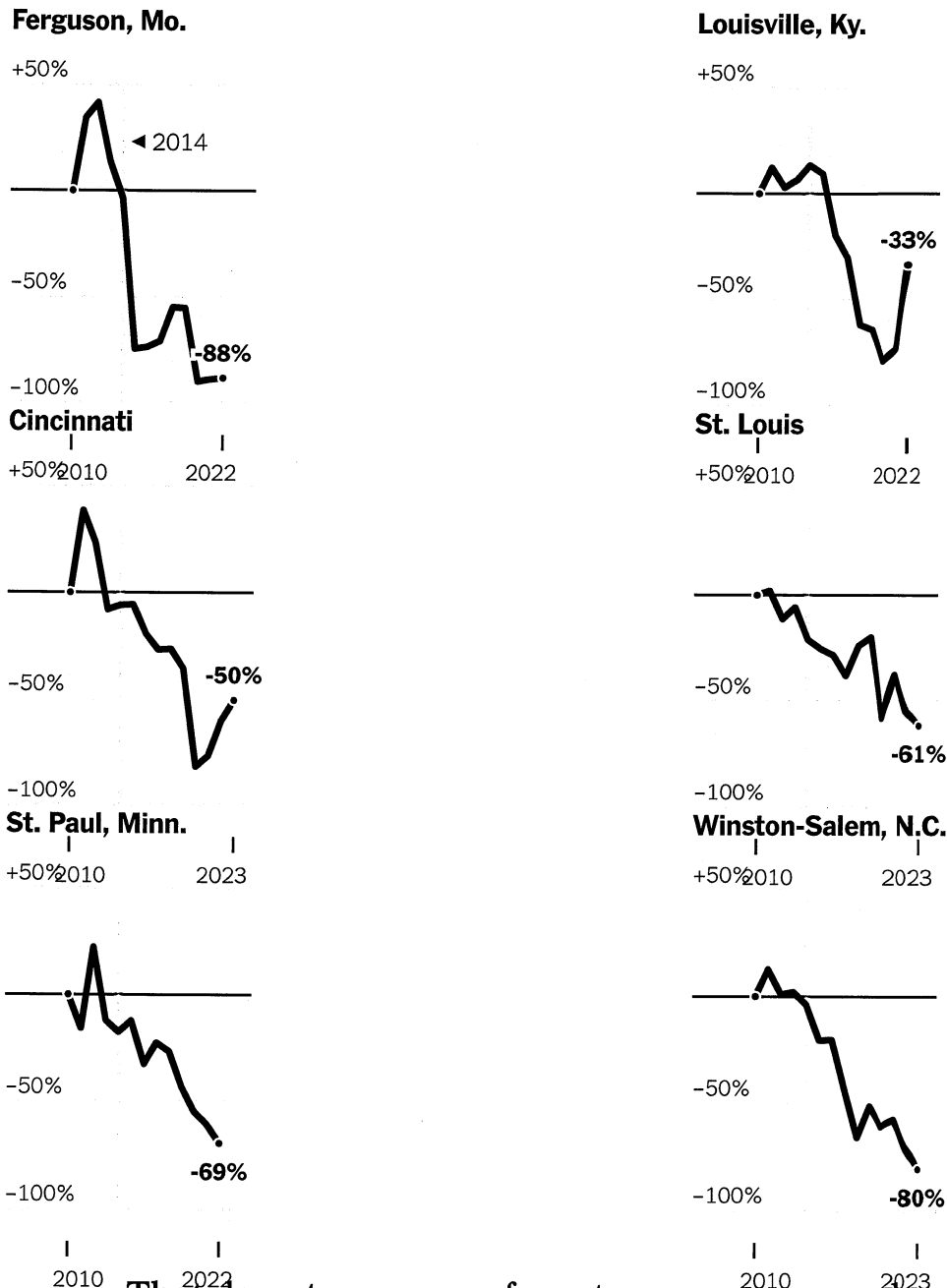
But a longer-term decline of enforcement appears elsewhere, too. Since about 2010, D.U.I. arrests have fallen in F.B.I. crime data (with no comparable decline in alcohol-related fatalities). And the share of Americans who say they have been pulled over has fallen since at least the late 1990s in a periodic federal survey tracking contacts between the police and the public. That share has dropped in particular since 2015, after the police shooting death the prior year of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo.

“The decline in traffic enforcement predates Ferguson by probably 10 years or more — that’s an important thing,” said Jeff Michael, a former longtime official at the National Highway Traffic Safety

Administration who now studies road safety at Johns Hopkins University. “But Ferguson certainly had an effect. That’s without a doubt. Ferguson, and everything after.”

That is apparent in Ferguson itself, among some other cities.

Change in traffic stops after Ferguson



That downturn comes from two sources — orders from on high and individual officers on the street — that can be hard to untangle.

First, some police departments shifted guidance after Ferguson, directing officers to pursue fewer vehicle searches or nonmoving violations. Racial disparities are widest among drivers stopped for

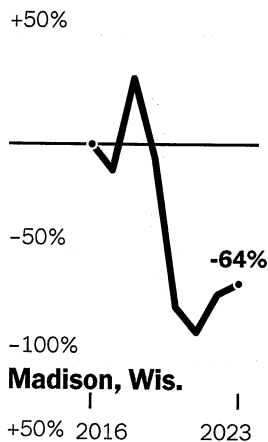
those reasons. Equipment and registration issues are also seldom associated with crashes, while stops for such infractions have been more likely to involve the use of police force.

The second force is more diffuse, as officers retreat from interactions with the public that are essentially discretionary.

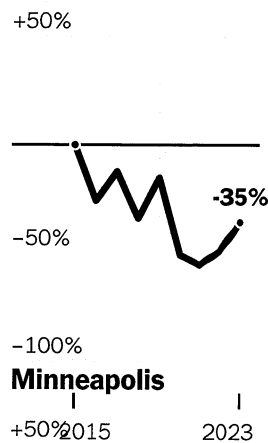
“Why subject yourself to potential discipline or problems?” said Tom Saggau, spokesman for the Los Angeles Police Protective League union. “Why subject yourself to the inherent danger of engaging? Many times, officers are questioning: ‘Why am I even doing this?’”

Change in traffic stops

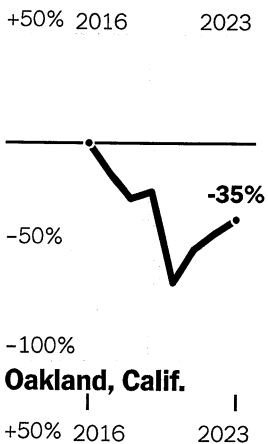
Baltimore



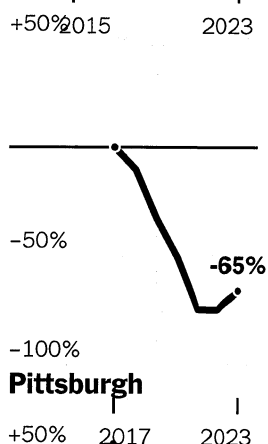
Charlotte, N.C.



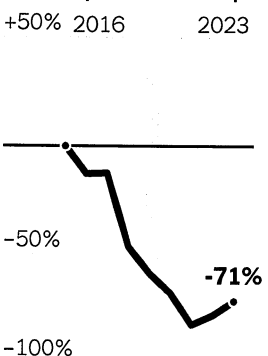
Madison, Wis.



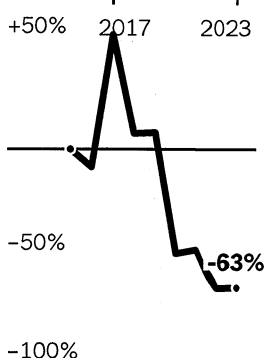
Minneapolis



Oakland, Calif.



Pittsburgh



These decisions by officers and police leaders intensified three months into the pandemic, when George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis officer who knelt on his neck in a scene viewed around the world. Protesters rallied in hundreds of communities against discrimination and the deadly use of force. A 2021 New York Times investigation found that American police in five years had killed more than 400 drivers or passengers who were neither wielding weapons nor under pursuit for a violent crime.

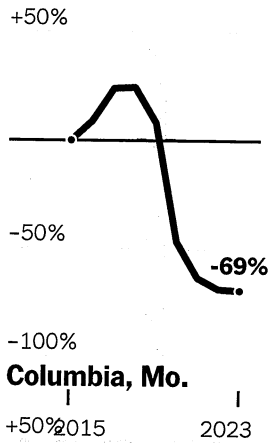
In Los Angeles, the police department responded by requiring officers to record their rationale for pretextual stops — when officers use a minor violation as an opening to search for more serious crimes. Philadelphia enacted a law limiting stops for reasons like a broken taillight.

In data from this era, it's hard to separate the effects of the pandemic from the demands for reform, or to know if policing patterns might have bounced back from the first shock had the second never happened.

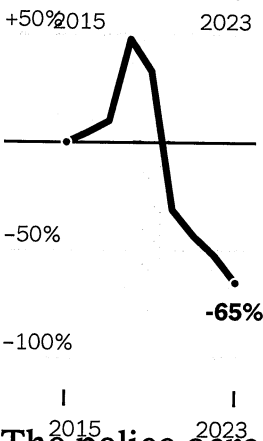
“We had two great forces coming together at once,” said Scott Sophier, a commander in the Evanston, Ill., police department.

Change in traffic stops in smaller cities

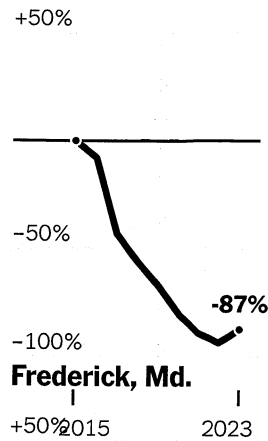
Evanston, Ill.



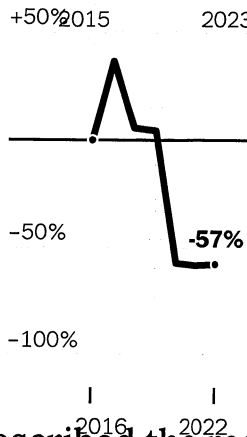
Columbia, Mo.



Burlington, Vt.



Frederick, Md.

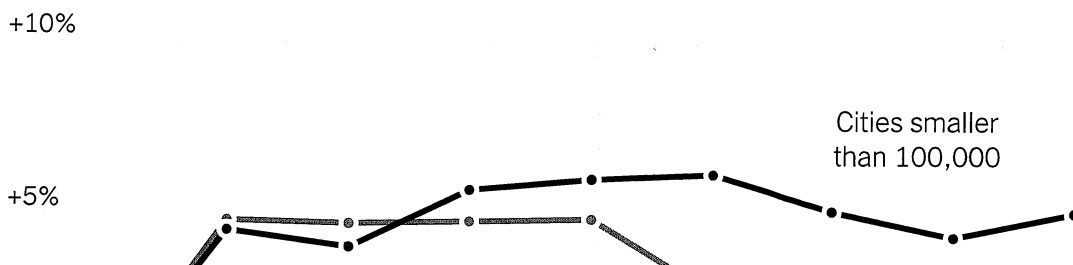


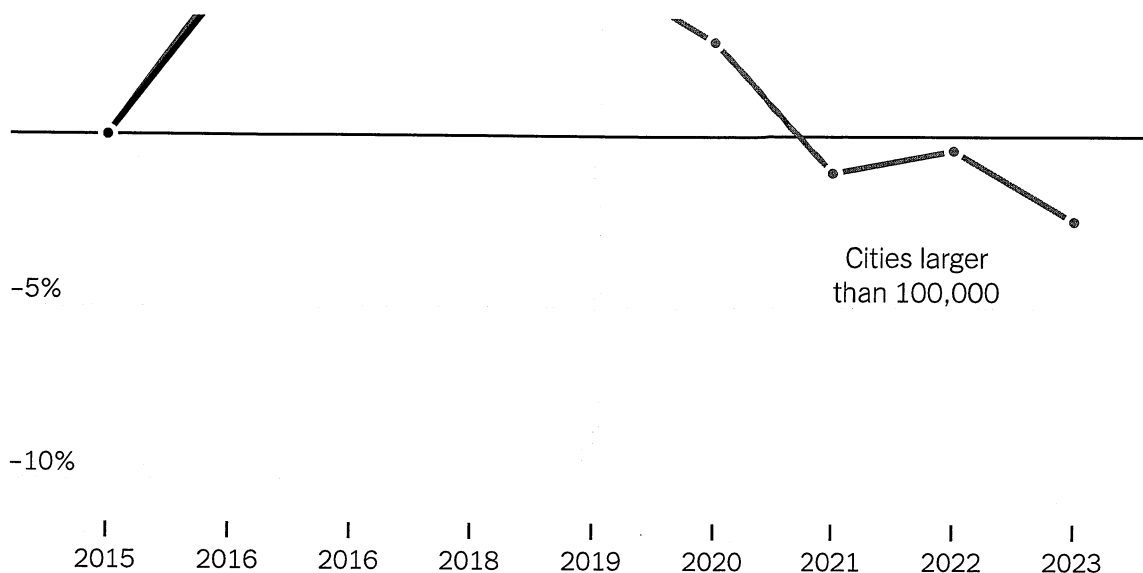
The police across several cities described the resulting period as one of “police withdrawal,” “cooling off” and confusion over what the public wanted.

“When you hear your community tell you, ‘Where are you? I need you here,’ and you hear the elected leaders say, ‘We’re going to try everything we can to protect you from the police department’ — that’s this conflicting messaging,” said Don Graham, a deputy chief of the Los Angeles Police Department.

The pandemic, the protests and calls to cut police funding also contributed to a police staffing shortage that became acute in larger cities.

Change in law enforcement officers





Source: F.B.I. Uniform Crime Reporting police employee data. Municipal police departments only. Police force percent change adjusted for change in city size.

And when police departments are short-staffed, they cull specialty units like the traffic division to fill patrol roles. Departments described struggling with staffing during a time when 911 calls and crime were rising. Mental health calls, homelessness and illegal street racing were growing more common. So were marches and demonstrations — and traffic officers often handle those, too.

“We were in kind of a weird situation, because traffic deaths were going up,” said Adrian Diaz, who led the Seattle police department from 2020 until earlier this spring. “And then our staffing is going down. And finally crime was also going up. How do you prioritize just the violent crime, but then also recognize that traffic deaths are a huge issue?”

In 2022, he instructed officers not to stop drivers solely for minor violations like a missing front license plate. Today, in a Seattle traffic division that had about 60 officers prepandemic, there are 12 left.

The number of traffic infractions issued in Seattle over the same time fell by more than 80 percent.

Roads or racetracks?

Since the pandemic, another set of headlines has emerged. Hit-and-runs surged in Philadelphia. Washington had its highest road fatality count since the mid-2000s. In Los Angeles last year, car crashes killed more people than homicides — more than half of them pedestrians.

Patricia Strong-Fargas, a pastor in South Los Angeles who has served on a city task force reconsidering road safety, described drivers treating the roads like racetracks, the stop lights like suggestions. She has three young-adult grandsons whom she prays for daily.

“I pray they will not get involved in any officer entanglement. I pray that no gang member will attack them,” she said. “I pray that nobody runs a red light.”

Two of those three threats are intertwined because the U.S. relies, to a far greater degree than other high-income countries, on police enforcement to produce road safety.



Patricia Strong-Fargas believes reckless driving has worsened in Los Angeles since the pandemic. “Running red lights means nothing,” she said. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

Many peer European and Asian countries have reduced fatalities by designing roads that discourage speeding and protect pedestrians and cyclists, while deploying cameras more widely.

The U.S. in essence uses the police to make up for not doing those things. And over time, that enforcement has become increasingly inseparable from fighting crime, with many stops serving no road safety outcome.

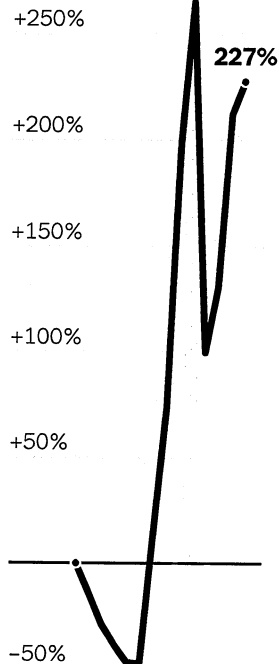
The degree to which that’s true varies. In Connecticut, at least 70 percent of stops are categorized as moving violations in nearly every jurisdiction in the state.

By contrast, in Chicago only about 30 percent of traffic stops in 2023 were for moving violations. Stops there have soared in recent years, contrary to the pattern nationwide. And they started to rise

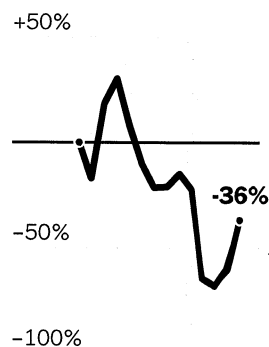
after a 2015 agreement to reform the department's stop-and-frisk practices, suggesting that the police shifted their crime-fighting stops from pedestrians to drivers.

Change in traffic stops in Illinois

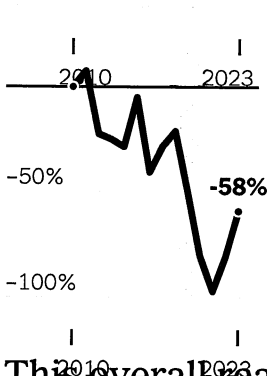
Chicago



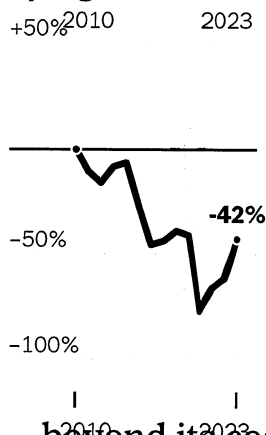
Aurora



Champaign



Springfield



This overall road safety strategy — beyond its costs in over-policed communities — has proved insufficient to reduce fatalities. In 2023, about 41,000 Americans died in road crashes. Those deaths also disproportionately affect Black Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans, a pattern that reflects in part disparities in who lives along dangerous roads and who must walk or bike there.

For police enforcement to improve road safety, it must shift driver behavior broadly, not just the particular behavior of drivers caught with a ticket, researchers said. And they disagree over how effective the police are at doing that.

Recent history offers some evidence: The motor vehicle death rate in the U.S. dropped in the 1980s and 1990s as states adopted seatbelt laws, and as Mothers Against Drunk Driving lobbied for stricter drunken driving laws. Crucially, those laws were accompanied by aggressive police enforcement, often in the form of highly visible sobriety checkpoints and “click it or ticket” seatbelt campaigns.

Some studies have also suggested police enforcement can affect road safety. But it’s less clear that the benefits last after the police drive away. And while enforcement may have helped shift norms around seatbelts and alcohol, speeding is another challenge entirely.

To address it, other evidence suggests that enforcement and road engineering ought to work together.



Transportation planners say better road infrastructure, not just more police enforcement, will help reduce fatalities. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

In the years preceding the pandemic in Burlington, Vt., traffic stops and serious crashes were declining together. That's because while the police scaled back minor stops and vehicle searches, the city also redesigned speed humps and crosswalks, said the city's police chief, Jon Murad.

"I believe there's an elastic bottom to that, at which point things snapped back," he said. And indeed during the pandemic, serious crashes rose again. "Absent enforcement, the engineering methods don't do the job by themselves."

Vision Zero programs, embraced by many U.S. cities to reduce road fatalities, have tried to pair police enforcement with redesigned roads and public education campaigns.

In New York, Vision Zero helped reduce road injury rates in the years leading up to the pandemic. But during the pandemic, New York lost those gains, according to a study tracking injuries in Medicaid claims data. One major difference? Police enforcement plummeted, the researchers point out.

“So much of traffic safety hinges on making sure people follow the rules we’ve made for the road,” said Kacie Dragan, one of the study’s authors. “My gut feeling, from that public health perspective, is it’s a bad thing to see that decline. But that’s not the only perspective that matters.”

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Two competing harms

The question before communities today is in part whether enforcement can return, stripped of the harms that have long been a part of it.

In a country with about 18,000 local police agencies — where the department culture and rate of stops vary widely — each will need an answer.

The Rate of Stops Varies City to City

CITY	STOPS PER 1,000 RESIDENTS IN 2023
Chicago	202
Cincinnati	169
Dallas	112
St. Louis	98
Charlotte, N.C.	80
Philadelphia	75
Denver	65
Los Angeles	53
Nashville	45

Austin, Texas	36
Minneapolis	30
San Francisco	13

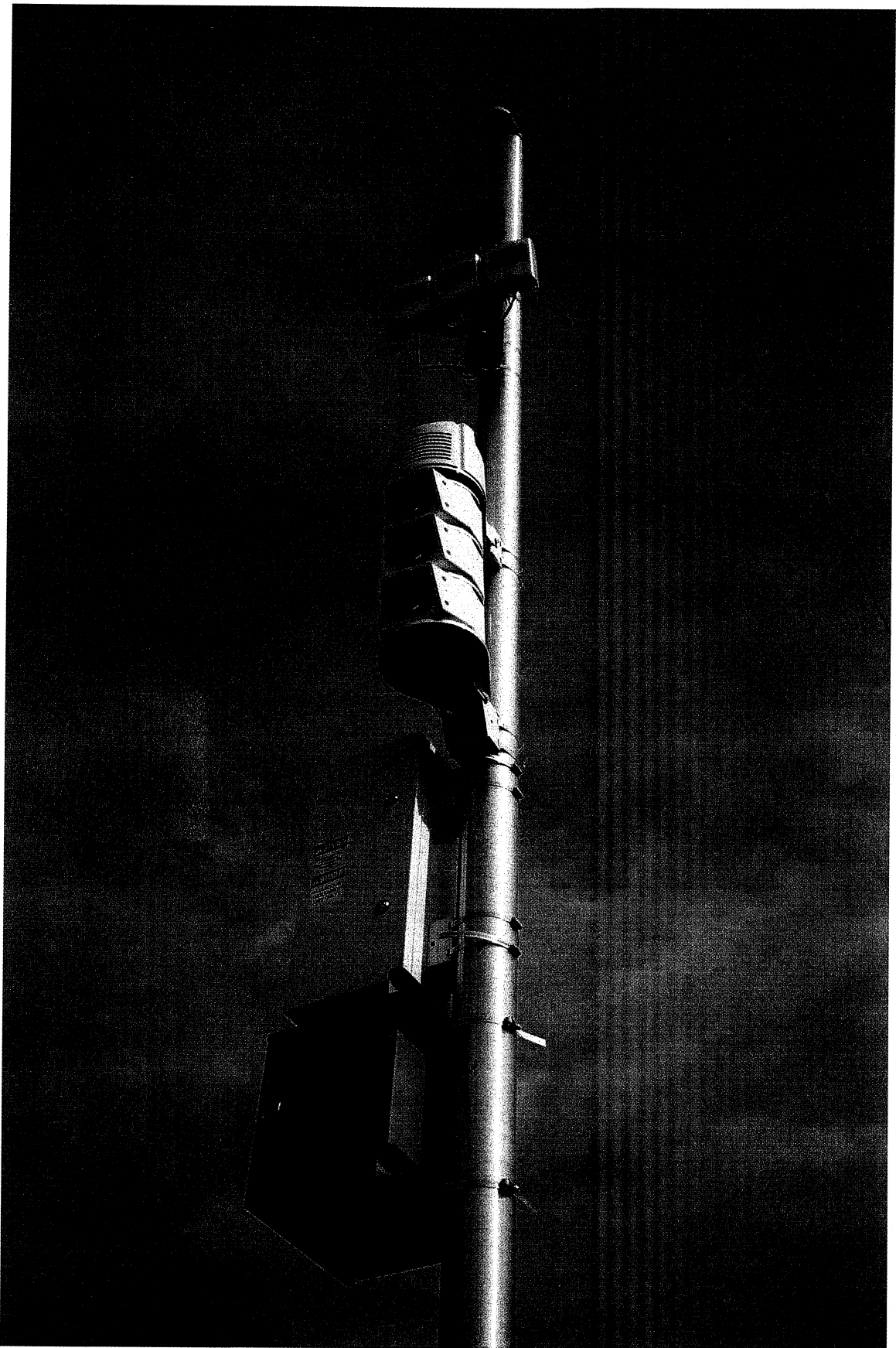
The most common policy response has been to reduce the stops that are least connected to dangerous driving — “to make certain the traffic work that is done is about traffic safety,” as Mr. Murad put it in Burlington.

But that is not uncontroversial. Police unions and Republican officials have balked at changes that would restrict pretextual stops. That has left some departments at odds with their unions, and put some more liberal cities in conflict with conservative state legislatures.

The Vision Zero movement in the U.S. has meanwhile backed away from emphasizing enforcement.

“Really long-term, design has to be the solution,” said Shawn Garcia, director of advocacy for the safe-streets organization Transportation Alternatives in New York. “Policing is not the direction we want to go in.”

Even among safety advocates, there’s no agreement on automated cameras as an alternative to the police. Studies in the U.S. and overseas show that speed cameras are effective at reducing speeds and injuries. But civil libertarians oppose the surveillance. And officials worry that cameras targeted in high-crash corridors may disproportionately ticket low-income and minority drivers, because decades of racially biased urban planning have left their communities with the most dangerous roads.



Studies have shown that automated cameras, like this one in Philadelphia, can reduce speeding and injuries. But several states ban them. Caroline Gutman for The New York Times

Communities should also reconsider if they really need someone with a gun and a background in detecting crime to fill out speeding tickets, said Scarlet Neath, the policy director at the Center for Policing Equity.

Critics have many retorts: It's unrealistic to redesign every dangerous road. Without pretextual stops, police will miss weapons and crime leads. And while better-designed roads or civilian responders may shape the behavior of typical drivers, they're no match for the most reckless and distracted ones.

"There's a whole laundry list of other things we support unarmed responses to, 100 percent," said Mr. Saggau with the Los Angeles police union. "Mental-health calls — we're on board. But when it comes to traffic — bad idea all the way around."



Vulnerable cyclists and pedestrians have borne the brunt of rising road fatalities in many cities.
Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

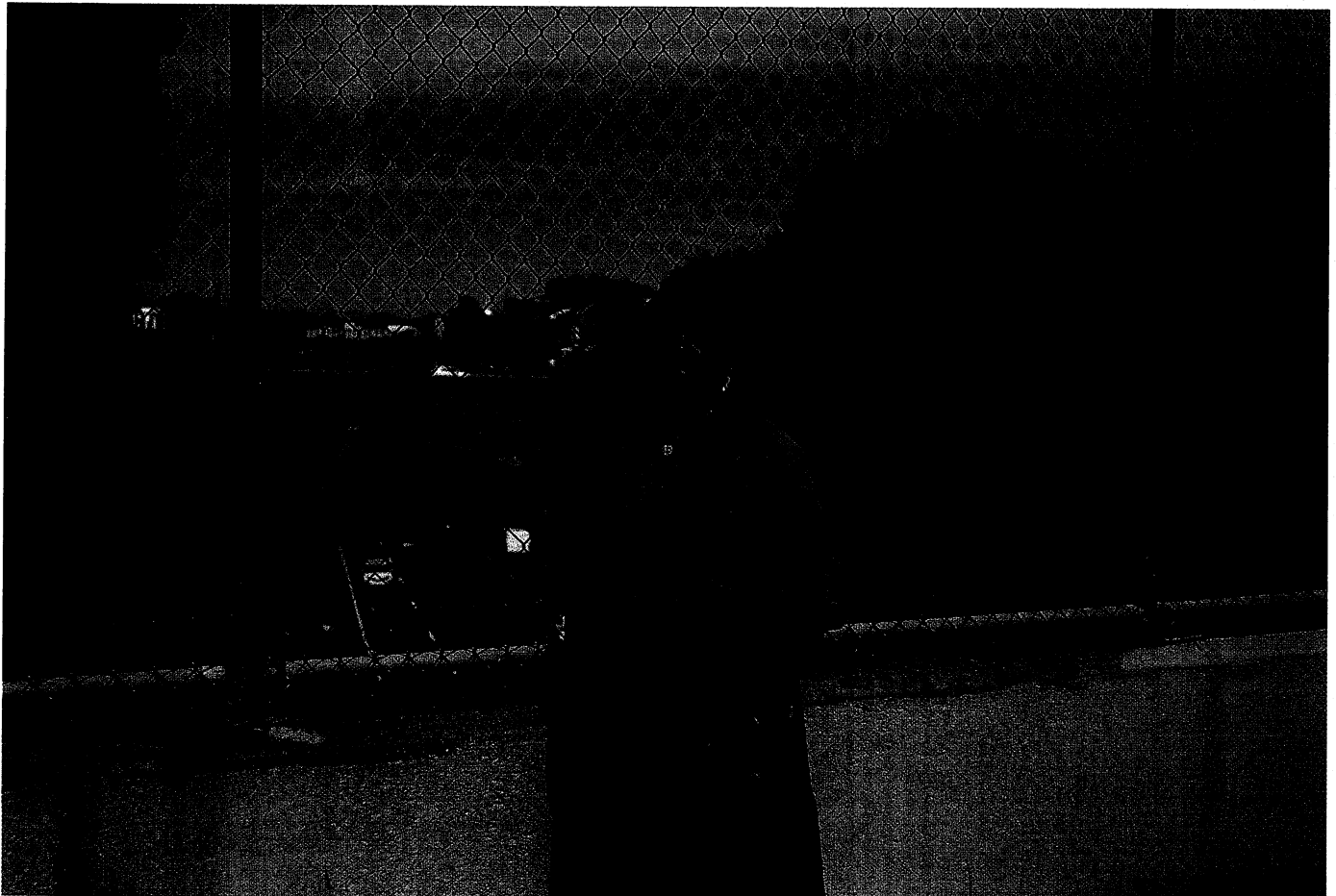
We also don't know today the full consequences of reforming traffic enforcement, including for crime trends and general police behavior, said Robin Engel, an Ohio State researcher who has long studied policing.

There are other factors at play, too.

"When you have that lived experience," said Isaiah Thomas, a Philadelphia City Council member who led the city's reform bill, "you know how demoralizing it can be to be a participant in a traffic stop."

Particularly a traffic stop that feels racially targeted and unrelated to safety.

At its most raw, this debate pits two harms against each other, with communities searching for a path to lessen both.



Stephanie Evans, whose son died in a hit-and-run, laments that road violence doesn't receive the attention of gun violence. "The vehicle is a bullet," she said of the driver who killed her son. "And when he put that vehicle in drive, he pulled the trigger." Caroline Gutman for The New York Times

In Philadelphia, the Rev. Stephanie Evans lost her 37-year-old son Robert in January 2020. He was stepping out of his pickup truck when he was struck by a driver who sped away. In her grief, she has become an advocate for hit-and-run victims. To her, that means demanding more cameras — but also more of the police.

“I’m not conflicted over that,” she said, even acknowledging the damage that has come from pulling over more drivers.

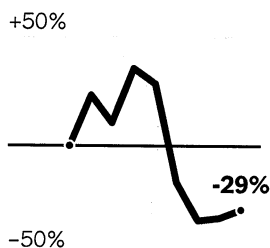
“I want them stopped,” she said. “I’m sorry. It’s the lesser of two evils.”

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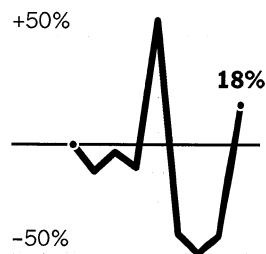
See all cities in our data set

Change in traffic stops

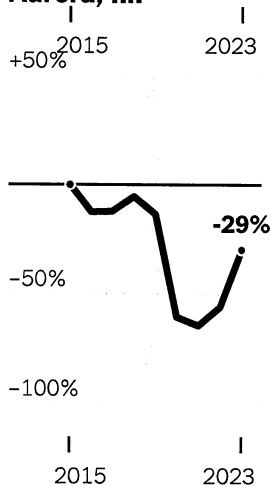
Arlington, Texas



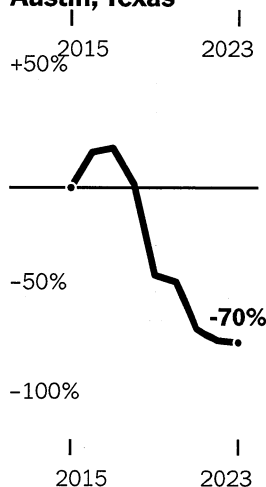
Asheville, N.C.



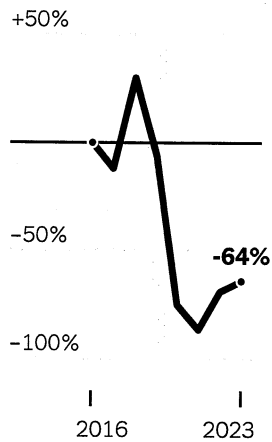
Aurora, Ill.



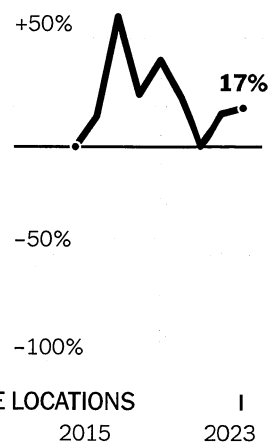
Austin, Texas



Baltimore



Billings, Mont.



SEE MORE LOCATIONS

Listed decrease calculated from earliest listed year to most recent listed year. Data collected from official releases from police agencies.

Methodology

All stop and citation data shown here is publicly reported by individual municipal police departments, city governments, state police agencies or state road safety organizations. Because the timeline of available data varies by place, the changes in traffic stops are calculated from the earliest to the most recent data point.

There is no national reporting standard for traffic stops, and some locales include certain criminal or investigative stops that others may exclude. We removed pedestrian and cyclist stops from the data. Some states report traffic stops as “vehicle stops” or “stops,” but we referred to them all as “traffic stops.”

There is also no national reporting standard for traffic citations. Language to describe them also varies, with some cities publishing data on “tickets” or “infractions.” In our graphics, we have used the word “citation.”

Pandemic-era fatality data comes from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s Fatality Analysis Reporting System. Deaths were counted for each city based on the location of crashes.