

January 2023

## Traffic Safety for All – Equitable Solutions to Rising Traffic Fatalities in Washington (HB 1513)

Washington faces dual crises in traffic safety outcomes and racial inequities in traffic enforcement. 2022 marked the third consecutive year of rising traffic fatalities in Washington with preliminary data indicating a 25-year high of 700 traffic deaths.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, nationwide traffic fatalities started to decline in 2022.<sup>2</sup> By preventing traffic stops for low-risk issues (e.g., broken taillights, equipment violations, or expired tabs) that do not affect traffic safety, HB 1513 will free police to focus enforcement on unsafe driving behavior (e.g., impaired driving or speeding). This will save lives and reduce harmful racial disparities.

### The current approach to traffic stops is not working.

**Data shows that traffic stops are an ineffective law enforcement tool for investigating and preventing crime.** Out of more than 11 million traffic stops made by Washington State Patrol between 2009 and 2019, only 0.27 percent resulted in the discovery of contraband.<sup>3</sup> The Tacoma Police Department had an even lower hit rate for contraband at 0.11 percent.

**Data also shows that these stops are harmful.** Police contact carries significant social costs, including negative effects on individual and community health, educational achievement, economic well-being, civic participation, and community engagement.<sup>4</sup>

**The harms of traffic stops include significant racial disparities.** Washington State Patrol data from 2009 to 2018 shows large racial disparities in searches: officers searched the vehicles of Black drivers at twice the rate we would expect based on the proportion of Black people in the population, even though white drivers were more likely to have contraband found when searched. In contrast, white drivers were underrepresented in searches. Similarly, in a study of more than 21,000 low-risk stops made by Washington State Patrol between 2009 and 2015, InvestigateWest found that Black, Latino, and Pacific Islander drivers were about twice as likely as white drivers to be searched, and Native Americans were five times more likely.<sup>5</sup>

By reducing low-risk stops, we can promote traffic safety while increasing the fairness of traffic enforcement.

**Washington State Patrol stopped 11 million motorists and found contraband material in only a quarter of a percent (0.27%) of these stops**



Source: Washington State Patrol (2008-2018), accessed via Stanford Open Policing Project.

**The Tacoma Police Department stopped nearly 2,000 motorists and found contraband material in only one-tenth of a percent (0.11%) of these stops**



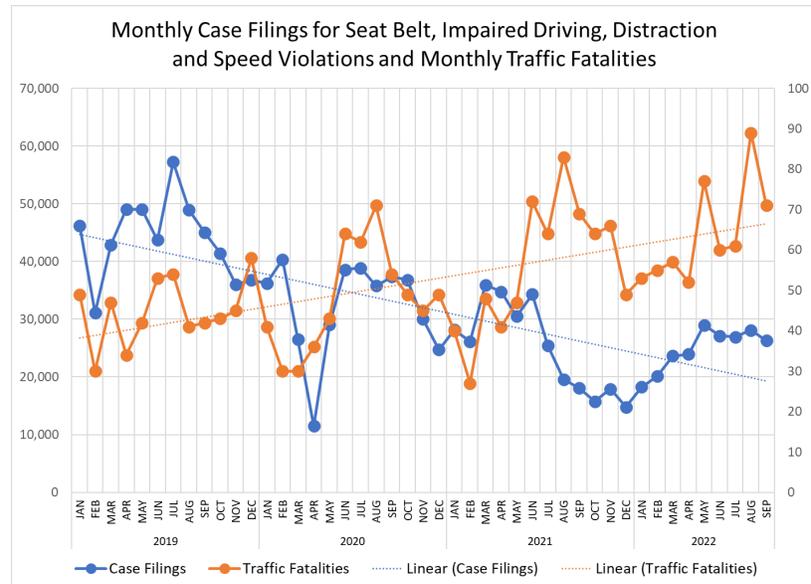
Source: Tacoma Police Department (January 2021-June 2021).

## HB 1513 is a data-driven solution to reduce accidents and reduce racial disparities.

De-prioritizing low-risk traffic stops and focusing on safety related stops, as this bill does, saves lives while increasing equity. Research supports this approach. A study of 20 million traffic stops showed that there are fewer racial disparities in safety-related stops than in low-risk stops.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, by virtually eliminating low-risk stops, one jurisdiction in North Carolina was able to focus its resources on increasing the number of safety stops for dangerous driving. This reduced traffic accidents and racial disparity in overall stops—with no impact on non-traffic related crime.<sup>7</sup>

Traffic enforcement provides safety when it focuses on high-risk behaviors. Data from the Washington Traffic Safety Commission also points to a link between prioritizing safety-related stops and increased public safety, showing that when officers gave fewer citations for safety-related issues—impairment, distraction, speed, and seatbelt violations—fatalities increased.

**The evidence is clear: HB 1513 is a win for safety, justice, and all Washingtonians.**



Source: Washington Traffic Safety Commission

### Notes

1 Statement by Debbie Driver, Senior Policy Adviser, Transportation, “Senate Transportation Committee Meeting,” January 9, 2023, 30:13, [tvw.org/video/senate-transportation-2023011099/?eventID=2023011099](https://www.tvw.org/video/senate-transportation-2023011099/?eventID=2023011099).

2 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, “NHTSA Estimates for First Nine Months of 2022 Suggest Roadway Fatalities Beginning to Level Off After Two Years of Dramatic Increases,” January 9, 2023, [nhtsa.gov/press-releases/nhtsa-estimates-traffic-deaths-2022-third-quarter](https://www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/nhtsa-estimates-traffic-deaths-2022-third-quarter).

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all data points come from analysis by the Vera Institute of Justice of data provided by the Stanford Police Project. For questions, contact Aaron Stagoff-Belfort, program associate, at [abelfort@vera.org](mailto:abelfort@vera.org).

4 Aaron Stagoff-Belfort, Daniel Bodah, and Daniela Gilbert, *The Social Costs of Policing* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), [vera.org/publications/the-social-costs-of-policing](https://www.vera.org/publications/the-social-costs-of-policing).

5 Jason Buch and Joy Borkholder, “Driving While Indian? You’re More Likely to be Searched by the Washington State Patrol,” InvestigateWest, December 19, 2019, available at [invw.org/2019/12/19/driving-while-indian](https://www.invw.org/2019/12/19/driving-while-indian).

6 Frank R. Baumgartner et al., *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us About Policing and Race*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

7 Mike Dolan Fliss et al., “Re-prioritizing traffic stops to reduce motor vehicle crash outcomes and racial disparities,” *Injury Epidemiology* 7(3), 2020, [injepijournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40621-019-0227-6](https://www.injepijournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40621-019-0227-6).