Did COVID-Induced Reductions in Vermont Traffic Stops Lower Racial Disparities?

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The COVID-19 pandemic led law enforcement agencies across the country to conduct fewer traffic stops in order to reduce contagion and because there were fewer cars on the road. We analyzed Vermont's traffic data to identify the impact of the changes in traffic policing on overall stop rates and racial disparities in traffic policing.[2] These results can help to inform the vibrant debate in Vermont on what the role of policing in our communities should be and help us evaluate whether we are over-policed. Our goal in providing this analysis is to stimulate interest in that discussion in a way that leads to more trust in policing, reduced racial disparities, and an appropriate allocation of resources to policing.

Our main findings are:

- Statewide, traffic stops fell by 40% in 2020. But almost one fifth of agencies *increased*, rather than decreased their stops.
- Vermont's stop rate per 1,000 residents fell by almost half, from 318 to 187. Still, our rate is well above the (pre-COVID) national average of 81.[3]
- Amongst agencies that reduced stops in 2020, the lower number of traffic stops appears to have contributed to a narrowing of racial disparities in arrest and search rates.
- Statewide, there was little impact on racial disparities in stop rates. For the state as a whole, stops of white drivers decreased by 40%, but only 38% for Black drivers.

The following are our more detailed findings:

About 70,000 fewer cars were stopped in Vermont in 2020 than in 2019.[4] That's a 40% decrease. This is a substantial reduction in stops although some states had even larger

[2] Data used in this analysis are available from Vermont Criminal Justice Council at: https://vcjc.vermont.gov/content/traffic-stops-race-data.

[3] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. (2020) *Contacts Between the Police and the Public 2018- Statistical Tables*.

[4] We would have preferred to compare March-December in 2019 and 2020, but many agencies fail to report date and time of stop. As a result, estimates presented here are likely an underestimate of the decrease in car stops in 2020.

reduction. The reduction in stops is good news in the sense that prior to the pandemic, Vermont had much higher stop rates per 1,000 residents than the national average. Nationally, police stop 81 drivers per 1,000 residents. In Vermont, prior to the pandemic, the state's stop rate was 318 per 1,000 residents. That fell to 187 in 2020. Even with that decline, Vermont's stop rate remains substantially above the (pre-COVID) national average.

Moreover, not all Vermont law enforcement agencies reduced their stops in 2020. About 20% of Vermont law enforcement agencies actually *increased* their traffic stops by 30% last year. Stops by these 17 agencies comprised 7% of all stops in 2019, rising to 16% in 2020. Most notably, Wilmington increased stops by 109%, Dover by 80%, and Franklin County Sheriff's Department by 57%. (See the table below).

More than half the agencies that increased stops in 2020 increased stops of Black drivers by a higher percentage than of white drivers. For example, in Wilmington, stops of white drivers doubled but stops of Black drivers increased by almost 400%. In Norwich, stops of white drivers increased 14% but doubled for Black drivers. Overall, if we look at the agencies that increased their traffic stops in 2020, racial disparities widened substantially. For that group, stops of white drivers increased 29% compared to a 54% increase in stops of Black drivers

For those agencies that did decrease stops in 2020, did this also lead to a reduction in racial disparities in traffic policing? The good news is that the lower number of traffic stops in 2020 appears to have contributed to a reduction of racial disparities in arrest and search rates. There were 30% fewer arrests of Black drivers in 2020, while arrests of white drivers fell 20%. Thus, although Black drivers are still more likely to be arrested than white drivers in Vermont, arrest rate differences declined in 2020.

The racial gap in search rates also narrowed. Black drivers were 24% less likely to be searched than in 2019, and white drivers 19% less likely to be searched. This is a modest improvement but progress nevertheless. Black drivers are still approximately 2.75 times more likely to be searched than white drivers. (In both years, Black drivers were less likely than white drivers to be found with contraband that results in a citation or arrest, indicating continued over-searching of Black drivers).

Among some agencies that reduced the overall number of traffic stops in 2020, however, racial disparities widened. Essex County Sheriff's Department reduced stops of white drivers by 22% but increased stops of Black drivers by 250%. In Brandon, stops of white drivers fell 61% but stops of Black drivers increased by 71%. And in Pittsford, stops of white drivers fell 36% but increased 87% for Black drivers.

In sum, the 2020 data provide some evidence that reducing the number of stops can help to reduce lower disparities in arrests and searches, if not stops.

Did the decrease in traffic stops compromise public safety as measured by accidents? We can't answer that precisely because we don't know how many cars were on the road in 2020. But Burlington's experience provides some information for us. Burlington has substantially reduced traffic stops in recent years. For example, in 2017, Burlington's stop rate per 1,000 residents was 144, already far below the state average. This fell to just 52 per 1,000 in 2019 (before COVID hit). During that time, traffic accidents *fell* by 6%. At least during these years, we can safely say that public safety as measured by traffic accidents was not harmed as a result of stopping fewer cars in Burlington.

Table 1. Percentage Change in Stops from 2019 to 2020

a. Agencies that Decreased Traffic Stops

Agency	Change in White Drivers Stopped	Change in Black Drivers Stopped	Change in Total Stops	White Drivers Stopped (2020)	Black Drivers Stopped (2020)	Total Stops (2020)
All Vermont	-40%	-38%	-40%	96,983	3,484	104,854
All Police	-31%	-31%	-31%	53,367	2,395	58,419
All Sheriffs	-32%	-24%	-32%	22,161	436	23,268
VSP	-59%	-58%	-59%	21,455	653	23,167
Addison County	-64%	-64%	-64%	1,703	32	1,780
Barre City	-18%	-20%	-18%	1,343	49	1,425
Barre Town	-61%	-71%	-61%	667	7	687
Bellows Falls	-25%	-13%	-25%	1,147	28	1,209
Bennington	-34%	-20%	-36%	3,175	105	3,403
Bennington County	-42%	-41%	-43%	1,126	22	1,160
Berlin	-46%	-39%	-46%	1,075	34	1,127
Bethel	-53%	0%	-37%	9	0	17
Bradford	-64%	-100%	-63%	35	0	36
Brandon	-61%	71%	-60%	282	12	299
Brattleboro	-28%	-46%	-26%	2,383	75	2,705
Brighton	-13%	0%	-13%	20	0	20
Bristol	15%	20%	-4%	664	6	718
Burlington	-42%	-37%	-44%	939	121	1,117
Caledonia County	-5%	0%	-1%	208	0	218
Chester	-57%	-27%	-56%	207	8	240
Chittenden County	-14%	-11%	-13%	2,983	125	3,219
Colchester	-29%	-40%	-28%	1,980	116	2,202
Essex	-42%	-14%	-42%	2,441	178	2,760
Essex County	-22%	250%	-21%	507	7	542

Fair Haven	-40%	36%	-38%	1,166	38	1,256
Hardwick	-4%	0%	-3%	328	7	343
Hartford	-53%	-60%	-54%	1,033	34	1,129
Hinesburg	-6%	-25%	-5%	657	12	693
Killington	-93%	0%	-92%	12	2	16
Lamoille County	-30%	-31%	-29%	808	24	852
Lyndon	-28%	0%	-27%	265	4	272
Manchester	-24%	-14%	-22%	778	31	850
Middlebury	-16%	-21%	-16%	950	27	1,003
Milton	-48%	-48%	-48%	1,957	65	2,061
Montpelier	-50%	-34%	-49%	1,005	33	1,069
Newport	-41%	-37%	-39%	636	12	675
Northfield	-5%	15%	-8%	452	15	492
Orange County	-46%	-40%	-46%	896	12	927
Pawlet	-40%	-100%	-57%	3	0	3
Pittsford	-36%	87%	-29%	179	28	218
Richmond	-81%	-100%	-80%	117	0	124
Rutland County	-43%	-47%	-41%	2,519	47	2,681
S. Burlington	-35%	-2%	-33%	1,142	161	1,360
Shelburne	0%	-22%	-4%	1,131	51	1,233
Springfield	-58%	-38%	-58%	697	15	727
St. Albans	-34%	-37%	-35%	2,586	57	2,701
St. Johnsbury	-18%	35%	-15%	955	23	1,007
Swanton	-24%	0%	-24%	588	10	622
Thetford	-49%	0%	-51%	141	4	146
UVM	-70%	-80%	-71%	290	22	329
Vergennes	-57%	-39%	-57%	775	43	859
VT DMV	-25%	-37%	-27%	4,878	419	5,693
Washington County	-37%	40%	-36%	1,291	21	1,337
Weathersfield	-17%	1,000%	-13%	288	11	314
Williston	-53%	-51%	-53%	1,776	107	1,966
Windham County	-47%	-18%	-47%	1,435	9	1,459
Windsor	-84%	-70%	-83%	135	3	144
Windsor County	-33%	-34%	-33%	3,680	56	3,926
Winooski	-66%	-78%	-67%	452	60	554
Woodstock	-24%	18%	-20%	553	26	645

b. Agencies that Increased Traffic Stops

Agency	Change in White Drivers Stopped	Change in Black Drivers Stopped	Change in Total Stops	White Drivers Stopped (2020)	Black Drivers Stopped (2020)	Total Stops (2020)
Castleton	30%	95%	30%	1,466	43	1,527
Dover	72%	229%	80%	759	23	864
Fairlee	0%	-100%	9%	31	0	36
Franklin County	58%	142%	57%	2,146	29	2,206
Grand Isle County	0%	20%	1%	1,912	42	1,984
Ludlow	6%	144%	11%	663	22	717
Morristown	1%	-4%	1%	817	25	863
Norwich	14%	100%	16%	743	10	796
Orleans County	0%	67%	0%	947	10	977
Poultney	21%	67%	23%	453	10	476
Royalton	51%	-14%	31%	216	6	236
Rutland	48%	16%	45%	2,435	73	2,573
Rutland Town	17%	0%	16%	214	9	229
Stowe	6%	8%	6%	1,470	52	1,559
Wells	50%	0%	50%	9	0	9
Wilmington	109%	389%	109%	1,176	44	1,376

Note: Green indicates a greater percent *reduction* in the number of traffics stops from 2019 to 2020. Red signifies a greater percent *increase* from 2019 to 2020. Yellow reflects a small change year over year. Stops of Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans are omitted for brevity. *Weathersfield* stands out as an agency with a substantial increase in stops of Black drivers. To contextualize that result, in 2019, 347 white drivers were stopped and 1 Black driver. In 2020, the number of white drivers stopped fell to 288, while stops of Black drivers rose to 11.