

**Testimony of Daniel Bodah, Esq.
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**Before the House Judiciary Committee of Maryland
In Support of Maryland House Bill (HB) 635, Motor Vehicles
Secondary Enforcement & Admissibility of Evidence**

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The Vera Institute of Justice appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony to the Maryland House Judiciary Committee in support of HB 635. Vera is a national research and policy organization that has been working to end mass incarceration and build safe, thriving communities for more than 60 years. As a senior program associate with Vera's Redefining Public Safety initiative, I work with law enforcement leaders, legislators, and community members across the United States in efforts to improve roadway safety and address harmful racial disparities in traffic enforcement while maintaining public safety.

Nationally, police stop more than 20 million motorists a year for alleged traffic violations.¹ A significant number of these traffic stops are for minor violations that do not affect public safety. This is also true in Maryland. In 2023, the most common reasons for traffic stops in Maryland given by local and state police were registration violations (23 percent) and equipment defects (20 percent).² Available data covering 2016 to 2023 shows that these are long-standing enforcement trends: over this period, equipment defects are the top reason for stops (20 percent), and registration violations are third (15 percent).³

However, traffic safety research also shows that crashes and crash-related deaths have increased in recent years in Maryland, and these low-level infractions are not significant factors in roadway safety.⁴ As detailed below, these stops for low-level infractions are not only unnecessary for keeping roads safe, but they also do not effectively prevent crime, and they disproportionately subject Black drivers and other drivers of color to harmful, unwarranted stops, searches, and uses of force. HB 635 presents a reasonable policy approach to modernize traffic enforcement that will prioritize traffic safety, reduce harm to communities, and free police to fight serious crime more effectively.

I. HB 635 Represents a Solution

Addressing low-level stops is emerging as a key solution to the harms caused by traffic stops, as well as high traffic fatalities nationwide.⁵ Backed by evidence, states from Virginia to Oregon and cities from Philadelphia to Ann Arbor have enacted policies like HB 635 that remove police from enforcement of minor traffic violations. By Vera's count, at least 12 jurisdictions nationwide have passed such policies, and many more have done so by law enforcement agencies directing officers to refocus traffic enforcement on safety.⁶ Extensive research shows that these policies provide four key benefits:

First, policies like HB 635 improve traffic safety by freeing police to focus enforcement on unsafe driving behavior. A major study showed that by virtually eliminating stops for minor traffic violations, one jurisdiction in North Carolina was able to focus on safety stops for dangerous driving. This reduced traffic accidents and racial disparity in overall stops—with no impact on non-traffic-related crime.⁷ Traffic enforcement provides safety when it focuses on high-risk behaviors like speeding and impaired

driving. By redirecting limited police resources away from low-level infractions unrelated to road safety, HB 635 would support Maryland's strategic highway safety goals.

Second, ending low-level stops can promote public safety and community trust. The frequency of these stops and their disparate impact on communities of color can compound distrust in government institutions such as police departments and prosecutors' offices, which depend on the public's cooperation to solve crimes.⁸ Studies repeatedly show that Black drivers and other drivers of color are not only more likely to be stopped than white drivers but are also treated more harshly during stops.⁹ Further, they are subjected to more use of force and more frequent searches despite being less likely to have contraband.¹⁰

Third, these policies can protect drivers and police from being hurt in unnecessary traffic stops.¹¹ In 2024, police killed 152 people during traffic stops.¹² Traffic stops are also dangerous for law enforcement officers; being killed by a passing car during a traffic stop is one of the top five reasons for line-of-duty deaths.¹³ In addition to physical harms, fines and fees from traffic stops can cause economic harm, pushing low-income Americans further into a cycle of debt and poverty.¹⁴ Further, the social costs of police interactions like traffic stops include increased risk of negative impact to health, educational development, civic participation, and economic security.¹⁵

Fourth, these policies reduce harmful racial disparities. The harms of traffic stops are not equally felt. Nationally, more than 25 percent of people killed in traffic stops are Black, despite Black people making up only 12 percent of the population.¹⁶ And although racial disparities abound throughout traffic enforcement, studies in Montgomery County, Maryland, and elsewhere find greater disparities in non-safety stops than in safety-related stops.¹⁷ Eliminating these stops works: after Philadelphia instituted its policy on low-level stops, traffic stops involving Black men went down 54 percent.¹⁸

Long-standing racial disparities in Maryland's traffic enforcement are documented in the Race-Based Traffic Stop Data Dashboard established by the legislature with [Transportation Article § 25–113\(f\)\(2\)](#). In 2023, Black drivers made up more than 43 percent of drivers stopped by police—despite representing only 32 percent of the state population. Conversely, white drivers accounted for 39 percent of stopped drivers but 57 percent of the population.¹⁹ These racial disparities have persisted since the beginning of data collection in 2016.²⁰

II. Ending Low Level Traffic Stops Has Proven to Increase Public Safety

Opponents of these policies tend to argue that these stops are necessary for fighting crime and keeping the road safe, both of which are demonstrably false.

Regarding public safety, which is often the stated reason for enforcing these minor infractions, low-level stops very rarely result in the recovery of guns or other contraband.²¹ Data from across the country has repeatedly confirmed this, including Vera's own research in Suffolk County, Massachusetts.²² A 2018 study of nonmoving violation traffic stops in Nashville, Tennessee, found that less than one-tenth of one percent (0.8 out of every 1,000) of such stops resulted in police charging someone with possessing a weapon. The Nashville study also found—as did the previously referenced North Carolina study—that non-traffic crime did not go up when the volume of traffic stops went down.²³

Looking more broadly at *all* traffic stops, studies find that they are not an effective crime fighting tool.²⁴ For example, a recent study of the eight largest California police departments revealed that firearms were confiscated in only about 0.5 percent of stops.²⁵ In Maryland, the Montgomery County Police Department's (MCPD) numbers are even lower: in 2022, MCPD confiscated firearms in just 172 out of 35,945 traffic stops, a 0.5 percent recovery rate, or approximately one seizure per 209 stops.²⁶ Policies like HB 635 actually seem to make police searches more effective: after Philadelphia removed eight non-safety infractions from police enforcement, the number of stops dropped but the number of successful seizures of firearms *increased*.²⁷ While addressing gun violence is an important goal, police should use methods far more precise than the needle in a haystack approach of searching vehicles for firearms during tens of thousands of unrelated traffic stops, given the grave risk to drivers' safety and community trust caused by these stops.

Regarding road safety, banning low-level stops does not prohibit police from making traffic stops due to more serious equipment violations, like two missing headlights or anything causing visibly reckless driving. Also, the equipment violations enforced in low-level traffic stops do not contribute to accidents, as a Connecticut analysis found. For example, defective lighting accounted for 9.4 percent of all Connecticut traffic stops, but only 0.1 percent of crashes between 2015 and 2019.²⁸ The evidence is clear: eliminating the low-level stops specified in HB 635 will not prevent police from stopping dangerous driving. The status quo has failed to keep Maryland roadways safe from crashes, and modernizing roadway safety requires laws like HB 635 that refocus enforcement on the dangerous, intoxicated, and distracted driving that we know is responsible for carnage on the roads.²⁹

III. Policies like HB 635 Have Bipartisan Voter Support

Polling from Safer Cities Research indicates that 69 percent of all voters support such policies, with support from 81 percent of Democrats and 59 percent of Republicans. When asked the best approach to dealing with a driver with a single burned-out brake or taillight, for example, only 21 percent of voters selected a stop by an armed police officer.³⁰ Voters clearly understand there are better ways to handle these issues.

HB 635 takes a meaningful yet commonsense approach to the harms of low-level traffic stops, curtailing police enforcement only for a targeted and evidence-backed list of minor violations unrelated to public safety. We encourage the Maryland legislature to join the national movement to modernize traffic enforcement through a well-crafted policy that can save lives and also reduce harmful racial disparities. Everyone in Maryland deserves to be safe behind the wheel, and HB 635 is a step in that direction.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute testimony. Please contact me at dbodah@vera.org if the Vera Institute of Justice may provide further information or assistance.

¹ The Stanford Open Policing Project, "Findings," 2023, <https://openpolicing.stanford.edu/findings/>.

² Maryland Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy (GOCPP), "Race-Based Traffic Stop Data Dashboard," accessed January 24, 2025, <https://gocpp.maryland.gov/data-dashboards/traffic-stop-data-dashboard>.

³ Ibid.

- ⁴ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *Traffic Safety Facts 2022: A Compilation of Motor Vehicle Crash Data* (Washington, DC: Department of Transportation, 2024), “Table 64. Related Factors for Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes,” 111, <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813656>; and Maryland Department of Transportation Motor Vehicle Administration Highway Safety Office, “Maryland Crash Data,” accessed January 25, 2025, <https://zerodeathsmd.gov/resources/crashdata>.
- ⁵ See Sarah Holder, “These Cities Are Limiting Traffic Stops for Minor Offenses,” Bloomberg CityLab + Equality, February 2, 2023, perma.cc/AJW7-ZMFY. For high traffic fatalities in the United States, see Jonathan Adkins, “U.S. Traffic Deaths Remain Unacceptably High Despite Minor Decrease,” press release (Washington, DC: Governors Highway Safety Association, January 9, 2023), perma.cc/9ZGK-HPSX.
- ⁶ Jurisdictions passing these policies include Virginia, Philadelphia (PA), San Francisco (CA), Pittsburgh (PA), West Hollywood (CA), Brooklyn Center (MN), Berkeley (CA), Oregon, Evanston (IL), New York, Chapel Hill (NC), and Memphis (TN). Jurisdiction enacting such policy through police order include Fayetteville (NC), Nashville (TN), Lansing (MI), Los Angeles (CA), Seattle (WA), Portland (OR), Culver City (CA), Oakland (CA), Minneapolis (MN), and Mecklenburg County (NC). Jurisdictions with relevant prosecutorial policies include Ingham County (MI), Ramsey County (MN), Chittenden County (VT), and Washtenaw County (MI).
- ⁷ Mike Dolan Fliss, Frank Baumgartner, and Paul Delamater, et al., “Re-prioritizing traffic stops to reduce motor vehicle crash outcomes and racial disparities,” *Injury Epidemiology* 7, no. 3 (2020), perma.cc/S75L-HMUE.
- ⁸ Libby Doyle and Susan Nembhard, “Police Traffic Stops Have Little to Do with Public Safety,” Urban Institute, April 16, 2021, perma.cc/UG9K-Z7X2; and Simone Weichselbaum, Emily R. Siegel, and Andrew Blankstein, “Police face a ‘crisis of trust’ with Black motorists. One state’s surprising policy may help,” NBC News, October 7, 2021, perma.cc/T2FX-WW4H.
- ⁹ Stanford Open Policing Project, “Findings,” 2023.
- ¹⁰ Center for Policing Equity, “Compounding Anti-Black Racial Disparities in Police Stops,” October 9, 2024, <https://www.policingequity.org/newsroom/official-statements/cpe-publishes-white-paper-on-compounding-anti-black-racial-disparities-in-police-stops>.
- ¹¹ See Sarah Holder, “These Cities Are Limiting Traffic Stops for Minor Offenses,” Bloomberg CityLab + Equality, February 2, 2023, perma.cc/AJW7-ZMFY. For more on the physical harms of traffic stops, see Sam Levin, “US Police Have Killed Nearly 600 People in Traffic Stops Since 2017, Data Shows,” *Guardian*, April 21, 2022, perma.cc/YS2U-SZD4; for psychological harms, see Rheana Murray, “The Conversation Black Parents Have With Their Kids About Cops,” ABC News, December 8, 2014, perma.cc/J7ZZ-HVAW; for economic harm, see German Lopez, “The Tyranny of a Traffic Ticket,” *Vox*, August 10, 2016, perma.cc/K6E5-3BGU; for high traffic fatalities in the United States, see Jonathan Adkins, “U.S. Traffic Deaths Remain Unacceptably High Despite Minor Decrease,” press release (Washington, DC: Governors Highway Safety Association, January 9, 2023), perma.cc/9ZGK-HPSX.
- ¹² Mapping Police Violence, “2024 Police Violence Report,” 2025, <https://policeviolencereport.org>.
- ¹³ National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, “Causes of Law Enforcement Deaths: Over the Past Decade (2014-2023),” <https://nleomf.org/memorial/facts-figures/officer-fatality-data/causes-of-law-enforcement-deaths>.
- ¹⁴ The Crime Report, “Driven to Debt: How Traffic Fines ‘Punish Americans for Their Poverty,’” March 8, 2019, perma.cc/6RQ4-2ZQR.
- ¹⁵ Aaron Stagoff-Belfort, Daniel Bodah, Daniela Gilbert, *The Social Costs of Policing* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), perma.cc/6ZN7-M2UT.
- ¹⁶ Levin, “US Police Have Killed,” 2022. See also, Mapping Police Violence, “2022 Police Violence Report,” 2023.
- ¹⁷ For racial disparities in all traffic enforcement, see Emma Pierson, Camelia Simoiu, Jan Overgoor, et al., “A Large-Scale Analysis of Racial Disparities in Police Stops Across the United States,” *Nature* 4 (2020), 736-745, perma.cc/3LR6-ZBDF. For racial disparities in low-level stops, see Frank R. Baumgartner, Derek A. Epp, and Kelsey Shoub, *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us About Policing and Race* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For racial disparities in Montgomery County traffic stops, see Natalia Carrizosa, Memorandum from Montgomery County (MD) Office of Legislative Oversight to County Council, OLO Memorandum Report 2022-12, re: “Analysis of data Montgomery Traffic Violations Dataset,” October 25, 2022, 15-19, [http://perma.cc/DQG6-VNXN](https://perma.cc/DQG6-VNXN).

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- ¹⁸ Sammy Caiola, “Data Shows Philly Traffic Stops Involving Black Men are Down 54 percent” WHYY, March 6, 2023, [perma.cc/LMJ3-FFSH](https://www.whyy.com/news/local/data-shows-philly-traffic-stops-involving-black-men-are-down-54-percent). The findings from Fayetteville, NC also showed that eliminating low level traffic stops reduced racial disparities. See Fliss et al., “Re-prioritizing traffic stops,” 2020.
- ¹⁹ Maryland GOCPP, “Race-Based Traffic Stop Data Dashboard.” For population demographics, see U.S. Census Bureau, “Quick Facts Maryland,” access January 27, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MD/PST045223>.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ ACLU-DC & ACLU Analytics, *Racial Disparities in Stops by the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department: Review of Five Months of Data* (Washington, DC: ACLU, 2020), [perma.cc/N4B8-AA86](https://www.aclu.org/document/racial-disparities-stops-by-the-dc-metropolitan-police-department-review-five-months-data).
- ²² Seleeke Flingai, Mona Sahaf, Nicole Battle, and Savannah Castañeda, *An Analysis of Racial Disparities in Police Traffic Stops in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, from 2010 to 2019* (New York: Vera 2022), 34.
- ²³ The Policing Project at New York University School of Law, *An Assessment of Traffic Stops and Policing Strategies in Nashville* (New York: New York University School of Law, 2018), 9, [perma.cc/YFD2-7RJL](https://www.policingproject.org/assessments/assessing-traffic-stops-and-policing-strategies-in-nashville); and Fliss et al., “Re-prioritizing traffic stops,” 2020.
- ²⁴ Geoff Pearson and Mike Rowe, “Gone Fishing: The Operation of Police Vehicle Stops in England and Wales,” *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, February 25, 2023, doi.org/10.1177/17488958231155275.
- ²⁵ Deepak Premkumar, Andrew Skelton, and Magnus Lofstrom, “How Often Are Firearms Confiscated During Traffic Stops?” Public Policy Institute of California, February 16, 2023, [perma.cc/92WP-RHWJ](https://www.ppic.org/publication/how-often-are-firearms-confiscated-during-traffic-stops/).
- ²⁶ Montgomery County Council, Transportation & Environment and Public Safety Committees, *Discussion: OLO Memorandum Report 2022-12: Analysis of Data Montgomery Traffic Violations Dataset*, February 6, 2023, 1:32:00 (statement of Captain Brian Dillman, Traffic Operations Division, MCPD), [youtube.com/watch?v=y0d_5_FhGxo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0d_5_FhGxo).
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- ²⁹ For information on effective ways to reduce pedestrian deaths, see U.S. Department of Transportation, “What Is a Safe System Approach?” [http://transportation.gov/NRSS/SafeSystem](https://www.transportation.gov/NRSS/SafeSystem).
- ³⁰ Vera Institute of Justice, *New Polling Shows Support for Limiting Police Stops for Low-Level Traffic Violations* (New York: Vera, 2023), [perma.cc/DY9L-9FAQ](https://www.vera.org/news/new-polling-shows-support-for-limiting-police-stops-for-low-level-traffic-violations).