

CURBING PRETEXTUAL STOPS:

Early Evidence of Harm Reduction in San Francisco

Pretextual stops, also known as non-safety stops, occur when police officers pull a driver over for a legitimate, though minor, infraction, often unrelated to traffic safety, with the goal of discovering some unrelated criminal offense. On July 17, 2024, the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) implemented a [policy](#) restricting officers from making stops based on certain pretextual reasons, such as a missing front license plate or defective taillights. In a new [report](#), the Center for Policing Equity (CPE) assessed whether the policy coincided with changes in traffic safety, public safety, and racial disparities and, through original data collection, sought to ensure experiences of people directly affected by these stops informed the analysis.

Key Findings

CPE analyzed SFPD stop data from 2018 through 2025, to determine the extent to which drivers in San Francisco experience harmful impacts of pretextual stops, and how policing practices and safety outcomes changed following the new policy's implementation. Overall:

- Pretextual stops were decreasing before the policy, and decreased further after its adoption — from 16% of all stops in 2018, to 5.2% in 2025. The proportion of stops for pretextual reasons decreased across all racial groups studied, but Black drivers still experience pretextual stops twice as often as White drivers.
- Officers conducted discretionary searches in 10.7% of pretextual stops, compared to 3.6% of other traffic stops. Despite the higher search rates, officers found contraband less often in searches during pretextual stops. With fewer pretextual stops, discretionary searches decreased for all racial groups, but racial disparities in search rates persisted.
- The overall number of firearms and other weapons recovered from searches at traffic stops did not change.
- Officers used force twice as often at pretextual stops (0.6%) as at all other traffic stops (0.3%), and the reduction in pretextual stops also coincided with the lowest rate of use of force over the 2018-2025 period.
- Following implementation of the policy, the average number of violent crimes decreased from between 127 and 165 per day from 2018 through 2023, to 82 per day in 2025. Similarly, the average number of property crimes decreased from between 116 and 151 per day between 2018 and 2023, to 73 per day in 2025, mirroring similar decreases at the state and federal levels.
- Stops for pretextual reasons other than those included in the policy increased following implementation of the policy, suggesting the need for a more comprehensive policy.

Community Experiences

CPE conducted interviews with San Francisco community members who had recently experienced at least one pretextual stop. The qualitative findings show that:

- Most participants reported being stopped for a pretextual reason after the policy went into effect.
- Nearly 80% of participants did not believe they were stopped for the reason given and almost half said they were racially profiled.
- Fifty-four percent of participants described negative experiences with officers conducting the stop. These interviewees described negative effects to their physical and mental health (79%), fear and anxiety around driving after the stop (50%), and altering where they drive (63%), among other adverse outcomes for transportation, relationships, and finances.



Quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrates that eliminating pretextual stops is a promising step toward reducing harmful police interactions and the negative outcomes that often follow from such interactions. Further, CPE's findings suggest that SFPD may be able to include additional pretextual stop types to deepen the improvements already made without compromising public safety.