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Vision Zero's Enforcement Problem: Using Community Engagement to Craft Equitable Traffic Safety Strategies

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Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.7922/G2K35RVT

Vision Zero's Enforcement Problem: Using Community Engagement to Craft Equitable Traffic Safety Strategies

Rabi Abonour, MURP (2018)

Research Topic

As traffic fatalities increase in America, cities are turning to a traffic safety framework called Vision Zero, which sets as a goal the elimination of all traffic-related injuries. Vision Zero plans are generally based on a set of strategies known as the “three Es”: education (of road users), engineering (of streets), and enforcement (of traffic laws). The focus on enforcement has drawn criticism from activists concerned about racially biased policing; researchers find that people of color are more likely than white people to be stopped by the police for traffic violations and are more likely to be searched after being stopped.

This report analyzes the relationship between Vision Zero and racial justice. The research focuses particularly on task force-style community engagement conducted by cities, along with community concerns about racially biased policing and city effectiveness at addressing these concerns in Vision Zero plans. By talking to government officials and activists in four cities — Portland, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago — the researcher identified major shortcomings of existing Vision Zero processes and developed a set of recommendations to help address these issues.

Main Findings

- Resource constraints limit both planners and community members. Government staff are often pressured to create Vision Zero plans in just a year, leaving activists and community members little time to meaningfully participate to shape the plan.
- Lack of inter-agency coordination can hamper plan implementation. Vision Zero requires cooperation between multiple city departments, most notably transportation and police. Because neither agency oversees the other, they can become gridlocked over the role of enforcement.
- Stakeholders often lack defined roles in the planning process. In some cities, activists are brought onto a task force, while other cities convene a task force made up of government representatives but hold open meetings or invite a limited number of activists. When stakeholders concerned about racial justice are more fully included in the process they are more able to effect the final plan.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Engaging a diverse group of stakeholders can lead to the adoption of Vision Zero plans that are conscious of racial equity.
- Cities must support Vision Zero with funding, both to hire enough staff to conduct in-depth engagement and to compensate stakeholders for their time.
- Automated enforcement has the potential to reduce racial disparities in traffic policing, but needs to be paired with reduced fines for low-income drivers.

Study

For this study, the researcher focused on four cities that have published Vision Zero plans and are home to advocates and/or government staff who have spoken out about the importance of racial equity in Vision Zero. The researcher spoke to at least one government official and at least one activist in each city and conducted 11 interviews in total. These four case studies do not tell the entire story of Vision Zero, traffic enforcement, and racial equity. This research is instead meant as a starting point to draw preliminary conclusions about Vision Zero planning.

Conclusion/Recommendations

- Prioritize proactive outreach. The best way to improve outreach is to hire staff with deep connections to the local community. Holding task force meetings outside of weekday business hours and compensating attendees for participation could also help ensure more diverse voices be included in the planning process.
- House Vision Zero within the mayor's office. Vision Zero is a complicated, politically charged effort that requires strong leadership in city government. Planning departments do not have enough power to make transformative changes to city policy without mayoral support. In addition, mayoral oversight can help ensure the program gets the funding necessary for success.
- Pair automated enforcement with new fine structures. Automated enforcement has the opportunity to remove racial bias from traffic policing, but cities must address the issue of traffic fines disproportionately affecting low-income communities of color. This could

be accomplished by establishing programs that allow low-income drivers to pay reduced fines or perform community service instead.

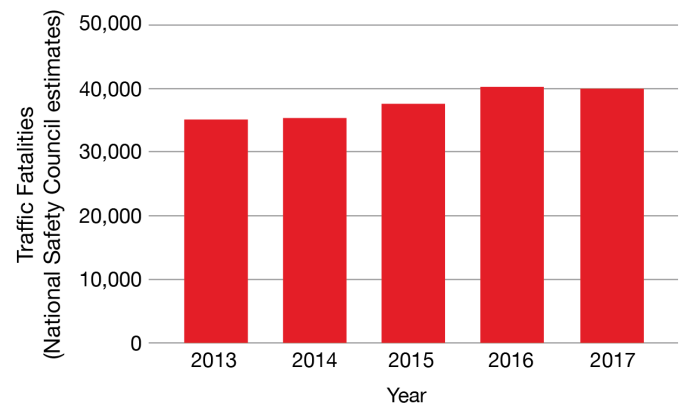
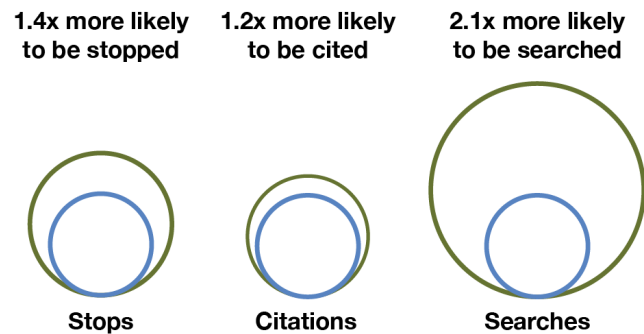


Figure 1. Traffic fatalities, 2013-2017

White Drivers vs. Black Drivers



Source: Pierson, E. et al. (2017). A large-scale analysis of racial disparities in police stops across the United States. Working paper. Retrieved from <https://5harad.com/papers/traffic-stops.pdf>

Figure 2. Stops, citations and searches of white drivers compared to black drivers.

For More Information

Abonour, R. (2018). *Vision Zero's enforcement problem: Using community engagement to craft equitable traffic safety strategies* (Masters capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://ucla.app.box.com/s/815yg8s408h8qvq3l2rstm797lg0p76l>

Research presented in this policy brief was made possible through funding received by the University of California Institute of Transportation Studies (UC ITS) from the State of California via the Public Transportation Account and the Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (Senate Bill 1). The UC ITS is a network of faculty, research and administrative staff, and students dedicated to advancing the state of the art in transportation engineering, planning, and policy for the people of California. Established by the Legislature in 1947, UC ITS has branches at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, and UCLA.



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