

More people are dying on Denver's roads as cops write far fewer traffic tickets

Citations drop by 45 percent in a decade, but street-safety advocates aren't all calling for more patrols



Michael Ciaglo, Special to the Denver Post

Denver police traffic officer John Bolen looks for speeders traveling north on Federal Boulevard Thursday, Feb. 14, 2019, in Denver. DPD officers are issuing 45 percent fewer tickets than they were 10 years ago.

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The show of force was impressive as 11 Denver police officers fanned out on Interstates 25 and 70 on a recent Friday. In short order, they handed tickets to 101 drivers and gave warnings to 21 more, the department said. The average clocked speed exceeded 80 mph, and the fastest was recorded at 110 mph.

Police intend for recurring highway “saturation patrols” like the Feb. 1 operation to [send an unmistakable message](#) to speed demons caught in the act. But such blitzes belie the larger reality in most of Denver: Drivers who flout speed limits, blow through red lights, fail to obey stop signs or otherwise drive carelessly are much less likely to get pulled over by a police officer than they were a decade ago — at a time when fatal crashes have been going up, not down.

Since 2009, as the traffic unit patrol staff has dwindled, the number of tickets filed each year in Denver County Court has dropped by nearly 45 percent, from about 145,000 back then to just under 80,000 in 2018,

according to court data requested by The Denver Post. Over the same period, the city's population has grown by about 20 percent.

DENVER TRAFFIC CITATIONS COMPARED TO CRASHES

Car crashes have increased at the same time as fewer traffic tickets have been issued.

The city is relying ever more on crazy-efficient photo enforcement, in the form of red-light cameras at four intersections and roving speed-radar vans that generated nearly 173,000 mailed citations last year.

But experts and street-safety advocates — even those who see photo enforcement as more equitable — point out that limited equipment and state restrictions on where cameras can be used render higher-speed roads and many other areas off-limits.

That makes robust traffic patrols a vital part of the equation, especially because photo citations carry lower fines than traditional tickets, don't count against drivers' records and don't monitor other kinds of moving violations.

The decline in ticket writing comes as Denver city leaders are pursuing the 2017 "Vision Zero" action plan, which aims to eliminate traffic-related deaths and serious injuries by 2030. The strategy urges improvements to road and intersection design, public education campaigns and smarter enforcement of traffic laws.

"Enforcement is directly linked to saving lives," said Michelle Roche, a Denver mother who has become a strong advocate for the plan. "People can get killed — people do get killed."

One of them was her son, Cole Sukle. In July 2016, the 14-year-old was skateboarding with two friends from his dad's house to his middle school in southeast Denver. They were turning onto a curvy stretch of Yale Avenue, in a 25 mph zone, and were in the bike lane when a drifting Audi driven by an 81-year-old woman struck Cole and a friend who was on a bike. The car crashed at high speed in a nearby park.

Cole died two days later, while his friend survived less-severe injuries. The driver, Patricia Livingston, was intoxicated and had a checkered driving

history. She faced careless driving charges but [died of her injuries](#) later that month.

“If Denver is really a Vision Zero city committed to having no traffic-related deaths, then obviously the infrastructure piece is going to take a long time to build out,” said Roche, 52, citing an unsafe road design on Yale as one factor in Cole’s death. “But what we can do right now is enforce the laws we have laid out.”

Outside Denver, [state judicial statistics](#) show a smaller overall decline in officer-initiated traffic case filings elsewhere across Colorado.

Those filings have fallen by about 27 percent in the last decade, despite the state’s long-lasting population boom. The data include most tickets written by state troopers.

The trend isn’t universal, as cities such as Aurora report that the issuance of traffic tickets has fluctuated from year to year rather than following a clear trajectory.



Jon Murray, The Denver Post

A white-painted bike was dedicated Feb. 2 as a memorial to cyclist Dave Martinez on Zuni Street at West 33rd Avenue, near where he was struck in December while biking home from work. He died Jan. 7 from his injuries.

Denver’s highest recent level of fatalities

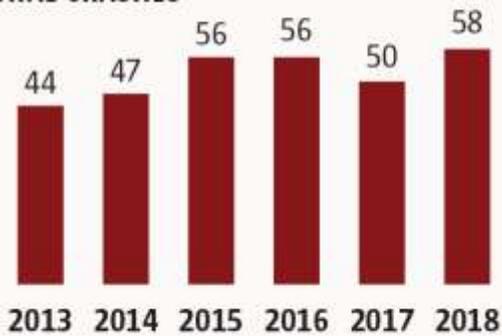
Last year, the Denver Police Department counted 63 people who were [killed on the roads](#), with an official tally of 58 separate fatal crashes —

both measures reaching the highest levels this decade. And the total number of crashes in the city has increased by 17 percent since 2013. The city's annual budget documents, while generally noting an inverse relationship between the level of traffic enforcement and the occurrence of crashes, have spelled out in recent years that other safety priorities and day-to-day traffic- and crowd-control needs have competed with road patrols.

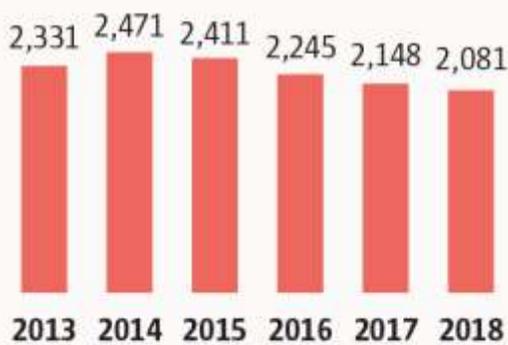
Fatal crashes rise

Fatal crashes reached their highest number since 2013. The number of people injured in accidents has decreased steadily since 2014.

FATAL CRASHES



PEOPLE INJURED IN TRAFFIC CRASHES



Source: Denver Police Department
The Denver Post

The DPD traffic patrol's day shift typically numbers about a dozen officers, with assists from district patrol officers who often write tickets too.

“We need to deploy the resources that match (Vision Zero),” said City Councilman Paul López, who represents Denver’s west neighborhoods. “And that includes officers that are on patrol.”

But Denver police officials say staffing figures for the traffic-enforcement staff, which have fallen in recent years while [overall police ranks have increased](#), tell only part of the story.

“Obviously, over the years we’ve kind of moved resources around to try to solve some problems in the districts and around the city,” said Cmdr. Patrick Phelan, whose Special Operations Division includes traffic operations.

In recent years, he said, the department has reassigned eight accident-investigation cars to the geographic police districts to allow quicker responses. It has also hired 27 civilian report technicians whose ability to respond to some crashes has freed up traffic cops’ time, and it has staffed up the photo-radar unit over the last decade.

Still, the decline in traffic patrol staffing has caught the attention of López and other council members in recent months as they have weighed a proposal to add red-light cameras at a few more intersections — a prospect most of them embrace. (That move [is on hold for more study](#) this year.) A lieutenant in the traffic enforcement bureau told a committee in December that back in 2005, he recalled being among as many as 120 officers in traffic operations.

Now, the department says there are 68 officer positions in the traffic unit, though Lt. Robert Garcia low-balled the total at 50 during his council comments.

Responded Councilman Paul Kashmann, who represents southeast Denver: “And how many more hundreds of thousands of people do we have driving our streets?”

The Post sought to burrow deeper into Denver’s traffic-ticket declines, but the Department of Public Safety’s records administrator, Mary Dulacki, said it lacked reliable data showing breakdowns by type of violation. And Denver courts declined to run a records search to show infraction breakdowns. Since DPD is in the process of switching to electronic ticketing, Dulacki said, more detailed data should be available in the future.



Michael Ciaglo, Special to the Denver Post

Denver police traffic officer John Bolen holds his speed gun as he looks for speeders along Auraria Parkway Thursday, Feb. 14, 2019, in Denver.

In Aurora, traffic tickets are way up

In Aurora, traffic enforcement has been controversial of late — voters in November [voted overwhelmingly to nix the use of red-light cameras](#), which had been installed at more than twice as many intersections as in Denver. But traditional patrolling is very much alive.

The number of traffic tickets written by officers there has increased by nearly 38 percent in the last two years, to 38,420 last year, according to the Aurora Police Department's traffic unit. That increase followed a steep decline from 2013 to 2016, after the end of a brief ramp-up of staffing in the unit, Lt. Jad Lanigan said.

Despite [studies supporting a link](#) between increased enforcement and safer driving, as drivers are put on alert, Aurora's surge in ticketing hasn't resulted in less deadly streets — not yet. Lanigan cited 33 road fatalities last year, up from 27 in 2017 and just 19 in 2013.

That has left the suburban city's police brass scratching their heads — especially because their enforcement strategies are more targeted than in the past, relying upon crash data and safety complaints.

DPD's Phelan also cites a more data-driven and responsive approach intended to make the smaller traffic ranks more effective.

"All of these (digital) speed signs you see around the metro area showing what your speed is — those are keeping information," Lanigan said, while making drivers aware of their speeds.

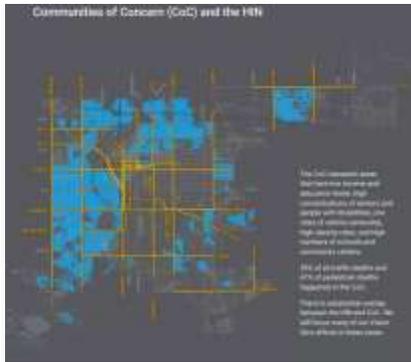


Image from Denver Vision Zero plan

Denver’s Vision Zero plan identifies a “High Injury Network” of streets that are frequent sites of wrecks. “Communities of Concern,” shaded blue, have low average incomes and fewer people driving and are viewed as at higher risk for traffic-related injuries.

Phelan said DPD officers view traffic enforcement as a strategy rather than a simple tally of tickets.

“We do a lot of warnings,” he said. “As far as Vision Zero is concerned, we do a lot based on analysis with the High Injury Network,” city lingo for a collection of major streets such as Federal Boulevard that are frequent sites of wrecks, **often maiming or killing people on foot**. He added: “We’re concerned (about making sure) the tickets we’re giving have an impact on the problem we’re trying to solve.”

While crashes involving pedestrians and cyclists have fluctuated in recent years, and fatalities have risen, the number of people injured overall has been on the decline each year since 2013 — one bright spot for Denver. Injuries have dropped nearly 11 percent during that span, to 2,081 last year.

Are more traffic cops the answer? Some say no.

Denver’s [Vision Zero plan](#), in noting “a significant problem with speeding and aggressive driving, driving under the influence, distracted driving, and failure to use motorcycle helmets and seat belts,” calls out a need for more traffic enforcement.

Instead, both back wider use of automated photo enforcement, since the devices catch every violation in a target area.

The worry — also articulated by the DPD’s Phelan — is that more patrols could overburden low-income communities and places with large minority populations.

“The last thing we want to do is give police officers another reason to be pulling over black and brown people in poor neighborhoods in Denver,” said Jill Locantore, who chairs [the Vision Zero Coalition](#). She’s also executive director of WalkDenver, which presses for pedestrian safety. Those areas tend to be along commuter corridors and state highways, including Federal and Colorado boulevards and Colfax Avenue, that state officials haven’t yet cleared for Denver’s photo-enforcement operations.

“So our biggest focus, policy-wise, has been fending off the attempts by the state legislature to ban automated enforcement,” she said. “In the way that it is now, it’s not allowed in the places where it’s needed most.”

After then-Gov. John Hickenlooper [vetoed previous attempts to ban some or all photo-enforcement devices](#), that specter is back in the form of [House Bill 1099](#), which targets all forms — and under a new governor whose views on the devices aren’t known. The bipartisan legislation has a hearing Feb. 20.

In the past, supporters of a ban have questioned the cameras’ public safety value and [suggested that local governments used them to raise money](#), a charge denied by DPD and other agencies.

Indeed, they do raise a lot — Denver has taken in \$65.5 million since 2009 from photo red-light and speeding citations (which typically cost \$75 and \$40, respectively), while Aurora was bringing in more than \$2 million a year from its red-light camera network. Both far exceeded each city’s contracting costs to operate the systems.

Skeptical state officials have restricted photo enforcement: Speed-radar vans must have a human on board to monitor the equipment, and they can only be staged on streets that have a speed limit of 35 mph or less — and only in residential areas, in school or construction zones, or next to parks.

Some in Denver, like Councilmen López and Kashmann, want increased enforcement of both the human and electronic varieties.

“We hear daily, all over our city, real fear — it’s past the point of concern — for what our traffic situation’s doing,” Kashmann told traffic enforcement

leaders at the December meeting. “Thank you for what you’re doing. We will hope to hear more requests for more bodies and technology, whatever (you need).”

But Phelan, the DPD commander, says more positions aren’t in the plans.