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After years of debate, police make major change in number of Nashville traffic stops

Mariah Timms, Nashville Tennessean Published 10:00 p.m. CT April 17, 2019 | Updated 10:11 p.m. CT April 17, 2019
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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Traffic stops dropped from 99,742 in a four-month period to just 39,073
- The tactic has been debated since the 2016 study "Driving While Black" found racial disparities
- A second study found that Nashville stopped drivers more than twice as often as comparable cities

The number of traffic stops conducted by the Metro Nashville Police Department plummeted in recent months [after two reports showed the strategy failed to reduce crime](#).

While traffic stops had been declining, this acceleration is the clearest indication yet of the department's departure from a policy that shaped policing in Nashville for more than a decade.

Between October 2018 and February 2019, MNPD conducted 39,073 traffic stops, which is more than 60% fewer than in the same time period the previous year.

[Although the department insists there has been no citywide policy shift](#), precinct commanders have instituted practices that have pulled officers from traffic stop duty.

"Simply doing traffic stops and lighting up an area with blue lights isn't necessarily the most effective strategy," East Precinct Commander David Imhoff said. "Strategies evolve, crime patterns evolve, we have to evolve with the times."

In records obtained by the USA TODAY Network - Tennessee, MNPD reported:

- 105,616 traffic stops between Oct. 1, 2016, and Feb. 28, 2017.
- 99,742 between Oct. 1, 2017, and Feb. 28, 2018.
- 39,073 between Oct. 1, 2018, and Feb. 28, 2019.

The drop was just 5.6% from October 2017 to February 2018 compared to same period the year before.

Shifting policing strategies

The latest plunge comes after the [Policing Project, a nonprofit led by the New York University School of Law](#), released findings in November 2018 that Nashville's traffic stop strategy was not reducing crime.

Many of the report's findings [aligned with the 2016 "Driving While Black" study](#) published by activists with local nonprofit Gideon's Army. They found [black drivers were more likely to be stopped than white drivers](#).

"It is encouraging to see the numbers of stops come down significantly in recent months," said [Maria Ponomarenko](#), deputy director of the Policing Project. "We urged MNPDP to consider alternative strategies, including more targeted, community-based approaches."

Although MNPDP's top brass did not say whether the department had specific plans to [reduce traffic stops or address racial disparities](#), Imhoff said MNPDP has been in the process of moving away from a focus on traffic stops for years.

Former MNPDP Chief Ronal Serpas had created a culture focused on the policing approach, [especially in high-crime areas](#), and it had continued under Chief Steve Anderson, who has led the department since 2010.

The stops reached a decade high in 2012 and have generally declined each year since then by an average of 13% per year.

The 445,152 stops in 2012 had decreased to a low of 204,484 by 2018, according to MNPDP data.

The East Precinct Imhoff oversees is largely urban and densely populated, which he said affects how his officers patrol the area, including in the public housing at Cayce Place.

"There are nooks and crannies. There's just a lot of it that you cannot effectively patrol in a car," he said. "A lot of us have gone to bikes and foot patrols. You get to know people better. Sometimes a car can be a barrier to meet people and build bridges and build relationships."

On the other side of town, [North Precinct patrol officers](#) have been required to spend about a half hour of their shift out of their cars talking to neighbors, knocking on doors or playing basketball with kids.

The policy was implemented in January, just a month and a half after the Policing Project's report was released.

A researcher who looked at bicyclist stops in Tampa found similar racial disparities to those recorded here. He said Nashville's recent drop in stops was not unprecedented.

"We've seen it here in Tampa, in New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Newark — wherever there's an effort at reform, the first thing that changes is the number of stops," said [Ojmarrh Mitchell](#), an associate professor in the department of criminology at University of South Florida.

"This is good policy. Getting away from these kinds of stops lets police engage in other kinds of activity, find other ways to do their jobs effectively."



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Metro Nashville police officer Chris Dickerson visits with Danquron Begley, 14, in front of his home along 27th Avenue North on Monday, April 1, 2019. During the "fixed post" time of his shift, Dickerson spends about 30 minutes in different areas of the north precinct visiting with people in the neighborhood. (Photo: Mark Zaleski/ For *The Tennessean*)

Disparities in stops

Nashville traffic stops soared to the forefront of public conversation when "Driving While Black" was published in October 2016.

"It made us all reflect on policing practices and harm caused to communities by those practices," said Gideon's Army founder Rasheedat Fetuga.

After the study found that black drivers were more likely to be stopped than white drivers, Anderson slammed the report's methodology in a letter to the city council and said Gideon's Army failed to take into account factors that guide the deployment of police resources.

Police say the disparity exists because they deploy officers to high-crime areas, often neighborhoods where many people of color live.

In response to the report, as well as to an officer killing [Jocques Clemmons](#) in 2017, former Mayor Megan Barry asked the Policing Project to investigate the city's law enforcement strategies.

The group found Nashville police conducted traffic stops at more than twice the per-capita rates of comparable cities like Raleigh, North Carolina, and Charlotte, North Carolina, and more than five times those of Austin, Texas, and Columbus, Ohio.

The Policing Project also found black drivers in Nashville were stopped at a rate 44% higher than white drivers. "Even controlling for crime, unexplained racial disparity still remains," according to its report.

Both the study and the department said evidence of disparity was not inherently evidence of discrimination, but researchers said it should be reduced no matter the cause.

It is still too early to see whether the recent drop will affect the racial disparity in stops.

Fetuga, the activist with Gideon's Army, hopes that the drop in stops is a sign of better days ahead for Nashville's African American community. Gideon's Army has continued to push for community-focused policing strategies, of which she says the police have been supportive.

"It's a good start. My eyes are open. I'm watchful, but I'm always hopeful," she said. "I couldn't be an activist if I wasn't."

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