

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/ive-been-targeted-by-police-true-public-safety-means-ending-unnecessary-police-stops>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The first time I was picked up, I was 11 years old and in the wrong neighborhood literally on the wrong side of the tracks in Racine, Wisconsin. I didn't have bus fare, so I was walking home from school and had to pass through a white neighborhood. To the police, I didn't look like I belonged.

As a teenager, it continued. I was arrested more than 15 times and detained countless others. Can you imagine the impact that has on a kid?

Even in my second year after joining the NBA, the harassment continued most of the time from traffic stops. They'd say there was something wrong with the car I was in or would find something even more frivolous. I had bought a nice foreign car to celebrate and was pulled over because the police wanted to check it out. They had never seen one like it before. That gave them all the cause they needed to detain me.

As an individual story, one might say it's benign. But after you experience it that many times, you know exactly what it is that feeling of being dehumanized. As a kid, when I realized I was going to be dehumanized, I felt like I should just run from the police. I knew I would always fit the description. I was getting stopped, searched, and detained frequently for trivial reasons.

[There's an arrest every three seconds in the United States.](#) Many of those are traffic stops. How many of these stops for minor infractions as an excuse to look for evidence of bigger crimes actually make people safer?

Sandra Bland was pulled over because a police officer said she failed to signal a turn. Philando Castile was stopped for an allegedly malfunctioning brake light. Daunte Wright was driving a car with an expired registration tag. None of these deaths were necessary. None of these stops were in the interest of public safety.

Police action should make people safer. I feel frustrated and angry thinking back on my experiences and knowing that today Black kids are still experiencing harassment. I'm very fortunate. I made it. I've had a very successful career and been able to escape what so many others never do. I've lived through the harsh realities of overenforcement in Black and brown neighborhoods, police violence, and racially biased fatal police shootings. Many people are only now waking up to this reality.

Thanks to research, we know that the vast majority of non-public safety stops do not result in the discovery of drugs or weapons. [Out of 297,000 frisks conducted in New York in 2012](#), for example, only 2 percent resulted in the discovery of a weapon. With such clear evidence that non-public safety stops create pointless risk without making us safer, more and more law enforcement agencies are directing officers to cease stopping drivers for violations that don't present a clear danger and focus on safety risks. Some prosecutors are also working to eliminate the harms of non-public safety traffic stops.

This week, we celebrate a small victory. In Ramsey County, Minnesota, County Attorney John Choi has announced a new policy to not prosecute cases that are filed as a result of a non-public safety stop. Now, when an officer pulls over a driver for a minor traffic or equipment violation and uses the stop as a pretext to look for more serious charges, the DA's office won't press charges.

I'm hopeful that new policies from John Choi and other district attorneys who are interested in true public safety will make people safer by limiting unnecessary interactions with the police. These policies will save countless lives. I wish they'd been around when I was a kid.

I know now that there are so many more tools that we can use to reduce crime and the root causes of crime. We've been experiencing cycles of trauma for generations now, and mass incarceration has had its hand in making the situation worse. I've been speaking out about this for more than 20 years, and only now do I see bold progress within the criminal legal system. I'm grateful that people now are seeing the tremendous damage caused and are coming out in support of major structural changes.

I joined Vera because I could see the work that they were doing researching and talking to communities about what needs to be changed. I hope you'll join me in supporting the communities, organizations, and leaders dedicated to ending mass incarceration and the legacy of racism in this country.

[Vera envisions a society that respects the dignity of every person and safeguards justice for all. Click here to join us.](#)

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