

The logo for Decarcerate Memphis, featuring the word "Decarcerate" in a black, sans-serif font above the word "MEMPHIS" in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font. The text is set against a light blue, rounded rectangular background with a yellow horizontal stripe behind "MEMPHIS".

Decarcerate  
**MEMPHIS**

# Driving While BIPOC Summary

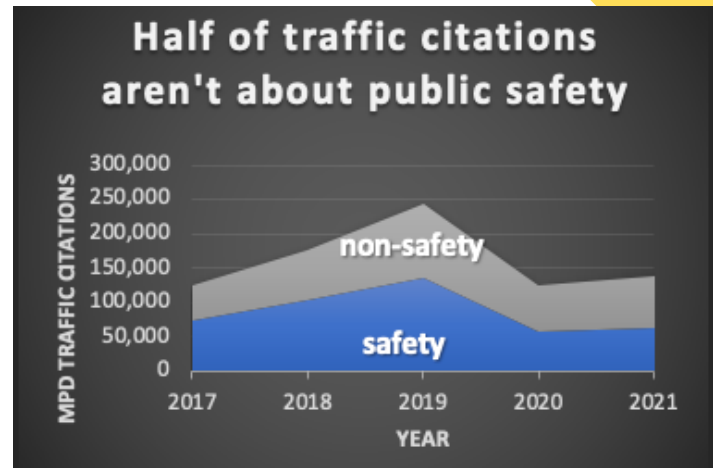
2022, MEMPHIS, TN.

A background image showing a white police car with a light bar on top, viewed from a low angle through a window. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The background is split into yellow and dark blue geometric shapes.

Prepared By:  
Decarcerate Memphis

# TRAFFIC DATA SUMMARY

Police tell us they enforce traffic violations to keep people safe. Yet half of traffic tickets in Memphis aren't about public safety—they're about financial requirements (chiefly driver's license, registration, and insurance). We address these bureaucratic matters by deploying armed police to collect fines (42% of all police contact is traffic stops).<sup>1</sup> This counterproductive practice endangers the public and traps low-income drivers in poverty.



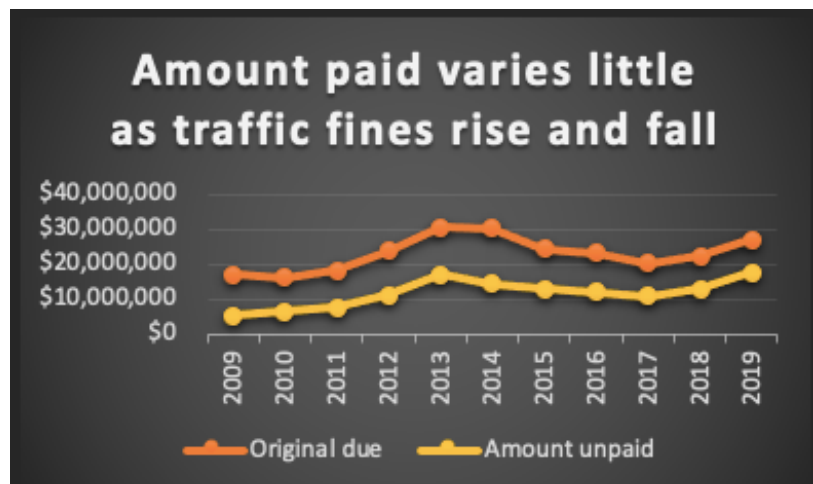
From 2012-2016, over 250,000 Tennessee driver's licenses were suspended solely for unpaid traffic debt.<sup>2</sup> In most cases, restoring a Tennessee license costs \$500 or more.<sup>2</sup> More than 93% of Tennesseans with un-reinstated licenses live in poverty.<sup>3</sup> For low-income people, a fine triggers a cascade of "unpaid bills, delinquencies, and adverse financial events"—causing financial strain equivalent to \$950 of income loss for a \$175 fine.<sup>4</sup>

Name	Reason for MPD traffic stop	Outcome	Year
Anjustine Hunter	Vehicle registration	Killed	2013
Darrius Stewart	Headlight	Killed	2015
D'Mario Perkins	Vehicle registration	Killed	2018
Martavious Banks	Insurance	Wounded	2018
Rhonda Rawls	Vehicle registration	Wounded	2021

Financial strain is only part of the problem; lives are forever altered and some are even lost to the burden of non-safety traffic enforcement.

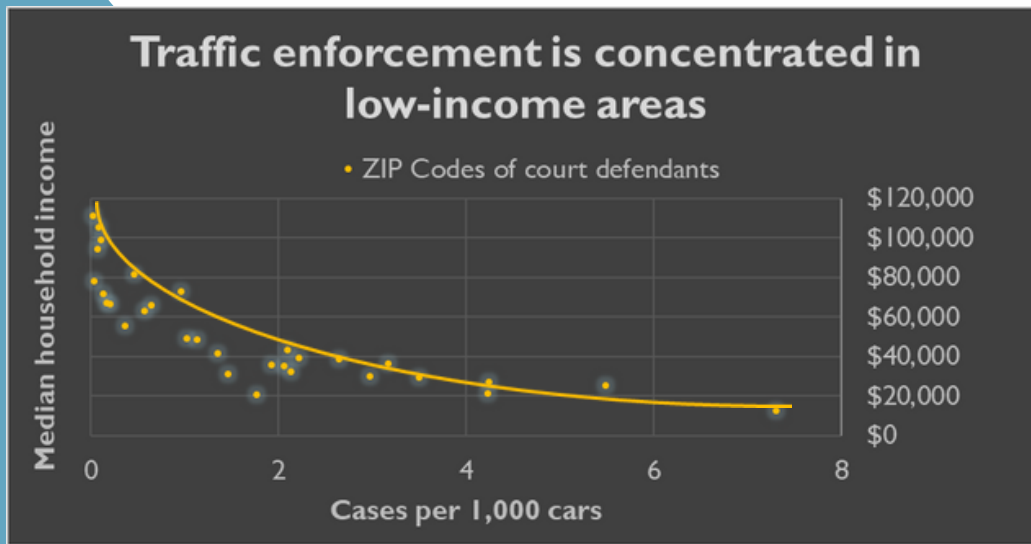
*These traffic stops ended in tragedy.*

Fines for lack of insurance, license, or registration demand money from people who can't afford necessities—and when those fines are unpaid, the right to drive and the ability to earn are taken away. As Memphis traffic fines increased by \$10 million from 2009 to 2019, unpaid fines increased by \$13 million.<sup>5</sup>



Worse yet, traffic laws are disproportionately enforced upon Black and low-income drivers. From 2017-2021, Black drivers were cited 10 percentage points more than their share of the population. Black drivers were twice as likely as white drivers to receive multiple citations on one ticket. Just over half of Black drivers' citations were not about public safety, versus only a quarter of white drivers' citations.<sup>6</sup>

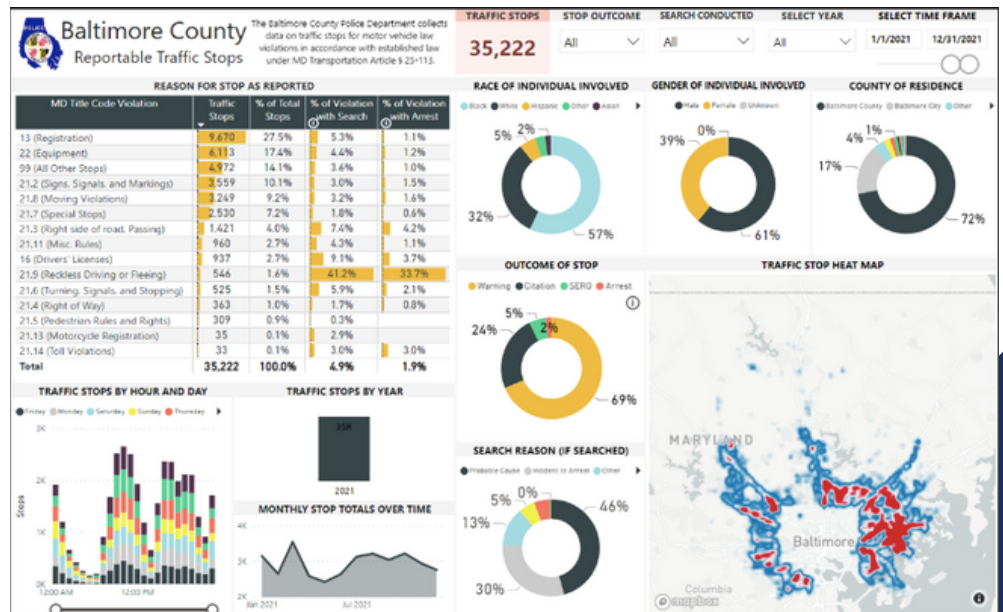
In a sample of 487 criminal court cases stemming from traffic stops in 2019 and 2021, 90% of defendants were people of color, 93% of whom faced only misdemeanor charges. Two-thirds of cases were dropped, but only after days were wasted in court.



The waste is concentrated in low-income areas: as the median income of a ZIP code decreases, its drivers appear more frequently in court.<sup>7</sup>

The scope of the problem is likely worse than we know, because MPD does not track and publicize key metrics of their traffic enforcement activity, as similar cities such as Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Nashville do. MPD claims they do not know how many stops they make, nor the demographics of those stopped.

**MEMPHIS SHOULD IMPLEMENT A TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT DASHBOARD IMMEDIATELY, SO THAT THE PUBLIC MAY EASILY KNOW WHOM MPD STOPS, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, AND WHAT OUTCOME RESULTED. DECARCERATE MEMPHIS HAS PREPARED A CITY ORDINANCE TO THAT EFFECT.**



# CITATIONS

1 A Brief History of the Traffic Stop (Or How the Car Created the Police State);  
<https://observer.com/2016/07/a-brief-history-of-the-traffic-stop-or-how-the-car-created-the-police-state/>

2 The Criminalization Of Poverty In Tennessee;  
<https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/the-criminalization-of-poverty-in-tennessee.pdf>

3 The Fiscal Impact of Debt-Based Driver's License Suspensions;  
<https://civilrightscorps.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/7QZT9ZsRTT6YYwglCeYQ.pdf>

4 Speed Trap or Poverty Trap? Fines, Fees, and Financial Wellbeing;  
<https://mello.github.io/files/jmp.pdf>

5 City of Memphis, City Court Clerk

6 Memphis Police Department

7 Shelby County Court Clerk