



Traffic Stops

San Francisco Police Department



California has some of the most expensive traffic citations in the country, with California drivers paying billions of dollars in fines and fees every year. The high cost of these citations puts a significant burden on lower income people, as they are less able to pay the hundreds or thousands of dollars in unexpected expenses that can arise from traffic stops. In order to understand the impact of traffic stops and citations on cities and counties across California, SPUR analyzed traffic stop data in seven locations across the state. Using 2019 data, most likely to be representative of true driving habits before the pandemic interrupted driver behavior, we looked at who was stopped by police, why they were stopped and whether or not they were given a citation.

While traffic stops and citations intend to make our roads safer by discouraging dangerous behavior, data show that in many cities and counties, traffic stops are not evenly distributed across racial or ethnic groups. Black and Latinx people are disproportionately stopped by police, and in many places are disproportionately stopped for traffic offenses that have little to no impact on public safety — such as displaying a license plate incorrectly. These stops are less likely to result in citations than stops of white and Asian drivers, possibly because white and Asian drivers are mostly stopped by police when they are engaging in moving violations that endangers themselves or others. Understanding how traffic stops are used and who is exposed to their potentially harmful effects is essential to considering ways to change the systems.

Key San Francisco Facts:

22% of Black drivers stopped for an incorrectly displayed license plates were given a citation

80% of white drivers stopped for failing to stop at a stop sign or crosswalk were given a citation

FIGURE 1

Black and Latinx drivers were disproportionately stopped by police in San Francisco.
San Francisco Traffic Stops by Race and Ethnicity

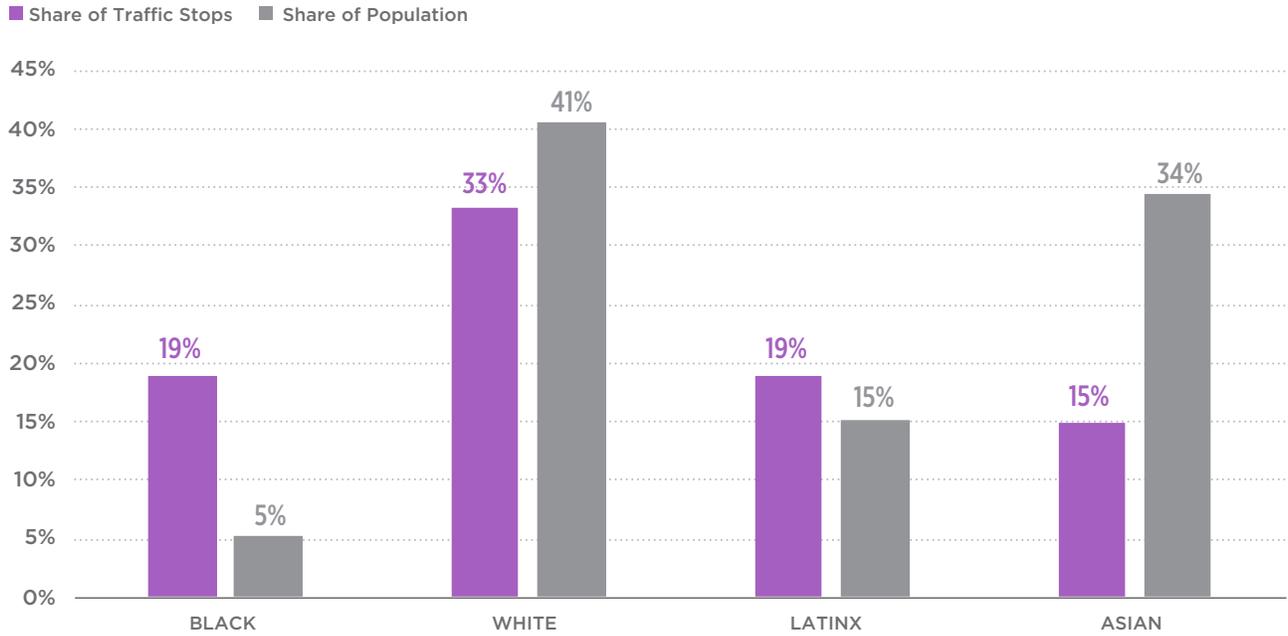


FIGURE 2

Black men made up 14% of traffic stops but just 3% of San Francisco's population.
San Francisco Traffic Stops by Race, Ethnicity and Gender

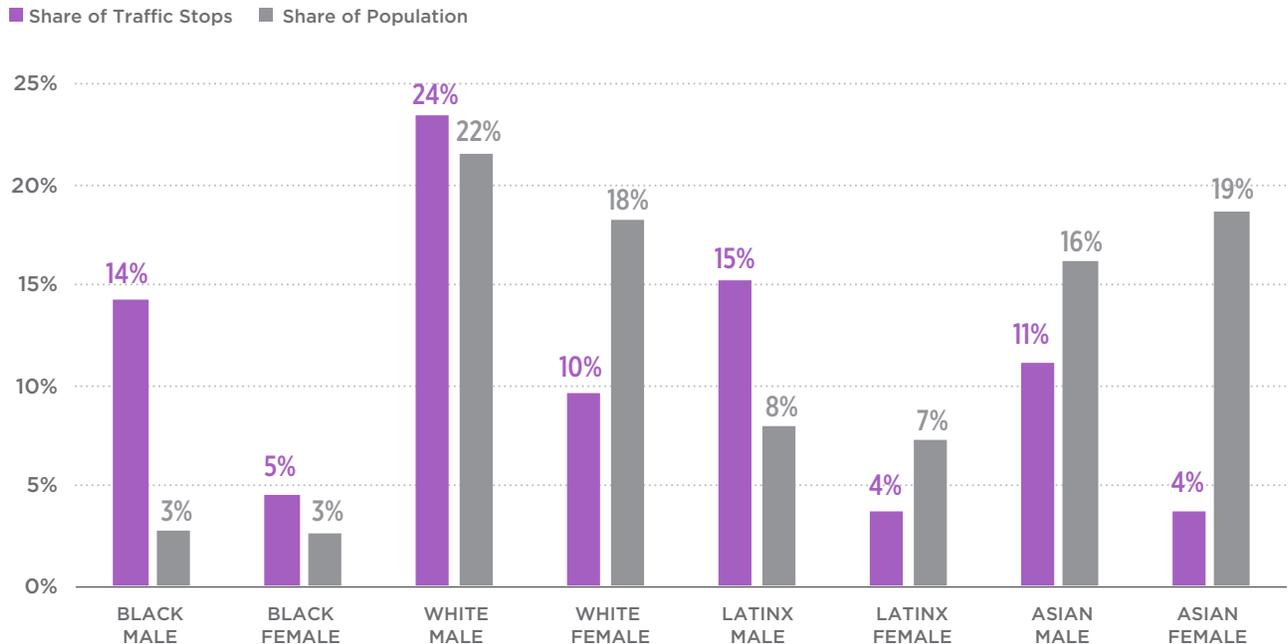


FIGURE 3

Black and Latinx drivers were more likely than their neighbors to be stopped for equipment or nonmoving reasons, like having a tail light out or not having their registration.
Reasons for Traffic Stop by Race and Ethnicity in San Francisco

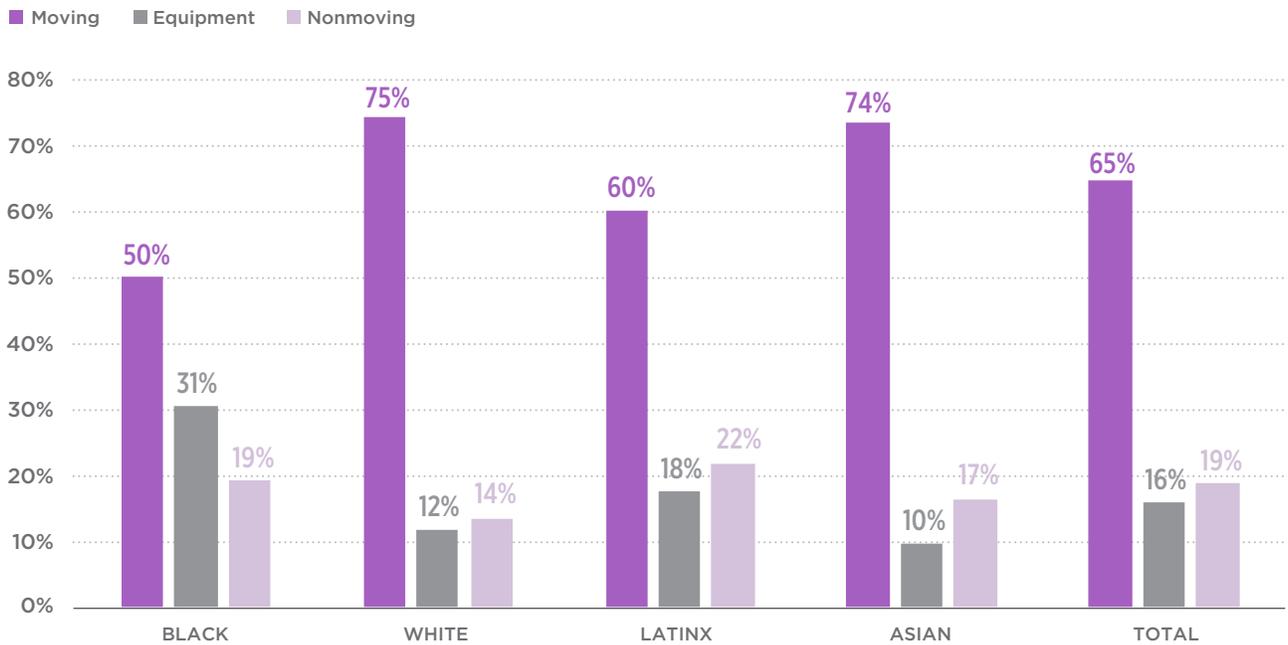


FIGURE 4

30% of all Black men and women subjected to a traffic stop in San Francisco were stopped for equipment reasons, compared to 12% for white men and women.
Reasons for Traffic Stop by Race, Ethnicity and Gender in San Francisco

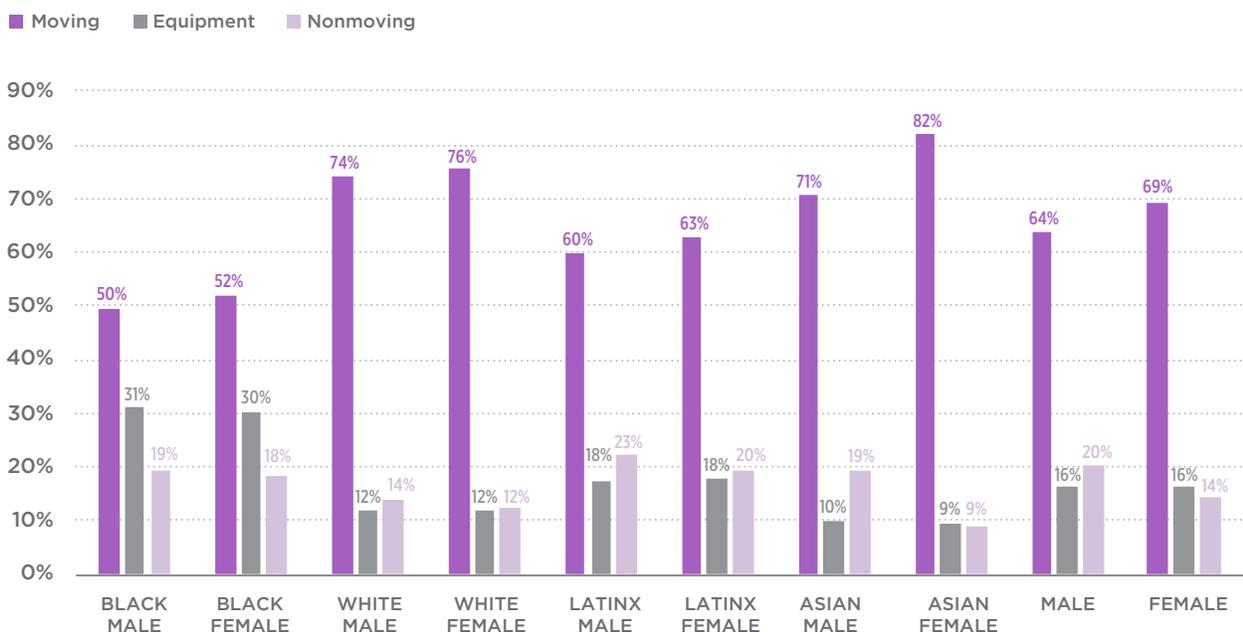


FIGURE 5

Black drivers were less likely to receive a citation than any other group.
Result of Traffic Stop by Race and Ethnicity in San Francisco*

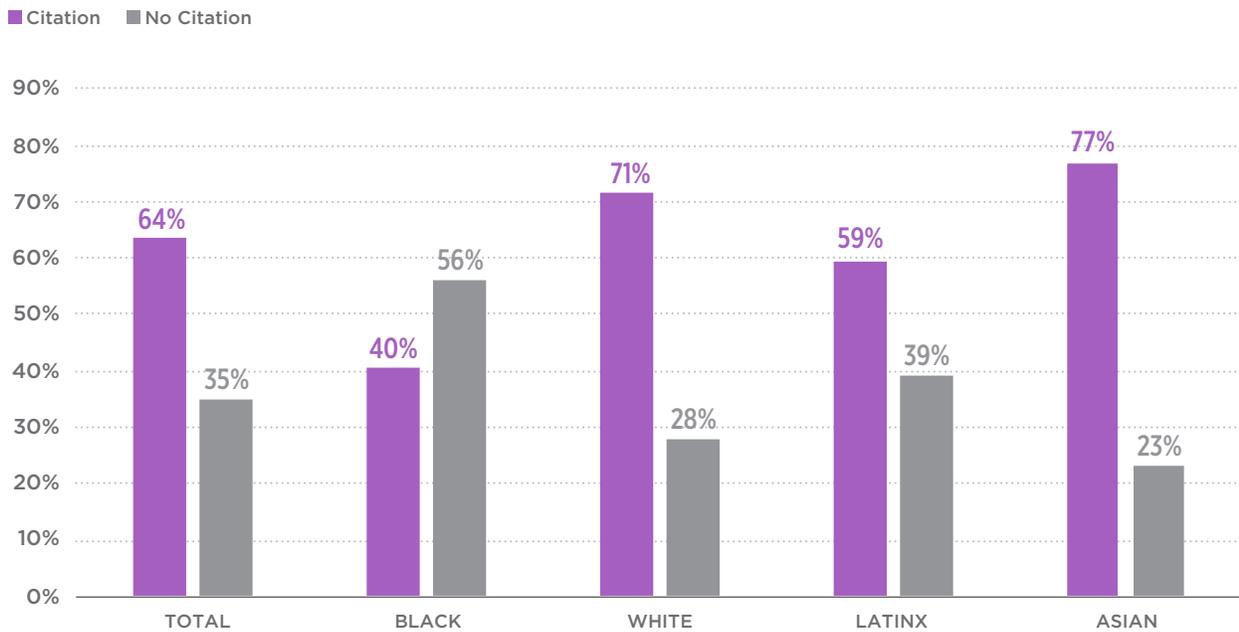
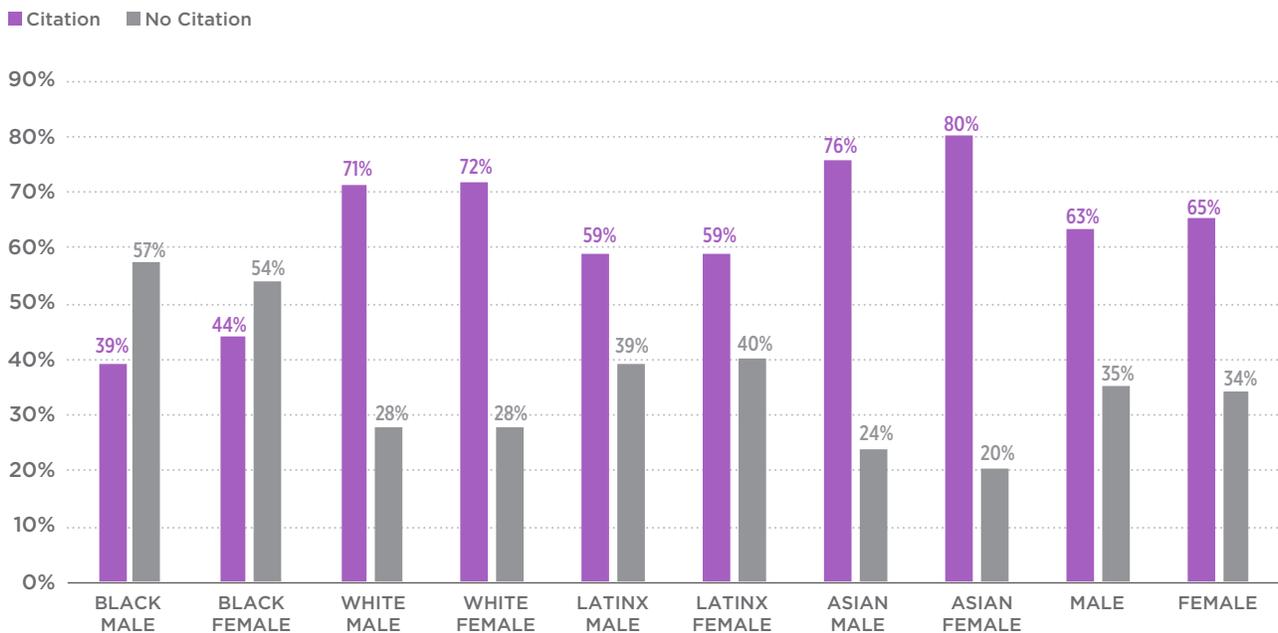


FIGURE 6

Black men were less likely than any other group to receive a traffic citation during a traffic stop.
Result of Traffic Stop by Race, Ethnicity and Gender in San Francisco*



* Percentages may not equal 100%, as traffic stops can result in cases outside of a person being given a citation or not, such as being arrested.

FIGURE 7

Black and Latinx drivers were most likely to be stopped by police for displaying license plates incorrectly or for a local ordinance violation. White and Asian drivers were most likely to be stopped for failing to stop at a crosswalk or a stop sign.

Most Common Reasons for Traffic Stop by Race and Ethnicity in San Francisco

	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD
BLACK	Display license plates incorrectly	Failure to obey signs or signals	No registration for vehicle, trailer, etc.
WHITE	Failure to stop vehicle at stop sign, crosswalk, etc.	Failure to obey signs or signals	Unsafe speed for prevailing conditions
LATINX	Local ordinance violation	Failure to obey signs or signals	Failure to stop vehicle at stop sign, crosswalk, etc.
ASIAN	Failure to stop vehicle at stop sign, crosswalk, etc.	Local ordinance violation	Unsafe speed for prevailing conditions
TOTAL	Local ordinance violation	Failure to stop vehicle at stop sign, crosswalk, etc.	Failure to obey signs or signals

SOURCES FOR THIS RESEARCH:
 Original analysis of 2019 RIPA stop data, <https://openjustice.doj.ca.gov/data>, and 2019 American Community Survey data, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>. All dollar estimates are based on the Judicial Council of California's Uniform Bail and Penalty Schedules, <https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/UBPS-2021-Final.pdf>.

Through research, education and advocacy, SPUR works to create an equitable, sustainable and prosperous region. We are a member-supported nonprofit organization.