

Bicycle Ticketing Compounds Inequities and Fails to Improve Safety

Policy Brief

November 9, 2020

A strategy to achieve zero traffic deaths is a common approach to safety, but what is the role of traffic enforcement?

The growth of pedestrian and bicyclist deaths on US roadways is alarming. The number of cyclists involved in fatal crashes has increased 38% since 2010 to 857. Black, Latino, and Native American cyclists bear the brunt of this burden, dying in greater numbers relative to the share of trips they make by bicycle and the miles they travel. The exact causes for the safety crisis are still debated, but poor street design, lack of infrastructure, distracted drivers, and ever larger vehicles are likely to blame. Many cities, including Chicago, have adopted data-driven approaches to identify crash-prone hotspots and target safety improvements in those locations to combat this problem. In some cases, analysts will overlay neighborhood sociodemographics and characteristics of crash victims so they can apply equity criteria when prioritizing remedies.

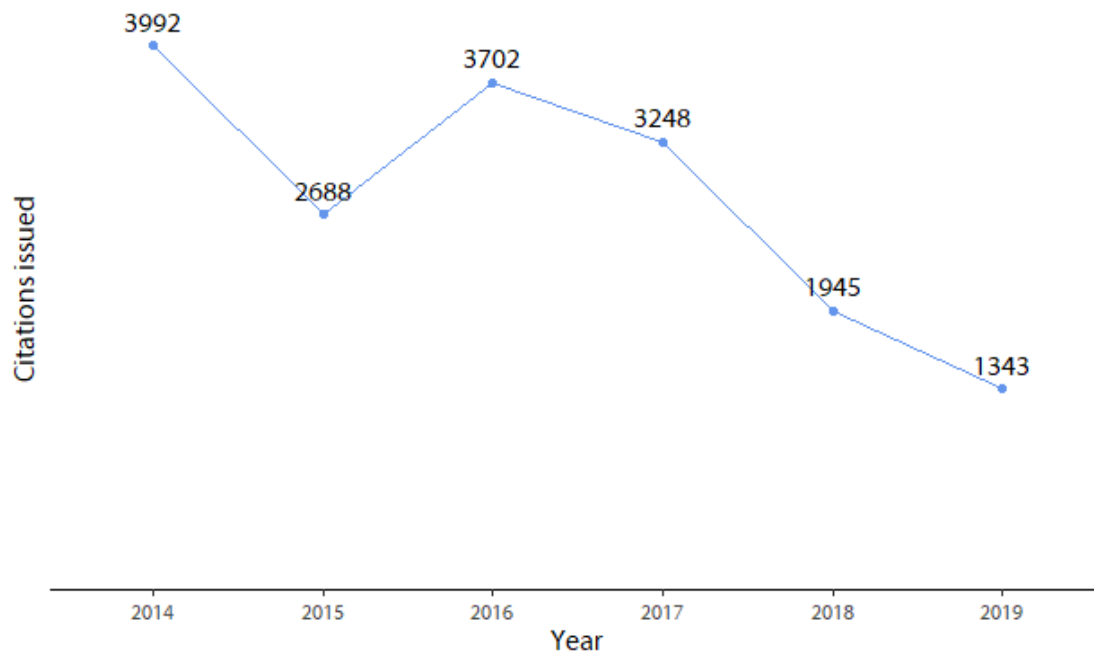
The most common of these approaches is Vision Zero, a systems-level approach that aims to eliminate traffic deaths by addressing some root causes of safety failures. Details of the implementation of Vision Zero vary from city to city, but often include a number of “Es” like better engineering of streets, educational campaigns, encouragement of active transportation and (traffic) enforcement. The second goal of Chicago’s Vision Zero Action Plan, released in 2017, commits to bringing a culture of safety to the city and its residents, with “police engagement” as a central tenet of this commitment. A goal of enforcing traffic laws fairly may not, for some, be on its face an unreasonable tactic to improve safety. But when viewed in light of the violence and harm that the police have inflicted on Black communities and other communities of color—particularly in Chicago—residents have a right to wonder whether armed officers who enforce traffic laws should be central to an equitable Vision Zero. Because vulnerable road users, like cyclists, adapt their travel to minimize safety risks, and because safe infrastructure is more likely to be absent from Black and Latino neighborhoods, the potential for disproportionate policing is brought into sharper relief.

This brief describes research that documented the conditions associated with tickets issued for riding a bicycle on the sidewalk in Chicago. Findings indicated that inequities in citations are persistent, compounded by inequitable distribution of infrastructure, and not strongly linked to traffic safety.

Bicycle citations, infrastructure, safety, and policing

Between 2017 and 2019, the *Chicago Tribune* published a series of articles that showed bicycle citations in the city of Chicago were issued roughly twice as often in majority Black

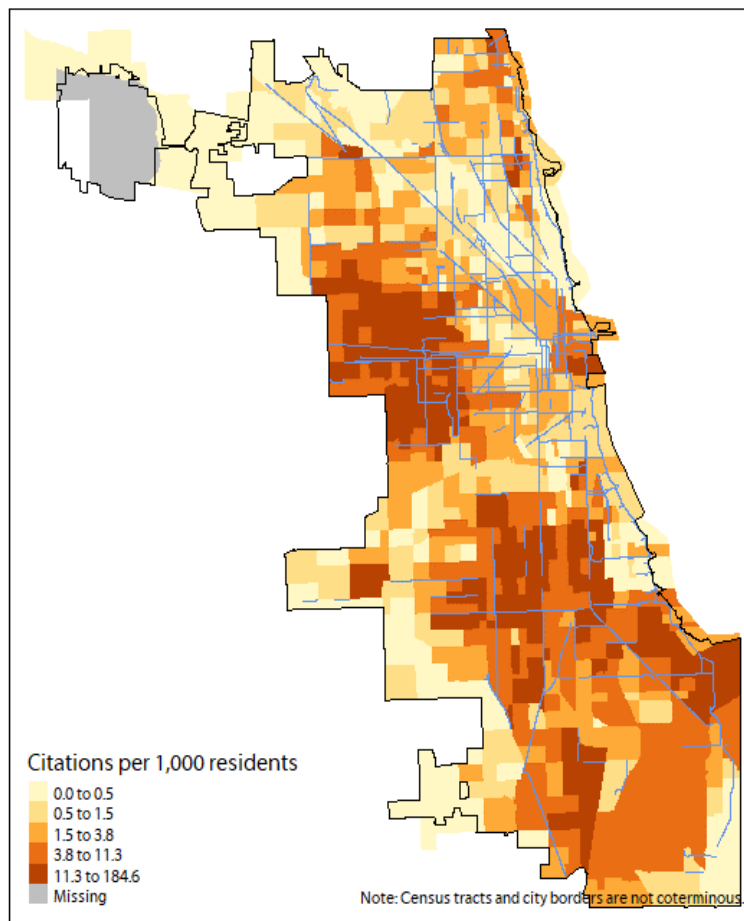
neighborhoods than in majority white or Latino neighborhoods. Researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign and the University of California, Davis took this analysis further by examining how street characteristics or safety needs might explain this distribution of tickets. The research team created a database of all citations issued for cycling on the sidewalk (based on information obtained through Freedom of Information Act Requests to the Chicago Police Department) between 2014 and 2019. Tickets for cycling on the sidewalk accounted for 90% of all bicycle tickets. The team conducted statistical analyses of those tickets issued since 2017. The database included information about the time and the location of each sidewalk cycling citation, but not about individual characteristics of the person receiving the citation.



Citations issued for riding on the sidewalk in Chicago, 2014–2019

Three key findings resulted from this research:

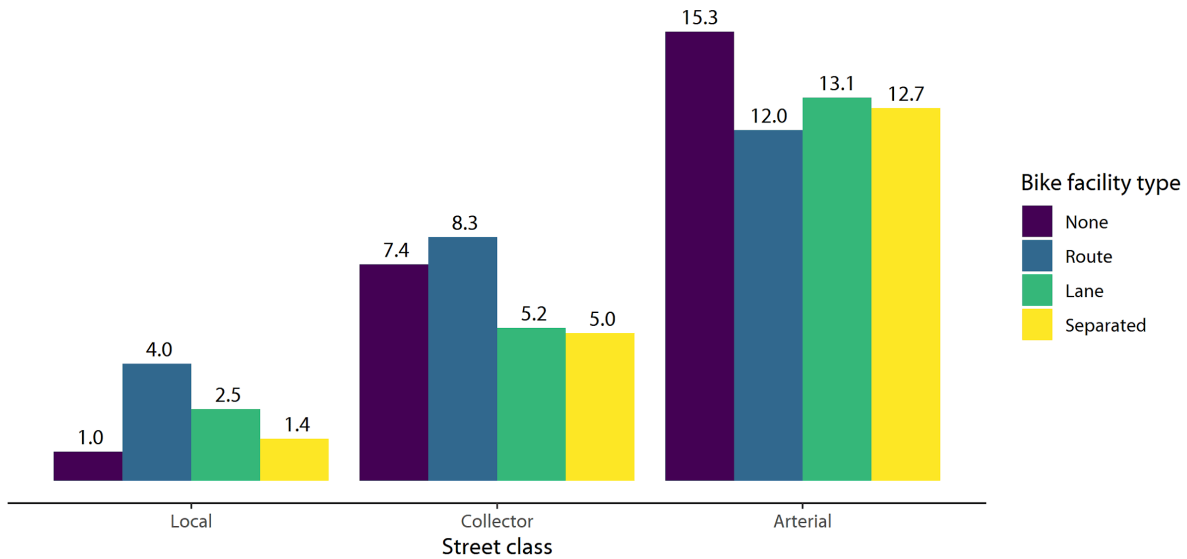
1. **Racialized inequities in ticketing are prevalent and persistent, despite a decline in the total number of tickets over time.** More tickets and more tickets per capita were issued in communities of color. Between 2014 and 2019, cyclists in majority Black neighborhoods were issued an average of 16.6 sidewalk cycling tickets per 1,000 residents, compared to 5 per 1,000 residents in majority Latino neighborhoods and 1.5 per 1,000 residents in majority white neighborhoods. Since 2017, Black neighborhoods saw 5.9 sidewalk cycling tickets per thousand, compared to 1.9 per thousand and 0.7 per thousand in Latino and white neighborhoods, respectively. This was in spite of the fact that Black neighborhoods had the fewest fatal or severe bicycle crashes. Black neighborhoods also had a higher than average share of streets without bicycle infrastructure and a slightly higher than average share of streets classified as high-traffic arterial streets.



Distribution of sidewalk cycling tickets by census tract, 2017–2019, with bicycle infrastructure shown in blue.

- Inadequate infrastructure compounds sidewalk riding citation inequities.** More sidewalk cycling tickets were issued on street segments where there were bike lanes or signed bike routes, likely because there were more cyclists riding on those corridors overall. Cyclists on busier streets without bike infrastructure were also more likely to receive citations. Compared to local streets, police were 15 times more likely to issue tickets on arterial streets and 7 times more likely to issue them on collector streets. But when those busier streets had bike infrastructure, the rate of ticketing decreased by roughly 30%. This evidence suggests that cyclists felt less of a need to ride on sidewalks when safe bike facilities were available, thereby reducing their likelihood of getting a ticket for this adaptation.

Incidence rates of tickets issued per street segment
Compared to local streets without bike facilities



The rate of ticketing generally decreases about 30% when there is bike infrastructure on a street segment.

- Bicycle citations are not issued in the most high-crash locations.** If bicycle citations were targeted where traffic safety interventions were most needed, there should have been more tickets issued in locations where there were more serious crashes. Instead, the researchers found the opposite. There was no relationship between the number of tickets issued and the number of fatal or severe bicycle crashes in a census tract, and there was a *negative* relationship between tickets and serious crashes involving any type of vehicle. What is more, police issued more bicycle citations in neighborhoods where there was more violent crime. Put together, this evidence corroborates the Chicago Police Department’s own statements that the bicycle ticketing effort has been primarily tool to supplement a “stop and frisk” strategy rather than a safety strategy.

Chicago can reimagine street safety

Our findings add to the body of work that shows infrastructure matters for helping cyclists feel safe. Chicago must continue to prioritize investment in bikeways in long-underserved neighborhoods. In addition, the city must work to create safer streets by using engineering and environmental cues to lower vehicle speeds, increase compliance with right-of-way laws for pedestrians and cyclists, and generally create safer conditions for vulnerable road users. The city should implement pilot projects using temporary materials to create diverters, barriers, and expanded space for those walking, rolling, cycling, and scooting when engineering and hardscaping is not feasible. This work must be done in full partnership with Black and Brown communities, however; after a long time of neglect, many are understandably wary of investments that they see as linked to gentrification and displacement pressures. Research on The 606, for example, shows that Black and Latino youth

are marginalized from that space because predominately white neighbors will call police on them when they hang out and linger on the trail.¹

Our research also points to the tenuous link between police enforcement of traffic laws and the improvement of cyclist safety. Racial justice advocates around the country have called for the removal of police enforcement as a central tenet of Vision Zero because of the long history of mistrust that communities of color have toward policing. Several large cities are exploring what that would mean for their own Vision Zero plans, while Berkeley (Calif.) has already taken the first steps by approving a proposal to replace armed officers with civilian technicians in traffic enforcement. The city of Chicago must also undertake this work. Replacing police enforcement does not mean allowing unsafe road behaviors to go unchecked, however; safety strategies should focus on eliminating the most dangerous driving behaviors, such as speeding and red-light running, without the use of police as much as possible. This might include automated enforcement cameras, paying close attention to equitable placement and levying fines according to ability to pay, in conjunction with more authority for civilian code enforcement. It would also include de-emphasizing violations that have minimal effects on safety, such as most bicycle and pedestrian violations and minor equipment infractions for motor vehicles.

About this research

This study is part of Equiticity's *Mobility Justice in Chicago* research initiative. For more information about the study, contact Jesus Barajas (jmbarajas@ucdavis.edu), Assistant Professor of Environmental Science and Policy at the University of California, Davis. For more information about Equiticity, visit <https://www.equiticity.org/> or contact Olatunji Oboi Reed (oobi@equiticity.org), President and CEO.

¹ Harris, Brandon, Alessandro Rigolon, and Mariela Fernandez. "To Them, We're Just Kids from the Hood': Citizen-Based Policing of Youth of Color, 'White Space,' and Environmental Gentrification." *Cities* 107 (December 2020).