FINES AND FEES JUSTICE CENTER

Mayor Bowser Made a Wrong Turn on Traffic Safety. A Real Task Force Can Get DC Moving in the Right Direction.

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As a parent raising two young children in Washington, DC, I think about street safety every day — whether it's using a song to help them remember to look both ways before crossing the street or making sure my kids are properly buckled up before we drive off. My goal is to set them up to do the safe thing, rather than just punishing them when they don't.

Across the country, our approach to street safety looks very different. Instead of prioritizing interventions that would curb or reduce the likelihood of crashes, fatalities, and dangerous driving, many cities and towns have chosen to address street safety by leading with automated traffic enforcement, or ATE.

ATE includes license plate readers, noise monitoring devices, school bus stop cameras, and, most prominently, speed and red light cameras. Once touted as a way to make streets safer (with promises of plans to improve street design, engineering, and infrastructure in long under-invested neighborhoods), ATE has now morphed into a lucrative revenue stream that is on the rise throughout jurisdictions across the country. And, of course, this shouldn't be too surprising when you consider there's one thing that all forms of ATE have in common: punitive fines and fees.

In Washington, DC, my Mayor, Muriel Bowser, just rolled out a plan to install 342 more traffic cameras throughout the city. And while the Mayor said that she hopes "we don't collect anything from the cameras," this camera rollout is part of her budget plan, which would use the expected $580 million in revenue to address the city's budget shortfalls over the next four years. Strange that a Mayor would plan a budget around a revenue stream she hopes doesn't come through.

In D.C., ATE citations often *start* at $100. From there, they double within 30 days and come with a cascade of other punishments for those who are not able to pay. D.C.'s consequences are particularly punitive, considering its "Clean Hands" law which denies occupational licenses, and other services to those with fines and fees over $100.

Enforcement-heavy safety strategies, coupled with flat fine systems, also have a particularly devastating impact on lower-income and working-class communities, as well as communities of color. A 2018 DC Policy Center report stated that predominantly Black neighborhoods in the District bore the brunt of automated traffic enforcement. These are disproportionately residents living in Wards 7 and 8, where the median household income is less than $51,000 and $45,000 respectively, and where over 20% of the population lives below the poverty line. These are also our least invested-in Wards, with limited protected biking lanes, crosswalks, and designs that prioritize safety. Families living in these areas don't have the option to simply

pay off a citation without consequence. One $100 ticket could be the difference between having enough food for your family or not being able to feed your children.

While our city's street safety issues remain a top concern, policy discussions around this issue have shifted from "How can we keep people safe?" to "How can we use enforcement to balance our budgets?". The result of this shift is a growing emphasis on enforcement-focused technology:

- In just three years, D.C. issued $1 billion in traffic and parking tickets.
- In just one year, 1.3 billion motorists were ticketed for traffic violations by cameras.
- In FY 2017, D.C had the highest reported revenue from fines per resident of any municipality in the country.

Enforcement-heavy strategies are often tempting solutions for policymakers, who are grappling with costly and longer-term investments in infrastructure, design, and engineering. But the truth is using financial penalties as the primary solution for improving overall traffic safety doesn't work. It is unclear what role, if any, fines play in changing driving behavior. And there is certainly no evidence that higher fines result in increased traffic compliance. What we do know is awareness, and the immediacy of that awareness (think driver-feedback signs) has a similar effect on driving speed as speed cameras, but without any fines.

ATE doesn't necessarily stop bad behavior from happening, it simply notes the bad behavior once it has already occurred. What do we think people want more: a system that would prevent them from being hit by cars or one that would punish the driver after they've already been hit?

If cities want safer streets for both pedestrians and drivers, they should be looking to evaluate how exactly their current design and infrastructure are impacting community safety. Several jurisdictions across the nation have done this, and the results are promising.

Hoboken, New Jersey is a great example of a city that focused on meaningful solutions to their traffic and street safety issues. The "square mile" city and 4th most densely populated city in America, has managed to have 0 traffic fatalities in the past 6 years as a result of the Mayor and the DOT's intentional street planning and design efforts. The city has an ambitious goal of not only 0 fatalities, but 0 injuries, and is moving towards its goal in a state that currently bans automated traffic enforcement tools.

Given ATE's potential to wreak havoc on working-class communities while at the same time not meeting its purported safety goals, the decision to use these technologies should only be undertaken after all other aspects of street safety are evaluated by experts that can speak to wide-ranging impacts on respective communities.

Mayor Bowser's recently announced task force on Automated Traffic Enforcement Equity and Safety could have been the first step towards developing, designing, and implementing equitable safety solutions. Currently, however, the taskforce consists solely of government officials with zero representation from community voices and experts on the fines and fees policies — both are essential to the process.

We all want to feel safe in our communities —whether we're walking our kids to school, going for a bike ride, or driving home from work. Policymakers have a responsibility to address our safety concerns with solutions that work towards preventing harm, rather than those that simply redirect harm onto vulnerable communities. The decision to use ATE should be guided by a comprehensive evaluation of street safety, traffic safety, and the real impact of imposing and enforcing fines and fees. It should never be driven by budget concerns.

Mayor Bowser, it's not too late to assemble a Task Force that's worthy of its name and purpose. DC community members and advocates are willing and waiting to lend their voice and expertise towards developing effective, equitable solutions. Are you ready to listen?

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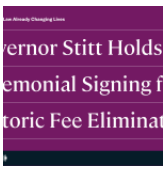

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