

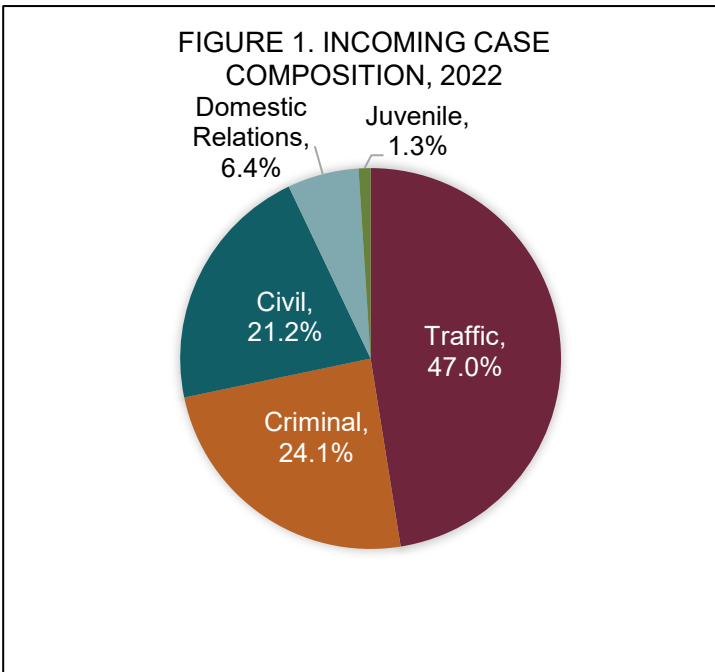
Traffic Caseload Highlights

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Non-criminal traffic cases have the ability to impact public safety and the funding and functioning of courts. These cases made up almost half of all incoming cases to state courts in 2022 (Figure 1). The most recent available data from the National Center for State Court's (NCSC) [Court Statistics Project](#) (CSP) reveals that traffic cases [declined](#) dramatically during the pandemic, and while those caseloads have increased slightly, they remain substantially below pre-pandemic levels. This current decline followed a decade-long decline in traffic cases prior to the pandemic. The decline during the pandemic (2020 to 2022) does not appear to be due to less driving nor safer driving. This volume of Caseload Highlights focuses on non-criminal traffic cases, including how they are processed through the courts and why they matter.



What is Included in Non-Criminal Traffic and Ordinance Caseloads?

Non-criminal traffic and local ordinance cases include a variety of violations. The [CSP State Court Guide to Statistical Reporting](#) breaks non-criminal traffic cases into four subcategories:

- Traffic violations or infractions include offenses such as speeding, failing to signal a turn, and failing to use a seatbelt.
- Parking violations are those where an individual parks a motor vehicle in a manner that contradicts a state statute or ordinance.
- Ordinance violations are violations of local regulations created by county, city, state, or other local authority.
- Other violations are those that are violations of statutes and local ordinances covering traffic, parking, or a violation of other local ordinances.

Traffic cases where the offense is considered a misdemeanor or felony (such as driving while intoxicated or speeding above a certain threshold) are considered criminal cases and are not included in this analysis.

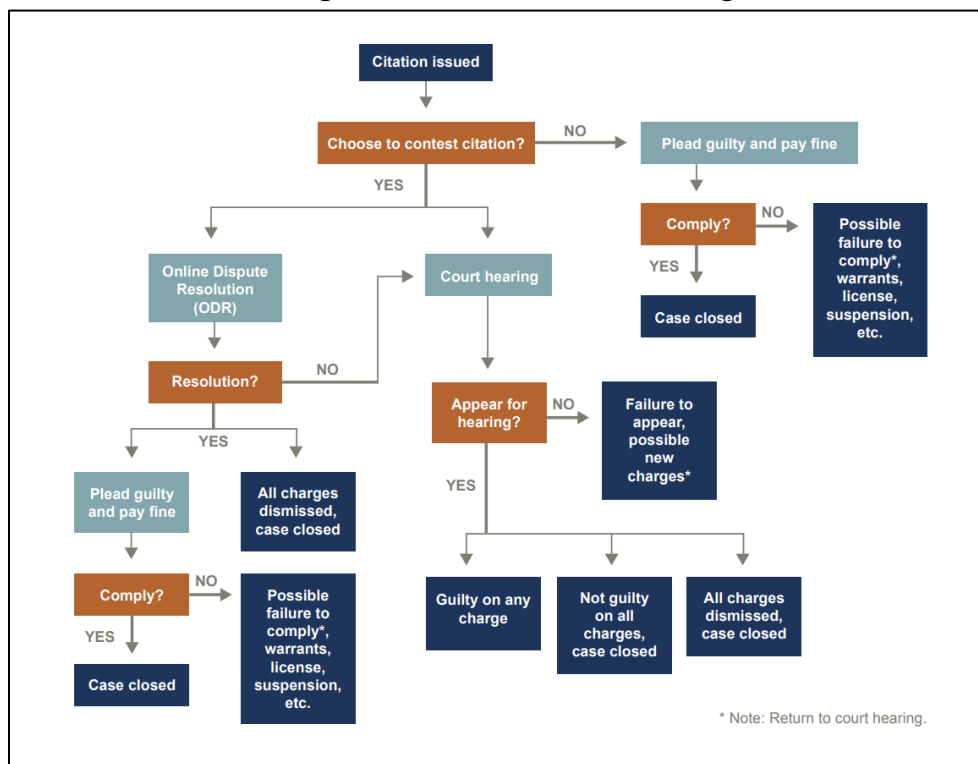
Processing of Traffic Cases

While there is variation across courts in terms of how traffic cases are processed, they follow a similar general pattern. A detailed depiction of this process is displayed in Figure 2.

Traffic cases are initiated with the issuance of a citation/ticket. Many cases are quickly resolved when the individual pleads guilty and pays a fine, often without ever appearing in court. Those who wish to contest the ticket may do so either in court or as part of an online dispute resolution (ODR) process. In states with a two-tiered court structure, these cases are heard in the limited jurisdiction court. Limited jurisdiction courts are lower courts and only have jurisdiction over specific case types, such as traffic and ordinance cases. If a state has a single-tiered structure, all cases are heard by the same court.

While for many individuals, a traffic or ordinance violation is a minor inconvenience, for others there can be serious consequences. Failure to appear or failure to comply with sanctions can result in consequences that could include warrants, additional fines, and driver's license suspension. The negative consequences of license suspension include difficulties maintaining employment, paying for housing, accessing healthcare, and completing everyday tasks, such as going to the grocery store.¹

Figure 2. Traffic Case Processing



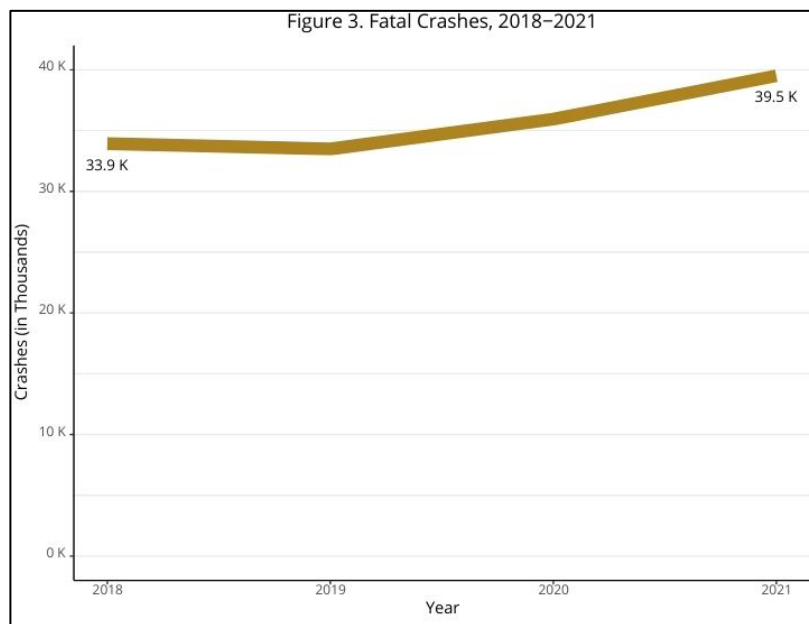
¹ Crozier, W., Garrett, B.L. and Modjadidi, K. (2020). "Understanding the Impact of Driver's License Suspension: Lay Opinion in Impacted and Non-Impacted Populations." [Duke Law School Public Law & Legal Theory Series No. 2020-70.](#)

Why are Traffic Cases Important?

Traffic cases comprise the largest share of the incoming caseload in state courts. Twenty-nine percent of the public has attended traffic court for parking or speeding tickets, making this one of the most common ways people interact with courts.² These experiences have the capability to shape perceptions of the courts and broader trust and confidence in the criminal justice system.

Traffic cases are also a matter of public safety, given the potential deterrent effect of traffic enforcement on dangerous driving behavior. That, added to the volume of cases, and the frequency of the public's interaction with traffic courts means that the decline in the number of traffic cases has implications across a number of domains.

Public safety: While non-criminal traffic violation cases increased by 1% between 2021 and 2022, the traffic caseload in 2022 remains 29% less than in 2019.³ This was despite an increase in the miles driven in 2022.⁴ Nor does the decrease in the number of traffic cases seem to be the result of safer driving practices, as the number of crashes involving fatalities in 2021 was the highest since 1990.⁵ Fatal crashes increased by 18% between 2019 and 2021, with a 9.9% increase between 2020 and 2021 (Figure 3). While injury-only motor vehicle crashes remained below 2019 levels, they increased by 8.4% from 2020 to 2021 (Figure 4), and crashes involving only property damage increased by 19.7% between 2020 and 2021 (Figure 5).⁶ Therefore, safer driving practices do not appear to be responsible for the reduced number of traffic cases.



² National Center for State Courts. [State of the State Courts](#).

³ Moffett, M., Gibson, S., & Robinson, D. (2024). 2022 [Caseload Highlights: Incoming State Trial Court Cases](#). Williamsburg, VA: National Center for State Courts.

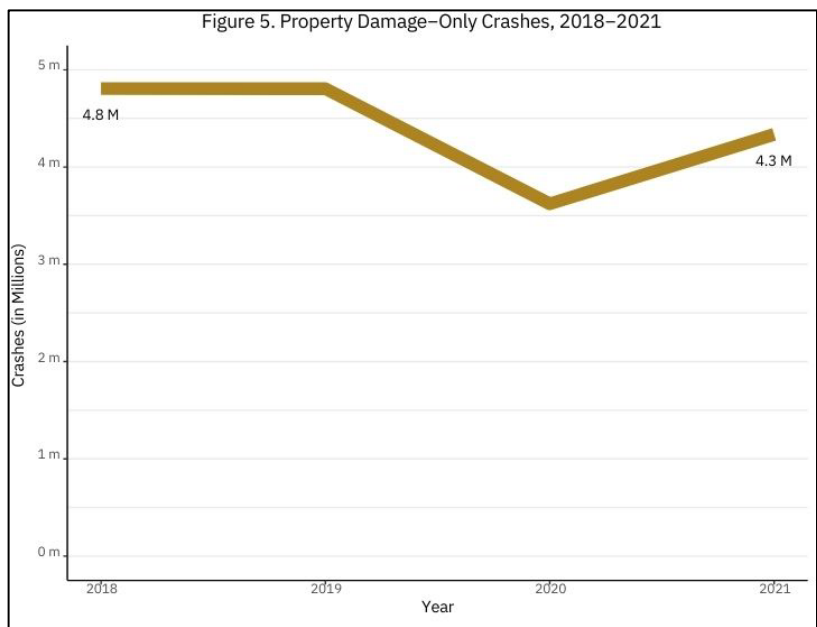
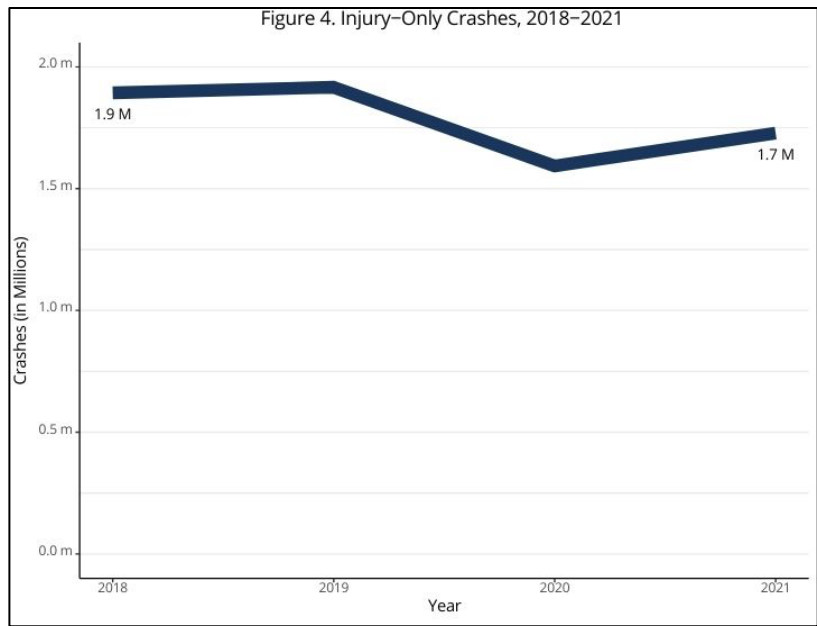
⁴ The data on number miles driven comes from the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration's [December 2022 Traffic Volume Trends](#).

⁵ See the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's [Fatality Facts 2021 Yearly Snapshot](#).

⁶ This information comes from the [U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration's](#) Fatality and Injury Reporting System Tool (FIRST).

Funding: Although courts are not responsible for generating revenue,⁷ a reduction in the number of traffic cases has implications for funding the courts. According to state statutes, 17 states allocate at least some portion of speeding ticket *fin*es to courts or law enforcement. Meanwhile, the *fees and surcharges* associated with speeding tickets contribute to court budgets and/or law enforcement in 39 states. Smaller cities, especially in higher poverty or rural areas, tend to utilize revenue from fines, fees, and forfeitures more than larger cities.⁸ If the current trends in traffic cases continue, some areas may face budget shortfalls that impact the courts and other local services.

This volume of Caseload Highlights is the first in a larger series of research briefs that will dive deeper into traffic trends to identify the factors behind the reduction in traffic cases, explore anticipated impacts, and propose responses courts can consider to prepare for the future. While the trends analyzed in this volume are national, differences between the states will be discussed in future publications. The CSP invites jurisdictions to share case-level data to uncover additional data-driven insights. Case-level data would provide an opportunity to assess differences in traffic caseloads within states.



The Court Statistics Project is the only source for comparable annual state court caseload data, with court data published at www.courtstatistics.org/. For more information about 2012-2022 court data, please see our website at www.courtstatistics.org/court-statistics/interactive-caseload-data-displays/csp-stat. NCSC is available to provide training or assistance! Contact CSP Staff at csp@ncsc.org for more information.

⁷ Conference of State Court Administrators. (2012). [2011-2012 Policy Paper Courts Are Not Revenue Centers](#).
⁸ Boddupalli, A. and Micciolo, L. (2022). [Following the Money on Fines and Fees: The Misaligned Incentives in Speeding Tickets](#). Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.