

Disparities in helmet law enforcement in Seattle



Ethan Campbell and Alexander Lew
Helmet Law Working Group

Partner organizations:



Police harassment represents a “silent barrier” to biking

Chicago Tribune

'Biking while black': Chicago minority areas see the most bike tickets

With Dallas bike helmet law, rules of the ride enforced unevenly

The Dallas Morning News



Biking while Black: Racial bias in Oakland policing

Cycling on the Sidewalk: The New Stop-and-Frisk?

the village VOICE

Tampa Bay Times

Federal report: Tampa police bike tickets burden blacks, have no benefit

Bicycling

Black Cyclists Are Stopped More Often Than Whites, Police Data Shows

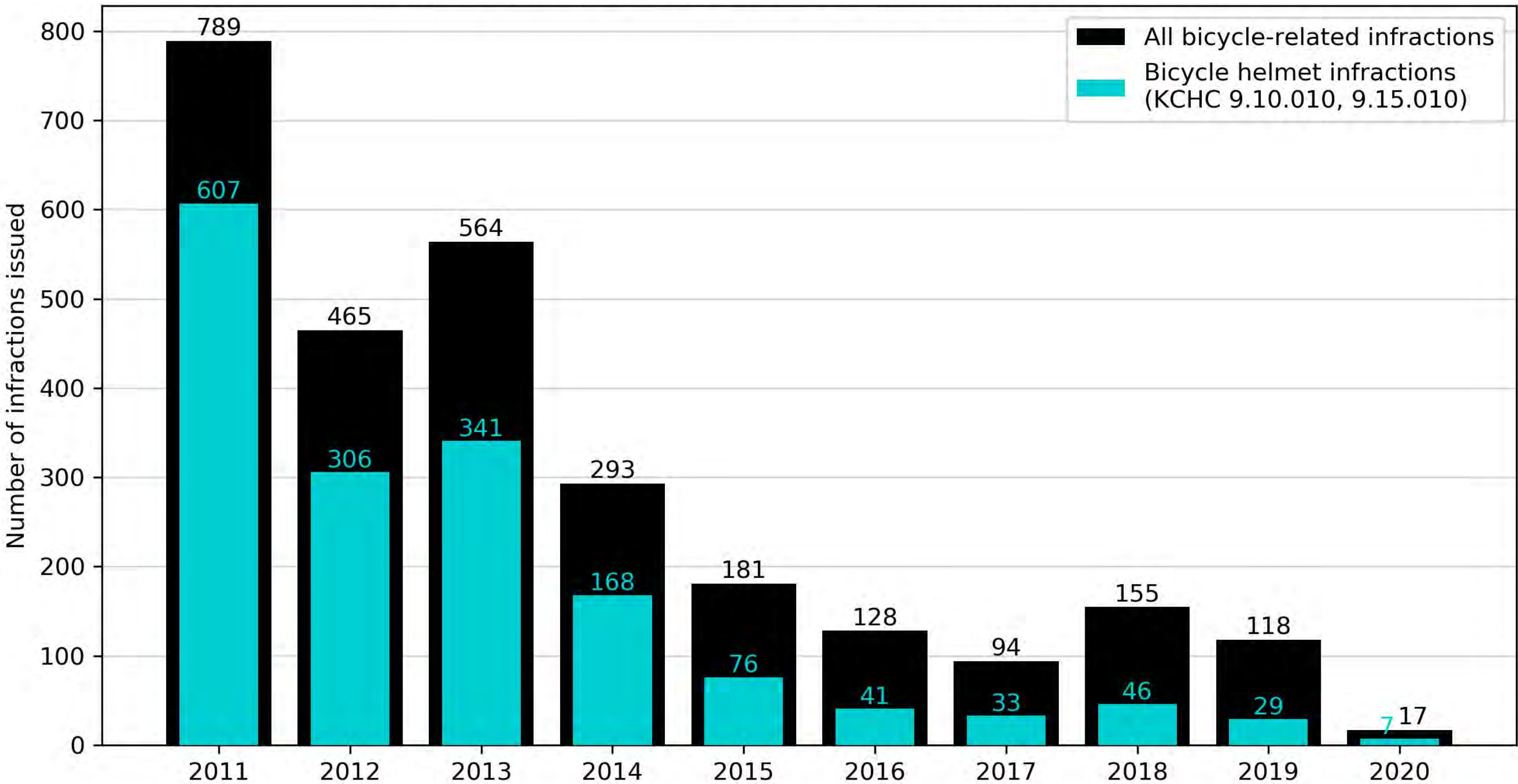


SILENT BARRIERS TO BICYCLING, PART III: RACIAL PROFILING OF THE BLACK AND LATINO COMMUNITY

by Stefani Cox and Charles Brown

Current low rate of infractions points to discretionary enforcement

SPD Detective Mark Jamieson: “Do we write [helmet-related] tickets? Yes, from time to time. We have the discretion to either write a citation or explain the laws and road safety and provide a warning. I think officers probably do the latter more.” (Seattle Times, 2017)



Data: Seattle Municipal Court, Bicycle Infractions Data Report

Bicycle-related infractions in Seattle (2003-2020)*

Infraction	Count
Bicycle helmet required	1668
Rights and duties of riders or roadway rules	986
No/improper lamps/reflectors	213
Yielding right of way in crosswalk or on public path	90
Unsafe pass on right	27
No/improper hand signals	20
No/improper brakes	12
Bike control (one hand minimum required)	8
Others (clinging/attaching to vehicle, failure to ride on seat, excess passengers, etc.)	13

* Due to incomplete court records, these 3,037 citations are a subset of the approximately 6,000 that have been issued from 2003-2020.

Seattle police issued 43% of helmet citations since 2017 to homeless cyclists

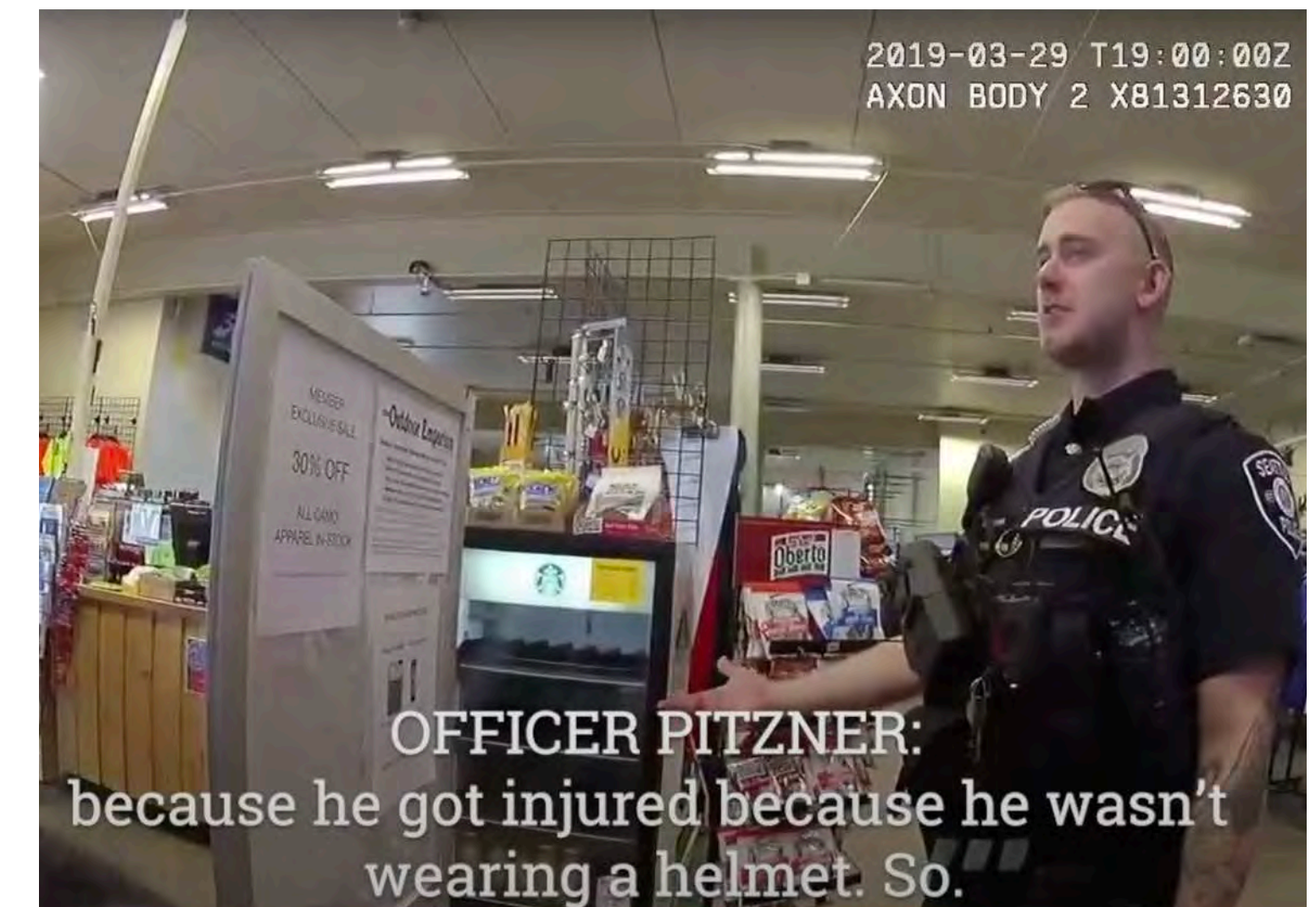
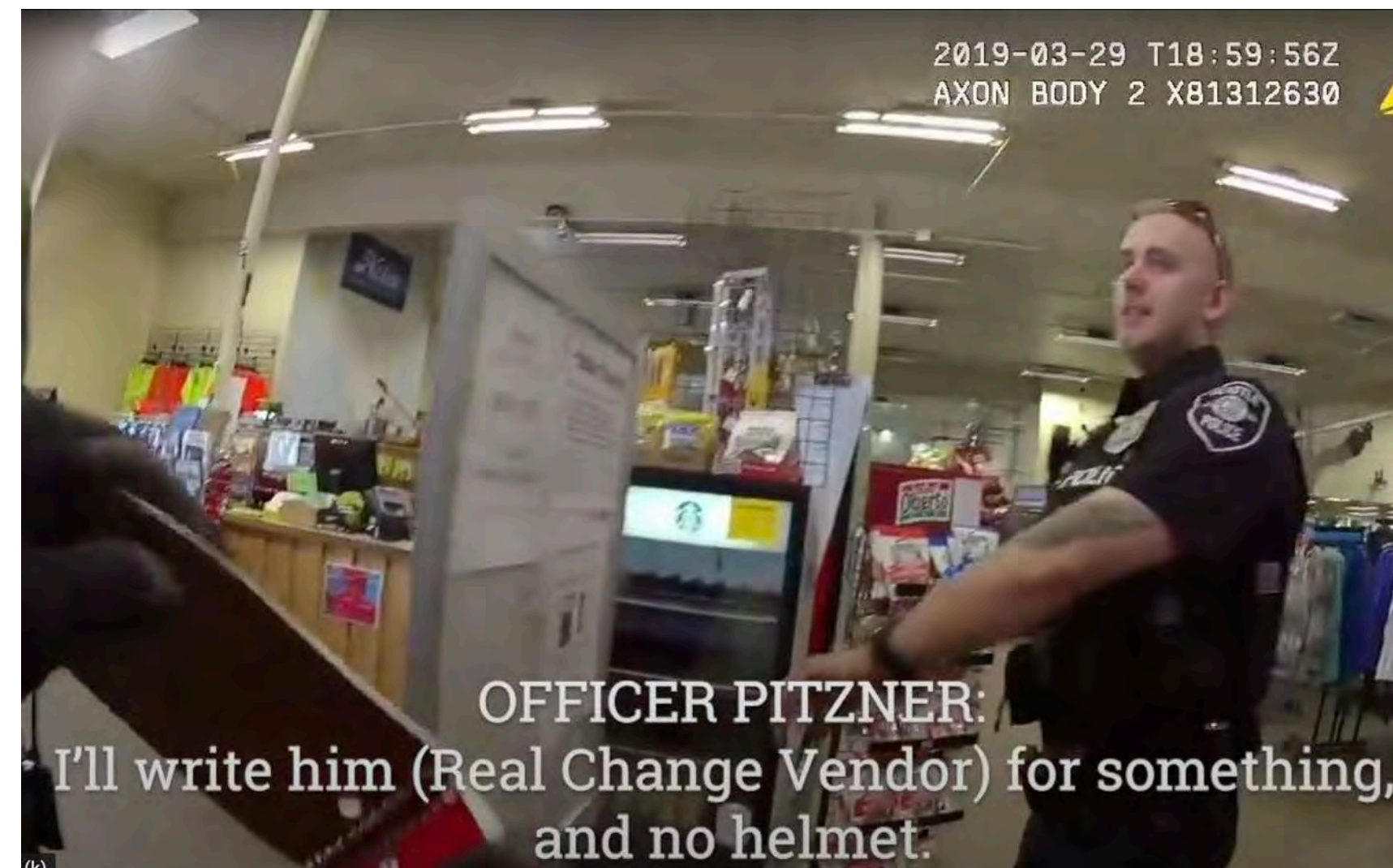
Crosscut.

Nearly half of Seattle's helmet citations go to homeless people

Seattle police rarely enforce the law that bikers must wear a helmet. When they do, it's often against people struggling with homelessness.

by [David Kroman](#) / December 16, 2020

Dr. Fred Rivara (UW Medicine): *"I still firmly believe in the importance of helmets. Whether having a law enforced now would help to boost that, I don't know. It's an open question."* ([Crosscut, 2020](#))



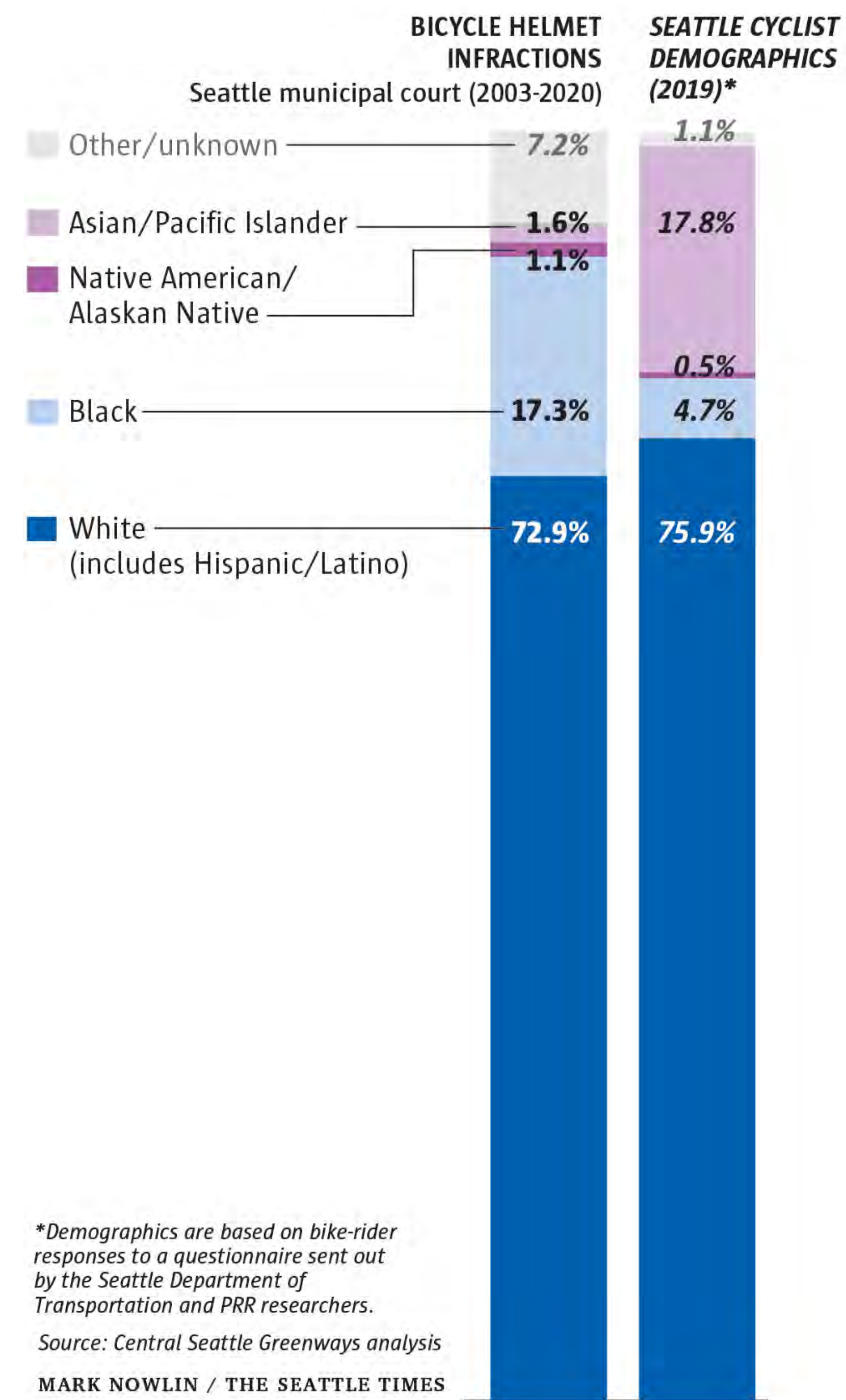
Source: Real Change, [YouTube](#) (Nov. 2020); also see [Seattle Bike Blog](#) (Nov. 2020), [Crosscut](#) (Dec. 2020)

Court records also reveal racial disparities in helmet citations

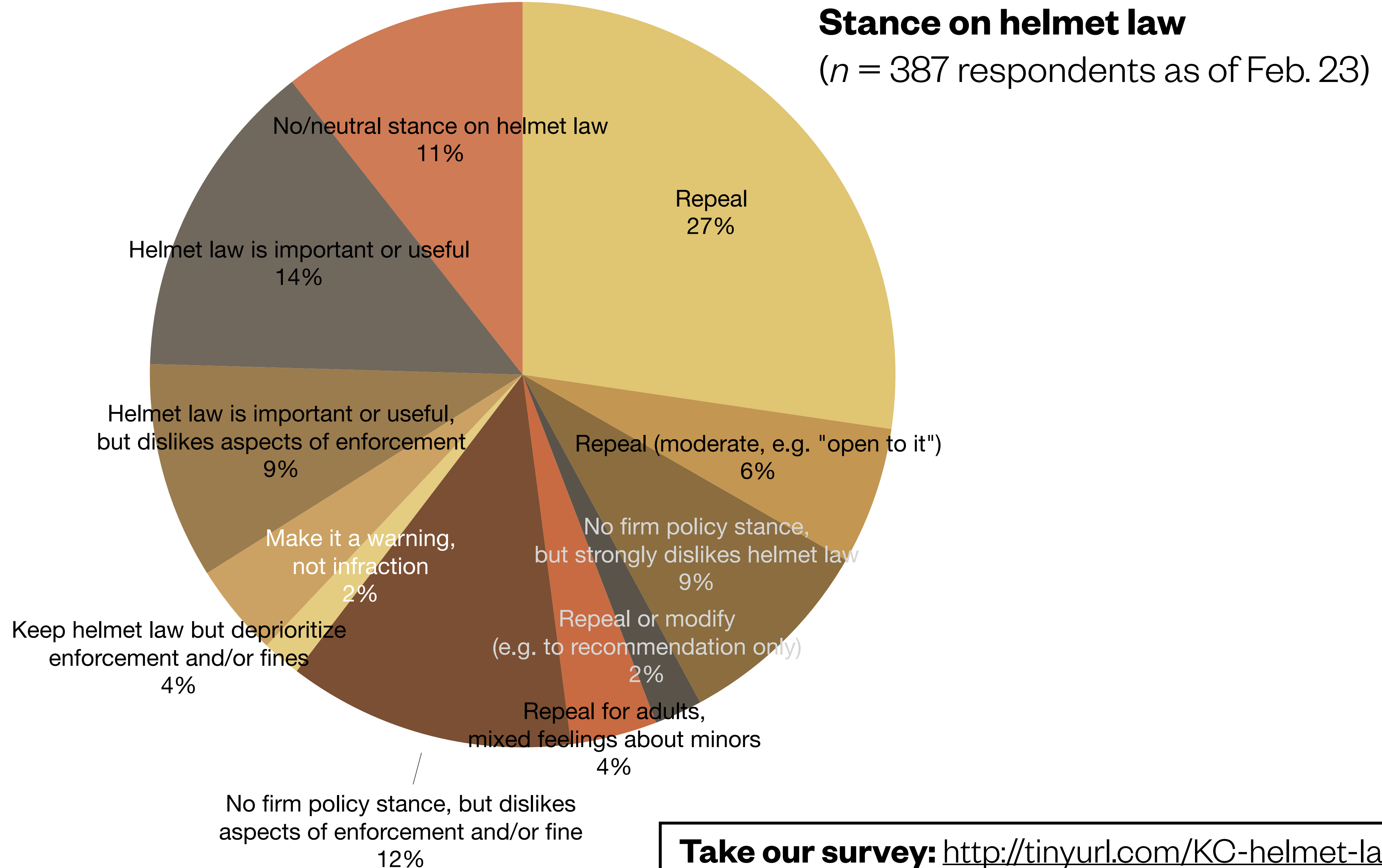
- Seattle police issue helmet citations to Black cyclists about **four** times more frequently and Indigenous cyclists more than **twice** as frequently as white cyclists
 - 1,667 helmet infractions from 2003-2020 examined
 - Rates are relative to demographic groups' estimated share of bicycle trips
- Next steps for research:
 - Geographic distribution of citations in Seattle
 - Frequency with which helmet citations go unpaid and are sent to collections
 - Disaggregation of non-Hispanic and Hispanic riders
 - Rates of citation issuance in King County cities outside Seattle

For more information: [“Technical report on bicycle infractions in Seattle \(2003-2020\): Methodology and preliminary findings on racial disparities,”](#) Ethan C. Campbell (Mar. 2021)

Related reporting: [Seattle Times](#) (source of graphic at right), [South Seattle Emerald](#), [Crosscut](#), [Cascade Bicycle Club](#), [Seattle Bike Blog](#) (Feb. 2021)



Helmet Law Working Group survey responses



Take our survey: <http://tinyurl.com/KC-helmet-law-survey>

Board of Health to review helmet law this year

- King County has declared that racism is a public health crisis ([Seattle & King County Public Health, 2020](#))
- Last month, King County Councilmember Jeanne Kohl-Welles introduced an amendment committing the Board of Health to reexamine the law in 2021
 - The amendment was adopted in a unanimous vote (12-0)
- What the Helmet Law Working Group is asking for:
 1. A thoughtful process that engages community, especially BIPOC and unhoused individuals, and stakeholders like the Seattle Bicycle Advisory Board
 2. Alternative strategies to promote helmet use without police involvement
 3. Recognition that safety goes beyond helmets, and consideration of interventions like safer infrastructure and lower vehicle speeds