

# Mass. police issuing fewer traffic violations

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GEORGE RIZER/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

**Police warned and ticketed drivers for texting while driving in West Bridgewater in 2015.**

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) and [Todd Wallack](#)

GLOBE STAFF JUNE 20, 2017

Police patrolling Massachusetts roads have been writing fewer people up for traffic violations than in past years.

State and local departments issued about 666,600 violations in 2016, a 35 percent drop from 2009, when more than 1 million were issued statewide.

Law enforcement officials said various factors have contributed to the decline. In some cases, they said, reductions in federal and state grants for traffic enforcement have led to cuts in the number of troopers and officers assigned to patrol duty.

Officials also say some agencies have shifted to using traffic stops as an opportunity to teach drivers about their mistakes, with the hope that an explanation — and perhaps a written or verbal warning — will do more to correct bad driving habits than issuing a fine.



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Such a tactic can not only “increase police legitimacy” but can also “enhance the practice of fair and impartial policing to the public at large,” Brian Kyes, president of the Massachusetts Major City Chiefs of Police Association and chief of Chelsea police, said in an e-mail.

## **Table: Violations by Mass. police department**

See how many violations your local police department has issued in recent years.

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Some officers might be more reluctant than they once were to issue violations amid heightened scrutiny of police behavior, including the use of force.

“Police officers are very sensitive to the excessive scrutiny the profession is receiving these days,” said Mark Leahy, executive director of the Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association and a former Northborough police chief. “In an environment where every action is subject to being video recorded, some may choose to forgo traffic enforcement altogether, or merely write written warnings.”

Leahy lamented the decline in violations. “Sadly, strict traffic enforcement is in the best interest of all motorists, as it promotes safety,” he said.

Even so, he and road safety experts said they do not believe the drop in violations has been the root cause of the jump in traffic [deaths in Massachusetts last year](#). Officials attribute the increase to an improved economy that has led drivers to log more miles, increasing the odds of accidents, and a rise in the number of people driving while distracted.

Police in Massachusetts [have cracked down on distracted driving](#), writing more violations for texting while behind the wheel every year since the state’s ban was implemented in 2010. But specialists said handing out violations alone can only go so far in preventing distracted driving.

“Certainly strong enforcement makes a difference, but laws can often be challenging for police to enforce,” said Mary Maguire, spokeswoman for AAA Northeast.

She said laws banning the use of phones or other distracting devices can be particularly tricky to enforce, especially in Massachusetts where texting is outlawed but dialing or talking on a phone is still allowed — actions that can be tough for officers to distinguish.

The statewide drop in overall violations has been driven by significant decreases among several of the largest police agencies in the state, including State Police. The force is responsible for about 40 percent of all traffic violations issued in Massachusetts.



State Police spokesman David Procopio said in an e-mail that staffing was a main factor that affects how many violations the department issues. But he did not respond to questions about how much the department's staffing has changed in recent years.

Data show violations issued by State Police fluctuated a bit from 2010 through 2014 before dropping significantly in 2015, when they fell to about 285,000, or about 14 percent lower than the year before and down 22 percent from the 368,000 issued in 2010.

For Boston police, the state's next-busiest department in terms of violations, there was a steady year-to-year decline from 2010 through 2015, when violations dropped 54 percent overall, according to the state data.

Officials there said the numbers did not match the department's internal records, but they did not respond to follow-up questions.

The third-busiest agency, Lowell police, saw a steady decline during those years, a 38 percent drop overall.

Lowell police also said their internal figures were somewhat different than the state data and showed less of a decline, more around 14 percent. It wasn't exactly clear why the department's figures were different, but one possible explanation was their internal data included written warnings whereas the state data did not.

Lowell police Captain Timothy Crowley said a reduction in state highway safety grant funding was probably a key reason why violations issued by the department dropped.

Crowley said in an e-mail that he was in charge of the traffic division from 2007 through 2013, and each year during that span, "We would get the same grants/programs, however the amount of funding was less each year, which would result in fewer patrols going out issuing fewer citations."

Still, for some departments, violation figures have been steady or are even up considerably in recent years.

Springfield police issued the fourth-highest number of violations from 2010 through 2015 and saw its figures rise significantly, particularly during 2014 and 2015.

The 24,170 issued in 2015 was about 60 percent higher than the 15,100 tallied in 2010.

Springfield police Captain David Martin said the increase was driven by a rise in grant funding. He said some of the additional money has been to target seat belt use or distracted driving, but even grants not targeted at traffic enforcement can be a factor.

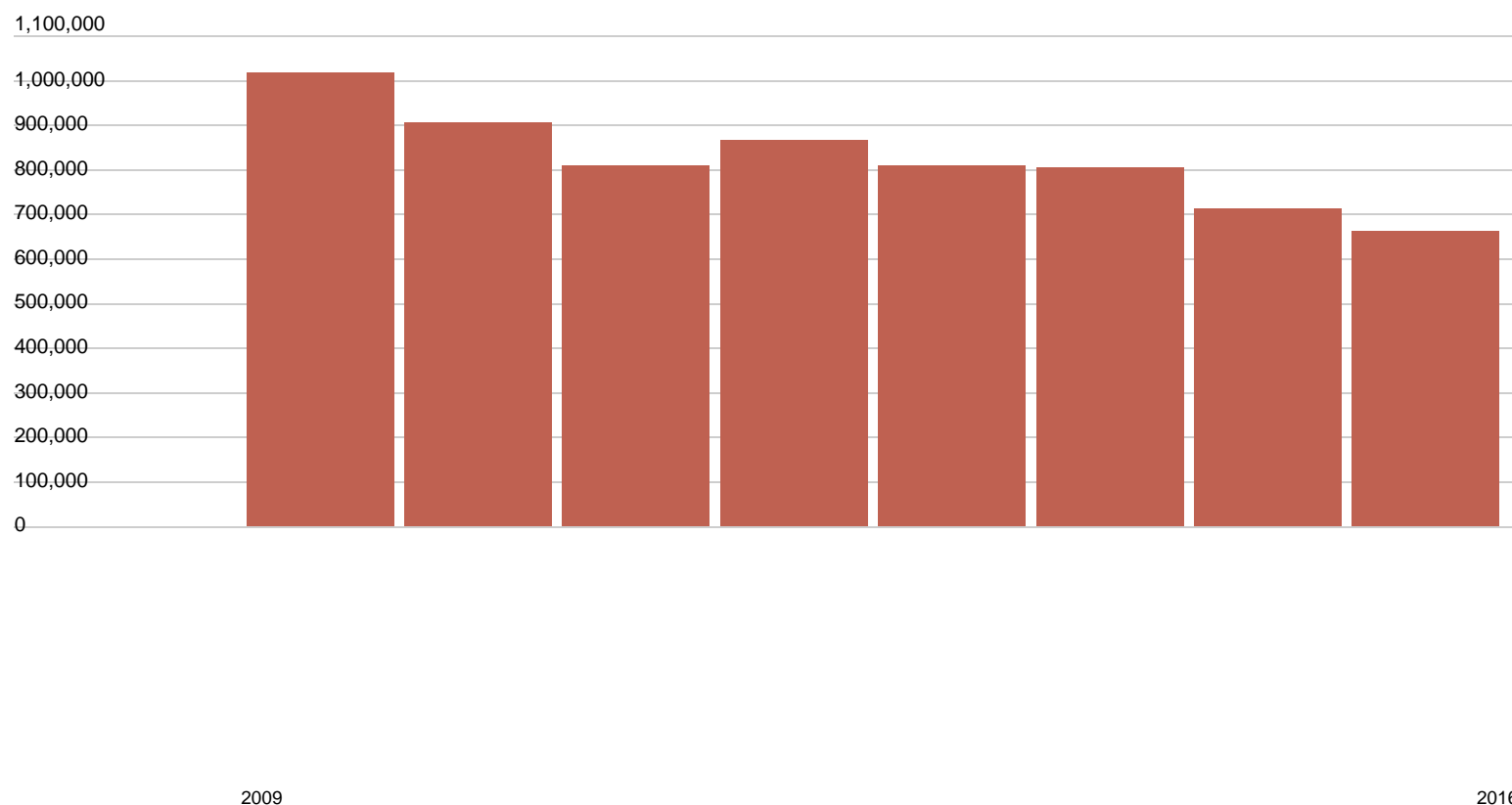
Martin said that, for example, recent grants the department received to crack down on gang activity has helped fund more patrols that inevitably lead to officers pulling over drivers who they spot breaking rules of the road.

He said another lesser factor could be turnover within the department, as a significant number of older officers have retired and been replaced by newer, younger officers.

“You definitely get higher numbers from newer officers,” Martin said. “Like any new officer that comes on, they’re very eager to get out there and learn and they do more and write more citations.”

#### Traffic violations issued, per year

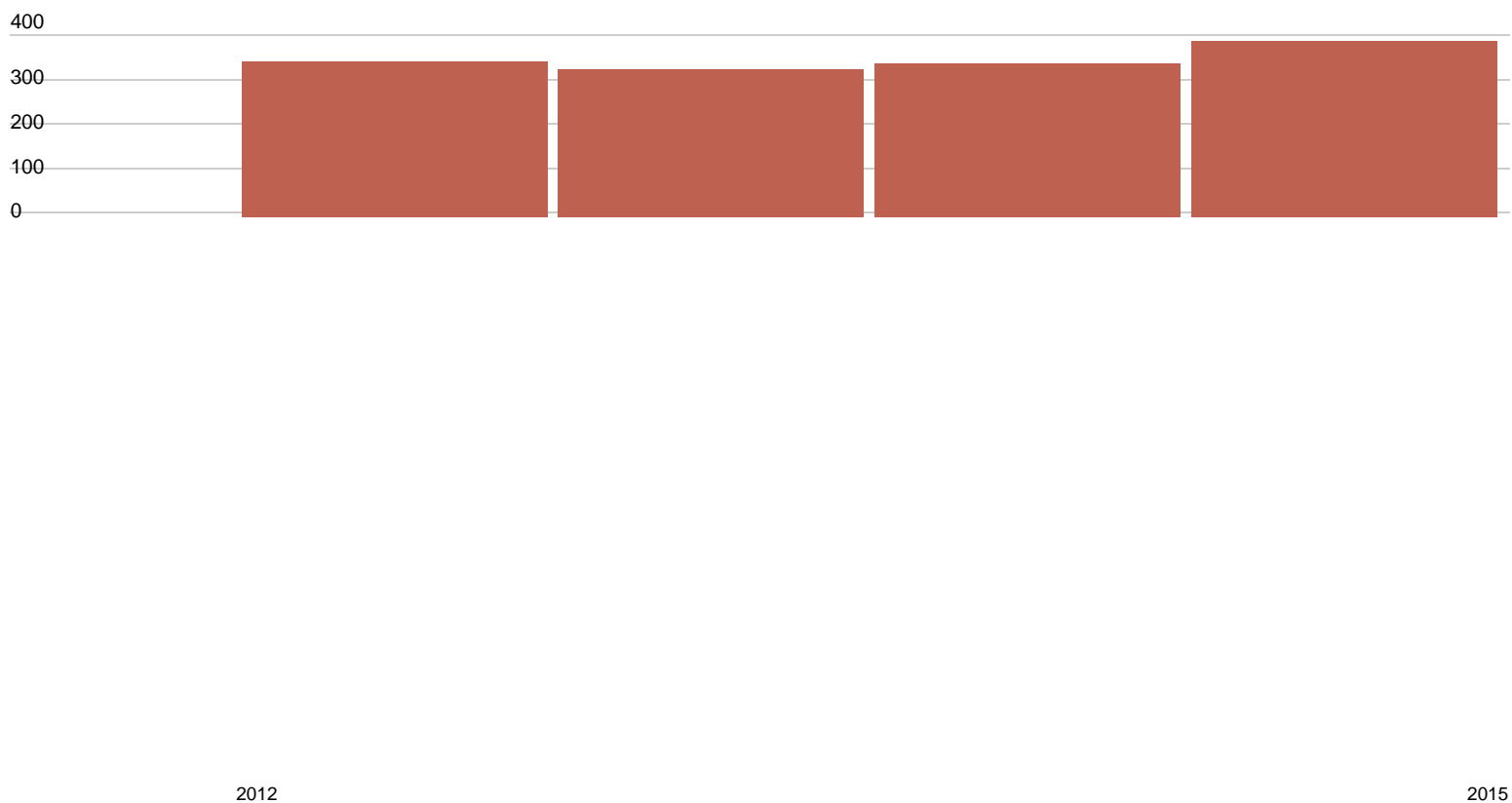
Data cover all police departments in Massachusetts.



#### Vehicle miles traveled in Mass., by year



### Deaths from motor vehicle crashes in Mass., by year



SOURCES: Massachusetts Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, National Safety Council, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Office of the Comptroller, Division of Local Services  
MATT ROCHELEAU/GLOBE STAFF

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