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CRIMINOLOGY 101 · CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY

EVALUATING THE NECESSITY FOR STRICTER ENFORCEMENT OF TRAFFIC LAWS IN FRESNO

A Multifaceted Approach to Mitigating Violence on the Road

FRESNO POLICE DISTRICT 4 · CENTRAL VALLEY

INSTRUCTOR

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ABSTRACT

Crime in Fresno and the broader Central Valley has tracked the national upward trend over the last several years, accelerated by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and a sustained opioid crisis. Among the underexplored contributors to that increase is aggressive driving — a category of road behavior that imposes risk well beyond the vehicle itself and may correlate with violent expressions in other domains of life. This paper evaluates whether augmented enforcement of traffic laws in Fresno could function as a proactive intervention against both roadway aggression and the spillover effects that flow from it.

The investigation proceeds along three empirical lines and one theoretical line. First, publicly available Fresno Police Department traffic-stop data from 2014 through 2017 is reconstructed, adjusted for known reporting gaps, and visualized to test the popular narrative of declining enforcement. Second, FBI Uniform Crime Report data for the ten most populous California cities is normalized against population to characterize Fresno's violent-crime profile relative to its peers. Third, a preliminary survey of nine Fresno residents in City Council District 4 captures resident perceptions of aggressive driving frequency, enforcement visibility, and the perceived link between road aggression and broader violence; responses are tested against the null using one-sample t-tests at $\alpha = 0.05$. Eight criminological frameworks — spillover theory, the brutalization hypothesis, reversal theory, the frustration-aggression hypothesis, both Mertonian and Agnew strain theories, social learning theory, and moral disengagement — are then applied to interpret the findings.

Three structural conclusions emerge. First, the available enforcement data is insufficient to support strong claims of either decline or improvement; the dataset is fragmented, capped at three usable years, and was subsequently consolidated to the state under AB 953 with no evident continuity for independent analysis. Second, while Fresno's overall violent-crime rate falls within the average band of comparable California cities, aggravated assault accounts for over 60% of its violent offense profile — a categorical concentration worth further study in the context of road-related aggression. Third, when survey responses marked “unsure” are excluded, respondents register a statistically significant belief both that reduced police presence has driven aggressive driving upward and that aggressive driving correlates with violent behavior off the roadway. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations for cross-district comparative analysis, durable historical data preservation, grass-roots community engagement, and sustained study of enforcement efficacy.

SECTION I

THE AGGRESSION THAT TRAVELS

VIOLENCE IN CONTEXT: THE CENTRAL VALLEY

Crime, in its many forms, has been a rapidly growing concern for Fresno and the broader Central Valley, mirroring the national trajectory of the past several years. The drivers are multiple and entangled: the social rupture of the COVID-19 pandemic, the persistent opioid crisis, demographic and economic pressure on the urban core, and the political turbulence that has accompanied each. Urban centers tend to register a disproportionate share of violent incidents, and Fresno is no exception. From domestic confrontations in the home to street altercations in the public square, the manifestations of violence here are diverse, which makes the city a useful site for examining underlying causes and deriving actionable interventions.

FROM TAILGATE TO THRESHOLD: THE SPILLOVER QUESTION

One of the underexplored facets of violence in Fresno concerns aggressive driving — a behavior often dismissed as an inconvenience but increasingly understood as a precursor to more serious harm. A small but growing body of research suggests that aggression displayed on the roadway does not always remain on the roadway. It travels. It can spill over into the home, the workplace, and other domains of life, contributing to forms of violence that no traffic ticket would ever describe. The phenomenon is not confined to those who initiate the aggression; the impatient honking, verbal escalation, and sometimes physical confrontations witnessed or absorbed on the streets can serve as the seedbed for risky and violent behaviors in those affected. The concern is not merely that aggressive driving disrupts the order of public roads. The concern is that it lays the groundwork for a culture of escalation that transcends the isolated sphere of driving.

THE ARGUMENT FOR STRICTER ENFORCEMENT

The central argument of this paper is that law enforcement, properly resourced and deployed, has a meaningful role to play in mitigating aggressive driving and, by extension, in dampening the second-order effects that flow from it. A coordinated effort that bolsters traffic enforcement could function as a proactive measure against road aggression, generating a cascade of incidental benefits across the broader violence-generating dynamics that an overly frustrated populace tends to produce. Through a deliberately constructed approach that joins

visible presence, consistent consequence, active community involvement, and education focused especially on new and youth drivers, it is conceivable to foster a safer and more harmonious environment in Fresno and the larger Central Valley. The pages that follow examine that premise in detail: investigating the current state of enforcement, characterizing its implications for violent tendencies, and proposing a holistic framework that addresses the intertwined issues of aggressive driving, road rage, violent crime, and enforcement practice.

SECTION II

A CENTURY OF SHIFTING COMPLIANCE

PUBLIC ATTITUDES FROM THE 1930S TO THE PRESENT

Public posture toward law enforcement has shifted substantially over the last century. Consistent public-opinion polling on police did not exist until the late 1960s and early 1970s, but qualitative historical analysis suggests that the general perception of police from the 1930s through the modern era has been more stable than is commonly assumed (Oliver, 2020). What has changed dramatically is the social fabric in which that perception sits. Communities were smaller in the early and mid-twentieth century, urban centers had not yet reached their current density, and the populace had recently navigated the Great Depression and the collective sacrifice of the Second World War. Smaller communities meant less anonymity, and a greater sense of local duty followed naturally. Through the 1950s, those features supported a broader societal norm of compliance and respect for authority that did not require defending.

As the second half of the century unfolded, that base eroded under successive pressures. The Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam-era protest, geopolitical events such as Tiananmen Square, and the steady accumulation of investigative journalism shifted public posture toward questioning of authority and active challenge of inherited norms. The trend has continued and accelerated through the rise of the internet and social media, which simultaneously confer anonymity and a public voice. Dissent is more easily expressed and more rapidly amplified than at any prior point in the historical record.

Fresno, like many other urban centers, has witnessed a growing trend in aggressive driving over the past several years. While some cities have succeeded in deterring and mitigating these roadway risks to varying degrees, Fresno's particular combination of social transition, post-pandemic strain, and rising overall crime has placed measurable pressure on policing efforts — particularly those related to effective traffic management. Examining these shifts through historical and statistical lenses helps untangle the cluster of factors contributing to current road culture and positions the city to respond proactively rather than reactively.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF THE AGGRESSIVE DRIVER

Aggressive driving is not new, but road users now perceive it as a significant problem because it is a major cause of crashes and injuries; aggressive driving behavior is significantly correlated with higher numbers of crashes (Berdoulat, Deninotti, and Vavassori, 2021). Berdoulat and colleagues identify four profiles of drivers — Respectful, Aggressive-Avenger, Aggressive-Dominant, and Aggressive-Situational — and clarify the connection between trait anger and aggressive tendency on the road.

The link between these aggressive profiles and the deterrent effect of police presence can be located within reversal theory, which holds that an individual's behavior is strongly influenced by the configuration of current metamotivational states (Apter, Fontana, and Murgatroyd, 1985). Because the propensity to engage in aggressive driving is partly a function of the situational state at the moment of decision, an effective and visible deterrent should influence those behaviors at the margin.

A 2023 study examines what happens when police pull back. Following budget cuts, political and public pressure, and the operational shock of COVID-19, U.S. policing in 2020 absorbed a near 30% spike in homicide alone (Nix, Huff, and Wolfe, 2023). While that study focused on the neighborhood level in Denver, its central finding is portable: large-scale reductions in stops and drug-related arrests were associated with significant increases in violent and property crime. The Fresno narrative is further compounded by post-pandemic stress, growing population pressure on already-congested roadways, and a media environment in which calls to defund or restructure police have been a persistent, if unevenly applied, theme.

SECTION III · PILLAR ONE

ENFORCEMENT TRENDS

DATA ACQUISITION AND REPORTING GAPS

Traffic enforcement statistics for this analysis were collected from publicly available reports issued by the Fresno Police Department and processed from raw tables into the visualizations that follow. No alterations were made to the source values, but several reporting gaps must be noted before the data can be interpreted responsibly. The 2015 dataset is missing source data for all categories except the fourth quarter, leaving roughly nine months of the year uncategorized. The 2017 dataset is missing all data for the fourth quarter, leaving roughly three months uncategorized. The result is a publicly accessible dataset that effectively spans two complete years (2016) flanked by partial years on either end.

Attempts were made to acquire additional data through the Fresno Police Department's Community Outreach liaison and through Fresno City Council; both attempts failed to produce usable supplementary records. The City of Fresno Records and Reports section, where the data was originally obtained, clarifies that as a result of California Assembly Bill 953, the stop data previously reported on the city site is now transmitted to the state. Subsequent exploration of the state's reporting systems did not surface comparable, granular data suitable to continue the local analysis. The implication is that any longitudinal study of Fresno-specific traffic enforcement is, at present, capped at this fragmented window.

TABLE 1

Fresno Police Department traffic stops by reason, 2015–2017.

REASON FOR STOP	2015*	2016	2017*
Hazardous Moving Violation	5,707	20,469	27,403
Non-Hazardous Moving Violation	2,700	8,435	7,796
Vehicle Equipment Violation	2,752	7,967	6,340

REASON FOR STOP	2015*	2016	2017*
DUI — Driving Under the Influence	—	*Reported*	*Reported*
Investigative Stop	—	*Reported*	*Reported*

Note. 2015 is missing categorical data for Q1, Q2, and Q3. 2017 is missing all data for Q4. Adapted from City of Fresno Records and Reports (2023).

Hazardous moving violations clearly dominate the enforcement profile. Holding 2015 and 2017 to their reported quarters, the 2016 data — the only fully reported year — shows roughly 5,000 hazardous-moving stops per quarter. The fourth quarter of 2015, the only quarter for which 2015 categorical data exists, registered 5,707 hazardous-moving stops. To estimate the missing data, one method is to sum all reported hazardous-moving quarters and divide by the number of quarters captured: (5,707 + 20,469 + 27,403) ÷ 8 ≈ 6,697 hazardous-moving stops per quarter.

Applying that estimate to the missing quarters produces adjusted totals of approximately 25,798 hazardous-moving stops in 2015, 20,469 reported in 2016, and 34,100 in 2017. Read this way, the apparent dramatic upward trend in the raw chart resolves into something more nuanced: a roughly 21% drop in enforcement between 2015 and 2016 followed by a roughly 40% increase between 2016 and 2017, for a baseline 2015–2017 increase of approximately 24%. The story is less a runaway escalation and more a recovery from a midpoint dip.

TABLE 2

Fresno Police Department total traffic stops, 2014–2017.

YEAR	2014*	2015	2016	2017*
Total Traffic Stops	47,129	69,018	40,700	43,807

Note. 2014 is missing all data from Q1 and is missing categorical breakdown for the entire year. 2015 is missing categorical data from Q1–Q3. 2017 is missing all data from Q4. Adapted from City of Fresno Records and Reports (2023).

Total stops show a more volatile pattern: a spike between 2014 and 2015, a substantial drop into 2016, and a partial recovery into 2017. The 2014 figure must be read with care, since the first quarter is entirely missing and the year contains no categorical breakdown for any quarter. The 2015 spike is similarly compromised by missing categorical data through the first three quarters. The cleanest read across these years suggests year-over-year

variability of approximately ±20%, which without a longer baseline is difficult to interpret as a structural trend rather than ordinary noise.

To summarize: the available evidence does not support a strong conclusion that traffic enforcement in Fresno has either improved or declined over the period in question. The interpretive ceiling is set by the data itself — fragmented categorical reporting, a short time window, and the post-AB 953 transition to state-level consolidation. A meaningful longitudinal study of Fresno enforcement will require either the recovery of pre-2014 data or sustained, granular, accessible reporting going forward.

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SECTION IV · PILLAR TWO

THE VIOLENT-CRIME PROFILE

To set the local enforcement question against a more general background, violent-crime data was drawn from the FBI's 2018 Uniform Crime Reporting tables for the ten most populous California cities. The data is presented in three views: absolute occurrences by category, occurrences normalized as a rate against city population, and the categorical composition of violent crime within each city. The combination is intended to characterize where Fresno actually sits relative to its peers, rather than relying on the absolute counts that almost mechanically place Los Angeles at the top of every measure.

TABLE 3

Violent crime by category, top 10 California cities by population (2018).

CITY	MURDER	RAPE	ROBBERY	AGG. ASSAULT
Los Angeles	258	2,528	10,327	17,013
San Diego	35	605	1,439	3,281
San Jose	28	615	1,593	2,208
San Francisco	46	354	3,165	2,579
Fresno	32	170	909	1,842
Sacramento	36	102	1,052	2,139
Long Beach	30	219	979	2,056
Oakland	70	448	2,624	2,338
Bakersfield	31	113	811	940

CITY	MURDER	RAPE	ROBBERY	AGG. ASSAULT
Anaheim	21	230	499	821

Note. Adapted from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime in the U.S. 2018. Rape figures use the revised UCR definition.

The absolute counts are unsurprising. Los Angeles ranks highest across every category by a wide margin. Aggravated assault tends to lead each city's profile, with robbery typically second. Aggravated assault tops the list in seven of the ten cities; in San Francisco and Oakland, robbery and aggravated assault are close, with robbery slightly higher. The categorical pattern, however, is more useful than the absolute one — and more useful still when normalized to population.

TABLE 4

Violent crime as a rate of population, top 10 California cities (2018).

CITY	VIOLENT CRIME / POPULATION
Los Angeles	0.75%
San Diego	0.37%
San Jose	0.42%
San Francisco	0.69%
Fresno	0.56%
Sacramento	0.66%
Long Beach	0.70%
Oakland	1.27%
Bakersfield	0.49%

CITY	VIOLENT CRIME / POPULATION
Anaheim	0.34%

Note. Calculated as total violent offenses divided by city population. Adapted from FBI Crime in the U.S. 2018.

Normalized for population, the picture changes. Oakland stands out at 1.27%, nearly double the second-highest rate in the dataset. Los Angeles, despite its absolute dominance, falls back into the same band as several smaller cities. Fresno, at 0.56%, sits squarely in the middle of the distribution — neither distinguishing itself in either direction. The implication is that Fresno's violent-crime rate, on a per-resident basis, is unremarkable among large California cities.

TABLE 5

Categorical composition of violent crime, top 10 California cities (2018).

CITY	MURDER	RAPE	ROBBERY	AGG. ASSAULT
Los Angeles	0.86%	8.43%	34.42%	56.69%
San Diego	0.65%	11.21%	26.66%	60.80%
San Jose	0.62%	13.66%	35.39%	49.04%
San Francisco	0.74%	5.66%	50.66%	41.30%
Fresno	1.07%	5.69%	30.40%	**61.61%**
Sacramento	1.10%	3.11%	32.05%	65.16%
Long Beach	0.92%	6.71%	30.00%	63.03%
Oakland	1.27%	8.10%	47.45%	42.27%
Bakersfield	1.66%	6.05%	43.42%	50.32%

CITY	MURDER	RAPE	ROBBERY	AGG. ASSAULT
Anaheim	1.31%	14.34%	31.10%	51.18%

Note. Each row sums to approximately 100% (subject to rounding) and represents the share of each city's total violent crime allocated to each offense category. Adapted from FBI Crime in the U.S. 2018.

The categorical view, however, surfaces a feature worth noting. Fresno ranks among the top three California cities for the share of violent crime that is aggravated assault. For every violent act recorded in Fresno, there is over a 60% probability that it falls into the aggravated assault category. Robbery, the next-largest contributor, accounts for roughly 30%. Aggravated assault is a category that often involves heated, in-the-moment confrontation rather than premeditated criminal enterprise — the emotional shape of which has at least surface-level resonance with the kind of escalation that aggressive driving, road rage, and frustration-aggression dynamics can produce. The historical, descriptive nature of UCR data does not permit a causal claim. It does, however, justify continued attention to the category.

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SECTION V · PILLAR THREE

THE RESIDENT SURVEY

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

To empirically test the hypothesis that lax traffic enforcement in Fresno correlates with elevated aggressive driving, a brief survey was administered to residents within Fresno City Council District 4. District 4 was selected because it sits centrally within the city and encompasses a mix of residential, commercial, and arterial driving environments. Participants were recruited at random in public common areas, with representation sought across age groups; the qualifying question was, “Do you frequently drive within Fresno?” Selection did not follow a structured nth-person criterion, and the resulting convenience sample of nine respondents is acknowledged as a limitation.

The instrument was designed to elicit both subjective perceptions and pseudo-objective accounts of aggressive driving and law enforcement. Items were drafted with reference to the published research literature, kept to a maximum of five questions to respect street-level attention budgets, reviewed in advance by a Fresno State University statistics professor, and reviewed again at the conclusion of the survey under the same professor's guidance. Administration ran across two weeks, with all participation voluntary and unpaid. Verbal informed consent was given prior to the survey, anonymity was assured, responses were recorded by the participant on paper, and respondents were reminded not to leave any identifying information.

Responses were coded numerically for analysis. One-sample t-tests were applied to each question to determine whether observed sample means deviated significantly from the expected population mean under the null. For questions that included an “Unsure” or “Prefer not to answer” option, two parallel evaluations were conducted: one (A) including those responses in the calculation, one (B) excluding them. The intent of the dual treatment is to characterize how much certainty drives the result.

INSTRUMENT DESIGN

The survey consisted of five multiple-choice questions. Four questions used a six-option Likert-style response (a–f) with the final option reserved for an “unsure” or related opt-out. Question 4 used three options, of which two were yes/no and the third was “prefer not to answer.” The five constructs were: (1) frequency of witnessed

aggressive driving; (2) perceived visibility of traffic enforcement on a 0–5 scale; (3) belief that reduced police presence has driven aggressive driving upward; (4) personal or close-circle impact from road rage or aggressive driving in the past year; and (5) belief in a correlation between aggressive driving and the likelihood of violent behaviors off the roadway.

RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

TABLE 6

Response counts by question and option (n = 9).

QUESTION	A)	B)	C)	D)	E)	F)
1	5	3	0	1	0	0
2	0	1	5	3	0	0
3	1	3	2	1	0	2
4	5	4	0	—	—	—
5	2	5	0	0	0	2

Note. Question 4 used only three response options. Em dashes indicate options not present on the instrument. Adapted from McGauley (2023).

The descriptive picture is unambiguous on Question 1: a clear majority of respondents witness aggressive driving multiple times per day, with the remainder concentrated at daily or weekly. Question 2 is more diffuse — the highest single response is 2 on a 0–5 scale of enforcement visibility, followed by 3, suggesting an average-leaning-low perception of police presence. Question 3 produced a substantial "unsure" share, with the highest non-unsure category being agreement that reduced police presence has driven aggressive driving upward; the question's phrasing is flagged for revision in any follow-up study. Question 4 split nearly evenly between yes and no, which limits its interpretive weight given only three response options. Question 5 showed the same diffusion pattern as Question 3, with agreement again leading among non-unsure responses but a noticeable proportion seeking clarification during administration.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING AT A = 0.05

Each question was tested under a one-sample two-tailed t-test against a null hypothesis set at the median of the available response scale: $\mu = 3.5$ for six-option items, $\mu = 2.0$ for the three-option Question 4. For questions with an "unsure" or opt-out option, a B-evaluation was constructed by excluding those responses and reanchoring the null to the median of the remaining scale. The instrument was designed such that lower-numbered responses (a, b) shifted the curve in the direction of supporting the paper's premise, while the higher-numbered options (d, e) shifted it the other way. Results are summarized below.

TABLE 7

One-sample t-test results by question, $\alpha = 0.05$ ($n = 9$).

Q.	CONSTRUCT TESTED	H_0	RESULT	DECISION
1	Frequency of witnessed aggressive driving	$\mu = 3.5$	$\bar{x} = 1.67$	Reject H_0
2	Visibility of traffic enforcement	$\mu = 3.5$	$\bar{x} = 3.22$	Fail to reject
3A	Reduced policing → aggressive driving (with "unsure")	$\mu = 3.5$	$\bar{x} = 3.22$	Fail to reject
3B	Reduced policing → aggressive driving (without "unsure")	$\mu = 3.0$	$\bar{x} = 1.89$	Reject H_0
4A	Personal impact (with "prefer not")	$\mu = 2.0$	$\bar{x} = 1.44$	Reject H_0
4B	Personal impact (without "prefer not")	$\mu = 1.5$	$\bar{x} = 1.89$	Fail to reject
5A	Aggressive driving ↔ off-road violence (with "unsure")	$\mu = 3.5$	$\bar{x} = 2.67$	Fail to reject
5B	Aggressive driving ↔ off-road violence (without "unsure")	$\mu = 3.0$	$\bar{x} = 1.33$	Reject H_0

Note. A-evaluations include "unsure" / "prefer not to answer" responses; B-evaluations exclude them. Adapted from McGauley (2023).

Read together, the results suggest a coherent reading: respondents register aggressive driving as a frequent, near-daily phenomenon in Fresno (Q1); they do not register a strong opinion that enforcement is invisible, although the central tendency leans toward modest visibility (Q2); their certainty about the link between enforcement levels and aggressive driving (Q3) and between aggressive driving and broader violence (Q5) is masked by a substantial "unsure" share, but emerges as statistically significant when only respondents who chose a definite position are counted.

Question 4's interpretive instability is worth flagging. With three response options including "prefer not to answer," the math distinguishes "impacted" from the rest as a strong signal in evaluation A, but loses that signal in evaluation B once the opt-out is excluded. The instrument is recommended for revision in any future iteration to allow a richer set of response gradations and a clearer construct definition. The overall sample size of nine is also acknowledged as a hard ceiling on inference; results here are reported as preliminary and as motivation for further study, not as definitive findings.

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SECTION VI

THEORETICAL ARCHITECTURE

To translate the empirical findings of Sections III through V into a coherent argument, eight criminological frameworks are drawn upon: spillover theory, the brutalization hypothesis, reversal theory, the frustration-aggression hypothesis, both Mertonian and Agnew strain theories, social learning theory, and the theory of moral disengagement. The frameworks are grouped here in the order most useful for tracing how aggression on the roadway connects to broader violent behavior.

SPILLOVER THEORY

As the name suggests, spillover theory describes the migration of aggressive or violent behavior from one domain into others where it was never originally directed. The frequently cited example is the child who was disciplined through corporal punishment and learned the use of physical force as a method for problem-solving; that learned response then surfaces in adulthood as a behavioral default for handling resistance and conflict (Alvarez and Bachman, 2021). Applied to road behavior, the framework suggests two paths: a child who grows up observing road rage from a parent may replicate it as the model for resolving roadway conflict, and an adult whose problem-solving repertoire is shaped predominantly by aggression may carry that repertoire onto the road as a continuation of established habits.

THE BRUTALIZATION HYPOTHESIS

The brutalization hypothesis travels alongside spillover theory. It holds that a society's tolerance for certain devaluations of life or dignity raises the baseline for behavior consistent with that devaluation (Alvarez and Bachman, 2021). The standard illustration is the death penalty, where the argument is that society's continued use of capital punishment communicates a low marginal cost to taking a life, with downstream effects on homicide rates.

A parallel logic applies to roadways. As more drivers engage in aggressive driving without accountability or visible consequence, the social cost of that behavior to the aggressor falls and the implicit toleration of it by others rises. Drivers who repeatedly observe or absorb aggressive behavior come to expect it, then accept it as a feature of the road, then potentially adopt it themselves under strain conditions consistent with strain

theory's adaptation framework. The pattern is reflected in the upward five-year moving average of aggressive-driving incidents reported in California Department of Transportation collision data between 2012 and 2017 (Department of Transportation, 2020).

REVERSAL THEORY

Reversal theory begins from a rejection of homeostatic models of motivation in favor of a bistable account: human motivation is not a fixed disposition but an oscillation between metamotivational states, configured at any moment by the interaction of internal disposition and external environment (Apter, Fontana, and Murgatroyd, 1985). The implication for the present argument is that an individual's decision to engage in aggressive driving is not a stable trait but a function of state variables that include the perceived presence or absence of consequence. Reduced enforcement, in this framework, removes one of the environmental constraints that would normally shift the metamotivational state away from aggression. The fuller theory is more nuanced than this single application can accommodate, but the directional logic is sufficient for the argument here.

THE FRUSTRATION-AGGRESSION HYPOTHESIS

The frustration-aggression hypothesis specifies a sequence and a set of moderating factors. The sequence is: a person is blocked from achieving something they want, the blockage produces frustration, and the frustration generates a heightened probability of a violent or aggressive response (Alvarez and Bachman, 2021). The probability is amplified when the frustration is perceived as intentionally caused by another party, when the blockage is perceived as unfair, and when situational stimuli prime aggression.

All three moderators are present on the road in routine quantities. Being cut off in traffic reads as intentionally caused. Watching another driver run a red light without consequence while one waits patiently reads as unfair. The vehicle environment routinely supplies aggressive stimuli through music selection, the perceived presence of weapons, or a bad day already in progress. The model does not predict a guaranteed escalation; it predicts an elevated baseline probability under combinations of these conditions, which is consistent with the observed pattern of road-rage incidents emerging from disproportionately small triggers.

STRAIN THEORY — MERTON

Robert Merton's strain theory frames anomie as the structural mismatch between a society's promoted goals and the legitimate means available for achieving them, with violence and deviance arising as adaptations to that mismatch (Alvarez and Bachman, 2021). The economic focus of Merton's original frame complicates direct

application to road behavior, but the adaptation taxonomy translates with some interpretive stretch. Conformity describes the driver who continues to adhere to the rules. Retreatism describes the driver who copes through substance use, which the DUI category reflects. Rebellion describes the driver who deliberately challenges the norms — the illegal street racer is the textbook case. Ritualism describes the driver who continues their habits unchanged regardless of the evolving environment around them.

STRAIN THEORY — AGNEW

Robert Agnew's general strain theory broadens the original frame to cover non-economic stressors and offers a more direct fit for the road context (Alvarez and Bachman, 2021). Agnew identifies three sources of strain: blockage from achieving a positively valued goal, removal of something positively valued, and imposition of something negatively valued. Each translates clearly onto the roadway. The driver is blocked from the goal of safe, predictable travel. The driver risks the loss of vehicle, property, and bodily safety, with the loss occasionally realized in a totaled vehicle or, in the worst cases, a fatality. And the driver is forced to absorb the imposed presence of an aggressive driver in the shared space of the road, with no opt-out available. The accumulation of these strains over the course of routine commuting helps explain why an environment that is, statistically, only modestly dangerous nonetheless feels emotionally exhausting to navigate.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Social learning theory holds that an individual's propensity to engage in violence rises with sustained association with people and groups who use violence (Alvarez and Bachman, 2021). The framework was originally developed in the context of gang behavior, but a roadway extension is defensible. Drivers form, however loosely, a community of practice during their time behind the wheel: law-abiding drivers, new drivers, commercial drivers, aggressive drivers, and so on. Drivers who associate disproportionately with aggressive drivers — through participation in illegal street racing, through regular commuting on routes saturated with aggressive driving, or through media diet — receive more reinforcement of aggressive behavior as a normal mode of operation. Signaling theory adds a related dimension: visible vehicle modifications can mark group affiliation in ways analogous to gang or fraternity insignia, and the recognition-seeking dynamic that follows can reinforce aggressive driving as performative identity rather than incidental error.

Social learning also operates through desensitization, both first-hand and mediated. The Fast and the Furious franchise is a frequently cited example of the celebration of aggressive and illegal driving as entertainment, but desensitization in news coverage may matter more. Vehicle accidents and roadway violence appear with such routine frequency in local reporting that they have become background noise; the rate of occurrence and the

rate of coverage have decoupled, and the implication is that the social signal which once made these events unusual has weakened.

THE THEORY OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

Moral disengagement describes the cognitive mechanism by which individuals justify behavior that would normally violate their stated values (Alvarez and Bachman, 2021). Under sufficient stressor, the individual rationalizes a moral exception, treating the present situation as outside the normal scope of the rule. A driver who would never engage in aggressive driving on an ordinary commute may, under a sufficiently egregious provocation — say, a sideswipe with children in the vehicle — convince themselves that following the offending driver while contacting police is justified. The pursuit, however, requires keeping pace with an aggressive driver, which in practice means engaging in aggressive driving. The behavior the moral exception was meant to license is also the behavior the exception now produces. The further compounding effect is that any children in the pursuing vehicle are now learning aggressive pursuit as an acceptable response to roadway provocation, completing a small social-learning circuit in real time.

Each of these eight frameworks contributes a partial account; none is sufficient on its own. Read together, they describe a behavior — aggressive driving — that originates in a specific situational pressure, is reinforced through social learning, escalates under frustration and removed constraint, normalizes under brutalization, and migrates into adjacent domains through spillover. The empirical record assembled in Sections III through V is consistent with this composite picture, though not yet large enough to confirm it.

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SECTION VII

AGGRESSIVE DRIVING VS. ROAD RAGE

Before the recommendations are stated, a definitional distinction needs to be made. Aggressive driving and road rage are routinely conflated in public discussion but are categorically separate phenomena under the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's framework. The NHTSA defines aggressive driving as the operation of a motor vehicle in a manner that endangers, or is likely to endanger, persons or property; road rage is the extreme form, where the behavior turns violent (DOT HS 809 707, 2004). The legal consequence follows the distinction: aggressive driving is a traffic violation, while road rage, beyond the routine yelling and gesticulating, is a criminal offense.

AGGRESSIVE DRIVING

Aggressive driving covers the running of red lights, excessive speeding, weaving in and out of traffic, cutting off other motorists, and similar behaviors that endanger others. The category is common, and it is taken seriously by the public: an NHTSA national survey reported that 60% of respondents view unsafe driving as a real threat to themselves and their families (DOT HS 809 707, 2004). The behavior is frequent. The consequence, in the absence of consistent enforcement, is often nominal.

ROAD RAGE

Road rage, by NHTSA's own characterization, has incidence rates that remain a fraction of a percent. The category is rare on a population basis, but the distinction matters because road rage is criminal where aggressive driving is administrative, and because the consequences of a road-rage incident — particularly in a state with high rates of legal and illegal firearm ownership — can be lethal. A vehicle is often perceived as a private safe space by its occupants, which under the theoretical frameworks of the previous section can lower the inhibitory threshold against escalation. The combination of perceived safety, mobile platform, and accessible weaponry produces a category in which a single failure of self-regulation can cost a life.

SECTION VIII

RECOMMENDATIONS

ENFORCEMENT STRATEGY

Municipal budgets are stretched thin, particularly given the high rates of other crime categories that compete for police time and resources. The Fresno Police Department does maintain a dedicated traffic enforcement team, colloquially known as Motors. The NHTSA's enforcement study explicitly recommends that limited resources be spent on officer labor rather than publicity, and that focusing enforcement responsibility on a small team assigned full-time to special enforcement patrols outperforms distributing the responsibility across a large number of officers as occasional overtime duty (Stuster, 2004). The Fresno model, whether by design or by parallel evolution, is consistent with that recommendation. Despite this alignment, public perception of aggressive driving frequency remains elevated, which suggests that team capacity is bounded by something other than its operational philosophy.

Three operational recommendations follow from the evidence presented here. First, cross-district comparative analysis should be commissioned to test variation in observed aggressive-driving rates across Fresno's seven council districts; a within-city comparison would help identify whether problematic concentrations are geographically specific. Second, time-bounded enforcement campaigns should be considered for districts identified through that comparative analysis as outliers, with patrol officers folded into traffic enforcement for the duration of the campaign. Third, public-facing data infrastructure should be improved: enforcement records should be made readily accessible, complete across categorical and temporal dimensions, and preserved for longitudinal study. The fragmentation observed in Section III's data is not a limitation of analysis — it is a limitation of governance, and it is correctable.

COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES

The NHTSA enforcement study examined several community-based interventions including aggressive-driving hotlines for citizen reporting, supporting billboards and printed materials, and professionally produced television and radio commercials accompanied by augmented marked and unmarked enforcement (Stuster, 2004). The study's finding was that the public-information component, even paired with targeted

enforcement, did not produce the expected results, which is what informed the recommendation to concentrate spending on labor over publicity.

Two adjustments to the community-engagement model are worth considering for Fresno. First, grass-roots engagement at the high-school level — targeting new drivers during the period when their road habits are still forming — has not been adequately tested in the published literature and may produce outcomes that the broader-targeted public campaigns of the original study could not. Second, community-based publicity led by local civic organizations rather than professionally produced advertising may produce different engagement profiles, particularly in a city where local media penetration is uneven across demographic and linguistic lines. Either approach should be paired with the cross-district analysis recommended above to allow efficacy to be measured rather than assumed.

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SECTION IX

CONCLUSION

Several constraints shaped this study. The Fresno traffic-enforcement dataset is fragmented across the only window in which it was publicly accessible, the post-AB 953 transition has consolidated reporting at the state level without preserving independent local accessibility, and the survey instrument, while pre- and post-reviewed by a statistics professor, was administered to a sample of nine. None of these limitations is fatal to the inquiry. Each is recoverable in subsequent work.

The recommendations carry forward in two parts. The first is methodological: comparative analysis between Fresno's council districts and between Fresno and similarly sized peer cities — controlling for population density, demographic profile, and crime-rate baseline — would allow clearer separation of what is specifically Fresno from what is common across mid-sized California cities. The second is structural: durable, granular, accessible historical data on enforcement and roadway behavior is a precondition for any honest evaluation of intervention efficacy. Public interest and education efforts should be studied as separable variables rather than as a single category, since the Stuster (2004) findings suggest that not all forms of engagement perform identically.

Road-rage and roadway violent encounters together represent only a small share of the violent crime profile of Fresno or any California city. Aggressive driving, however, is endemic — the survey reported in Section V registers it as a multiple-times-per-day occurrence for the majority of respondents — and the theoretical frameworks examined in Section VI describe a series of mechanisms by which that endemic behavior could plausibly migrate into other expressions of violence. The empirical evidence assembled here is suggestive rather than conclusive. It is sufficient to motivate further study, sufficient to recommend a sharpened cross-district enforcement strategy, and sufficient to argue for sustained investment in the data infrastructure required to evaluate that strategy. It is not yet sufficient to claim a causal link between road aggression and broader violence in Fresno. The work to do that is ahead. The conditions for doing it well — accessible data, repeatable methodology, durable institutional commitment — are within reach.

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APPENDIX A

TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT DATA

Source data was extracted from the City of Fresno Records and Reports public traffic-stops disclosures and reorganized for analysis. Categorical breakdowns are reproduced below as reported. Asterisks denote years with incomplete reporting; refer to the table notes for the specific gaps.

TABLE A1

Fresno Police Department traffic stops by primary reason, 2015–2017.

REASON FOR STOP	2015*	2016	2017*
Hazardous Moving Violation	5,707	20,469	27,403
Non-Hazardous Moving Violation	2,700	8,435	7,796
Vehicle Equipment Violation	2,752	7,967	6,340

Note. 2015 is missing categorical data for Q1, Q2, and Q3. 2017 is missing all data for Q4. Source: City of Fresno Records and Reports (2023).

Additional categories tracked in the public reports — including DUI stops, investigative stops, courtesy stops, daily-crime-bulletin warrant stops, and seat-belt violations — are aggregated in the source documents but not consistently broken out across the available reporting period; they are therefore omitted from this paper's categorical analysis. Total-stop figures for 2014 through 2017 are provided in the main text (Section III, Table 2).

Future preservation of these public records — preferably with consistent categorical reporting and continuity across the AB 953 transition — would substantially improve the longitudinal analytical capacity available to outside researchers.

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APPENDIX B

VIOLENCE AND CRIME DATA

Comparative violent-crime data was drawn from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting tables for 2018, the most recent year for which complete city-level UCR data was available at the time of this study. Tables 3 through 5 in the main text present, respectively, raw counts by category, rates as a percentage of population, and the categorical composition of violent crime within each city. The population values used to compute rates are reproduced below for reference.

TABLE B1

Population values for the top 10 California cities (2018).

CITY	POPULATION (2018)
Los Angeles	3,990,456
San Diego	1,425,976
San Jose	1,030,119
San Francisco	884,363
Fresno	527,438
Sacramento	501,901
Long Beach	467,354
Oakland	428,827
Bakersfield	380,874
Anaheim	352,497

Note. Population figures as published with the UCR 2018 release. Source: FBI Crime in the U.S. 2018.

Rape figures throughout this analysis use the revised UCR definition adopted by the FBI; comparisons against pre-revision data should be approached with appropriate caution, since the revised definition captures a broader category of offenses than the legacy definition. The categorical analysis presented in Section IV does not depend on rape figures specifically and is therefore robust to the definitional change.

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APPENDIX C

SURVEY INSTRUMENT AND RESPONSES

PRELIMINARY QUALIFYING QUESTION

Prior to administration, prospective participants were asked: "Do you frequently drive within the city of Fresno?" A negative or unclear response ended the recruitment interaction with no further questions. The survey itself was administered only to respondents who answered affirmatively.

HEADER

Student Survey · Traffic Enforcement within Fresno

Blind survey — please do not leave any personal information.

Conducted by Brian McGauley for Criminology 101 research, California State University, Fresno, Fall 2023.

INSTRUMENT

1. In the past month, how often have you witnessed aggressive driving behaviors (e.g., tailgating, excessive speeding, weaving in and out of traffic) in Fresno?

- **A)** Multiple times per day
- **B)** Once per day (daily)
- **C)** Weekly
- **D)** Occasionally
- **E)** Rarely
- **F)** Never

2. On a scale from 0 to 5, how would you rate the visibility and active presence of traffic enforcement in Fresno, with 0 being "No Presence" and 5 being "Very High Presence"?

A) 0

B) 1

C) 2

D) 3

E) 4

F) 5

3. Do you believe that a reduced police presence on Fresno roads has led to an increase in aggressive driving?

A) Strongly agree

B) Agree

C) Neutral

D) Disagree

E) Strongly disagree

F) Unsure

4. Have you, or someone you know, been directly impacted by road rage or aggressive driving behavior in Fresno within the last year? Note: impacted should be understood as anything other than witnessing — e.g., vehicle accident, personal injury, verbal or physical altercations.

A) Yes

B) No

C) Prefer not to answer

5. Do you believe there is a correlation between aggressive driving and an increased likelihood of violent behaviors off the road?

A) Strongly agree

B) Agree

C) Neutral

D) Disagree

E) Strongly disagree

F) Unsure

ADMINISTRATION NOTES

Responses were collected on physical paper, then transcribed and ranked in spreadsheet form for one-sample t-test analysis. The response matrix and the hypothesis-testing results are reproduced in the main text (Section V, Tables 6 and 7). The instrument was reviewed before and after administration by a Fresno State University statistics professor; recommended revisions for any subsequent iteration include sharper construct definition for Question 4 and reduced ambiguity in the phrasing of Questions 3 and 5.

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END OF DOCUMENT