Red-Light Camera Traffic Enforcement

By Anne Teigen

Running a red light is a dangerous yet common violation made by drivers. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), in 2014, red-light running caused 171,000 traffic crashes nationwide, which led to approximately 126,000 injuries and 709 deaths. Data shows that more than 50 percent of the fatalities were bicyclists, pedestrians and occupants in the vehicle that did not run the red light.

Recognizing that right-angle, or “t-bone,” crashes at signalized intersections are dangerous and prevalent, and that law-enforcement resources are limited, approximately 430 communities around the country use red-light cameras to take pictures of violators and send them a ticket. Ideal red-light camera programs increase the odds that red-light runners are held accountable, discourage would-be violators by publicizing the programs, and focus on safety outcomes rather than increasing revenue.

Studies from IIHS show that red-light cameras reduce fatal red-light crashes by about 21 percent. Additionally, a 2016 IIHS report showed that removing red-light cameras from intersections actually cost lives. Researchers compared trends in annual crash rates in 14 cities that had ended their camera programs with those in 29 cities in the same regions that continued their programs. They found that, after adjusting for other factors, red-light-running crashes increased by 30 percent at intersections where cameras were removed. The study estimated that 63 deaths would have been prevented in the 14 cities if they had not turned off their cameras. Some studies have noted that red-light cameras may increase rear-end crashes; however, overall they tend to lead to a decrease in the number and severity of crashes.

Politically, red-light cameras remain controversial. Opponents of the programs point to recent bribery-for-contract scandals in Chicago and Florida to argue they are corrupt and designed to bring in revenue to cash-strapped cities. While still being launched in some places, the total number of communities with red-light cameras fell to 430 in 2016, from a peak of 533 in 2012.

State Action

City and local governments in 23 states and the District of Columbia use red-light cameras. In most cases, state legislatures have passed enabling statutes with specific provisions to allow local governments to develop red-light camera programs. In some states, like Iowa and Missouri, no state law exists, but local communities have chosen to develop programs.

On the flip side, seven states—Maine, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, South Carolina, South Dakota and West Virginia—have statutes prohibiting using red-light cameras to issue citations to motorists. Nevada and Ohio effectively prohibit red-light camera programs because their
laws require law-enforcement personnel to be present if cameras are used.

In recent years, state legislation aims to make red-light-camera programs more transparent and to place the focus on safety. Some states, like Pennsylvania and Texas, specifically require in statute that any revenue generated in excess of what it costs to run the program must go to trauma care centers or other traffic safety programs.

California passed legislation in 2012 to require signs posted within 200 feet of intersections to warn motorists that the law prohibits government agencies from taking revenue generation into account when they consider installing red-light cameras. In 2016, Louisiana passed a similar law, requiring posted signs within 500 feet of the red-light camera. Virginia requires a yellow-light signal length of at least three seconds at all intersections with red-light cameras and gives motorists who receive tickets the right to appeal to a circuit court. Tennessee now requires a disclaimer on all red-light citations stating that non-payment cannot adversely affect the driver’s credit score or report, driver’s license, and/or automobile insurance rates.

Federal Action

Automated enforcement—using cameras to enforce traffic safety laws—is discussed in Title 23, Sections 148 and 402, of the United States Code as amended by the five-year, $305 billion Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act). First, the legislation prohibits states from using federal funds from the Highway Safety Improvement Program and the Highway Safety Grant Program to purchase, operate or maintain automated traffic-enforcement cameras, except for those located in school zones. Second, states with automated-enforcement systems are required to conduct a biennial survey. It must include a list of automated-enforcement systems in the state; data to measure transparency, accountability and safety; and a comparison of their systems to earlier Department of Transportation guidelines on automated red-light-running enforcement programs. These requirements will go into effect in fiscal year 2018.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides an innovative web tool for state policymakers called “Motor Vehicle Prioritizing Interventions and Cost Calculator for States” (MV PICCS). It reviews the costs and benefits of different statewide traffic safety interventions, allowing the user to select countermeasures like installing red-light cameras. The tool also calculates the expected number and monetized value of injuries prevented and lives saved by instituting that countermeasure. The tool can adjust to state-specific information, assess the potential revenue to the state from fines and fees, and analyze a combination of policies to find the most cost-effective way to spend limited dollars on traffic safety.

NCSL Contact and Resources

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Automated Enforcement webpage

NCSL/NHTSA Traffic Safety Legislation Database

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