

CAPITOL RESEARCH

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Speed & Red Light Camera Laws

Cameras are used in a variety of ways to help enforce traffic laws around the country. At some railroad crossings, they're used to discourage drivers from trying to cross as the train approaches. They also are used to make sure drivers pay their tolls for driving on some tolled roads and to catch drivers who block intersections, fail to stop at a stop sign, drive past a stopped school bus or fail to yield to pedestrians. But two of the most common uses for traffic enforcement cameras are catching speeders and red light runners in the act. While such applications for cameras have the potential to aid law enforcement, help improve safety, and bring in often much-needed revenues to state and local government coffers, they are also increasingly controversial. Critics contend the cameras invade privacy, serve to administer backdoor tax increases, benefit for-profit companies more than safety and actually cause accidents in some cases. The impact of the controversy has been to create a hodgepodge of state and local statutes and approaches that runs the gamut from permissive to prohibitive.

According to the Governors Highway Safety Association:

- 12 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands have speed cameras operating in at least one location.
- 24 states, the district and the U.S. Virgin Islands have red light cameras operating in at least one location.
- Two states plus the district permit the use of speed cameras, while another seven states plus the U.S. Virgin Islands limit their use by location or other criteria.
- 21 states, the district and the U.S. Virgin Islands have enacted laws permitting some form of red light camera use.
- 29 states have no law addressing speed cameras.
- 20 states have no law concerning red light camera enforcement.
- 12 states have passed laws that prohibit—with very narrow exceptions—the use of speed cameras.



- Nine states prohibit the use of red light cameras.
- Some localities operate speed and/or red light cameras even if the state doesn't specifically permit or prohibit their use.¹
- As of April 2014, 503 communities around the country had red light camera programs and 132 communities had speed camera programs.²

New Jersey Transportation Officials Like Red-Light Cameras So Far

In December 2009, the New Jersey Department of Transportation began a five-year pilot program to gauge the effectiveness of traffic control signal monitoring systems, also known as Red Light Running systems, in the state. A March 2014 interim report on the experiment suggested promising, if not quite conclusive, results.

“The data show overall decreases in the number of annual crashes as well as decreases in the number of annual citations issued for all programs,” the report said.

Right-angle crashes dropped by 86 percent for locations with cameras in place for three years, 60 percent at locations with cameras for two years and 15 percent at locations with cameras for one year. Rear-end collisions dropped 58 percent at the three-year intersections, the report found.³

The state DOT cautioned that some of the sample sizes are too small and it needs to collect more

information before drawing conclusions. A fourth report is due later this year. The pilot is scheduled to end in December 2014, at which point the state must decide whether to keep the devices.

One vocal critic of red-light cameras in the state legislature called the latest report “fatally flawed.” Assemblyman Declan O’Scanlon noted that red-light locations without cameras showed decreases in crashes greater than locations that had cameras in place for two years.

“If crashes are decreasing faster at intersections where there are no cameras, why do we need cameras that produce \$40 million to \$60 million a year in ticket revenue?” O’Scanlon told *The (Bergen County) Record*.⁴

For some longtime media critics, the latest numbers were enough to suggest an evolution in thinking and to call at least a temporary ceasefire.

“We’ve said it for years, and the public is catching on: New Jersey’s red-light cameras are a naked cash grab—fleecing motorists for millions a year, while using traffic safety as a cover story that grows flimsier all the time,” the editorial board of *The (Newark) Star Ledger* newspaper said in a March 2014 editorial.⁵

A few days later, however, as the data in the latest report came out, the editorial board weighed in again.

“Even we must concede that last week’s Department of Transportation report, which indicates a reduction in crashes at camera-covered intersections, gives us pause,” the board wrote. “Because safety is what’s supposed to matter.”⁶

South Dakota’s Restrictive Camera Ban

Elsewhere, though, the tide may be turning against traffic cameras.

With overwhelming legislative support, South Dakota in 2014 enacted the most sweeping ban on red light and speed cameras of any state in the country. As of July 1, not only will South Dakotans be protected from red light camera tickets issued within state borders, but they also will be immune to automated citations issued in most other states, officials say.



South Dakota’s red light photo ticketing program has been shut down for some time. In 2010, a circuit court judge struck down Sioux Falls’ red light camera operation, ruling it violated state law by turning a misdemeanor—red light running—into a civil penalty without authorization from the state legislature.

But that wasn’t quite the end of the story. South Dakota lawmakers continued to hear complaints from constituents who received speed camera tickets on the freeway traveling to and from Iowa. State Rep. Anne Hajek proposed legislation prohibiting collection agencies from calling South Dakota residents about camera tickets. But some lawmakers had concerns about the constitutionality of a South Dakota law imposing requirements on another state. Aides to Gov. Dennis Daugaard stepped in to propose legislative language that would block other states from converting a license plate number into the name and address of a South Dakota vehicle owner, which effectively cuts off Iowa’s ability to ticket South Dakota residents. Under the new law, South Dakota will refuse to turn the information over to NLETS, an interstate justice and public safety network used by photo ticketing companies, for the purpose of processing tickets.

The new law states: “The Department of Public Safety and the Division of Motor Vehicles shall not enter into any compact to provide to another state, or governmental entity located in another state, information used to impose or collect a civil fine that results from an alleged violation captured by a red light camera or speed camera. ... The Department of Public Safety and the Division of Motor Vehicles shall not provide information used to impose or collect a civil fine that results from a violation captured by a red light camera or speed camera through any existing interstate compact that does not specifically allow, or require, information to be shared for that explicit purpose.”

Under the law, not only would photo tickets from Iowa be blocked, so too would those from any other state with cameras with the possible exception of Arizona and California. In those two states, tickets carry license points in addition to civil fines and are treated as criminal charges.⁷

Observers say the South Dakota law is the opposite of the way things normally work between states and could lead to some battles.

“We occasionally talk about policy diffusion in politics, where one state does something, so it gets copied by other states,” University of Northern Iowa political science professor Christopher Larimer told *The Sioux City Journal* in April 2014. “This sounds like policy diffusion in reverse. Not only are you not adopting, you’re preventing that state from enforcing its own policy.”

For Iowa, the South Dakota law “creates a problem and a conflict in public policy,” state Rep. Chris Hall of Sioux City told the newspaper. States often have reciprocity agreements to share information and resources.

“(This) could lead to a war of reciprocity,” Hall said. Iowa House Transportation Committee Chairman

Josh Byrnes worries that could lead down a slippery slope of legislation and counter-legislation with little regard for the law on the other side of the state line.

“Could we pass a law that Illinois can’t collect tolls (from Iowa drivers)?” he asked. “So if I’m an Iowan driving in Illinois, I can just blow through all the tolls as long as I make it to the state line?”⁸

Red-Light Cameras on the Decline

The first communities in the United States began turning to red-light cameras in the 1990s as a low-cost way to police intersections.

“Without cameras, enforcement is difficult and often dangerous,” the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety said in a 2011 report. “In order to stop a red light runner, officers usually have to follow the vehicle through the red light, endangering themselves as well as other motorists and pedestrians. Moreover, the manpower required to police intersections on a regular basis would make it prohibitively expensive. In contrast, camera programs can pay for themselves by requiring people who break the law to shoulder the cost of enforcing it.”⁹

At least that’s how it’s supposed to work. In reality, a number of issues with red-light cameras have prompted some significant rethinking around the country. Whereas the number of communities in the country with red-light cameras had ballooned to about 700 in 2011, that number was down to slightly more than 500 at the end of 2013.

California’s Experience With Red-Light Cameras

While about 50 communities in California are using the cameras, 60 others have ended red-light camera programs in recent years, according to Jay Beeber, the executive director of the group Safer Streets L.A., who is an anti-camera advocate and researcher working on a report on red-light cameras

for the libertarian-leaning think tank the Reason Foundation.

“The trend has begun to reverse itself,” Beeber told *The San Gabriel Valley Tribune* in January 2014.¹⁰

Among the reasons cities have given for pulling the plug on the cameras: increases in the number of accidents, declining revenues and a nonsupportive court system.

City council members and city traffic engineers told Beeber photo enforcement is causing more rear-end accidents from people slamming on their breaks when they see a yellow light at a camera-controlled intersection. One intersection in Los Angeles saw an 80 percent increase in rear-end collisions, according to Beeber. The town of Murrieta, Calif., reported a 325 percent increase.

When Los Angeles and Pasadena got rid of their red-light cameras, one reason given was declining support from the Los Angeles County Superior Court. The court did not report violations to the state department of motor vehicles and the violations did not become part of a person’s driving record. Drivers would receive notice of their violations in the mail, but the courts said that was not proof the driver violated the law, only the car. Judges typically would reduce fines for violations or dismiss them, particularly if the picture of the driver in the video was blurry. Eventually, the amount of money brought in from the fines dropped below what the program cost to operate, Pasadena traffic engineer Norman Baculinao said.

“The judge exercised a lot of discretion,” he told the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* “Sometimes the judge would give them community service and then no revenue would go to the city.”

Former Los Angeles City Councilman Dennis Zine told the newspaper his city ended the program because payments to the vendor who supplied the red-light cameras and time spent by Los Angeles





Police Department officers reviewing videotape from the cameras outweighed the benefits.

“It was costing us much more than the city was receiving from the fines,” he said.

Zine said the city later determined most of the fines levied were for people who stopped at the red light, but made a right turn where a sign prohibited it. But right turns on red, or so-called “rolling right turns,” were not causing traffic collisions. That made the \$500 fine for violations seem excessive to the public.¹¹

Other States Find Fault With Cameras

In Florida, some found much the same thing. A 2012 consultant’s report done for the city of St. Petersburg and a subsequent *Tampa Bay Times* review of data collected from the city’s cameras found that while the number of dangerous side-impact collisions decreased at intersections with red-light cameras, rear-end collisions increased.

“Three years ago, these red-light cameras were pitched as safety devices,” state Sen. Jeff Brandes, a St. Petersburg Republican who has proposed banning the cameras, said in a 2013 interview with Stateline. “Instead, they’ve been a backdoor tax increase.”¹²

Colorado in 2014 is considering bipartisan legislation to banish both speed and red-light cameras from the state.

“These cameras just create revenue for cities and don’t actually increase public safety at our intersections,” said House Speaker Mark Ferrandino, the

bill’s primary sponsor in the House, according to *The Denver Post*. “I think we should be focused on making people safe, not raising money.”

Groups representing local governments and chiefs of police have expressed opposition to the measure.¹³

But a *Denver Post* editorial expressed support for the camera ban with the argument that “Justice is not something that should be mechanized. It is a distinctively human product, distilled from circumstances and tempered by judgment and the fair application of laws.”¹⁴

Back in California, Beeber, the activist and Safer Streets L.A. executive director, said red-light cameras are ineffective and unnecessary. He believes lengthening yellow light times is a better way to reduce collisions.¹⁵ Beeber supports AB 612, a bill the California state legislature is considering in 2014 that would require the minimum yellow light time be increased by one second beyond the designated interval set by a state manual on traffic control devices for all intersections with red-light cameras.¹⁶ If approved, the legislation would make invalid red-light camera violations issued at intersections with the shorter yellow light. Research from the Texas Transportation Institute shows that fewer violations also would be issued since most occur within the first second a light turns red. According to that research, a one-second longer yellow light decreases accidents by 40 percent.¹⁷

But in a 2011 report by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund, researchers found that some contracts between private camera vendors and some California cities actually included provisions imposing financial penalties on the city if traffic engineers extended the length of the yellow light at a red-light camera intersection, which would reduce the number of tickets and the profits for the vendor.

“Privatized traffic enforcement system contracts that limit government discretion to set and enforce traffic regulations put the public at risk,” the report said.

Some contracts required municipalities to strictly issue tickets on all rolling right turns. Cities that chose to alter their enforcement standards in this regard were hit with financial penalties. In addition, some contracts included language that could penalize municipalities for not approving enough tickets, thus establishing ticket quotas that undermined the authority of local officials to decide which violations warranted citations, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group report found.

If concerns about such provisions reached critical mass and local officials reached a decision to terminate the red-light camera contract, the communities sometimes faced penalties for early termination that left taxpayers on the hook even when the camera program had failed to meet its objectives.

The report included a series of principles to protect the public interest for local officials to keep in mind as they consider red-light camera contracts. They included:

- Ensuring contract language is free from potential conflicts of interest;
- Avoiding direct or indirect incentives for vendors

- based on the volume of tickets or fines;
- Retaining complete public control over all transportation policy decisions;
- Retaining the option to withdraw from a contract early if dissatisfied with service or its effects; and
- Considering the establishment of state standards to help cities avoid contracting for automated enforcement systems that are not justified or when alternatives make more sense.¹⁸

Maryland Aims to Reform Speed Camera Program

Cameras used to catch speeders have not been immune to problems and controversies either. *The Baltimore Sun* conducted a months-long investigation starting in 2012 that documented erroneous speed readings at seven cameras in Baltimore, including a car stopped at a red light. The investigation also revealed that Baltimore City and Baltimore County were both engaged in contracts in which the vendor was paid per citation.¹⁹

An audit conducted by consultant URS Corp. evaluating the camera system run by Xerox State and Local Solutions in 2012 found an error rate of more than 10 percent. Since the city issued 700,000 speed camera tickets at \$40 each in fiscal year 2012, that means 70,000 drivers were wrongly charged a total of \$2.8 million, *The Baltimore Sun* reported. The audit found 13 cameras with double-digit error rates in Baltimore, including one that was giving out more erroneous tickets than accurate citations. City officials shut down the entire speed camera program in the spring of 2013 once they became aware of the audit's findings. They also were moved to void or refund tickets they believed were obviously erroneous.²⁰

In April 2014, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation supporters say will provide new protections for motorists from erroneous tickets. It requires jurisdictions to employ ombudsmen to void erroneous tickets before a trial and bans the so-called bounty system in which contractors are rewarded financially for issuing more tickets. The legislation does not apply to current contracts, however. It requires jurisdictions to alert motorists to the presence of cameras by posting signs and observing a 15-day waiting period before issuing tickets. It does not require time stamps on tickets to help verify accuracy as some believe is needed. But it does require local governments to publish detailed annual reports and subjects contractors to damages if their error rate exceeds 5 percent.²¹

Critics of speed cameras say the compromise legislation, which was two years in the making, doesn't go nearly far enough.

"The bill provides no actual oversight of local speed camera programs, and leaves the public with no choice but to trust every municipality in the state to be responsible and competent—even those which have proven time and again that they are not," the Maryland Drivers Alliance, a group that opposes the use of cameras, wrote on its website. "It writes into law that contractors can issue up to 5 percent (1 in 20) citations in error, which for a program the

size of Montgomery County's or Baltimore's would allow many thousands of errors per year. Even this is based only on the number of 'errors' which the local government freely acknowledges, indeed even citations identified as errors in court are specifically forbidden from being counted."²²

Baltimore's speed camera system remains offline for the time being and city officials said they will look to the bill, along with the recommendations of a task force appointed by Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, for guidance as they re-evaluate the program for the future.²³

Other Traffic Enforcement Camera Reforms

Opponents of traffic camera programs say the diversion of excess revenues into state and city general funds is proof the programs are more about money than safety.

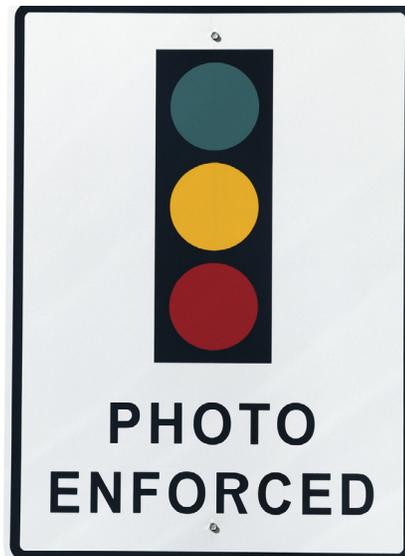
"If the state needs additional tax revenue, the legislature needs to be fair and honest about how it gets that revenue," Florida state Sen. Jeff Brandes told Stateline in 2013.²⁴

Concerns about the revenues produced by traffic enforcement cameras are among those addressed in a 2012 report from the Transportation Research Board's National Cooperative Highway Research Program.

"Generation of revenue should not be the motivation for a program," the report said. "If a program is not motivated by safety, it will not succeed."²⁵

Some states do limit where excess revenues from enforcement cameras can go. In Texas, revenues in excess of what it costs cities to run the program are required to go to trauma care centers that treat car crash victims and to local transportation expenses. Pennsylvania sends the surplus revenues back to the state department of transportation, which divides the money up into competitive traffic safety grants for cities.²⁶

The 2012 Transportation Research Board report recommends the intended allocation of proceeds from a camera program, including what happens with



any surplus funds, “should be clearly identified at the start of the program and communicated because this can be a subject of contention and a focus for the media. ... The legislation should specify any revenue remaining after paying for the cost of the program should be allocated for *highway safety functions*.”

More broadly, the report argues that traffic enforcement cameras should never be viewed as a substitute for traditional human enforcement efforts or for properly designed intersections.

“Automated enforcement should only be used at locations as a supplement to traditional engineering, enforcement, and education countermeasures and should never replace these measures,” the report said. “Officers should continue to provide traditional enforcement at locations with automated enforcement. Any deficiencies in the design or operation of the locations should be corrected before automated enforcement is put into use. Locations selected for automated enforcement should be designed and operated with a solid engineering foundation and be appropriate for local conditions. For automated speed enforcement locations, the program director should ensure that the speed limit is clearly communicated to approaching drivers, set based on an engineering study, and appropriate for the location. For automated red light enforcement locations, the program director should ensure that all traffic control devices are visible and conspicuous and that the traffic signal timing, particularly the yellow interval, is appropriate for the local conditions.”²⁷

Back in New Jersey, the state in the midst of a five-year red-light camera pilot program, the editorial board of *The (Newark) Star-Ledger* said it may be important for policymakers to consider other options before completely buying into such programs.

“Officials should consider longer yellows, better signs and redesigned intersections before turning Robocop loose in more than 500 cash-strapped towns,” an April 2014 editorial read.²⁸



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SPEED & RED LIGHT CAMERA LAWS BY STATE

State	Speed Cameras	Red Light Cameras	Details
Alabama	No state law or program	Limited (Montgomery only)	
Alaska	No state law or program	No state law or program	
Arizona	Permitted	Permitted	Cities & towns can't implement on state highway w/o permit from state DOT.
Arkansas	Prohibited (w/ narrow exceptions)	Prohibited (w/ narrow exceptions)	Allowed in school zones or at rail crossings when office is present and citation issued at time of offense. No current programs.
California	No state law or programs	Permitted statewide	
Colorado	Limited	Permitted Statewide	Speed cameras allowed in construction and school zones, residential areas or adjacent to municipal parks.
Connecticut	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Delaware	No state law or programs	Permitted statewide	
District of Columbia	Permitted districtwide	Permitted districtwide	
Florida	No state law or programs	Permitted statewide	
Georgia	No state law or programs	Permitted statewide	
Hawaii	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Idaho	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Illinois	Limited	Limited	Speed: construction zones or toll roads.
Indiana	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Iowa	No state law, but programs operating under local ordinance	No state law, but programs operating under local ordinance	
Kansas	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Kentucky	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Louisiana	Limited	Limited	
Maine	Prohibited	Prohibited	
Maryland	Limited	Permitted statewide	Speed cameras limited to Montgomery Co. school zones & residential, Prince George's Co. school zones, statewide school zones (by local ordinance) and work zones on expressways or controlled access highways
Massachusetts	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Michigan	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Minnesota	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Mississippi	Prohibited	Prohibited	
Missouri	No state law, but programs operating under Missouri DOT policy	No state law, but programs operating under Missouri DOT policy on state maintained roadways. Local municipalities may operate under their own policies.	
Montana	Prohibited	Prohibited	
Nebraska	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Nevada	Prohibited (with narrow exceptions)	Prohibited (with narrow exceptions)	Exception for cameras hand held by officer, installed in vehicle or law enforcement facility. No current programs
New Hampshire	Prohibited	Prohibited	
New Jersey	Prohibited	Limited	Local ordinance required; must apply to transportation commissioner for pilot program.
New Mexico	Limited	Limited	Banned on state and federal roads; localities must post warning sign and beacon.
New York	Limited to school zones	Limited to cities of more than 1 million residents or by local ordinance	
North Carolina	No state law or programs	Limited	
North Dakota	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Ohio	No state law, but programs operating under local ordinance	No state law, but programs operating under local ordinance	
Oklahoma	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Oregon	Limited to 4 hours per day for each location	Permitted within city limits; run by city jurisdiction	
Pennsylvania	No state law or programs	Limited to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, municipalities w/ more than 20,000	Police department must be accredited; requires local ordinance.
Rhode Island	No state law or programs	Permitted statewide	
South Carolina	Prohibited	Prohibited	
South Dakota	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	New prohibitions kick in July 1, 2014.
Tennessee	Permitted	Permitted	Statewide except non-work zone interstates
Texas	Prohibited	Limited	Local ordinance required
Utah	Prohibited (with narrow exceptions). No current programs.	No state law or programs.	Exception made for school zones with 30 mph speed limit or below; officer must be present; local ordinance required.
Vermont	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Virgin Islands	Limited	Limited	Beginning or end of highway
Virginia	No state law or programs	Limited	Local ordinance required; 1 site per 10,000 residents (up to 10 sites in D.C. area).
Washington	Limited to school zones	Limited to locations where two arterial roads intersect	
West Virginia	Prohibited	Prohibited	
Wisconsin	Prohibited	Prohibited	
Wyoming	No state law or programs	No state law or programs	
Totals	Prohibited: 12 states Limited: 7 + Virgin Islands Permitted: 2 + D.C. No state law: 29 Programs in operation: 12 + D.C., Virgin Islands	Prohibited: 9 states Limited: 11 + Virgin Islands Permitted: 10 + D.C. No state law: 20 Programs in operation: 24 + D.C., Virgin Islands	