

## Red Light Cameras: Safety Devices or One More Step Toward a Surveillance State?

Written by John W. Whitehead

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Before Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, unleashed full-body-imaging scanners and “enhanced” pat-downs on American airline passengers, she subjected Arizona drivers to red-light cameras. In August 2008, Napolitano, then the governor of Arizona, instituted a statewide system of 200 fixed and mobile speed and red-light cameras, which were projected to bring in more than \$120 million in annual revenue for the state. She was aided in this endeavor by the Australian corporation Redflex Traffic Systems.

Two years later, after widespread complaints that the cameras intrude on privacy and are primarily a money-making enterprise for the state (income actually fell short of the projections because people refused to pay their fines), Arizona put the brakes on the program. And while other states – including Maine, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, West Virginia, and Wisconsin – have since followed suit, many more municipalities, suffering from budget crises, have succumbed to the promise of easy revenue and installed the cameras. (Davenport began using red-light cameras in 2004.) As the *Washington Post* notes: “A handful of cities used them a decade ago. Now they’re in more than 400, spread across two dozen states. Montgomery County started out with 18 cameras in 2007. Now it has 119. Maryland just took the program statewide last month, and Prince George’s is putting up 50. The District started out with a few red light cameras in 1999; now they send out as many automated tickets each year as they have residents, about 580,000.”

In most cases, state and local governments (including Davenport’s) arrange to lease the cameras from a vendor, with the company taking its cut of ticket revenue first, and the excess going to the states and municipalities.

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The cameras, which are triggered by sensors buried in the road, work by taking photos of drivers who enter intersections after a traffic light turns red. What few realize, however, is that you don't actually have to run a red light to get "caught." Many drivers have triggered the cameras simply by making a right turn on red or crossing the sensor but not advancing into the intersection.

Each municipality has its own protocol for what happens next, but generally, the photos are reviewed by the private vendor, which then issues tickets to the drivers. And this is where your right to a fair and full hearing largely goes out the window. Indeed, while there is a system for challenging a ticket, it is often convoluted and onerous, with the burden of proof resting upon the driver. Even the courts have a tendency to view the cameras as infallible. According to the *Washington Post*

, Montgomery County, "in screening the tickets to mail out, has had to kick out 23,266 'violations' from May 2007 to June 2009 because 'no violation occurred/operator error.' And 10,813 were tossed for reasons including 'power interruption' and 'equipment malfunction.'" Once in court, however, the drivers were found guilty 99.7 percent of the time.

Some opponents advocate ignoring the ticket altogether on the pretext that there are few real penalties to not paying. In Los Angeles, about 56,000 people have opted not to pay their red-light-camera tickets, resulting in roughly 45 percent of all tickets issued since 2006 going unresolved with no punishment.

Still, supporters contend that the ends justify the means because the cameras increase traffic safety. Yet research suggests otherwise. In fact, multiple studies indicate that red-light cameras actually increase the number of crashes. For example, in Greensboro, North Carolina, the Urban Transit Institute at the North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University analyzed 57 months of data and concluded that the red-light cameras were associated with a 40-percent increase in crashes. In Ontario, Canada, Synectics Transportation Consultants found a 16-percent increase in accidents at intersections with cameras, as opposed to an 8-percent increase at comparison intersections with no police enforcement or cameras. It also found a 2-percent increase in injury/fatal crashes at camera intersections as opposed to a 10-percent decrease with police enforcement.

Studies conducted in Virginia also show that the cameras result in an increased number of rear-end collisions. The Virginia Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration funded a study of seven years of crash data by the Virginia Transportation

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Research Council. The study associated red-light cameras with a 27-percent increase in *rear-end* crashes and a 42-percent decrease in red-light-running crashes across six Virginia jurisdictions (Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax City, Fairfax County, Falls Church, and Vienna). Overall, however, crashes increased because there are generally more rear-end crashes than red-light-running crashes. Thus, the study concluded that the results “cannot be used to justify the widespread installation of cameras because they are not universally effective.”

There are, in fact, far superior alternatives to red-light cameras. For instance, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, intersection safety would be increased by simply lengthening the yellow-light time or adding an all-red light interval. A study by the Texas Transportation Institute found that increasing the length of yellow lights by one second decreased the chance of accidents by 40 percent. Similarly, another case study revealed that a 30-percent increase in yellow light-time produced substantial safety benefits. And when the Virginia Department of Transportation increased the yellow-light duration from 4.0 seconds to 5.5 seconds at an Arlington intersection in 2000, the problem of red-light running practically disappeared.

Rather than trading one type of crash for another, which is what red-light cameras do, increasing the duration of the yellow light has proven to be effective in actually enhancing intersection safety. So why aren't more communities extending the yellow lights?

Regrettably, a close examination of the history of traffic-monitoring devices reveals that, on a larger scale, the profit motive figures prominently into the increased use of red-light cameras. In fact, despite the fact that lengthening the yellow-light duration has been shown to increase intersection safety, national guidelines have actually lowered the recommended yellow-light duration at problem intersections, apparently in an effort to spawn the implementation of red-light cameras across the nation.

Moreover, a 2001 report released by former House Majority Leader Dick Armey found that in 1985, the Institute of Transportation Engineers began to change the way signal times were calculated so as to provide at least three methods resulting in a reduction of yellow-light time. The report ultimately concluded: “Transportation officials and engineers know that the yellow-signal timing is essential to safety. The data showing this to be the case are found in their studies. Nonetheless, some have systematically and intentionally ignored the inescapable engineering fact that longer yellows would solve the so-called crises caused by shortened yellows. Red-light cameras present a perverse disincentive for local jurisdictions to fix intersections with excessive red-light entries. It's hard to fix a 'problem' that brings in millions in

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revenue. In other words, red-light cameras aren't fixing a safety problem; they're creating one."

Virginia is a perfect example of what happens when politicians sacrifice safety to generate revenue. In March 2010, Governor Bob McDonnell approved legislation that allows private corporations operating the red-light-camera systems, such as Redflex, to directly access motorists' confidential information from the Department of Motor Vehicles. What this means is that not only will government agents have one more means of monitoring a person's whereabouts, but a remote, privately owned corporation will now have access to drivers' confidential information.

Another provision signed into law by McDonnell also shortened the amount of time given to alleged traffic-law violators to respond to citations resulting from red-light-camera violations. While prior law allotted 60 days for the response, the amendment cut that time to 30 days. This gives the driver scant time to receive and review the information, determine what action is required, inspect the evidence, consider appealing the citation, and respond appropriately. In this way, by shortening the appeal time, more drivers are forced to pay the fine or face added penalties.

The bottom line is this: Red-light cameras are not safety devices; they're revenue-raising devices for corporations, states, and municipalities, which is bad enough when it comes at taxpayer expense. But when coupled with the entire arsenal of technological tools being aimed at the American people, from license-plate readers, mobile scanners, and iris scanners to full-body scanners in airports, biometric ID cards, etc., they become yet another layer in our surveillance society. Ultimately, surveillance is about one thing – total control of the citizenry.

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