

advertisement

		<p><b>SAVE</b> up to <b>64%</b> Plus, get <b>3 FREE Gifts</b></p>	<p>To Order: <a href="http://www.OmahaSteaks.com/print71">www.OmahaSteaks.com/print71</a> or call 1-877-605-0496</p>
--	---	---	--

Special Code: 45069ZWN



## Challenges to red light cameras span US

Studies touting safety benefits sometimes contradictory, incomplete



Nick Ut / AP, file

Red light camera setup is shown in Los Angeles.

cameras are on the job in metropolises like Houston and Chicago and in small towns like Selmer, Tenn., population 4,700, where a single camera setup monitors traffic at the intersection of U.S. Highway 64 and Mulberry Avenue.

One of the places is Los Angeles, where, if the Police Commission gets its way, the red light cameras will have to come down in a few weeks. That puts the nation's second-largest city at the leading edge of an anti-camera movement that appears to have been gaining traction across the country in recent weeks.

A City Council committee is considering whether to continue the city's camera contract over the objections of the commission, which voted unanimously to remove the camera system, which shoots video of cars running red lights at 32 of the city's thousands of intersections. The private Arizona company that installed the cameras and runs the program mails off \$446 tickets to their registered owners.

The company's contract will expire at the end of July if the council can't reach a final agreement to renew it.

Opponents of the cameras often argue that they are really just revenue engines for struggling cities and towns, silently dinging motorists for mostly minor infractions. And

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



By **Alex Johnson** Reporter

msnbc.com

updated 6/24/2011 12:04:15 PM ET

In more than 500 cities and towns in 25 states, silent sentries keep watch over intersections, snapping photos and shooting video of drivers who run red lights. The



while guidelines issued by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration say revenue is an invalid justification for the use of the eyes in the sky (see box at right), camera-generated citations do spin off a lot of money in many cities — the nearly 400 cameras in Chicago, for example, generated more than \$64 million in 2009, the last year for which complete figures were available.

Los Angeles hasn't been so lucky.

The city gets only a third of the revenue generated by camera citations, many of which go unpaid anyway because judges refuse to enforce them, the city controller's office reported last year. [It found in an audit](#) that if you add it all up, operating the cameras has cost \$1 million to \$1.5 million a year more than they've generated in fines, even as "the program has not been able to document conclusively an increase in public safety."

Another common refrain from critics is that the devices replace a human officer's judgment and discretion with the cold, unforgiving algorithms of a machine.

"You've got to treat people fairly," said Jay Beeber, executive director of [Safer Streets LA](#), who has led the campaign to kill the city's red light cameras. "You have to give people a fighting chance that you're not going to penalize them for a minor lapse of judgment."

Paul Kubosh, a lawyer who has led a similar anti-camera fight in Houston, called the

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



camera systems "a scam on the public," because they "are writing tickets that police officers don't write."

There's a fierce court battle going on in Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city, after a U.S. district judge this week ruled that a measure voters approved to shut down the city's more than 70 cameras was invalid on procedural grounds.

### Could hundreds of lives be saved?

More than a dozen large studies over the past decade have concluded that the cameras reduce accidents and injuries. The most recent, published in February by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, crunched 10 years of federal traffic data for the 99 largest U.S. cities — 14 of which now deploy cameras — and calculated that had all 99 installed the devices, 815 lives would have been saved from 2004 through 2008.

"We still have thousands of people who die," said Adrian Lund, the Insurance Institute's president. "We look at where and how that's happening, and one of the most dangerous (locations) is intersections."

Citing reports like that, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, which coincidentally is headed by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, this week approved a resolution endorsing nationwide adoption of red light cameras.

And yet, in addition to the votes in Los Angeles and Houston:

- The Albuquerque, N.M., City Council voted this month to let residents vote on the future of the city's 20 red light cameras in October. (City lawyers are still weighing whether the vote would

have any official effect.)

- In May, a Missouri circuit judge issued a preliminary ruling saying the measure that authorized St. Louis' 51 cameras was illegally enacted.
- Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam said he would sign a bill the Legislature passed last month to limit — though not ban outright — localities' use of cameras at intersections.
- The North Carolina Senate voted in April to ban cameras; the measure awaits House action.
- The Florida House passed a bill last month to ban red light cameras; the measure failed in the Senate.
- A Superior Court judge last week struck down the law that enacted use of cameras in Spokane, Wash., agreeing that citations generated by the cameras were invalid because they were not personally signed by a police officer.

Often, the cameras lead to fines — and depending on the jurisdiction, costly points on drivers' records — for borderline infractions like failing to come to a complete stop before making a right turn. (That infraction makes up two-thirds of the citations issued at camera-monitored intersections in Los Angeles, even though it rarely leads to an accident, the controller's audit reported.)

Other common complaints are that the



automated citations violate due process and equal protection rights — often, there's no officer to confront in court — and invade motorists' privacy (see box at right).

Beeber, of Safer Streets LA, agreed that "as more people get tickets, they start getting mad about it," saying: "You start doing that year after year after year and you start generating enough anger in the populace and it gets to the tipping point."

What's changed in the last couple of years, Blakey said, is the "ability of people to organize online and form communities and organize actions that are well-orchestrated" on sites like Facebook and Twitter.

"These things are becoming more and more useful to a small minority of people who want to mount an action against anything," she said.

In response, Blakey's group points to the Insurance Institute study and others like it that conclude the "red light cameras lead to significant decreases in intersection violations and crashes."

#### **Large studies produce wide range of results**

This is where things get muddy, because hard research on the effect of red light cameras in the United States is incomplete and often contradictory.

That includes the widely reported Insurance Institute study from February. Like nearly all other studies over the past decade, that report found a significant decline in deaths from red light accidents in cities that use cameras. But deaths from U.S. roadway accidents of all kinds have dropped significantly — by 13.1 percent — during the study period of 2004 through 2008, data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show.

That means researchers have to dig deeper, but because there's no centralized database listing all of the nation's red light cameras, researchers have found it difficult to isolate

Leslie Blakey, executive director of the nonprofit [Campaign to Stop Red Light Running](#), which advocates for red light cameras, said opponents have fought the devices since they started taking root about a decade ago. She broke the opposition down into two camps: "civil libertarians who resist the imposition of automated enforcement" and "people who got tickets and just don't like it."



and study only intersections monitored by cameras on a national scale.

So the Insurance Institute researchers constructed a statistical projection model that counted deaths at *every* intersection in 14 cities that now have cameras at *some* intersections and sought to extrapolate what effect cameras would have had if they had been in place at all of them.

Those results, expressed as an average annual rate of deaths per million residents, were then compared with data from an earlier five-year period (1992-96), when there were no cameras at all in those cities. As a control, they also ran the same comparisons for 48 control cities that don't have any cameras.

Under that model, the Insurance Institute found a 35 percent reduction in the rate of deaths in the camera cities, compared with 14 percent in the non-camera cities.

Advocates say that's proof that the cameras directly save lives. Opponents say it's not, contending that the study, and others like it, compared apples to oranges.

The Insurance Institute's inventive approach was about as sound and rigorous a way as could be conceived to construct a comparison that necessarily involved incomplete data. How incomplete? In a city like Chicago, the institute had to include data from all 2,900 signalized intersections — fewer than 200 of which, or less than 7 percent — actually had cameras throughout the study period.

None of that means the Insurance Institute's conclusion is wrong. But it also doesn't mean it's indisputably right — and critics have been eager to dispute it, noting that the study didn't include Los Angeles, where the city audit

found that the rate of accidents actually rose or held steady at half if the intersections that had cameras. And it couldn't account for major rises in death rates in two of the 14 camera cities it did study — Raleigh, N.C. (a 99 percent increase) and Bakersfield, Calif. (a 55 percent increase).

#### **Other safety factors could affect numbers**

Opponents point to a variety of other factors that could also have contributed to the decline in deaths at intersections, both with and without cameras, over the past decade.



Cars are sturdier today thanks to tougher federal safety standards, and they almost universally deploy air bags. Authorities have cracked down on enforcing seat-belt and DUI laws, and engineering advances in roadway design have made intersections safer.

In particular, several traffic flow studies indicate that tinkering with signal cycles — lengthening the time a signal remains yellow, or ensuring all four signals are red for a time before anyone can proceed — results in a drastic drop in red light violations, accidents and deaths — in a few single-city studies, more than 90 percent. That's because drivers inclined to try to beat the light have more time to clear the intersection before traffic starts barreling through from the other direction, they suggest.

To further account for the Institute's differences, they argue that deploying cameras demonstrates that city officials were already concerned about intersection safety and probably aggressively pursued most or all of those strategies.

To boil it down: The studies conclusively establish a correlation between the use of cameras and a reduction in deaths at signalized intersections; even opponents of cameras acknowledge that. The arguments arise because of the statistical reality that a correlation — the fact that two things happened at the same time — doesn't necessarily mean that one of those things caused the other.

That's why many camera proponents, like Blakey, advise that municipalities "do a basic engineering review ... before they go to photo enforcement as a solution."

### Researchers deny conflict of interest

Beeber, meanwhile, suspects a profit motive also figures into the results of camera research, arguing that many of the studies are done by groups with links to interested parties.

He contended that the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety is "a lobbying group for the insurance industry," which he argued has an incentive to push cameras because they generate more violations on drivers' records. That lets insurance companies "jack up your rates, and many times it can be three or four times the rate that you were paying" previously, he said.

Lund, the institute's president, denied that, saying, "We aren't involved in the business of insurance."

While the institute is funded by auto insurers, it's an independent nonprofit whose "mission is to look at ways to lessen the losses," he said.

While it may be true that "the public health interest actually coincides with our insurance interests," that's no more than "a nice synergy, and I don't see any conflict in that whatsoever," he said.

Blakey also acknowledged that the Campaign to Stop Red Light Running was founded with funding from a manufacturer of red light cameras and that "after four years, we were able to get some of the other companies involved."

But she said the group broke ranks with the companies three years ago because she was troubled by their direct management of individual cities' camera programs, an example of "vendor overreach" that she said could call into question the programs' credibility.





Today, the campaign is funded by individual donors "concerned about red light running and speeding who feel that something needs to be done about this problem," she said.

"I have always maintained a great deal of independence," she said. "I would never agree that we were a front group."

### **Gauging the 'fear of death'**

In the absence of consistently reliable research and nationwide standards that make comparisons easier, the contention over red light cameras is "only going to get worse because they're starting to put these things in more places," Beeber said.

Notwithstanding all of the data on both sides, the rationale for the cameras is flawed at its heart, he argued. That's because they proceed from an assumption the people who run red lights do so intentionally and that they can therefore be stopped by stricter enforcement measures of any sort.

"The fallacy is someone looks at a red light and decides, 'Well, I'm just going to blow through that,'" he said.

"If the fear of death isn't enough to stop you from running a red light, I don't know what will."

[Follow Alex Johnson on Facebook](#) | [Follow Alex Johnson on Twitter](#)

© 2011 msnbc.com Reprints

Sponsored links

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™