

POLICY NOTES

Few of Georgia's Local Governments Use Cameras to Enforce Red Light Violations—Despite State Authorization To Do So

By *Tatiana Pirotskaya and William Gillespie*

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports that fatal crashes involving red light violations increased by 18 percent between 1992 and 1998 and that drivers who run red lights are responsible for over 750 deaths and 260,000 crashes annually.

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Drivers who ignore traffic signals cause a staggering number of crashes, deaths, and injuries in the United States. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports that fatal crashes at traffic signals increased by 18 percent between 1992 and 1998 and that drivers who run red lights are responsible for over 750 deaths and 260,000 crashes annually. Red light-related accidents cost the public approximately \$7 billion in 2000 (Hassan 2000). The toll from these accidents has captured the public's attention. Recent Harris polls show that there is a deep concern about drivers running red lights; a majority of the public (65 percent in 1998, 74 percent in 1999, and 69 percent in 2001) believes that state laws should permit the use of red light cameras by law enforcement agencies.

Red light cameras have been successfully used in a number of countries and U.S. cities, including New York, San Francisco, and Charlotte. The success of red light enforcement programs has not gone unnoticed by state and local governments in the United States. The National Conference of State Legislators found that legislatures of 24 states considered 68 bills regarding automated traffic enforcement during the 2001 legislative sessions. As of October 2001, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and 16 states (including Georgia) permitted the use of cameras to enforce traffic laws on speeding or running red lights (Savage et al. 2002).

In 2001 the Georgia General Assembly passed HB 678 (O.C.G.A. Title 40 as amended) authorizing municipal and county law enforcement agencies with at least one full-time certified peace officer to use cameras to enforce red light violations. Effective July 1, 2001, the law requires a public hearing and approval of the municipal or county governing authority and the chief law enforcement officer before these cameras can be used. The law also requires that signs (30" × 30") be posted warning drivers about the presence of red light cameras. Cameras must be tested periodically for accuracy and the results retained as part of the public record. Fines cannot exceed \$70 for each citation in Georgia, and a 30-day warning period after installation of a camera is required.

Under Georgia law, photographs, microphotographs, or electronic images (including videotape) are considered valid for enforcement purposes. A citation to the registered owner of the vehicle violating the traffic signal can be issued if at least two images are recorded and one of them clearly shows the license plate. Registered owners can challenge citations either by court testimony or sworn affidavit indicating that another person drove the car during the offense or by providing a police report showing that the car had been stolen prior to the offense. To protect local governments from accusations of using these devices as revenue producers—a charge often cited by those who oppose using the cameras—the law forbids financing the cameras based on the number of citations or amount of revenue generated. Financing by manufacturers is also prohibited, and local governments cannot pay arresting officers or court officials based on a fee system associated with the use of the cameras.

Since the law's passage, however, few local governments in Georgia have employed the new technology. Marietta was the first city to announce the installation of red light cameras, after

conducting tests in 2001 in which cameras (used on one lane and in one direction only) detected an average of 10 to 15 violations per day at two intersections. Subsequently, the cities of Decatur and Albany have approved plans to use red light cameras, and Atlanta, Columbus, and Athens are currently considering deploying them. As of March 2002, however, no city in Georgia had issued a citation using red light cameras.

Privacy issues may be the major reason why more local governments have not employed the cameras. Although national polls indicate that the public generally supports the use of red light cameras, some argue that camera enforcement violates the Fourth Amendment, despite the existence of considerable legal precedent that classifies streets as public places with little expectation of privacy. Others find it distasteful that governments can use cameras to spy on law-abiding citizens in an effort to identify violators.

The cost of a red light camera (approximately \$50,000) may be another deterrent to their use. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimates that installation of cameras at a single intersection can cost more than \$200,000 (for four-way coverage) and as much as \$5,000 per month to operate (Maccubbin, Staples, and Salvin 2001).

At the same time, evidence supporting the effectiveness of the technology is growing. An Insurance Institute for Highway Safety study found that the number of drivers who ran red lights significantly decreased in the 60 communities that used red light cameras. For example, the rate of red light–running violations dropped 42 percent in San Francisco and 75 percent in Los Angeles (Maccubbin, Staples, Salvin 2001). After only one year of camera operation, Charlotte, North Carolina, crash rates due to red light violations were reduced by 20 percent (*Safelight Charlotte*). Violation rates for running red lights declined 44 percent in Fairfax, Virginia (Retting et al. 1999). A Federal Highway Administration study found that after cameras were installed in Oxnard, California, the number of front-side collisions at intersections declined significantly, and the number of traffic light violations declined by as much as 60 percent (Retting and Kyrchenko 2001).

Although potentially controversial on privacy grounds, red light cameras can be effective in deterring red light violations, according to mounting evidence. Considerable data and information are available to assist Georgia cities and counties as they consider the feasibility of using red light cameras in their communities. The purpose of this note is to facilitate access to relevant studies and reports.

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San Francisco experienced a 42 percent reduction in the rate of red light–running violations, and Los Angeles County experienced a 75 percent drop.

After only one year of camera operation, Charlotte, North Carolina, crash rates due to red light violations were reduced by 20 percent

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Contacts for More Information

Authors (706-542-2736)
Tatiana Pirotskaya and William Gillespie
Governmental Services Division
Carl Vinson Institute of Government
University of Georgia
tatiana@cviog.uga.edu
gillespie@cviog.uga.edu

Series Editor (706-542-2736)
Richard W. Campbell
Carl Vinson Institute of Government
University of Georgia
campbell@cviog.uga.edu