

Reimagining public safety: Why automate traffic enforcement?

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This two-part blog series was created to share traffic enforcement insights and best practices. Part 1, below, underscores how speeding and crashes negatively impact public health and safety. In [part 2](#), we highlight ways state and local agencies can incorporate automation to cost effectively improve safety.

Speeding and red light running are significant problems that negatively impact the safety of everyone on the road. Fortunately, we can offer a great deal of evidence-based research that shows driver behavior is greatly improved by the enforcement of existing traffic [laws](#). The National Academy of Sciences' Transportation Research Board (TRB), for example, conducted a comprehensive assessment of automated speeding and red light enforcement in the U.S., including surveys and interviews with 350 jurisdictions across the nation. The study recommends agencies consider automated enforcement programs to help improve safety, noting that such programs “should be open and transparent, motivated by safety concerns, have strong enabling legislation, and be repeatable to achieve success.”

It's important to note that automated traffic enforcement includes a range of camera-based technologies designed to reduce crashes and improve safety at intersections, decrease red light running, and reduce speeding especially through work zones and school zones.

As municipalities work to modernize public safety, here are a few key factors to keep in mind when evaluating automated traffic enforcement.

1. Traffic crashes are a leading cause of death

Drivers know it's important to follow the rules of the road, but they don't always do so. In one national survey, 85% said it's very or extremely dangerous to run a red light, but 31% of respondents also said they had done so in the past month.

One primary reason why the U.S. has fallen behind most European nations, where camera-based traffic enforcement is nearly ubiquitous, involves public disapproval of cameras. In the 1990s, the U.S. rate of traffic fatalities was nearly identical to other countries across Europe. Since then, as camera-based enforcement expanded across Europe, the number of U.S. traffic deaths has grown to nearly twice as high as European nations. In this, the U.S. has become an outlier. This is because other countries have successfully reduced deaths due to traffic crashes much more sharply.

Despite the multiple, clear benefits of automated traffic enforcement, there is still a public pushback against the use of such technologies. In some cases, U.S. state and local legislators approve automated enforcement programs, only to later prohibit their use. There are currently 153 jurisdictions in 17 states with red light and speed cameras. However, 13 states have partly or completely outlawed speed cameras, and eight ban red light cameras.

Unfortunately, research indicates that when camera-based programs end, crashes increase and public safety is imperiled. One study of 14 cities that previously ended programs found a 30% higher rate of fatal crashes than would have been expected if their automated enforcement programs continued.

This is why it's important for state and local transportation agencies to closely examine how to incorporate automation to help improve public safety.

2. Automated traffic enforcement improves safety

Industry research across the transportation and health sectors has demonstrated the effectiveness of automated enforcement in reducing speeding and red light running. In fact, one trusted source of public health insights, County Health Rankings, recommends camera-based enforcement as a tool to improve public health. They give automated enforcement the highest score possible as a scientifically supported community health improvement method.

Separately, a combined review of 28 speed camera research studies found a reduction in crashes in every single investigation. Ultimately, those studies found that serious crashes were reduced by 17%-58%. Research into the effectiveness of red light cameras has also uncovered statistically significant public safety improvements. In a comparison of fatal crashes across ten years in several dozen large U.S. cities, there was a 35% reduction in deaths in cities with red light cameras, compared to a 14% reduction in cities without them. This is likely because fewer people run red lights when they know cameras are used in an intersection.

3. Acknowledging privacy concerns

A common misconception about camera-based traffic enforcement is that it violates an individual's privacy -- despite that driving is highly regulated and takes place on public roads. Even obtaining a driver's license requires an agreement that individuals must abide by traffic laws. Public agencies have been empowered to enforce traffic laws, and people must be held accountable when they don't follow the rules.

It's important to understand that the vast majority of state-enabling legislation for camera-based enforcement does not require driver identification. In many places, municipal agencies explicitly prohibit the use of facial recognition. Cameras are used to detect license plates, and in most public safety programs cameras do not capture driver or passenger faces, genders, or ethnicities.

This important distinction can help agencies ensure fair, equitable and safe traffic enforcement. State and local public safety agencies increasingly understand they must prioritize safety first. Municipal leaders must rely on trusted partners to gain insights into the tools and techniques that can help efficiently and cost-effectively inform risk assessments and empower traffic planning, while protecting privacy and improving the transparency of their operations.

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To learn more about how we can help you ramp up automated traffic enforcement, visit us at www.ConduentTransportation.com, or email us at transportation@conduent.com.

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