

Big Brother is watching you ... and your car

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Do red-light traffic cameras reduce accidents? Save lives? Are they a boon to resource-strapped law enforcement agencies? A boondoggle? An invasion of privacy? With government surveillance – and the citizenry’s awareness thereof – at a fever pitch, this issue will only become more relevant ... and divisive.

An AP article, “[Traffic cameras bring tiny Ohio village to a stop \[1\]](#)”, highlights the disastrous effects that traffic cameras can have on small communities. Overzealous enforcement — 6,600 tickets within the first month — turned the tiny town of Elmwood Place into a giant speed trap, hurt local business, and turned huge profits — for the state legislature and contractors.

In four months, Maryland-based Optotraffic pocketed a cool \$500,000, which amounts to 40% of the generated revenue. The small Ohio town — wracked by outsourcing and living well below the state poverty line — could ill-afford these expenditures.

“People couldn't afford those tickets,” said the manager of Elmwood Quick Mart, Holly Calhoun. “They can barely afford to pay their bills.”

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Earlier this year, Hamilton County Common Pleas Judge Robert Ruehlman suspended the use of the cameras, noting that "Elmwood Place is engaging in nothing more than a high-tech game of three-card monte. It is a scam that the motorists can't win."

Automated traffic enforcement is [no less popular](#) [2] across the country — fifteen states and twenty-one cities ban it outright. Since 1991, automated ticketing has failed in 86% of election contests in Arizona, California, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Texas, and Washington.

But does the technology work? And does it violate our privacy?

It's easy to forget, but we don't have an absolute right to public privacy. While I'd normally be the first to raise Big Brother concerns, it doesn't quite apply here — 1984's telescreens, installed in every private residence, are very different than cameras on public roads. And the courts agree.

According to a 2009 ruling by the 7th US Circuit Court of Appeals, "no one has a fundamental right to run a red light or avoid being seen by a camera on a public street."

The technology is more of a question mark. Numerous studies attest to its effectiveness. A [2003 report](#) [3] by the National Cooperative Highway Research Program noted that "There is a preponderance of evidence, albeit not conclusive, indicating that red light running camera systems improve the overall safety of intersections where they are used."

By contrast, a [2004 report](#) [4] from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University concluded that "RLCs are associated with higher levels of many types and severity categories of crashes."

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Motorists often jam their brakes short of red-light cameras, increasing rear-end collisions. And a whole cottage industry has sprung up around avoiding these little automated traffic cops. In California, when a positive ID cannot be made, many police departments send out "notices of traffic violation," which request identifying information about the driver — 5th amendment, anyone? — and are not legally-binding. Also known as "snitch tickets", these "notices" [are ignored](#) [5] by up to 1/3 of alleged violators.

Many object to for-profit companies inserting themselves into the criminal justice system.

As always, we leave the greater discussion up to you, dear readers. Are we better off with red-light cameras? Do they reduce accidents? Are they a transparent revenue generator or an ingenious way to stretch out police resources?

Join the discussion below!

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- [2] <http://www.thenewspaper.com/news/27/2769.asp>
- [3] http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/nchrp/nchrp_syn_310.pdf
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