



GUN AND GO: Analyzing Red-Light Running

BY JAMES SCHULTZ

**WE'RE TALKING TO YOU. ABOUT YOU.
YEAH, YOU. ABOUT YOU IN YOUR CAR.**

Admit it. You're in a hurry, in the usual rush as you're driving, and you're impatient to make it through the intersection before the light turns red. The line of cars in front is slow and you think — you know — you won't make it unless you get ready to gun it. There's just one car ahead of you. The light is turning yellow! What do you do? Speed up? Slow down? Stop?

If you're like many Americans, you'll gun it and go. According to the results of a national survey conducted by Bryan Porter, Old Dominion assistant professor of psychology, nearly 56 percent of respondents reported running red lights. Younger drivers, non-parents, those in low-technology or blue-collar jobs and the unemployed tend to report more red-light running. And those parents with children younger than 20 were more likely to run red lights than were parents of older children. Safety-belt use was the one constant variable across all groups. Unbuckled drivers were far more likely not to stop for red lights.

"Red-light running presents a significant safety issue," Porter contends. "Linked to that is aggressive driving. Not road rage per se, but recklessness that endangers others. Some evidence suggests that thousands of deaths have been caused by not stopping at red lights."

Porter's study was underwritten by DaimlerChrysler Corp. and was conducted via telephone with drivers in all 50 states, but concentrated in Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina and Texas. Overall, 5,024 respondents completed the survey. Of these, 4,007 were concentrated in the 10 target states, leaving 1,017 from the remaining 40 states as a comparison group. A "national" sample of 880 respondents was culled from the overall sample and reweighted to include a proportional number of respondents from each of the 50 states.

The survey indicated that, no matter the state, red-light running behaviors were virtually identical. Drivers were most likely to run red lights on weekday mornings while going to work or school. The typical light runner tends to be younger, is driving alone, with no children, and is rushing to work or school in the morning hours on weekdays. Violators are usually more than two miles from home and more likely to be repeat offenders.

Routine Violations

Porter admits that studying driver behavior was not exactly one of his career goals. Public health and safety was. He had assumed that he one day might become a physician. "I began my career as a biologist, with a strong interest in health and medicine," Porter recalls. "But biology really didn't interest me. Human behavior did. I was interested in changing unhealthy habits that get people hurt or killed."

Four years ago, Porter learned of a project initiated by

the Virginia Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to analyze driver behaviors in order to prevent accidents at intersections. Porter decided to pursue a collaboration, even though he assumed, as does the general public, that drunk driving, speeding or lack of seatbelt use posed a greater danger. And while such behaviors are indeed destructive, Porter found to his surprise that red-light running was an equally serious matter. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 1999 Fatality Analysis Reporting System, 59.1 percent of fatal intersection crashes occur between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. — the same interval when most respondents report they are most likely to run red lights.

Beginning in 1997, during local studies funded by the DMV that eventually involved seven cities and counties in southeastern Virginia, Porter, traffic engineering and law enforcement officials found that red-light running was routine: as many as 10 scofflaws per hour per intersection. At some intersections, as many as five cars would run a red light during the same light cycle. Fully one-third of the observed light cycles had at least one red-light runner.

Throughout the project, an intermittent public-information campaign was deployed, explaining the project's goals. Signage was put in place warning of consequences for lawbreaking, and was followed by aggressive enforcement. The approach seemed to work, at least for several localities. Overall, there was a 13 percent reduction in the incidence of red light running when the program, known as Intersection Connection, concluded in 1999. At least during that time period, and for the targeted intersections, Porter estimates that hundreds of drivers decided not to press their luck and so elected not to zoom through intersections once traffic lights changed.



Only Two Minutes

Absent consistent enforcement and re-engineering of intersections to "calm" traffic flow — both expensive and therefore unlikely options — long-term reductions in red-light running appear problematic. Although some states and localities have installed "photo red" cameras that capture violators' license plates on film, privacy concerns may prevent

widespread adoption of a technique that Porter believes is the most effective means of prevention. He is, however, openly skeptical that a privacy defense can or should be advanced where public behavior is concerned.

“You’re on a public road,” he says. “You’re in a public space. It’s not your property. To claim that running a red light is your right: I have serious problems with that argument.”

Traffic congestion shows no signs of abating. Even as larger vehicles are introduced by manufacturers and eagerly snapped up by buyers, overall capacity remains the same or will actually decline because of ongoing construction or maintenance. What all drivers have to realize, Porter says, is that it’s in everyone’s best interest to abide by the law even if it doesn’t fit with individual timetables.

“We never will have enough roads,” Porter affirms. “Congestion isn’t the primary frustration for drivers. It’s discourtesy. Red-light running is a discourtesy. You’re selfish. You’re taking my time because I have to wait for you to run the light.”

Porter says the potential consequences of red-light running are severe. With ever increasing frequency, drivers around the country continue to race through intersections

when the light turns red, leading to a significant number of intersection crashes, particularly in urban areas. Nor is red-light running an isolated behavior independent of other bad habits. According to Porter, red-light runners take other risks. They are less likely to wear safety belts, tailgate more often, weave in and out of traffic, speed, gesture angrily at other drivers and tend to have more driving violations on their records.

“Stopping at a red light loses you a minute, maybe two. And that’s the worst-case scenario,” Porter asserts. “You run a red light, you cause a crash. You hurt someone or yourself. The police come. You go to court. You have to fix your car. All to save two minutes. That’s it: two minutes.”

Porter has received national and international media attention for his ongoing research. He has recently obtained additional funding from the Virginia DMV for a study on close following, or tailgating. The Division believes that tailgating is also a leading cause of crashes in Virginia, and a primary signal of overly aggressive driving. Observations began in 2000 in three Hampton Roads cities; in January 2001 two more municipalities were added. Currently, 12 sites from these cities are being monitored, an effort that will continue through September of this year.



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