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**Author: Bradley Olson**

**SIIS Office: (512) 795-8214**

**SIIS Cell: (512) 965-4001 Jerry**
**(512) 468-6965 Sandra**

## Study: Wrecks increase at red-light cameras sites

By BRADLEY OLSON

The number of crashes at Houston intersections with red-light cameras doubled in the first year after their installation, according to a city-financed study released Monday.

But Mayor Bill White argued that the cameras' presence prevented even more collisions and that the study proves the monitoring program is keeping drivers safe.

Critics of the initiative, which mails $75 civil fines to drivers photographed running red lights at 50 intersections, said the study shows that cameras actually cause more crashes and bolsters their argument that the program is more about generating revenue than protecting the public.

White and the study's authors, who recommend installing additional cameras at some intersections for further research, said they based their conclusion on their belief that Houston has experienced a major uptick in collisions in recent years. They acknowledged, however, that comprehensive citywide vehicle crash data is not available.

The reason for the divergence of opinions is a statistical problem, according to critics, study authors and city officials.

The analysis examined crash data at intersections that had a camera monitoring at least one of the four or more traffic signals in an intersection. Most intersections had a camera installed in only one direction, meaning that there were three other signals at that intersection without cameras.

Interestingly, it was those unmonitored points in the intersection that saw the greatest increase in accidents. Where there is a camera, the accidents remained relatively flat or showed only a slight increase.

"Collisions are going up all over the city," said Bob Stein, a Rice University political science professor and one of the report's authors. "But red-light cameras have held back that increase at approaches where they have been installed."

But they supplied no data other than the examination of the non-monitored directions of the 50 intersections to support the conclusion that accidents are up citywide. Stein acknowledged that data from the Houston Police Department shows accidents have declined in the city since 2004, although he said the data is problematic because police officers no longer file reports on every wreck.

Study authors — who include Robert Dahnke, Benjamin Stevenson and Stein from Rice University's Center for Civic Engagement, and Timothy Lomax from Texas A&M University's Texas Transportation Institute — plan to analyze insurance industry data in the coming months. They believe that will more definitively prove their supposition that accidents have increased so dramatically. The results of that further research are expected to be completed sometime around August.

## At least 387,000 citations

Critics contend there is no obvious reason to conclude that accidents have gone up across the city in the past year.

City Councilman Mike Sullivan, who has long opposed the cameras, said the point of the study was to see if they reduced collisions, and the results clearly show that they do not.

"There is no scientific, documented proof that collisions are reduced with the red-light camera program," said Sullivan, who represents parts of northwest Houston. "I've maintained all along that the program was flawed."

He added that those who have fought red-light cameras, claiming they are merely a revenue-generating vehicle for the city, now have "something to feel good about."

The city has 70 cameras installed at 50 intersections which photograph cars running red lights and then send tickets to the address registered to the driver's license plate. Since September 2006, the cameras have led to at least 387,000 citations and generated more than $20 million in revenue.

Many who oppose the program believe that because accidents went up — even though they went up only at stoplights where there is not a camera and increased only slightly at those where there is — is enough evidence that they lead to unsafe driving.

## 'Proof in the pudding'

Some studies have backed up those conclusions. One 2005 analysis by The Washington Post found that although accidents increased citywide between that year and 1999, the number of crashes at intersections with red-light cameras was far more pronounced.

*For Additional Information:*

Others, including several that were funded by reputable insurance trade groups that study traffic safety, have found the cameras had a dramatic effect and reduced accidents by as much as 30 percent. A study released earlier this month from the Texas Transportation Institute, which contributed to this study, found a 30 percent reduction statewide.

White admitted the city cannot prove a citywide uptick in accidents led to the increases at the monitored intersections, but still contended the study shows the camera program has improved public safety.

He pointed to the "proof in the pudding," a vast reduction in red-light citations in October 2008 compared with the same month last year. They are down by 40 percent, city data show.

"People are in fear" when they approach a red light, the mayor said, often so much that they pause even when the light turns green, in case a driver is about to run the light.

"Our goal is to reduce the number of people who are running red lights," White said.

The study has come under fire from longtime opponents of the cameras, who believe it was not objective. Among their concerns is that Stein, one of the authors, is married to the mayor's agenda director.

## Was draft copy changed?

Last week, several attorneys who have opposed the program previously in court filed a lawsuit to force disclosure of a draft copy of the study, attempting to gauge whether the conclusions were somehow changed to suit White's support of the program.

Stein has repeatedly denied this was the case, noting that although some language has been revised, the substance of the study has remained consistent for months and did not change.

The conclusion the study makes "is insane," said Randall Kallinen, one of the lawyers who filed the open records lawsuit. "In one year, the accident rate in the city of Houston has more than doubled? You can't just assume that the wild increase somehow has nothing to do with the cameras."