

# STATUS REPORT

INSURANCE INSTITUTE  
FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

Vol. 33, No. 10, December 5, 1998



## ROAD RAGE

The perception is a driver who snaps and goes charging down the crowded roads of the 1990s, taking risks with the lives of all who get in the way. But road rage isn't a recent phenomenon. And it doesn't have to be this extreme to present a safety problem.

Aggressive driving, dubbed “road rage,” has been around about as long as cars. It’s just that we seem to pay attention to it in cycles, rediscovering it as a highway safety issue every decade or two.

Back in 1915, *Engleman’s Autocraft* noted that “some automobilists abuse their rights and heedlessly run over the rights of others.” And from a 1937 textbook: “Control the desire to beat or get ahead of the other fellow . . . . A good driver never

A 1954 magazine bemoaned the driver “who cannot tolerate being held up by a long line of traffic . . . . He pulls out of line and tries passing on the right or on the wrong side of the road. He runs through red lights or jumps the gun before the light has turned green . . . cuts in and out, races, and gets ahead of everybody else.”

Except for some antiquated prose, these reports could have been written last week. And there’s more. “Highway Mas-

inconsiderate drivers, and their tolerance level overflows. They explode. Their car becomes a weapon, and they strike out.”

Even the *National Enquirer* got into the act, warning in 1979’s “Car Wars” that “angry motorists are using tons of speeding metal as deadly weapons.”

**Problem is the same in the 1990s:** More recent news coverage is strikingly similar. A *Washington Times* article, also headlined “Car Wars,” says “the weapon of choice has six cylinders” and claims a 51 percent increase in violent highway incidents since 1990.

There’s no objective evidence to support the notion that highway hostility is increasing. “There always have been hostile drivers,” Institute President Brian O’Neill points out. “Certain egregious examples generate media coverage which, in turn, tends to lead to additional reports of such incidents.”

High-profile media attention isn’t the only focus on aggressive driving. Congress has held hearings. There’s been a proliferation of programs aimed at the problem.

**Road rage causes are similar, too:** If the phenomenon of aggressive driving gets rediscovered over and over, so does speculation about its possible causes. Everything is cited from summer heat, an increase in traffic congestion, and the stepped-up pace of urban life to an overall increase in violence and a general breakdown in manners.

“Experts place much of the blame on t.v. commercials and programs that stress macho themes and on self-awareness courses that emphasize individual assertion over concern for others,” a source told *The Los Angeles Times* in 1978. A decade later, another *Times* source said continuing immigration is a problem because it brings “motorists from the screech-and-batter school of driving.”

Even the now defunct 55 mph national speed limit has been cited as a cause: “One driver is out in the speed lane doing exactly 55 and a faster driver wants to pass. The guy doing 55 gets righteous and this is when the ‘car war’ begins.”



## **Modern congestion breeds aggression . . .**

permits himself to become angry. Anger frustrates good judgment.”

By 1951 the message hadn’t changed much. A traffic manual listed the “thoughtless and inconsiderate actions that so often contribute to accidents . . . failure to give signals, cutting in and not giving enough room to other vehicles, not keeping a safe distance from other vehicles.”

sacre,” a 1978 *Wall Street Journal* report, called attention to the “guns, knives, fists, and cars [that have] become drivers’ weapons on packed roads in the West.”

The same year, a Los Angeles police psychologist told *The Chicago Tribune* that “people are beginning to lose control . . . . They get frustrated at the stack-ups on our freeways, they get angry at other

Whatever the causes, aggressive driving is a continuing problem that's often viewed as a new one. In 1997, three out of four people surveyed by Gallup said people were driving more aggressively than they had been five years before. No one admitted to being personally at fault.

"This is a common reaction," O'Neill says. "Almost everyone believes he or she is a good driver, but they also believe there are lots of bad drivers. The belief that problems are caused by other drivers is one reason it's hard to change driver behavior through education."

**Crowded streets are nothing new:** Road congestion, often mentioned as a contributor to aggressive driving, also seems to be longstanding. The 1951 traffic manual points out that "since 1910, the number of motor vehicles has increased by over 2,000 percent, but new road construction for the same period has been less than 3 percent. This, in a nutshell, is the problem!"

In 1988, *The Los Angeles Times* was making the same point: "There are more than 6 million vehicles in Los Angeles County. That's about . . . 10,000 vehicles for every mile of freeway." More recently, *U.S. News & World Report* put road rage on its cover and claimed much the same thing: "It isn't your imagination that traffic is getting worse. Since 1987, the number of miles of roads has increased just 1 percent while the miles driven have shot up by 35 percent."

So the problem isn't new, the causes aren't new, and "the consequences can be as deadly now as in previous decades," says Allan F. Williams, Institute senior vice president. "At the same time, we must take care not to seize on ineffective measures just to do something. The goal is to be effective."

Last year, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration awarded grant money for special enforcement in the Washington, D.C. area. Police in nearby Fairfax County, Virginia, got a state grant to increase the ticketing of drivers who speed, run traffic controls, tailgate, change lanes improperly, fail to signal, or who drive on the shoulder. Maryland State Police announced they, too, are targeting aggressive drivers.

Programs like these are useful because they not only ticket more violators but also raise public awareness. Still, limited programs aren't the whole solution. It takes ongoing enforcement against the most common kinds of aggressive driving.

**Targeting everyday aggressors:** "Media coverage focuses on outlandish examples of aggressive driving including motorists who run others off the road or pull guns. It

makes for good newspaper copy, but, thankfully, it's rare," Williams says. "Much more common is the aggressive practice of deliberately entering an intersection after—sometimes several seconds after—the light has turned red."

While this "everyday" kind of aggression doesn't attract the same attention, it does contribute substantially to urban crashes. Williams notes that red light runners "are responsible for an estimated 260,000 crashes each year, of which approximately 750 are fatal" (see *Status Report*, July 11, 1998; on the web at [www.highwaysafety.org](http://www.highwaysafety.org)).

On a national basis, fatal crashes at traffic signals increased 19 percent during 1992-96, and red-light-running crashes increased 15 percent—both far outpacing the 6 percent increase in all other fatal crashes during the same period.

Apprehending violators one by one through traditional enforcement isn't realistic, given the extent of red light running, but technology can help. Several cities use cameras to ticket and (continues on p.6)



## **. . . but hostile driving isn't anything new.**

- 1915:** "Some automobilists . . . run over the rights of others."
- 1954:** "He runs through red lights or jumps the gun before the light has turned green . . . cuts in and out, races, and gets ahead of everybody else."
- 1978:** "People are beginning to lose control . . . They get frustrated at the stack-ups on our freeways, they get angry at other inconsiderate drivers, their tolerance level overflows. They explode."
- 1979:** "Angry motorists are using tons of speeding metal as deadly weapons."
- 1988:** "Polite drivers [are] becoming as rare as rain in August."

# Trucking groups flex muscle to keep rig safety under FHWA rule

## *Political maneuvering at highest levels of Congress blocks effort to transfer Office of Motor Carriers*

Heavy-duty lobbying by trucking associations put the brakes on a proposal to shift the Office of Motor Carriers, the agency charged with regulating interstate trucking, out of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The provision, sponsored by Rep. Frank Wolf of Virginia and approved by both the House and Senate, would have transferred the regulatory office to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), which already sets safety standards for new commercial trucks.

But then the trucking industry unleashed its considerable resources to block the proposal. Mounting an intensive campaign, trucking executives nationwide contacted key members of Congress while industry lobbyists met with House and Senate leaders. Wolf, who chairs the House Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee, heard from more than 500 carriers. The barrage paid off when committee staff, at the direction of Speaker Newt Gingrich, deleted the provision in the department's spending bill.

Big political contributions give the trucking industry a strong voice on the Hill. In 1997-98, this industry has shelled out more than \$2.8 million for congressional races — plus financing a lobbying arm. The American Trucking Associations has spent nearly a million dollars on lobbying since January 1997, including the services of well-connected former Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour.

"The industry lobbied House and Senate leadership long and hard to strike this transfer from Transportation's spending bill and, unfortunately, the effort paid off," says Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety president Judith Stone. Safety groups consider NHTSA a stronger regulator with a better enforcement record.

Gingrich's move was unusual because issues favored by committee chairmen rarely are tampered with. Wolf was so infuriated that he refused to vote for the bill or to sign it. "In developing the transportation appropriation conference report, my Senate colleagues agreed with moving the Office of Motor Carriers to NHTSA," Wolf

***Nearly a dozen employees inside the Office of Motor Carriers have complained to Wolf that the level of enforcement has declined dramatically in recent years.***

said. "But on the way to final passage, the trucking industry applied the pressure, and the transfer was halted."

American Trucking Associations president Walter McCormick isn't shy about taking the credit. Senator Wolf "tried a power play," McCormick says, "and he was beaten by power politics."

Trucking groups say their opposition is based on NHTSA's lack of experience regulating trucks. But the real reason may have more to do with the relationship the truck-



ing industry has developed with officials at FHWA. "Historically, this agency has been very sympathetic to the views put forth by the motor carriers," says Institute senior vice president Stephen Oesch.

The industry is waiting for a decision from FHWA about whether truckers will be allowed more driving time than current rules permit (see *Status Report*, Sept. 12, 1998; on the web at [www.highwaysafety.org](http://www.highwaysafety.org)). American Trucking Associations' chief lobbyist James Whittinghill says



these two issues are linked. He claims the proposal to move truck regulation out of FHWA was “motivated by a few people in the safety world who think they can get smaller trucks and fewer hours of service for truck drivers by transferring the Office of Motor Carriers to NHTSA.”

The Institute and other highway safety groups aren’t the only ones favoring the transfer. Nearly a dozen employees inside the Office of Motor Carriers have complained to Wolf that the level of enforce-

ment has declined dramatically in recent years. One employee wrote that “the average investigator completes one compliance review per month. Last year it was 2.5 compliance reviews per month and the year before it was more than 5 per month. Clearly, nobody at the top within FHWA recognizes the importance of compliance and enforcement.”

A 1997 audit by the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Transportation found that the number of compliance re-

views had dropped by 41 percent since 1991, even though 150 additional safety investigators had been hired. Only about a third of the regulated carriers have ever been reviewed. And when the Office of Motor Carriers does find violations, it either fails to fine the offenders or assesses low fines.

Wolf has asked the General Accounting Office and the Department of Transportation for a full investigation of truck safety regulation at FHWA.

(continued from p.2) deter violators. In cities in both California and Virginia, this led to big decreases in violations (see accompanying story).

Similarly, photo radar is effective against speeders (see facing page). Pictures are taken of speeding vehicles, and tickets are mailed to violators. Signs typically warn drivers about camera locations but don't indicate which cameras are active at any given time. Studies in Norway showed such enforcement reduced injury crashes by 20 percent on rural roads, and a subsequent study in British Columbia showed significant reductions in speeding vehicles. Cameras also are effective on urban roads, according to a London study in which researchers report "highly significant" decreases of 9 percent in all crashes and 56 percent in fatal crashes "as a direct outcome of the cameras."

The continuous application of proven enforcement techniques like these "can substantially reduce a range of traffic violations generally referred to as aggressive driving," Williams concludes. O'Neill echoes this, saying "the solution to this and most other driver problems is, in theory, simple. If all motorists obeyed all traffic laws, aggressive driving would disappear. But unfortunately, motorists routinely ignore many traffic laws, and this cascades into extreme behavior by a few."

Despite recent media attention rediscovering aggressive drivers, this has been a problem in one form or another for most of this century.

## Camera use deters red light running in Virginia community

Drivers are significantly less likely to run red lights when cameras are present, numerous studies show. The newest findings come from Fairfax, Virginia, a small city in the heavily congested Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

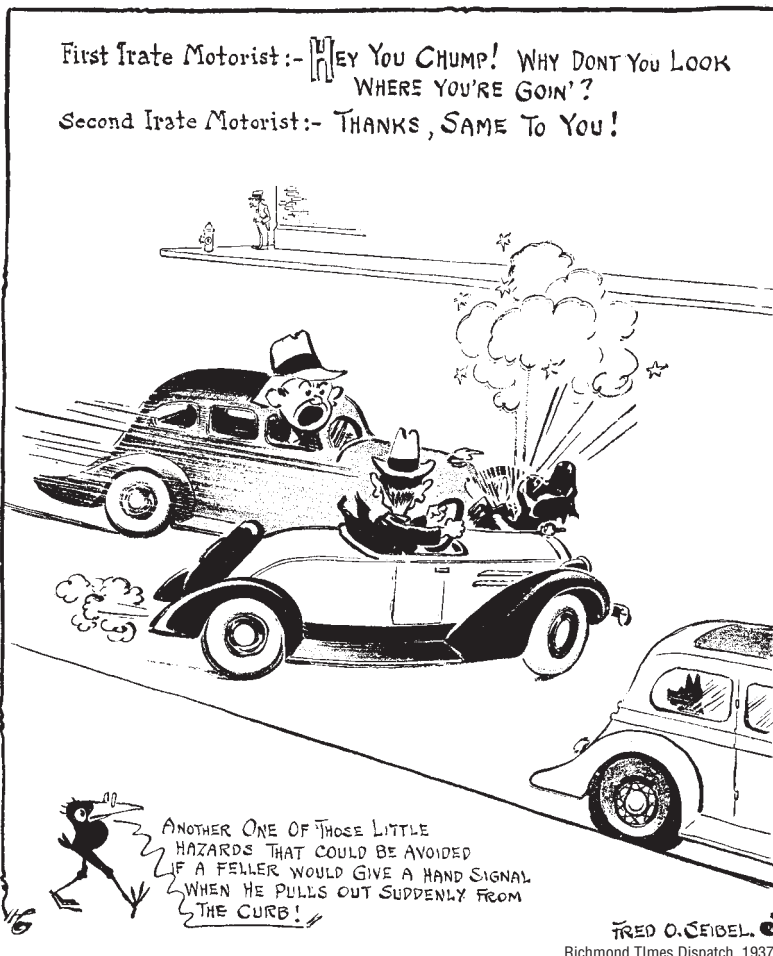
Red light violations declined 44 percent the first year after camera enforcement began. Results are similar to what Institute researchers found in Oxnard, California, where violations dropped 42 percent four months after the cameras were introduced there (see *Status Report*, March 7, 1998; on the web at [www.highwaysafety.org](http://www.highwaysafety.org)). Red light cameras were effective no matter who the jurisdiction held responsible for the violation. In Fairfax, a vehicle's owner received the ticket while in Oxnard it was the driver.

What really intrigues researchers is the influence of red light cameras on driver behavior at other intersections. In both Oxnard and Fairfax, red light running declined at intersections where cameras weren't located. The decline at noncamera sites in Fairfax was 34 percent.

"By reminding drivers that red light running is a serious traffic offense and implementing highly conspicuous enforcement measures, Fairfax and other cities with red light camera programs have been able to bring about a significant change in driver behavior," says Richard Retting, the Institute's senior transportation engineer.

In Fairfax, 84 percent of the residents support the use of red light cameras. Nationwide, 72 percent of city residents favor cameras. More than 30 communities use them, a number that's expected to double in the next year.

For a copy of "Evaluation of Red Light Camera Enforcement in Fairfax, Virginia" by Richard Retting et al., write: Publications, 1005 N. Glebe Road, Suite 800, Arlington, VA 22201.



## Evidence is mounting: photo radar helps to lower speeds and reduce injury crashes

Most drivers slow down when they see a police car. They ease up on the gas in the presence of photo radar, too, numerous studies have shown (see *Status Report*, March 22, 1997; on the web at [www.highwaysafety.org](http://www.highwaysafety.org)). Photo radar is a speed monitoring camera that snaps pictures of cars going too fast. New research from the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia, a government-affiliated agency, indicates this kind of enforcement reduces the risk of crashes and resulting injuries.

The study shows a 7 percent decline in crashes and up to 20 percent fewer deaths the first year the cameras were used. The proportion of speeding vehicles at photo radar deployment stations in British Columbia declined from 66 percent in 1996 to less than 40 percent today. Researchers also attribute a 10 percent decline in daytime injuries to photo radar.

What makes the evidence so compelling is that this is the largest deployment of photo radar ever in North America. Even so, it may not affect the use of speed cameras in the United States, where this enforcement method never has been as popular as it is elsewhere. About 75 countries rely heavily on photo radar, which is used in only about a dozen U.S. communities.

One reason photo radar hasn't been widely embraced in the United States is that our laws are more complicated. Communities generally have to enact specific legislation to authorize camera use. Many elected officials also believe photo radar lacks public support. But while Americans have some concerns about privacy, a 1995 nationwide telephone survey found that 57 percent of U.S. residents favor using cameras to enforce speed limit laws.

"Speeding is one of the major causes of crashes, and it's directly related to crash severity," says Institute senior transportation engineer Richard Retting. "There's little doubt that widespread use of photo radar would make our roads safer, but without organized and effective advocacy like what we've had to deter drunk driving, it's not likely to happen."

Although red-light-running cameras (see facing page) operate much like photo



radar, they're viewed more positively. "Most people consider running lights more dangerous than driving 10 or 15 miles an hour faster than the limit," Retting says.

Speed cameras haven't had an easy ride in Canada, either. The first act of the newly elected leader of Ontario in 1995 was to ban them on roads around Toronto less than a year after they were installed. He was fulfilling a campaign promise in which he referred to the devices as "Orwellian cash machines." British Columbia has the only province-wide program. In 1996, the government set up 30 cameras mounted on vans at sites of frequent crashes. Since then, these vans have spent more than 30,000 hours in operation. Although nearly 250,000 tickets have been issued, public support remains relatively high. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed said they favor the program.

For a copy of "Interim Evaluation Report on Photo Radar Program," write: Integrated Traffic Camera Unit, Attention Sandy Webster, 12140 Horseshoe Way, Richmond, B.C. V7A 4V5 Canada.

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1005 N. Glebe Rd., Arlington, VA 22201 703/247-1500 Fax 247-1588 Internet: www.highwaysafety.org

Vol. 33, No. 10, December 5, 1998

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
PERMIT NO. 252  
ARLINGTON, VA

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## Award goes to O'Neill

The Association for the Advancement of Automotive Medicine has awarded Institute President Brian O'Neill its 1998 Award of Merit. Bestowed at the group's 42nd annual meeting in October, this award goes each year "to an individual who has made unique and outstanding contributions to furthering the cause of reducing road-related trauma over a sustained period of time." In accepting the award, O'Neill noted the huge advances in the field of highway safety since the early 1970s. "My plea is simply this," he concluded. "Let's all keep insisting that highway safety countermeasures be based on science or data, not on wishful thinking or hunches."

Editor: Jo Ann Tooley  
Writer: Maria Kaufmann  
Art Director: Karen Long

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ISSN 0018-988X

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