

PICTURING SAFER STREETS

Fewer crashes — in some cases, far fewer — are occurring at most KC intersections that have red-light cameras.



AT THE FIRST 13 INTERSECTIONS WHERE KANSAS CITY INSTALLED RED-LIGHT CAMERAS...

... total wrecks are

**DOWN
26%**

... rear-end wrecks are

**DOWN
20%**

... red-light wrecks are

**DOWN
67%**

... injury wrecks are

**DOWN
42%**

PHOTOS BY DAVID ELLIOTT / THE KANSAS CITY STAR

By CHRISTINE VENDEL • The Kansas City Star

Two weeks after the red-light cameras appeared, a driver in front of Amanda Westerheid suddenly slammed his brakes for a yellow light at U.S. 71 and 59th Street.

Her vehicle plowed into the back of his.

Critics of the cameras predicted that such collisions would increase after the cameras went up in Kansas City last year. But that hasn't happened, according to a Star analysis of wrecks at the city's first 13 intersections with cameras.

Rear-end collisions actually decreased 20 percent at those locations, the newspaper found after studying 450 wrecks from 2008 and 2009.



At U.S. 71 and 55th Street, the number of wrecks fell 83 percent after red-light cameras were installed.

Wrecks overall declined 26 percent. Injury wrecks fell by 42 percent. And wrecks caused by drivers running red lights plunged 67 percent. Those declines contrast with a slight increase in wrecks citywide during that same time period.

"As a driver myself, I know I'm paying more attention," said Police Chief Jim Corwin. "I think a lot of people are paying more attention, so those figures don't surprise me."

Kansas City's statistics mirror those from some other studies nationwide that have shown red-light cameras reduce overall wrecks and dangerous right-angle wrecks caused by red-light runners. Unlike in Kansas City, those studies typically have shown an increase in rear-end

wrecks, however.

Experts caution that more data — preferably three years' worth — are needed for a statistically sound analysis, but Corwin and others say Kansas City's preliminary data are encouraging.

"I'm glad to hear it's making a difference," said Councilwoman Cathy Jolly, a proponent of the camera system. "This is why we did it."

Across the country, use of red-light cameras is growing. More than 400 communities, including Atlanta, Chicago and Denver, have cameras. Locally, Sugar Creek, Grandview and Excelsior Springs also use the technology. The state of Kansas has not granted permission for their use.

SEE CAMERAS | A18

CAMERAS: Crashes decline at 10 intersections but rise at 3

FROM A Kansas City police officer issued nearly 50,000 citations since the city installed its first camera a year ago. Tickets have risen steadily, however, since peaking in August.

When city leaders first debated the cameras in earnest in 2006, then-City Manager Wayne Cantriss touted their ability to reduce red-light running and generate revenue. Supporters added that cameras would force drivers to respect red lights while freeing police officers for other duties.

Critics complained the city was more concerned about money than safety. The system invades privacy, they argued, and unfairly tickets a car's owner when someone else may be driving.

Corwin said he initially supported the idea as long as the cameras were intended to improve public safety, not revenue.

"I wanted to wait and see what happened with accidents and violations," he said. "It looks like both are down. It looks like this is a tool that might be working."

John Robey of Holden, Mo., caught a glimpse of a van coming at him through a red light at 19th and Walnut streets in November 2008.

"I put on the brakes, but still got tagged," he said. "I got plowed out of nowhere."

Though Robey wasn't hurt, his car was a total loss.

Five months later, he drove through the intersection again and saw workers installing red-light cameras.

"I think it's a good thing," he said. "I travel that same intersection regularly, and I believe it is cutting down on camera blowing through there."

Robey's belief is backed by the Star's analysis, which shows that wrecks dropped at that location from five to zero.

The Star individually reviewed about 450 accident reports to verify the circumstances of each wreck at 13 camera-monitored intersections. The first six cameras were running by April, and the seven others came on line in June. For each location, The Star compared either nine or seven months of 2009 wrecks with the same months of 2008.

Among the findings:
■ Collisions declined at 10 intersections but increased at three.

■ At least 28 fewer motorists and pedestrians were injured.

■ Wrecks declined by at least 10 percent at five intersections, including U.S. 71 at 59th Street, where they fell from 34 to 4, or 88 percent.

■ Northland Intersection and North Oak Trafficway and Vivion Road — bucked the trend, logging an increase in wrecks at rear-end wrecks and injury wrecks.

■ Only two intersections logged increases in wrecks caused by red-light wrecks, and each by only a single crash.

Councilman Ed Ford, who has criticized the way intersections are selected for cameras, said he was glad the data showed so many decreases but disappointed that wrecks increased at three intersections.

"Does that mean that they're

RED LIGHT CAMERAS IN KANSAS CITY

68th St. & U.S. 169

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	20	26
Rear-end wrecks	8	9
Red-light wrecks	1	2
Injury wrecks	5	3

N. Oak & Vivion

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	17	0
Rear-end wrecks	15	23
Red-light wrecks	7	1
Injury wrecks	5	6

19th & Walnut

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	0	0
Rear-end wrecks	0	0
Red-light wrecks	5	0
Injury wrecks	1	0

27th & S.W. Trafficway

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	17	0
Rear-end wrecks	15	5
Red-light wrecks	0	0
Injury wrecks	5	4

39th & S.W. Trafficway

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	21	18
Rear-end wrecks	6	2
Red-light wrecks	3	2
Injury wrecks	5	1

39th & Main

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	35	3
Rear-end wrecks	10	5
Red-light wrecks	5	2
Injury wrecks	8	5

79th & Wornall

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	9	13
Rear-end wrecks	3	2
Red-light wrecks	3	2
Injury wrecks	4	4

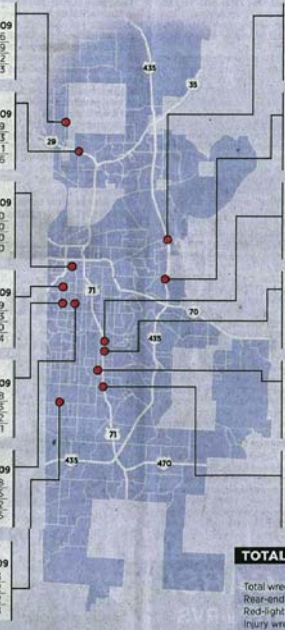


Kansas City Police Officer Gary Nevers recently demonstrated the process officers use to verify whether a car photographed at an intersection actually has run a red light. Tickets have fallen steadily in recent months.

not working at those locations," he said. "I would add more rather see a 5 percent reduction at each intersection than double-digits at some and increases at others."

He doubts that the city should have picked locations based on dangerous wreck incidents instead of the number of red-light runners and being

The Star compared Kansas City police accident data from months the red-light cameras operated in 2009 with the same months of 2008. At six intersections, that time frame was April through December, at seven, it was June through December. The Star then reviewed about 450 accident reports to determine the number of injury wrecks, rear-end wrecks and wrecks caused by drivers who ran a red light.



TOTAL

	2008	2009	Pct. change
Total wrecks	258	191	-26.0%
Rear-end wrecks	114	91	-20.2%
Red-light wrecks	39	13	-66.7%
Injury wrecks	66	38	-42.4%

THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Winner & I-435

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	10	4
Rear-end wrecks	7	3
Red-light wrecks	0	1
Injury wrecks	3	1

23rd & I-435

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	10	9
Rear-end wrecks	9	4
Red-light wrecks	3	1
Injury wrecks	5	1

55th & U.S. 71

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	24	4
Rear-end wrecks	10	2
Red-light wrecks	5	1
Injury wrecks	5	0

59th & U.S. 71

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	20	7
Rear-end wrecks	9	4
Red-light wrecks	0	0
Injury wrecks	4	1

63rd & Prospect

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	22	17
Rear-end wrecks	17	2
Red-light wrecks	1	0
Injury wrecks	7	3

Gregory & U.S. 71

	2008	2009
Total wrecks	31	38
Rear-end wrecks	18	26
Red-light wrecks	6	6
Injury wrecks	9	9

live in Smithville and works in Kansas City.

Nationwide studies of crashes at camera-monitored intersections have reported mixed results.

Large studies from Virginia and North Carolina reported crash numbers grew after cameras were installed. Other studies, including ones in Dallas and California, cited a reduction in crashes.

Both Ebel, director of the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center in Seattle, said many studies generally have found a decrease in right-angle or T-bone crashes but an increase in rear-end crashes.

Right-angle crashes tend to cause more serious injuries than rear-end crashes, said Ebel, a doctor who treats trauma patients.

"You have to ask how do those two weigh off against each other," she said.

Safety is what Bubba Bowden had in mind when he pushed for cameras to be installed in Montgomery, Ala., where he is the city's director

of traffic engineering. Intersections had become too dangerous, he said.

"I taught my own kids to wait when a light turns green. You never know who's going to come through there," he said.

"When I was growing up, things went at a low speed. Nowadays, it's not like that. Everyone's always in a hurry."

After Montgomery installed cameras at nine intersections, accidents dropped by 30 to 35 percent. Bowden said the traffic flow also improved, he said.

Though Kansas City officials say the goal of the red-light camera program is to improve public safety — not to raise revenue — it is clearly turning into something of a money-maker.

Budget officials estimate the city will receive \$3.5 million in fines in the fiscal year beginning May 1. Of that, the camera vendor will get \$4.50 per camera per month, or about \$16 million for the year. The city will add \$19 million, which would be new revenue for the city.

Some people point out that those vehicle and fines will go down over time, as people become familiar with where the cameras are. In other cities, that drop has been as much as 40 percent.

But public works spokesman Dennis Gagnon said \$19 million in net new revenue would be a conservative prediction for next year. He pointed out that 4,000 tickets were issued in December. If all those people pay their \$100 fines, that's \$400,000 for just one month. Even if those numbers drop somewhat, that could be \$4 million for a one-year period.

The city now has 29 cameras at 18 intersections, a fraction of the city's 650 signal-controlled intersections. Data from key locations show that motorists clearly are wiring up to some of the cameras, but others continue to generate far more citations than Gagnon would have imagined.

For example, violations have dropped by 91 percent at U.S. 71 and 55th Street and by 84 percent at Flintlock Road and Missouri 162 and at U.S. 71 and Red Bridge Road. City officials are encouraged by how those cameras appear to be changing risky motorist behavior.

But at 39th Street and Southwest Trafficway, where a camera has been snagging violators for the past year, violations have dropped only 13 percent. That camera caught 180 violators just last month.

Gagnon said that though some streets have many frequent commuters, other streets draw people just passing through who are less aware of the cameras. He said the city expects to keep the same locations and number of cameras for three years to gain solid data before deciding whether to expand or move cameras, he said.

In the meantime, the preliminary wreck data contain enough information to suggest a trend. "I hope it's a reflection of what's really going on out there."

By Lynn Hensley, Tony Rizzo and Laura Bauer contributed to this report. To reach Christine Vendel, call 314-953-4288 or e-mail to cvendel@kcsz.com.