



A Tale of Two Tickets:

How Disparate Standards of Traffic Enforcement Compromise Safety on City Streets

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POLICY BRIEF

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In 2017, more than 214 pedestrians, motorists, and cyclists lost their lives in traffic incidents across New York City.¹ Tragically, 2018 has already witnessed over a dozen fatalities, including the death of two children, a 1-year-old boy and 4-year-old girl mowed down by a runaway car careening through a red light in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

New York City must do all that it can to eliminate traffic fatalities and protect the well-being of all of those who travel on our streets. Yet an illogical disconnect in traffic enforcement enables dangerous drivers to evade serious repercussions for reckless driving. This needless disparity keeps thousands of drivers with multiple infractions on the road, including the perpetrator of the Brooklyn collision, who has received at least eight violations for running red lights or speeding in a school zone.

In short, drivers caught by a traffic camera face significantly fewer consequences than drivers ticketed by a police officer when it comes to speeding through school zones or running a red light. While approximately 300 traffic cameras positioned in school zones and intersections across the city identify millions of traffic violations every year, tickets produced by these traffic cameras do not result in meaningful penalties for repeat offenders.

In contrast, summonses issued by police officers for the exact same behavior – running red lights or speeding past schools – impose serious sanctions on drivers, including points on their license and significant fines. As a result of this two-tiered system of traffic enforcement, dangerous drivers can rack up tickets with relative impunity and avoid facing real consequences for their actions behind the wheel.

This policy brief by New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer offers an analysis of violations caught on traffic cameras over the 26 month period from January 2016 to February 2018. Drawn from the Department of Transportation's traffic camera ticketing program, this data demonstrates a clear pattern of disregard for basic safety by a significant number of drivers and a failure to sufficiently curtail repeat offenders:

- 82,307 vehicles have earned five or more camera-issued tickets for speeding within school zones, putting students at risk. Within this same time frame, a staggering 17 vehicles have chalked up more than 50 speeding violations near schools, with some cars accounting for as many as 74 tickets.

- 4,796 vehicles have received five or more camera-issued tickets for failing to stop at a red light. These include 87 vehicles responsible for more than ten violations that continue to be driven on New York City streets.
- 121,851 vehicles have accumulated a combination of over five camera-issued tickets for both red light and speeding violations. In total, these vehicles accumulated 874,629 tickets in the last 26 months.²

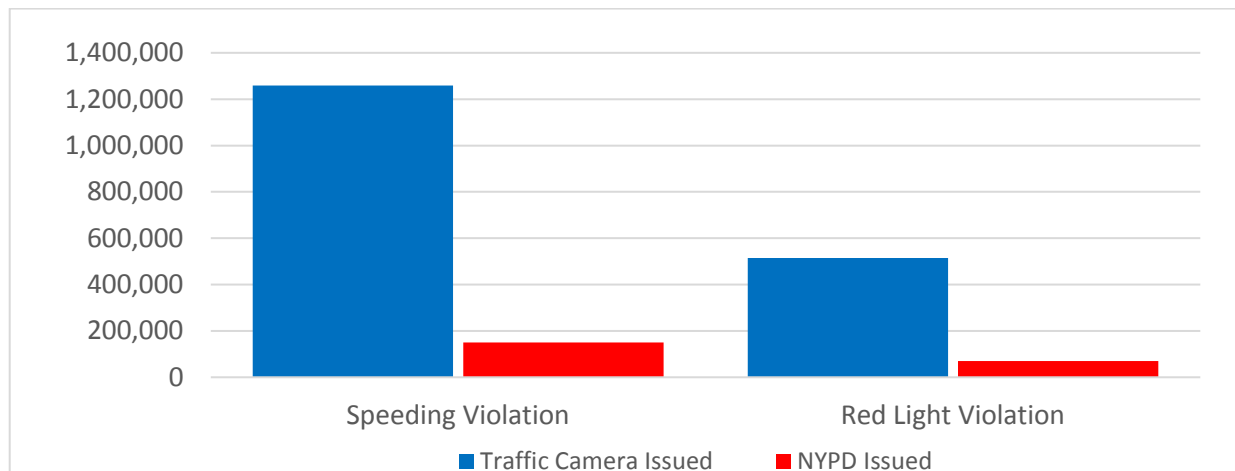
Put another way, 1,107 times per day in New York City, a vehicle with multiple violations is brazenly blowing through yet another red light or speeding through a school zone. That's 46 dangerous camera violations every hour – or one every 78 seconds in the five boroughs – each one a threat to the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, and other motorists, and each one by a driver whose license could potentially have been suspended if they had been stopped instead by a police officer.

New York City and New York State should take immediate action to put an end to this disparate system of traffic enforcement by attaching real penalties to drivers who continue to flout the law in front of the traffic cameras guarding our schools and crosswalks. Suspending or revoking the licenses of drivers who repeatedly violate the law, or revoking the registrations of vehicles associated with a high number of traffic violations, would take reckless drivers off the road and protect the safety of the millions of pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists who use our streets every day.

Enforcement by Officer

The New York City Police Department and the Department of Transportation enforce traffic laws using a variety of tools. NYPD Traffic Enforcement Officers issue more than one million summonses every year related to traffic moving violations.³ In 2017, the NYPD issued 70,021 summonses for running red lights and 149,955 summonses for speeding – far less than the 500,000 red light violations and 1.3 million speeding violations issued by traffic cameras (see Chart 1).⁴

Chart 1: Significantly more speeding and red light violations were issued by traffic cameras than by police officers in 2017



If uncontested, a traffic summons issued by a police officer can result in a fine and possibly the addition of points to a driver's record. If a motorist accumulates more than 11 points in an 18 month period, their license could potentially be suspended or revoked following a hearing by the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) Traffic Violations Bureau (TVB).⁵

Enforcement by Camera

New York City is also authorized by the State to monitor traffic violations using traffic cameras. Currently, State law permits the City to operate cameras within 140 school zones to monitor speeding and authorizes approximately 196 active cameras at road intersections to monitor red light infractions.⁶ These cameras have produced nearly 3.5 million tickets since 2016 and were responsible for the vast majority of traffic enforcement actions within the city.⁷

Tickets produced by traffic cameras, however, do not carry the threat of license points. Traffic cameras are only able to identify the vehicle involved in an infraction, not the identity of the driver. As a result, tickets are not attributed to the driver's record and cannot result in a license suspension under current law in New York State – even if an automobile racks up dozens of violations.

Indeed, penalties relating to the same category of violation vary wildly depending on whether a motorist is caught in the act by a cop or by camera. For instance, a summons for speeding in a school zone issued by an officer carries a fine between \$180 and \$600 as well as points on the driver's license. In contrast, the same incident if caught only on camera results in a comparatively paltry fine of \$50.⁸

On the whole, traffic cameras are credited with significantly improving driver and pedestrian safety. The vast majority of drivers react to cameras and camera violations by appropriately curbing their speed and abiding by the law. Research by the DOT shows that in locations equipped with cameras, speeding drops by 63 percent on average.⁹ However, as the analysis below demonstrates, a number of motorist scofflaws persist in breaking the law, thereby putting their fellow New Yorkers at risk.

Specifically, since 2016, 962,099 camera-issued violations have been dispensed for running a red light and 2.5 million for speeding in a school zone. Of the 3.5 million total violations, 2.9 million (or 85 percent) have been issued to drivers with New York license plates, 197,904 to drivers registered in New Jersey, and 88,416 to Pennsylvanians.

State License Plate	Red Light	Speeding	Total	Share of Total
New York	785,624	2,160,164	2,945,788	85%
New Jersey	68,769	129,135	197,904	6%
Pennsylvania	25,096	63,320	88,416	3%
Florida	14,204	40,034	54,238	2%
Other	68,406	130,606	199,012	6%

Standard passenger vehicles have received 85 percent of these red light and speeding violations, while for-hire vehicles have been issued 6 percent (225,832 total) and commercial vehicles 3 percent (111,949).¹⁰

Type of Vehicle	Red Light	Speeding	Total	Share of Total
Passenger Vehicles	795,599	2,178,642	2,974,241	85%
For-Hire Vehicles	88,744	137,088	225,832	6%
Commercial Vehicle	33,651	78,298	111,949	3%
Special Omnibus Rentals	11,409	34,600	46,009	1%
Other	32,690	94,610	127,300	4%

More troubling than the origin or class of vehicles, however, is the number of repeat offenders. In total, an extraordinary 82,307 vehicles have racked up more than five school zone speeding violations in the last 26 months. Of those, 8,297 have amassed between 11-25 infractions, 345 between 26-50, and 17 have received more than 50.

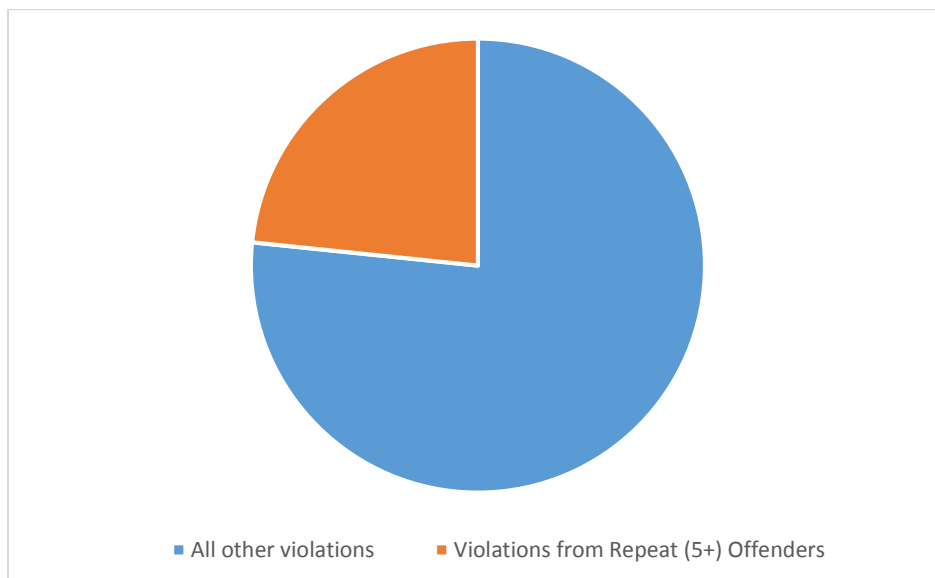
School Zone Speed Violations					
	Number of Violations				More than Five Violations
	5-10	11-25	26-50	50+	
Repeat Offenders	73,648	8,297	345	17	82,307

While passenger vehicles represent 70,222 of these repeat scofflaws, a number of for-hire vehicles (5,461) and commercial vehicles (3,041) also have five or more speeding violations.

School Zone Speed Violation					
Type of License	Number of Violations				More than five Violations
	5-10	11-25	26-50	50+	
Passenger Vehicles	62,639	7,079	293	11	70,022
For-Hire Vehicles	4,945	505	11	0	5,461
Commercial Vehicle	2,660	350	26	5	3,041
All Other	3,404	363	15	1	3,783
Grand Total	73,648	8,297	345	17	82,307

In total, these repeat offenders are responsible for 589,528 school speeding violations – or 23 percent of all offenses (see Chart 2).

Chart 2: Repeat offenders are responsible for 23 percent of all camera-issued speeding violations



Meanwhile, 4,796 vehicles have failed to stop at a red light on five or more occasions since 2016. Of those, 87 have blown a red light more than ten times.

Failure to Stop at a Red Light				
Type of License	Number of Violations			More than five Violations
	5-10	11-25	26-50	
Repeat Offenders	4,709	86	1	4,796

And while passenger vehicles represented 85 percent of repeat school-zone *speeding* violators they account for a smaller 62 percent of red light violators (2,950 in total). The list of vehicles that have run five or more red lights includes nearly 1,400 taxis, 235 commercial vehicles, and 47 tow trucks.

Failure to Stop at a Red Light				
Type of License	Number of Violations			More than five Violations
	5-10	11-25	26-50	
Passenger Vehicles	2,887	62	1	2,950
For-Hire Vehicles	1,379	15	0	1,394
Commercial Vehicle	231	4	0	235
Tow Truck	45	2	0	47
All Other	167	3	0	170
Grand Total	4,709	86	1	4,796

Looking at these two violations in tandem, a troubling 121,851 vehicles have racked up more than five speeding *and* red light violations combined since 2016. Of those, 12,389 have between 11-25 infractions, 488 have 26-50, and 24 have more than 50.

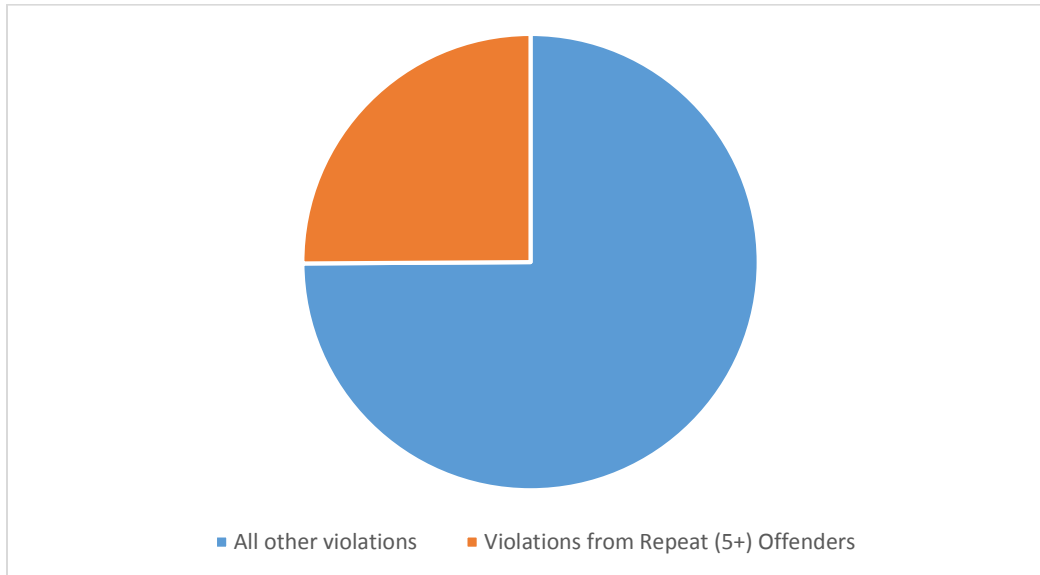
School Zone Speed and Red Light Violations					
	Number of Violations				More than five Violations
	5-10	11-25	26-50	50+	
Repeat Offenders	108,950	12,389	488	24	121,851

Passenger vehicles accounted for 99,896 of these repeat scofflaws, followed by for-hire vehicles (11,905) and commercial vehicles (4,525).

School Zone Speed and Red Light Violations					
Type of License	Number of Violations				More than five Violations
	5-10	11-25	26-50	50+	
Passenger	89,288	10,189	401	18	99,896
For-Hire Vehicles	10,754	1,125	26	0	11,905
Commercial	3,979	506	35	5	4,525
Total	108,950	12,389	488	24	121,851

In total, these 121,851 repeat offenders are responsible for 874,629 individual school zone speeding and red light violations – or 25 percent of all offenses (see Chart 3). Targeting these scofflaws and holding them accountable, then, will go a long way to making city streets safer.

Chart 3: Repeat offenders are responsible for 25 percent of all camera-issued speeding and red light violations



Recommendations

New York State and New York City should work together to develop strategies aimed at safeguarding our streets and stiffening penalties for repeatedly reckless drivers. A number of bills already in consideration in the New York State legislature offer policy solutions that, if enacted, could immediately enhance safety and protect lives.

Creating Real Consequences for Scofflaw Drivers

Current law only allows camera-issued tickets to be attributed to vehicles, not drivers, owing to the impossibility of accurately identifying a driver within a vehicle. The State should explore ways of targeting tickets and possibly license points to drivers listed on the vehicle's registration if a single vehicle accumulates a high number of points. Other municipalities have managed to implement workable programs which can attribute license points based on camera-issued tickets, including Phoenix, Arizona which applies both points and a fine for various offenses to the registered owner of the vehicle.¹¹ If the vehicle's owner was not responsible for the violation, the owner can contest the charge with the Phoenix DMV, which will then allow the Police to issue a new compliant to the actual driver.¹²

Should matching penalties to drivers prove difficult to legislate, the State should pass a law which would factor camera-issued citations into the DMV's vehicle registration program. A law recently proposed by Assembly Member Robert Carroll and Senator Jesse Hamilton would make it illegal to operate a car with multiple citations in a defined time period. This innovative proposal would go a long way to alleviating the menace of unsafe driving on New York City roads.

Increase Number of Red Light Cameras

The State should consider increasing the number of red light cameras permitted within New York City. Currently, the City is only authorized by the State to operate red light cameras at 150 of the City's 12,700 intersections.¹³ This artificial limit on the use of cameras prohibits the City from more widely deploying one of the most effective traffic enforcement tools in its arsenal. The legislature should consider amending the law to allow red light cameras to operate at all intersections that the City DOT deems necessary.

Increase Number of School-Zone Cameras

Similarly, State law also caps the number of speed cameras the City is allowed to operate within school zones. School speed cameras can only issue violations thirty minutes before and after scheduled student activities at schools, despite DOT research showing that “approximately 85 percent of fatal and serious injury crashes occur at times other than school hours on school days.”¹⁴ These limitations drastically restrict the City's use of speed cameras and leave students at the more than 90 percent of schools without speed cameras at real risk from reckless drivers. The State should consider expanding the scope of camera enforcement to allow cameras to operate at all hours of the day, thereby protecting those students and residents who remain in the school vicinity past designated hours.

The City Department of Transportation should better utilize speed camera data to target and inform safety enhancements on New York City streets and around New York City schools

The goal of traffic enforcement is not, of course, to punish drivers or increase ticket revenue. It is to curtail dangerous behavior. And while stiff fines and license suspensions are two methods for discouraging violations and removing bad drivers from the road, they are not enough. The city's roads must also be designed to prevent dangerous maneuvers and encourage smart, alert, and safe driving.

With this in mind, it is crucial that the City Department of Transportation map and utilize traffic violation data to target hot-spots and inform road re-designs. Areas with multiple offenses should be prioritized and traffic calming measures like speed bumps should be swiftly implemented.

Endnotes

- ¹ <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/016-18/vision-zero-mayor-de-blasio-pedestrian-fatalities-dropped-32-last-year-making-2017#/0>
- ² <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/City-Government/Open-Parking-and-Camera-Violations/nc67-uf89/data>
- ³ <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2018/nypd.pdf>
- ⁴ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/stats/traffic-data/traffic-data-moving.page>
- ⁵ <https://dmv.ny.gov/brochure/traffic-violations-bureau>
- ⁶ <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/nyc-red-light-camera-program.pdf> and <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/2014-10-speed-camera-faq.pdf>
- ⁷ Tickets produced by red light cameras are technically termed notices of liability.
- ⁸ <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/speed-camera-report-june2017.pdf>
- ⁹ <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2018/03/09/state-reps-intro-bills-to-prevent-speeding-and-keep-dangerous-drivers-off-the-streets/>
- ¹⁰ Vehicle registration designations are supplied by the NYS DMV. For-hire vehicle encompasses both taxis, ride-sharing services, and other regulated “community” cars. Commercial vehicles refer to vehicles operated by businesses.
- ¹¹ <https://www.phoenix.gov/policesite/Documents/070274.pdf>
- ¹² <https://www.phoenix.gov/policesite/Documents/070274.pdf>
- ¹³ <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/2014-nyc-red-light-camera-program.pdf>
- ¹⁴ <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/speed-camera-report-june2017.pdf>