

Embrace new technology to boost traffic safety, save lives

By LEONARD EVANS



During the Labor Day holiday many of us will be increasing our exposure to one of the greatest risks we face. We will be driving more.

Risks in traffic could be substantially reduced if only we would accept the conclusion of decades of research and common experience. The two most important factors that determine your risk in traffic are how you drive, and how other drivers drive.

We have suffered through four decades of misguided focus on relatively unimportant features such as airbags, tires and vehicle defects. The result has been that safety in the United States has fallen far behind that in other countries.

More than 41,000 Americans die on our roads each year. The majority — more than 29,000 — die in crashes involving a driver other than the victim. This majority includes pedestrians, passengers and drivers killed in two-vehicle crashes. The greatest threat to our lives is from the actions of other drivers.

Yet effective policies combining fresh thinking with new technology can sharply reduce the threat from other drivers. Illegal actions, such as running red lights, speeding and following too closely can be detected automatically using modern technology.

In some countries, including the United States, red-light cameras are already helping to reduce deaths and injuries. The cameras record license plates of vehicles that enter intersections after traffic lights have turned red. Radar speed cameras have been widely deployed in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. And technology to automatically record tailgating has been developed in Israel.

For Americans to reap the safety benefits of such technology, the nation must more fully embrace a simple principal — that driving is a public, not a private, activity. The privacy that is rightly sacrosanct for private activities should not apply to driving, be-

cause driving poses so great a threat to others. No one expects an airline pilot to enjoy privacy on the flight deck, or the speed and altitude of aircraft to be free from automatic monitoring.

There already is universal acceptance that driving a car is not an entirely private activity. Drivers face age requirements, speed limits and regulations for alcohol levels.

The breakthrough required is for the public to agree that technology should be used to more effectively enforce traffic laws. Of course, patrol officers do help, but assigning skilled police officers to monitor traffic is hardly the most effective use of so valuable a public resource.

A primary thrust of U.S. traffic policy since the 1970s is based on the delusion that safety can be achieved by changing vehicles to increase survivability in crashes. The focus must change to the priority that has been so successful in airline safety — to prevent crashes, not to survive crashes.

In terms of traffic deaths per million registered vehicles, the United States has dropped from being the safest nation in the world in the early 1970s to No. 13, and is still dropping. If the United States had stepped up its safety measures as have Australia, Canada or Britain in the last few decades, about 15,000 lives could have been saved in U.S. traffic in 2000 alone.

I believe that the public would warmly embrace the use of technology to effectively enforce traffic law if it were a central component of a broader policy change, which included the following changes:

1. Traffic law should have one purpose: to prevent injuries and deaths. Like other aspects of public health, traffic safety should be a government service supported by taxes. Given that traffic crashes cost our nation about \$200 billion per year, public expenditures that reduce crashes pay handsome dividends.

2. Automatically detected minor violations should receive no punishments for first or very infrequent offenses. Repeat and more major violations would receive increasing fines. The goal is

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to increase public support for safer traffic.

3. All traffic fines should be kept in a separate account, and distributed equally to all license holders as an annual bonus — perhaps just before Christmas. In a letter, the secretary of state could express hopes that everyone would work to ensure that the small bonus would be even smaller next year.

4. Automatic monitoring associates law violations with vehicle license plates, not drivers. Law changes would be necessary to make owners responsible for taking care of citations, ideally by persuading the offending driver to respond. Serious driving offenses would continue to focus on the actual driver.

These safety proposals would not inconvenience, embarrass or disadvantage any law-abiding citizen. They would save tens of thousands of lives annually.

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