

# School buses increasingly have cameras to catch illegal passing. Whether they keep students safe depends on who you ask



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11 minute read

Published 6:00 AM EST, Tue January 21, 2025



Two cars drive past a school bus's flashing stop sign in Yonkers, New York, in November 2023.

Peter Carr/The Journal News/USA Today Network/Imagn Images

**MiamiCNN —**

On the days Brigitte Beauchamps drives her daughter to a school bus stop in Florida, she is haunted by a phone call she received in mid-October.

Beauchamps' husband had just dropped off their daughter, Alexandra Ramos, at her school bus stop in Naples when her cell phone rang around 6:30 a.m.

"I'm thinking my daughter's calling me to tell me that the bus left her or that she forgot something," she said.

Instead, the voice of a distraught woman warned her daughter needed help: "Your daughter is on the floor. She is bleeding."

Alexandra had been hit by a car – the apparent victim of an impatient driver who switched lanes to pass the school bus, witnesses told the Collier County Sheriff's Office, according to a crash report from that office.

"I didn't know what was going on," Alexandra, 16, told CNN in December. "I remembered an ambulance coming, people surrounding me, and asking me if I was OK."

The high school junior suffered a cut to the head, a black eye, and a bruised body.



Alexandra Ramos was hit by a car in October.  
Courtesy Brigitte Beauchamps

Video from the school bus showed the bus with its yellow lights on, almost at a stop, when the driver “drove around the school bus in an aggressive manner and began to accelerate,” according to the crash report from the sheriff’s office. Alexandra was walking in front of the bus – from a median on the driver’s side to the bus’s door side – when she was struck, the report says.

The driver, who was cited on suspicion of reckless driving with personal injury, is being sued by the family.

To prevent these types of incidents at or near school bus stops, lawmakers in states across the country have passed legislation that allowed school districts to introduce stop-arm cameras on school buses.

The cameras, which a vendor or school district fits on the side of a bus, are meant to capture video of cars that illegally pass the bus when the bus’s stop arm – the retractable stop sign that bus drivers activate while picking up or dropping off children – is deployed. The camera system operators send any video of possible infractions, along with data such as time and location, to a local law enforcement agency, which then reviews the footage and decides whether to send a citation to the vehicle’s owner.

BusPatrol

One such vendor, Virginia-based BusPatrol, says it has installed cameras on more than 30,000 buses in 18 states.

“There are a lot of drivers around the country who are distracted, driving recklessly around school buses,” Steve Randazzo, BusPatrol’s chief growth officer, said. “We partner with communities to equip school buses with, in some ways, lifesaving technology.”

Whether the cameras keep students safe depends on who you ask.

## **It’s unclear how many children are struck near school buses**

Jay Beeber, executive director for policy at the National Motorists Association, a driver advocacy group, says he believes the main incentive for the program is profit – not safety.

“Automated enforcement is a for-profit entity that is mostly interested in generating revenue and generating as many tickets as possible,” he said.

Beeber argues in part that deaths of school-aged children from being struck by cars illegally passing stopped buses are rare.

From 2013 to 2022, four people 18 and younger – two in North Carolina, one in Pennsylvania and one in Georgia – were killed outside a vehicle in crashes where at least one driver involved in the crash was charged with a violation of passing a stopped school bus, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. This number has been [cited by Beeber's group](#).

However, in that same period, other children were fatally struck by drivers that [authorities said](#) failed to stop for a stopped school bus but were not noted in the NHTSA database as having been charged with illegal passing, including at least four in 2018 – three in Indiana and one in Mississippi.

BusPatrol

And the number of pedestrians 18 or younger fatally struck in school-transportation situations by vehicles other than school buses from 2013 to 2022 is 37 – or nearly four deaths a year – [according to NHTSA](#). The administration told CNN it could not immediately say how many of the 37 were killed by a vehicle illegally passing or failing to stop for a school bus.

NHTSA said it does not have a count of students – like Alexandra – who are injured, but not killed, by vehicles that authorities said failed to stop for a school bus.

Beeber also has argued the cameras often flag drivers for violations that, while technically violating the law, pose no dangers to children. In 2023 written testimony to the Pennsylvania State Senate Transportation Committee, he said an examination of violation footage from programs in Pennsylvania found “a significant percentage of infractions occur immediately upon the deployment or retraction of the stop arm – either before children disembark or after they have safely boarded the bus.”

BusPatrol

“While the offenses technically violate the letter of the law, they often pose minimal danger to schoolchildren getting on or off the bus,” he wrote.

But the National Transportation Safety Board, in a [report](#) on the 2018 deaths of the three Indiana children, recommended that every state allows stop-arm cameras on buses, citing early studies that it said might indicate reductions in illegal bus passing over time in certain communities using them. Twenty-seven states currently [allow](#) stop-arm [cameras](#) on school buses.

NHTSA, for its part, [says](#) the effectiveness of camera programs in reducing illegal bus passing “has not been widely studied.” A 2021 NHTSA [study](#) of three school districts using the cameras concluded that, although it “did not find clear evidence” the cameras

are effective in reducing illegal passing, such “programs may be effective.” It urged more research.

In Florida, days before the Miami-Dade County school district agreed to implement a stop-arm camera program, a school board member said the cameras would give students “an extra degree of protection,” and the potential for kids to be hit by bus-passing cars was reason enough.

“In my district, (bus-passing) is certainly a problem,” Danny Espino [said during a school board meeting](#). “It’s not just people passing on the opposite side of the street. It’s people passing on the same side of the street, honking at people, going around cars that are legally stopped. Frankly, I’m surprised and thank God that we do not have more incidents of vehicles striking children as they get on and off the bus.”

BusPatrol

Florida is one of the 27 states that allow stop-arm cameras, having passed its law in 2023. It didn’t take long for drivers in Miami-Dade County, home to one of the country’s [largest school districts](#) by enrollment, to experience the change.

## **Are fines a money grab or deterrent?**

As of December 16, BusPatrol’s cameras had led to more than 121,000 citations since the start of the school year in August, according to the Miami-Dade Sheriff’s Office. That works out to more than 1,500 citations for each school day.

“Sometimes people just unfortunately have to get hit in the wallet a little bit to make sure that they’re not driving recklessly,” Randazzo told CNN.

Beeber questions whether that many drivers really broke the law.

“It’s impossible for there to be that many horrible drivers that don’t care about children’s safety and simply willfully blow past school buses,” Beeber said. “There must be something else happening here, and this is the problem with automated enforcement, which is, they never look any further. They just churn the tickets. They don’t look at it and say, ‘Why are all these happening?’”

As for the fines: Florida [law](#) stipulates that illegally passing a stopped school bus carries a minimum penalty of \$225 if caught by a stop-arm camera (\$265 if not). In that state, fines from violations caught by stop-arm cameras must go to the school district where the violation happened, and [must be used](#) for initiatives related to student transportation and safety – including costs associated with stop-arm camera programs.

In Miami-Dade County, assuming a minimum of \$225 per citation, the more than 145,000 citations issued this school year would yield more than \$32.6 million if all were paid.

With all of its partners, BusPatrol covers the cost of installing and maintaining the cameras, the company says. After that, payment arrangements to BusPatrol vary by district.



The cameras are attached to the school bus to show multiple angles.  
Steve Pfof/Newsday RM/Getty Images

In Miami-Dade County, BusPatrol gets 70% of the collected money and the school district retains 30%, the company said. Over time, as BusPatrol recoups its initial investment, the revenue split shifts toward the school district, the company said, without specifying how much it would shift.

In Florida's Hillsborough County, BusPatrol has a different financial arrangement. The company said it receives a monthly fee from the school district for each school bus fitted with a camera. The fees range between \$200 to \$500, depending on the number of cameras installed. The company said it outfitted around 1,000 buses with cameras.

The company would not say how much revenue it has generated in the past year. One of BusPatrol's contracts is with Suffolk County on New York's Long Island. In 2022 and 2023, the first two years BusPatrol's cameras were operational, the county generated about \$45 million in fines from drivers, according to Michael Martino, spokesperson for the county's executive. BusPatrol netted 45% of that per its contract, earning \$20 million, Martino said.

Beeber says the service is a money grab.

“If somebody is willfully passing the school bus and almost hit somebody or put somebody in danger, then that type of fine is appropriate. But that is not what these camera systems capture,” he said.

## **Some drivers allege cameras can lead to incorrect citations**

A Miami resident told CNN he believes he was erroneously flagged for a bus-passing violation through stop-arm camera footage – and that the footage itself should prove him correct.

Joe Yap said he appealed his \$225 citation, which stems from a BusPatrol stop-arm camera recording showing his vehicle went by a school bus in Miami on the afternoon of October 4.

He provided CNN with a copy of his citation, which includes a link to a video of the alleged infraction. The video, Yap says, shows the bus still moving while he was in the process of passing it. The stop arm is extending as Yap drives by in a white sedan, the video shows.

AlertBus/BusPatrol

Yap said he remembers passing the bus, but insisted the bus did not have any flashing lights on.

“I thought nothing of it until a few weeks later when I received” a notice of violation from the Miami-Dade Police Department – which became the Miami-Dade Sheriff’s Office this month – in the mail, he said.

“I’m innocent,” he said, adding that when he passed “there was no yellow flashing or red flashing light.”

When CNN asked BusPatrol about Yap’s citation, the company said last Tuesday the citation had been voided. The company did not answer follow-up questions relating to why the citation was voided, who voided it, and when.

The Miami-Dade County Sheriff’s Office said Thursday that Yap’s citation was voided after a secondary review and internal investigation.

Fines for drivers who are captured on camera illegally passing a school bus and vary by state, and ranged from \$100 to \$1,000 as of April 1, 2022, according to the [National Highway Transportation Safety Administration](#).

“What we are seeing especially with the automated systems is it’s exposing the fact that a lot of violations occur,” said Beeber, who did not see the video connected to Yap’s citation of Yap’s alleged infraction. “Most of them are minor. Most of them are technical.”

BusPatrol said less than 2.5% of citations involving its cameras in South Florida have been appealed.

Drivers in other cities have alleged stop-arm camera footage can lead to incorrect citations.

In Suffolk County, New York, a comptroller’s [audit](#) of the county’s program with BusPatrol found that of the more than 200,000 citations mailed from September 2020 through 2022, more than 14,800 or about 7.35% were contested by the vehicle’s owner, leading to court hearings for 7,038 citations. Of the citations that drew a court hearing, nearly a quarter (1,597) were dismissed, the audit found.

Many of the dismissals happened because “of insufficient warning being provided to the motorist in advance” of the stop arm and flashing red lights being activated, the report said.

Judges generally believed the flashing of yellow lights for several seconds would have been sufficient warning, the report said.

The report called for changes to how the company reviews alleged violations before sending them to law enforcement. Yet it also said citation and collection data indicated the program “started to result in increased public awareness and improved driving behavior around school bus stops” in the county from 2021 to 2022.

Captured violations dropped from more than 85,600 from May through December 2021 to more than 68,500 during the same period in 2022, the report said. Captured violations also dropped from more than 49,400 during the first quarter of 2021 to more than 28,800 during the last quarter of 2022, according to the report.

Asked by CNN about the audit’s call for changes in the citation review process, the company said: “BusPatrol is in constant communication with our government partners, and supports any changes a local government we serve wishes to make to their citation review process in order to better serve the unique dynamics in their respective community.”

In Naples, the bus that Alexandra Ramos approached was equipped with a camera not affiliated with BusPatrol.

Though the camera’s presence did not prevent Alexandra from being struck and injured, her family hopes its story helps drivers think about safety when they approach a school bus.

“They need to stop and follow the rules,” her mother said. “They need to remember that the signs (on buses) are for the lives of our kids.”

As for BusPatrol, it continues to expand. The company says Florida’s Broward County, where the school district is [one of the country’s 10 largest by enrollment](#), and which is adjacent to Miami-Dade, is expected to sign a contract with BusPatrol this year.