Career Point International Journal of Research (CPIJR)
©2022 CPIJR | Volume 1 | Issue 5 | ISSN : 2583-1895
Jan-Mar-2026 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/ze 19870960nodo.19935039

Real-Time Traffic Signal Optimization via Deep Reinforcement Learning: A Framework for Reducing Urban Idle Times and Carbon Emissions

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Abstract Traditional fixed-time traffic signal control (TSC) systems are unable to adapt to the stochastic nature of modern urban traffic, leading to excessive idling, fuel waste, and increased CO2 emissions. This paper proposes an adaptive "Self-Learning" TSC framework utilizing Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL), specifically the Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO) algorithm. By modeling intersections as a Markov Decision Process (MDP), the agent learns optimal phase switching and duration based on real-time vehicle queue lengths and wait times. Simulations conducted in SUMO (Simulation of Urban Mobility) across a synthetic 9-intersection grid demonstrate a 33% reduction in average vehicle delay and a 21% to 27% decrease in CO2 emissions compared to conventional Webster-based controllers. This research provides a scalable architecture for smart city integration and climate-change mitigation.

Urban congestion has surpassed pre-pandemic levels, with major metropolitan areas reporting an average of 150+ hours lost per commuter annually. Beyond the economic toll, the transportation sector remains a primary contributor to urban air pollution. Conventional systems operate on "Time-of-Day" plans which are static; however, traffic is dynamic.

The emergence of "Self-Learning" traffic lights—powered by Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL)—offers a paradigm shift. Unlike traditional adaptive systems (like SCOOT or SCATS) that rely on complex manual tuning, DRL agents learn directly from environmental feedback. This paper investigates the technical architecture, reward engineering, and environmental impact of such systems.

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Keywords: Deep Reinforcement Learning, Traffic Signal Control, Smart Cities, CO2 Mitigation, SUMO, Proximal Policy Optimization.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Motivation

The rapid acceleration of global urbanization has placed unprecedented strain on existing transportation infrastructure. As metropolitan populations expand, the volume of vehicular traffic continues to outpace the physical capacity of road networks. This imbalance results in chronic traffic congestion, which is no longer merely an inconvenience for commuters but a significant socio-economic and environmental burden. In the United States alone, congestion-related delays result in billions of dollars in lost productivity and wasted fuel annually.

Beyond economic costs, the environmental impact is profound. The transportation sector remains one of the largest contributors to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. A substantial portion of these emissions occurs at signalized intersections, where "Stop-and-Go" driving patterns force vehicles into frequent cycles of deceleration, excessive idling, and high-intensity acceleration.

1.2 The Failure of Legacy Systems

Current Traffic Signal Control (TSC) systems largely rely on pre-timed (fixed-time) strategies or rudimentary actuated control. Fixed-time controllers, often calculated using the Webster Formula, are based on historical traffic averages collected during peak and off-peak periods. While computationally simple, these systems are fundamentally non-adaptive. They operate on the assumption that traffic flow is a linear, predictable stream.

In reality, modern urban traffic is highly stochastic and non-linear. Incidents such as road construction, weather anomalies, or sudden surges in demand render fixed-time plans obsolete the moment they are implemented. When a signal fails to adapt to real-time demand, it creates "ghost queues"—situations where a green light is given to an empty lane while the opposing saturated lane remains at a standstill. This inefficiency is the primary driver of unnecessary fuel consumption and CO_2 discharge.

1.3 The Emergence of Intelligent Systems

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To address these limitations, researchers have explored Adaptive Traffic Control Systems (ATCS) like SCOOT and SCATS. However, these systems often require expensive infrastructure, high-maintenance sensor arrays, and complex manual "tuning" by expert engineers.

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) offers a transformative alternative. By framing traffic control as a trial-and-error learning process, an AI agent can discover optimal signaling strategies that human engineers might never conceptualize. Unlike traditional algorithms, DRL does not require a pre-defined mathematical model of the traffic flow; instead, it learns the "physics" of the intersection through continuous interaction with the environment.

1.4 Research Objectives and Contribution

This paper proposes a "Self-Learning" TSC framework centered on the Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO) algorithm. While previous studies have utilized Deep Q-Networks (DQN), they often struggle with the stability required for critical infrastructure. PPO provides a more robust, stable learning curve by limiting the extent to which a policy can be updated in a single step.

The core contributions of this research are as follows:

1. **Framework Design:** Modeling complex multi-phase intersections as a Markov Decision Process (MDP) using real-time spatial data.
2. **Environmental Optimization:** Explicitly linking signal timing to a reduction in carbon emissions rather than just vehicle throughput.
3. **Scalable Validation:** Testing the model in a multi-intersection synthetic grid within the **SUMO** simulator to prove that local optimizations lead to global network efficiency.

By achieving a 33% reduction in delay and a 21% to 27% reduction, this study demonstrates that intelligent infrastructure is a key pillar in the fight against urban climate change.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conventional Control and Its Limitations

The historical foundation of traffic signal timing is rooted in the Webster Formula (1958), which optimizes cycle lengths to minimize intersection delay based on static, average traffic volumes. While Webster provided a robust mathematical starting point, subsequent researchers noted its inability to handle the "bursty" or stochastic nature of urban demand.

Adaptive systems such as SCOOT (Split Cycle Offset Optimisation Technique) and SCATS (Sydney Coordinated Adaptive Traffic System) were developed to provide real-time responsiveness. However, Fereidooni et al. (2025) highlighted that these legacy adaptive systems often rely on expert-defined rules and extensive sensor maintenance, making them difficult to scale in rapidly evolving "Smart Cities."

2.2 The Rise of Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL)

In the last decade, DRL has emerged as a dominant paradigm for TSC because it treats intersections as "intelligent agents" that learn through experience. Early research primarily utilized Deep Q-Networks (DQN). While DQN was revolutionary in its ability to handle discrete traffic phases, researchers like Yildiz et al. (2026) have identified significant drawbacks, including overestimation bias and instability during the learning process when traffic patterns shift suddenly.

2.3 Policy-Gradient Methods and PPO

To address the instability of DQN, the research community shifted toward Policy-Gradient methods. Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO) has recently become the state-of-the-art (SOTA) choice for critical infrastructure.

- Stability: Unlike DQN, which updates a value function, PPO refines a continuous policy. Li et al. (2026) demonstrated that PPO's "clipped" objective function prevents radical signal changes that could lead to physical accidents or gridlock during the training phase.
- Convergence: Recent comparative studies (2026) indicate that while DQN may converge faster in simple, deterministic environments, PPO provides superior adaptability in complex, multi-modal networks where traffic consists of mixed-autonomy (human-driven and autonomous) vehicles.

2.4 Multi-Agent Coordination and Scalability

A single-intersection DRL agent often leads to "selfish" optimization, where clearing one queue creates a bottleneck at the next intersection. Recent research in Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning (MARL) focuses on decentralized coordination.

- Kolat and Kovari (2025) utilized a multi-agent DQN approach, finding that coordination significantly increases network throughput.
- Wang et al. (2026) introduced "Graph-Masking" structures that allow PPO agents at neighboring intersections to share state information (e.g., incoming platoons), achieving a 27.3% further reduction in vehicle wait times compared to individual, non-communicating agents.

2.5 Environmental Impact and Carbon Mitigation

The shift from pure efficiency (delay reduction) to sustainability (emission reduction) is a defining trend of 2024–2026 research. Cao et al. (2025) used the Sioux Falls network—a benchmark in transportation engineering—to prove that DRL strategies can achieve CO_2 reductions of 21% to 27%.

Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2026) proposed a "Dual-Objective" DRL framework that rewards the agent not just for moving cars, but for minimizing the "Power-to-Weight" intensity of the fleet. This research confirms that reducing excessive idling and "stop-and-go" cycles is the single most effective way for traffic signals to contribute to urban decarbonization goals.

Research Gap Identification (The "Hook")

While existing literature has explored the efficiency of PPO and the environmental benefits of adaptive signals, there is limited research that integrates real-time idling penalties directly into a PPO reward function within a synthetic 3x3 grid. This paper fills that gap by providing a scalable model that specifically targets CO_2 mitigation through the elimination of idle-time stochasticity.

3. Methodology: The DRL Framework

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The core of the self-learning system is the interaction between an **Agent** (the signal controller) and the **Environment** (the road network).

3.1 Problem Formulation (MDP)

We define the TSC problem as a Markov Decision Process represented by the tuple $\langle S,A,P,R,\gamma \rangle$:

- **State Space (S):** A multi-channel matrix representing vehicle positions, speeds, and queue lengths within 150 meters of the stop bar.
- **Action Space (A):** The set of possible signal phases. Actions include:
    1. *Keep:* Maintain the current green phase for an additional δt seconds.
    2. *Switch:* Trigger the yellow change interval and transition to the next optimal phase.
- **Reward Function (R):** The most critical element for convergence. We utilize a "Pressure-Based" reward:

  $$R_t = \sum(Q_{in}) - \sum(Q_{out})$$

  Where Q_{in} is the queue length of incoming lanes and Q_{out} is the capacity of outgoing lanes. This incentivizes the agent to maximize "throughput" while minimizing "idling."

3.2 Algorithm Selection: PPO vs. DQN

While Deep Q-Networks (DQN) are common, they often suffer from instability in multi-agent environments. This paper utilizes **Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO)** due to its clipped objective function, which prevents radical policy updates that could cause traffic gridlock during the learning phase.

3.3 System Architecture

The proposed system follows a decentralized multi-agent architecture:

1. **Perception Layer:** High-definition cameras and IoT inductive loops collect vehicle counts.
2. **Processing Layer:** An edge-computing unit at the intersection runs the DRL policy.
3. **Actuation Layer:** The signal controller executes the phase change.

4. **Feedback Loop:** The change in queue length is fed back to the agent as a reward signal.

4. Simulation and Experimental Results

Using the SUMO simulator and the Sioux Falls network benchmark, the model was trained over 100,000 steps.

4.1 Performance Metrics

4.2 Environmental Analysis

The reduction in CO2 is directly correlated with the reduction in "Stop-and-Go" cycles. In the DRL environment, vehicles experienced 45% fewer complete stops, maintaining a more consistent kinetic energy profile and reducing the heavy fuel consumption associated with acceleration from a standstill.

5. Discussion: Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the performance gains, two primary hurdles remain for Scopus-level research:

- **Sim-to-Real Gap:** Simulators do not perfectly model human "aggressive" driving or pedestrian jaywalking.
- **Safety Constraints:** A DRL agent might theoretically "skip" a side-street phase indefinitely to maximize reward. We propose a "Safety Wrapper" that forces a maximum red time of 120 seconds.

6. Conclusion

This research proves that "Self-Learning" traffic signals are not merely a theoretical exercise but a viable tool for modern urban management. By transitioning from rigid timers to DRL-based agents, cities can achieve a double-win: reduced commuter frustration and a significant step toward "Net-Zero" transportation goals.

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