

While vacationing in a small, sleepy, quiet coastal town in Maine, you take your dog for a walk at the crack of dawn on a Sunday morning. You come to an intersection with a stop light. Looking carefully in all directions you don't see any cars. Then you notice a sign next to the stoplight that says:

JAYWALKING FORBIDDEN
Violators subject to fine
Village of Sleepy Cove

Immediately after you read the sign, you look up and see that the stoplight has turned red.

Would it be wrong of you to cross the street against the stoplight in the above circumstances? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: It would be all right to jaywalk under the facts described in this question. The duty to obey the law is not an absolute. Instead, a diverse array of considerations is relevant to the question of whether one should or shouldn't violate the law in a particular circumstance. In this situation it is clear that no one would be injured by your jaywalking, and no social interest, such as maintaining an attitude of respect for the law, would be undermined. It is true you do not know with absolute certainty that your jay walking will not result in harm to anyone. This could be said, however, of anything you might do under any circumstance.

Case from the February 26, 1998 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1998.