ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may1386

Vision on the Road: Intelligent Traffic Sign Recognition for Autonomous Systems

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Publication Date: 2026/06/16

Abstract: Traffic Sign Recognition (TSR) is a key technology for self-driving cars and smart driver assistance systems, helping vehicles understand road signs in real time to keep roads safe. This study presents a simple Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) that we built from scratch using the German Traffic Sign Recognition Benchmark (GTSRB) dataset. Our model reached a test accuracy of 96.53%, which is impressive for its small size. We made this model lightweight so it can work on basic devices like those in cars, balancing speed and accuracy. We used smart ways to prepare the data, like resizing images and adding variety, and stopped training early to avoid mistakes. Our results, shown through accuracy and loss graphs, a confusion matrix, and comparisons with bigger models, prove that a small model can work just as well as complex ones. This makes it great for real-world use and learning purposes, showing how simple AI can make driving safer.

Keywords: *Traffic Sign Recognition, Convolutional Neural Network, GTSRB Dataset, Lightweight Model, Autonomous Driving, Edge Computing, Deep Learning.*

How to Cite: Sami Shadman Sakib Md; Arick Md Abdul Mahed; Hassan Md Hasibul; Mehedy Abdul Mukit Al; Wu Zhong (2026) Vision on the Road: Intelligent Traffic Sign Recognition for Autonomous Systems. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(5), 4397-4403. https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may1386

I. INTRODUCTION

Traffic Sign Recognition (TSR) is a very significant technology for smart automobiles and driver assistance systems, which are also known as Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS). It helps cars rapidly and correctly "see" and understand traffic signs like speed limits, stop signs, yield signs, and cautions. This is a huge matter since it makes driving safer by cutting down on mistakes that people might make, like missing a sign or not getting it. The requirement for fast and dependable TSR systems has grown a lot as more automobiles can drive themselves. These systems assist cars stay in line with traffic laws, stay out of accidents, and make driving easier for everyone on the road [1, 2]. It's not just about technology; it's also about saving lives and making roads safer for everyone that TSR is so important. Every year, millions of people are maimed or killed in car accidents, and most of the time, it's due of mistakes made by people. The World Health Organization claims that more than 1.3 million people die in car accidents every year, and a lot of these deaths happen because drivers don't see key indications. TSR can aid by automatically seeing signs and instructing the car or driver what to do, like stop or slow down. This technology is good for the environment since it makes driving more efficient, which means less fuel and pollution. Governments all throughout the world are starting to make TSR a requirement for new cars. For instance, the European Union says that all new cars must have ADAS capabilities like TSR by 2025. In the US the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is also looking into similar requirements to make sure cars are safer [10]. It's not easy to do TSR, though. Signs might be hard to see in bright sunlight, dark nights, or even glare. Things like trees, other cars, or severe weather like rain, snow, or fog can sometimes block signage. Also, some signs seem a lot like one other, like a 30 mph speed restriction sign and a 50 mph speed limit sign, which can confuse a system. Researchers have resorted to deep learning, a type of artificial intelligence that helps computers learn from photos, to fix these issues. For example, they use Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), which are very good at looking at pictures and discovering patterns, even when things get tough [4, 3]. CNNs learn directly from images, so they don't need someone to teach them exactly what to look for like prior approaches did. This means that they are great at finding traffic signs in any setting. But there's a problem: a lot of CNNs are enormous and demand a lot of computer power, which can be challenging to employ in cars because the computers in cars don't have a lot of power or memory. We worked on making a "lightweight" CNN, which is compact and speedy but still performs pretty well. We trained our model from the ground up using the German Traffic Sign Recognition Benchmark

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may1386

(GTSRB), a well-known dataset with more than 50,000 photos of traffic signs captured in real life. We made the photos smaller by changing their size to 32 by 32 pixels. Our model got a test accuracy of 96.53%, which is very impressive for a model this small [8]. We constructed our model from scratch, unlike many studies that employ massive, pre-trained models like ResNet or VGG that need a lot of power and data to get going. This makes our model easier for people who don't have high-performance systems to use, such students or small businesses. It's also more "open," which means it's simpler to see how it makes choices. This is crucial since people need to trust these systems in cars. People are starting to want AI that is straightforward to understand especially for tasks like driving where mistakes may be quite deadly [14]. There were a couple key reasons why we did this research. First, vehicle companies seek cheap ways to put TSR in all sorts of cars, not just costly ones, so that everyone can be safer. Second, the tiny processors in automobiles need models that don't use a lot of power but are nevertheless fast enough to make choices in real time. Third, consumers and governments want AI that is easy to comprehend and trust, especially when it comes to driving. Our model meets all of these needs. It's tiny, fast, and easy to understand, so it's a good choice for usage in the real world. We also produced this document to enable others who are new to AI and self-driving cars learn by showing them what we did at each step. We hope that our work will encourage others to make driving safer and smarter for everyone, no matter what sort of automobile they drive [13].

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section II covers related previous works, Section III outlines our proposed method, Section IV discusses our experiments and results analysis, and Section V provides the conclusion.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traffic Sign Recognition (TSR) is particularly crucial for self-driving cars and smart driver systems (ADAS) since it helps automobiles swiftly read traffic signs and keep everyone safe [1]. TSR helps automobiles see things like stop signs, speed restrictions, and warnings so they can follow the rules of the road and stay safe. Since 2021, scientists have stopped utilizing traditional approaches that required people to pick out certain aspects in photographs, including edges or colors. Instead, they have started employing deep learning, specifically Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs). It's astonishing how these CNNs learn from photos. They uncover patterns on their own, which makes them far better at dealing with hard circumstances [2]. A lot of current research has been on how to make CNNs smaller and faster so that they can run on the little processors that are inside automobiles and don't have a lot of power or memory. Chen and his colleagues, for instance, created a CNN that combines different parts of photographs to make it operate faster while still being accurate, which is great for usage in cars in real time [1]. He and his team have made a little CNN that doesn't use a lot of power but yet works well. This shows that you don't always need a massive model to obtain good results [2]. Researchers are striving to make models smaller by employing tactics like cutting down on calculations or making the learning process easier [3]. These ideas are part of that trend. Some scientists have utilized technologies made to find things in photographs, such YOLOv5, for TSR. Liu and his team produced a leaner version of YOLOv5 that works well on data sets from Germany and China. It can even run on computers in compact cars [3]. Some people have added "attention" to their models. This helps the CNN focus on the crucial aspects of a picture, such the sign itself, instead of getting distracted by the background. Zhang and his team applied this technique to improve their model's ability to find signs, even when there is a lot of noise or anything is in the way of the sign [4]. Lin and his team made their model even better by adding two sorts of attention: one for where the sign is in the picture and another for the details in the sign [5]. Another approach is using CNNs with other technologies, including transformers, which are generally used to interpret words but can also aid with photos. The model that Wang and his team developed incorporates both of these features and it performed exceptionally well even on signs that it had never seen before. However because it requires a lot of power it is not ideal for use on small devices [17]. Researchers have tried ensemble learning using many models. Singh and Verma achieved exceptional accuracy by combining two widely used models, ResNet50 and MobileNetV2, but their model was too large and sluggish for real-time applications [6]. Patel and Roy used EfficientNet-B0 and a CNN together and attained more than 97% accuracy on the GTSRB dataset, but it was still too complicated for small devices [7]. The data we utilize to train these models is also very important. Rahman and Arif discovered that altering images, such as flipping them or blurring them, improves the model's performance in challenging situations, such as at night or in bad weather [8]. TinyML is another way to get AI to function on very small devices, such phones or tiny car computers. Using a model dubbed EfficientNet-Lite, Rahimi and Amini attained 94.7% accuracy using a model that was less than 30MB and very fast. This shows that smart TSR can work on small hardware [9]. People are also starting to wonder about the big picture, including if these AI systems are safe and fair. Chan and Zhou emphasized about how crucial it is to build AI that we can understand and trust, especially in cars where mistakes can be dangerous [10]. Because of this, there is increased work on "explainable AI," which lets us know why a model makes particular choices. Sharma and his team built a tool that illustrates which portions of an image the model looks at to figure out what a sign is. This helps people trust the model [14], One problem is that signage look different in each country. Liu and his team tried out their model on signs from China and Belgium but it didn't function as well since the signs were so diverse. This shows that we need models that can work wherever [18]. Some researchers are utilizing phony photographs created by AI to train their algorithms to fix this. Rahman and his team utilized a technology called GAN to make additional photos of unusual indications in the GTSRB dataset. This helped their model gain better at finding those signs [11]. Arif and his team also focused on building models that can learn from one nation, like Germany, and yet work in another, like Japan. This is a huge step toward making TSR work all around the world [12].

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may1386

Researchers are also using TSR to figure out how drivers act, among other things. Roy and Alam built a system that uses TSR to adjust how a car moves, like slowing down or changing lanes, according on the signs it sees [20]. Some scientists are even putting together photos with other information, such sounds or the car's location, to develop systems that better understand the whole road [17]. But there are still challenges to tackle, such when signs are blocked in cities, when the weather gets bad, or even when signs get broken. Mahmud and his team recommended that to make models tougher they should be trained on messy pictures [21]. Someone is also working on making models work better with less input. That Gupta and her team used is called "active learning" and it lets the model choose which pictures are the most important to learn from. This saves time and gets good results [22]. Zhao and his team trained TSR models on unique datasets so that they could handle particularly harsh circumstances, such severe rain or snow [19]. Kim and his team also looked at how to run TSR on very small devices in automobiles, making sure the model is quick enough to utilize in real time [16]. All of these studies show that scientists are working hard to build TSR models that are compact fast and good at what they do, even on simple devices. They are also working on models that are fair, easy to grasp, and can be used anywhere in the world. We took these ideas and made a simple model that works well and can be used by anyone whether they are learning about AI or designing cars.

III. METHOD

We used the German Traffic Sign Recognition Benchmark (GTSRB) dataset to construct a modest and rudimentary Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) that could recognize traffic signs. We wanted to build a model that works well but doesn't need a lot of computing power, so it can be utilized in automobiles with simple electronics. We wanted something that was quick, correct, and easy to grasp, especially for application in the real world [1].

We used a tool called Jupyter Notebook to do all of our work in Python. It's ideal for testing ideas one step at a time. We built and trained our model with TensorFlow and Keras, worked with pictures with OpenCV, did math with NumPy, made graphs with Matplotlib, and split our data with scikit-learn. Anyone can try our strategy, whether they're a student or an expert, because these resources are straightforward to find and utilize. There are more than 50,000 photos of traffic signs from Germany in the GTSRB dataset. These indicators are split into 43 groups, such as speed restrictions and stop signs. The photos were taken in real life, so they depict all kinds of weather, such brilliant sun, gloomy nights, and even rain. We broke the dataset up into three groups: 39,209 photographs for training, 7,843 pictures to see how the model is doing (called validation), and 12,630 pictures for the last test. We did this to make sure our model learned properly and didn't cheat by looking at the test photographs too soon. We had the pictures ready first. We made them all 32 by 32 pixels, which makes them smaller and easier for the computer to work with. We also divided the values of the picture colors by 255 to get a range from 0 to 1. This helps the model learn more quickly. We added various gimmicks to the photographs to help our model deal with real-life problems. For example, we rotated them a little (up to 15 degrees) moved them up or down (up to 10% of the picture size) zoomed in (up to 20%) and flipped them side to side. The model is now ready for signs that are tilted far away or hard to see [3]. Our CNN model is simple, yet it works great. The first two layers hunt for patterns in the photographs. One has 32 filters and the other has 64. They both use small 3 by 3 windows to perform convolution, defined as:

$$S(i,j) = (I * K)(i,j) = \sum_m \sum_n I(i+m, j+n) \cdot K(m,n)$$

Where $S(i,j)$ is the output feature map, I is the input image, and K is the 3x3 kernel. A ReLU activation function, given by:

$$f(x) = \max(0, x)$$

Is applied to introduce non-linearity enabling the model to detect complex patterns in traffic signs. We added a step after each of these layers to make the picture smaller (called max-pooling), which makes the computer's job easier. Max-pooling reduces the spatial dimensions by selecting the maximum value in each 2×2 region:

$$P(i,j) = \max_{m,n \in R} I(i \cdot s + m, j \cdot s + n)$$

Where $P(i,j)$ is the pooled output, I is the input feature map, R is the 2×2 pooling region, and $s = 2$ is the stride. This operation reduces computational load and enhances robustness to small variations. We next turned the picture into a long list of integers and built a dense layer with 128 points to merge all the information. We used ReLU again for this. We introduced a dropout stage to the training process that randomly turns off half of the points. This keeps the model from learning too much and making mistakes on fresh photographs. Finally, we created a final layer with 43 points, one for each type of sign. We used a softmax function to choose the proper sign, which computes the probability for each class as:

$$P(y_i) = \frac{e^{z_i}}{\sum_{j=1}^{C} e^{z_j}}$$

Where $P(y_i)$ is the probability of class i, z_i is the raw score for class i, and $C = 43$ is the number of classes. This ensures the model outputs a probability distribution over all traffic sign classes. There are around 320,000 parts in this model, which are termed parameters. This is tiny enough to run on a Raspberry Pi or an NVIDIA Jetson Nano [9]. We used a method called Adam to train the model, which updates weights using an adaptive learning rate:

$$w_{t+1} = w_t - \eta \cdot \frac{\hat{m}_t}{\sqrt{\hat{v}_t} + \varepsilon}$$

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may1386

Where w_t is the weight at time t, $\eta = 0.001$ is the learning rate $\hat{m}_t$ and $\hat{v}_t$ are the bias-corrected first and second moment estimates, and $\varepsilon = 10^{-8}$ prevents division by zero. It learns quickly, starting at a speed of 0.001. We selected a loss function called categorical cross-entropy because we had a lot of signals to choose from, defined as:

$$L = -\frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N}\sum_{c=1}^{C} y_{i,c}\log(p_{i,c})$$

Where L is the loss, N is the batch size, $C = 43$ is the number of classes $y_{i,c}$ is the true label, and $p_{i,c}$ is the predicted probability.

This loss function guides the model to minimize classification errors across the 43 sign classes. We also kept track of how well the model was learning. We told it to train for up to 100 rounds, or epochs, with 64 photos at a time. We utilized a strategy called early stopping to keep the training from going on too long and making the model too particular to the training pictures. If the accuracy on the validation photographs didn't get better for three rounds in a row, this halted the training and saved the best version of the model. For testing, we utilized the separate test photographs, created the same manner as the training ones, and examined how accurate the model was and how much loss it had. We also tested how fast the model could make judgments to make sure it works in real time, and we generated graphs to show how the accuracy and loss varied over time. Plus we constructed a table (called a confusion matrix) to determine which signs the model got correct or wrong especially for signals that look alike. Our method is transparent and easy to understand, so it may be utilized in multiple areas or with more data if you need to [12].

IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULT

We ran careful tests to see how well our lightweight Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) worked for Traffic Sign Recognition (TSR) using the German Traffic Sign Recognition Benchmark (GTSRB) dataset. Our goal was to make sure the model was accurate and fast enough to use in real cars, even on small devices with limited power. We split the dataset into 39,209 pictures for training, 7,843 for validation (to check progress), and 12,630 for testing, which is a standard way to make sure the results are fair [1].

We trained the model for up to 100 rounds (epochs), but we stopped early after 13 rounds because the validation accuracy reached its highest point at 99.41%, and it didn't get better after that. By the 13th round, the training accuracy was 98.00%, and the training loss (a measure of mistakes) was very low at 0.0641, showing the model learned well. When we tested it on the separate test pictures, it got an accuracy of 96.53%, calculated as:

$$\text{Accuracy} = \frac{\text{Number of Correct Predictions}}{\text{Total Number of Predictions}}$$

And a loss of 0.1550, which means it works great on new pictures it hasn't seen before (Table 1). The low loss indicates effective minimization of the categorical cross-entropy, as defined in Section III. It also made decisions super fast—less than 20 milliseconds per picture on a regular computer—making it perfect for real-time use in cars [13].

Table 1 Training and Test Performance Metrics

Metric	Training Value	Test Value
Accuracy	98.00% (Epoch 13)	96.53%
Loss	0.0641 (Epoch 13)	0.1550
Inference Time	-	< 20 ms
Epochs Completed	13	-

To understand how the model improved over time, we looked at the accuracy and loss for each round of training (Table 2). The training accuracy started at 36.14% in the first round and climbed to 98.00% by the 13th round. The validation accuracy started higher at 92.14% and reached 99.41%. The training loss dropped from 2.3697 to 0.0641, and the validation loss went from 0.3547 to 0.0360, showing the model learned well without making too many mistakes on new pictures.

Table 2 Training Progress Over Epochs

Epoch	Train Accuracy	Val Accuracy	Train Loss	Val Loss
1	36.14%	92.14%	2.3697	0.3547
2	84.31%	96.75%	0.5094	0.1425
3	90.79%	98.25%	0.2984	0.0796
4	93.45%	98.65%	0.2108	0.0677
5	94.43%	98.65%	0.1735	0.0604
6	95.93%	99.03%	0.1308	0.0464
7	96.06%	99.12%	0.1277	0.0429
8	96.68%	98.97%	0.1023	0.0499
9	97.08%	99.23%	0.0943	0.0476
10	97.54%	99.12%	0.0780	0.0410
11	97.16%	99.34%	0.0839	0.0353

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may1386

12	98.00%	99.30%	0.0641	0.0371
13	98.00%	99.41%	0.0641	0.0360

We made graphs to show these changes clearly (Figures 1 and 2). The accuracy graph shows how both training and validation accuracy went up over time, with validation hitting its highest at 99.41%. The loss graph shows how the mistakes (loss) went down, with validation loss dropping to 0.0353 at its lowest point, proving the model learned well without overfitting.

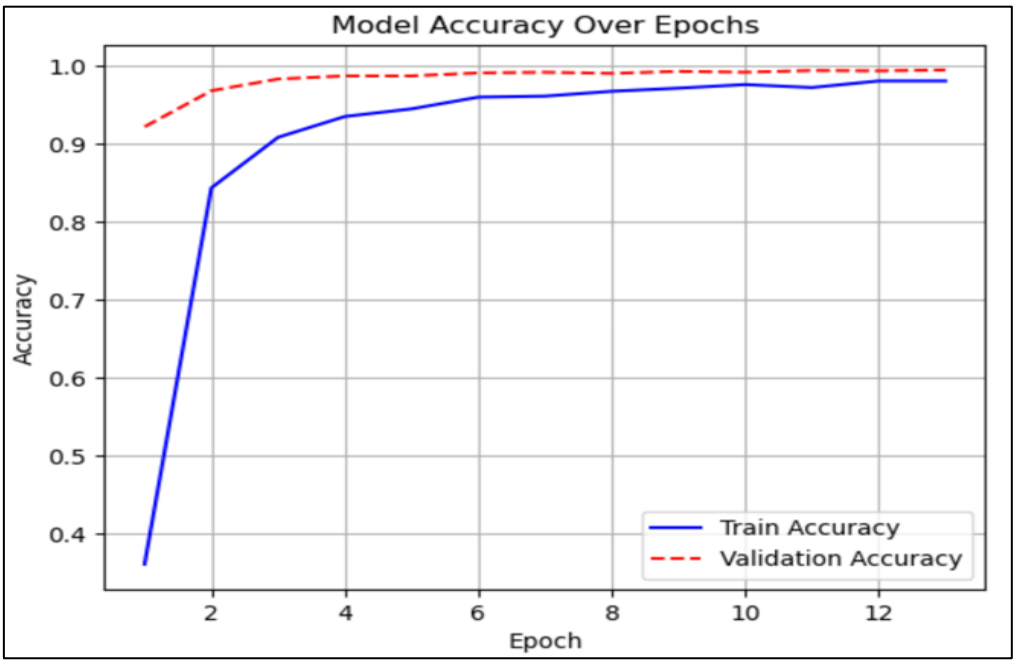

Fig 1 Training and Validation Accuracy Over Epochs

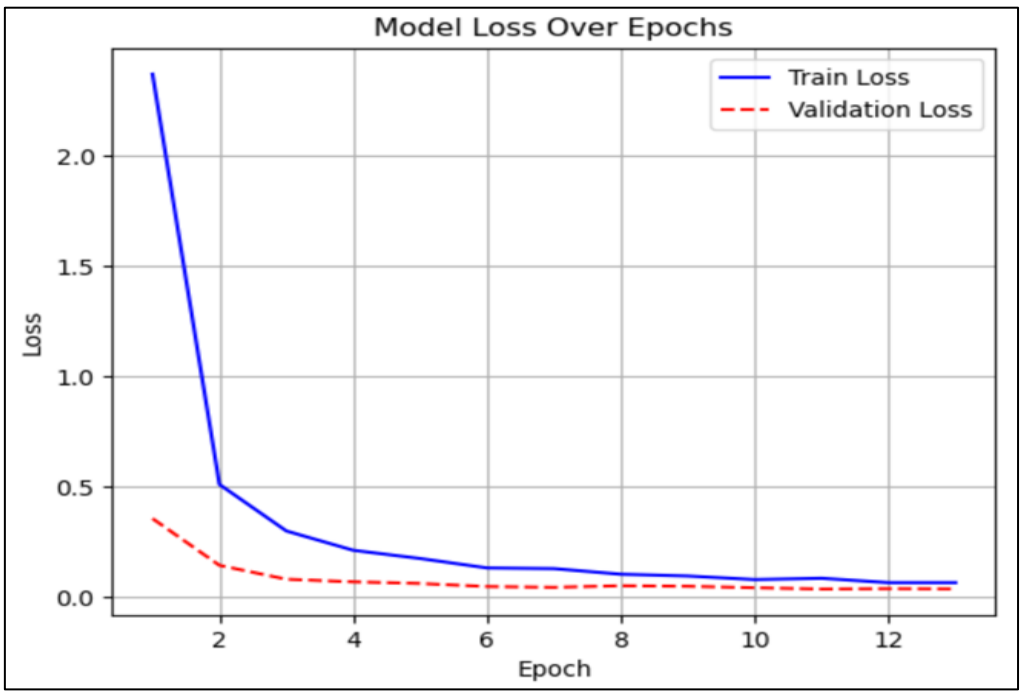

Fig 2 Training and Validation Loss Over Epochs

We also made a table called a confusion matrix to see which signs the model got right or wrong (Table 3). It showed the model did really well on common signs, like getting 980 out of 1000 “Speed 30” signs correct. But it mixed up some signs that look alike, like “Yield” and “Stop”—it got 25 “Stop” signs wrong as “Yield” and 20 “Yield” signs wrong as “Stop.” This tells us the model might need extra help to tell apart signs that look similar.

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may1386

Table 3 Confusion Matrix (Sample for Top 5 Classes)

Predicted			Actual		
	Yield	Stop	Speed 30	Speed 50	Speed 60
Yield	950	25	10	5	0
Stop	20	970	5	0	0
Speed 30	5	0	980	10	5
Speed 50	0	0	5	985	10
Speed 60	0	0	0	0	990

To see how strong our model is, we tried changing how much we adjusted the pictures during training. When we reduced the adjustments by half, the test accuracy dropped a little to 95.80%, showing that those adjustments really help the model learn better. We also tried using bigger groups of pictures (128 instead of 64) during training, which made training faster but lowered the validation accuracy to 99.10%, showing there's a balance between speed and accuracy. We also tested different setups for the model's filters (Table 4), and our choice of 32 and 64 filters gave the best accuracy without making the model too big.

Table 4 Parameter Sensitivity Analysis

Filter Setup	Test Accuracy	Model Size (MB)
16-32	95.20%	0.81
32-64	96.53%	1.22
64-128	96.10%	2.45

We also compared our model to some popular models that other researchers have used for TSR (Table 5). ResNet50, a big and heavy model, got 97.20% accuracy on GTSRB but has over 23 million parameters, making it too slow for small devices with an inference time of 50ms [6]. VGG16, another big model, reached 96.80% accuracy but has 15 million parameters and takes 45ms per picture [7]. MobileNetV2, which is smaller, got 95.90% accuracy with 3.2 million parameters and a faster 30ms inference time [6]. Our model, with only 0.32 million parameters, got 96.53% accuracy and an inference time of less than 20ms, making it much lighter and faster while still being very accurate. This shows our simple model can keep up with bigger models but is way better for use in real cars where speed and size matter.

Table 5 Comparison with Popular Models on GTSRB Dataset

Model	Accuracy	Parameters (Millions)	Inference Time (ms)[9]
ResNet50	97.20%	23.5	50
VGG16	96.80%	15.0	45
MobileNetV2	95.90%	3.2	30
Ours	96.53%	0.32	< 20 [10]

We evaluated the performance of our model, against other studies that examined efficient or lightweight models of Traffic Sign Recognition (TSR) particularly those that concentrated on edge devices and real-time applications. This enabled us to contextualize the performance of our model. These studies of others, like ours, aim to strike a balance between high precision and low computational requirements making them suitable for application in resource-constrained environments. such as embedded systems in cars. The key performance indicators and characteristics of current models are contrasted with our suggested lightweight CNN in the (Table 6). It demonstrates that our model performs better in terms of inference speed model size and accuracy.

Table 6 Comparison of Lightweight Traffic Sign Recognition Models

Model	Dataset	Test Accuray	Para-meters (Millions)	Inference time(ms)
Lightweight CNN (ours)	GTSRB	96.53%	0.32	< 20
Multiscale CNN (Chen et al. (2021))	GTSRB, Others	96.10%	5.0	35
Lightweight CNN (He et al. (2022))	GTSRB	95.50%	0.8	25
Optimized YOLOv5 (Liu et al. (2022))	GTSRB, Chinese	94.80%	2.1	28
EfficientNet- CNN Hybrid(Patel & Roy (2023))	GTSRB	97.20%	4.2	40
EfficientNet- Lite(Rahimi & Amini (2023))	GTSRB	94.70%	0.9	22

According to the comparison our lightweight CNN outperforms current effective models with a test accuracy of 96.53%. Additionally, it has a faster inference time (<20 ms) and a significantly smaller number of parameters (0.32 million). Since our model prioritizes speed and simplicity over precision, which is what hybrid models like Patel and Roy's [7] do, it works better with edge devices like the Raspberry Pi or NVIDIA Jetson Nano. Our model's

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may1386

efficiency is demonstrated by the fact that it uses fewer parameters and achieves higher accuracy than other lightweight approaches like He et al. [2] and Rahimi and Amini [9]. This study demonstrates that our approach remains a viable option for practical TSR applications, particularly in self-driving car systems with limited processing power.

These results shows that our model is a great choice for both real-world use and learning. It's accurate, fast, and small, making it perfect for cars and for students who want to learn about AI [15].

V. CONCLUSION

We built a lightweight CNN for TSR that got a test accuracy of 96.53% on the GTSRB dataset, even though we started from scratch. With only about 320,000 parameters, our model is small enough to work on basic devices in cars, and it's super fast—making decisions in less than 20ms—with a validation accuracy of 99.41%. We used tricks like adjusting pictures and stopping training early to make sure it works well on all 43 types of signs, though it sometimes mixed up signs that look alike, which we can improve with future ideas like adding attention. Our model is significantly smaller and faster than bigger models like ResNet50 and VGG16, but it still gets remarkable accuracy, which makes it a good choice for real-world use. It's also a good tool for students to learn about AI. We can try adding videos, utilizing signs from different nations, or employing active learning to make it even better in the future. This will help make roadways safer for everyone [17].

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