

Critics claim HPD tried to skew red-light study

Department accused of changing how crashes counted

By BRADLEY OLSON Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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The Houston Police Department tried to influence the outcome of a controversial city-commissioned study by changing how crashes at intersections with red-light cameras were counted, according to documents included in a lawsuit.

HPD's request was refused by the study's authors, however, who concluded the number of accidents at 50 intersections with the cameras had increased, not decreased as city officials expected, documents say.

Attorneys fighting to end Houston's 2-year-old red-light camera program seized on the documents — released after an open records lawsuit they filed against the city — as evidence the study was tainted by a purposefully skewed methodology.

“As in other cities, the red-light camera system in Houston is increasing accidents,” said Randall Kallinen, a lawyer who represents ticketed drivers in court. “This is very dangerous for the public, and we must end the red-light camera experiment.”

City officials and Rice University political science Professor Robert Stein, one of the study's main authors, contend the Houston Police Department's requests were part of an ordinary back-and-forth about how best to examine the efficacy of red-light cameras and were not a conspiracy to deliver false data.

Still, Stein acknowledged that the cameras are not working in Houston as well as he believes they have been shown to work in other cities. The city and critics should be more concerned about why, he said.

“Why are these crashes going up at these intersections?” Stein asked. “Nobody really cares to get at the truth here. Cars are being damaged, people are being injured and a handful of people are dying. ... What I want to know is, why they aren't working in Houston, and what we can do to improve them?”

Red-light cameras have been controversial in Houston since they were installed in September 2006. Critics say the cameras' primary purpose is generating revenue, not reducing accidents. Mayor Bill White has argued that the cameras have made Houston safer, noting that red-light running citywide has gone down 40 percent since the cameras were installed.

The devices photograph license plates of drivers who run red lights, and a city contractor sends the registered owners \$75 tickets in the mail. Seventy cameras installed at 50 intersections have produced more than 400,000 civil citations and more than \$21 million in revenue.

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Decades of study

Researchers have studied the impact of such cameras for decades, but the results are mixed and inconclusive, according to an analysis of numerous studies conducted by The Cochrane Collaboration, an international organization that evaluates medical and public health research.

The Cochrane analysis found only five studies that used statistically sound methodology to examine data from the U.S., Singapore and Australia.

The result was that red-light cameras usually reduce the number of fatal crashes but don't necessarily reduce total collisions.

The Houston study's authors and city officials expected that to be the result here. Instead, the review showed crashes doubled at intersections where at least one camera was installed, although the uptick in collisions happened in the approaching lanes without cameras. At the lanes with cameras, the increase was too slight to be statistically significant, the study's authors found.

According to an e-mail included in the lawsuit, an HPD official asked Stein in April to rule out accidents if they occurred more than 100 feet from the intersection. Kallinen also said that documents he obtained indicated the department attempted to rule out crashes that did not involve a red-light violation. Either of those steps would be more likely to lead to results showing the cameras reduced crashes, Kallinen said.

Stein, whose involvement has been criticized because his wife works for White, said the study's other authors rejected HPD's suggested change because they were using what they believed was the best methodology.

Mayoral spokesman Patrick Trahan said the police had legitimate reasons to consider limiting the crashes that way, as they did not want the study to include collisions that had nothing to do with running red lights or the cameras.

Additional contention

Another aspect of the report also has come under fire. Although the study found that crashes went up at red-light camera intersections, the authors speculated that was only because accidents are going up all over Houston. Collisions at the intersections they studied would have been higher, they reasoned, without the cameras, too.

They did not make that conclusion, however, in a draft report sent to the city in February. They made it only in the final version, released to the public last month, and produced no definitive data proving the underlying theory that crashes are going up in Houston. In fact, according to HPD data cited in the lawsuit documents, accidents have declined every year since 2004.

Stein acknowledged that, but he pointed to Houston-area data kept by the Department of Public Safety that shows crashes have been increasing in Harris County. He said he plans to complete further study on that and other aspects

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of the red-light camera program by August.

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