

Records show “intentional destruction” of dashcams by Chicago cops

By Jeff Lusanne
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In the latest example of criminal police conduct within the Chicago Police Department, records examined by *DNAinfo* show that the widespread lack of audio on police dashboard cameras is due to an intentional campaign of tampering.

This adds a further dimension of cover-up to recent cases of police violence in the city which have sparked ongoing protests. In the case of Laquan McDonald, who was shot 16 times by a CPD officer in 2014, only two of the five vehicles at the scene had working dashcams, and no vehicle had working audio.

The squad car of Officer Jason Van Dyke, who is currently under trial for McDonald's death, offers a remarkable example. A wiring issue from Spring 2014 took three months to fix after it was reported broken. It was finally fixed on June 17, 2014, only to be reported as broken a day later, in what technicians described as “intentional damage.” It was not fixed until October 8, and 12 days later, when Van Dyke shot and killed McDonald, the audio was broken again.

Two other vehicles at the scene of the shooting had cameras that recorded video throughout the month of October but, curiously, did not function properly on the night of the shooting.

Of the 22 police-involved shooting investigations that have been sent to the Cook County State's Attorney's Office this year, only three cases have dashcam video evidence, and none have audio.

Maintenance records show vehicles have microphones unplugged and placed in gloveboxes, microphones with batteries removed, cars with busted or missing antennas, or dashcams where the microphone is missing entirely. Of the 850 dashcam video systems, 80 percent don't record audio, according to the police department's own review.

The response of interim Police Superintendent John

Escalante has been to issue mild reprimands or three-day suspensions for not only the malicious destruction of taxpayer funded equipment but the deliberate effort to cover up police crimes.

The massive failure of dashcam equipment, particularly in cases where police shootings are involved, is an indictment not only of the individual cops but the police department, Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the entire political establishment. It is beyond belief that all of these forces were unaware of this widespread practice and did nothing to stop it.

Separately, the extended warranty on the dashcams, purchased from COBAN, expired in 2012 and wasn't renewed by the Emanuel Administration until December 3, 2014, after the McDonald shooting, suggesting an intentional disregard for the operation of the equipment.

Beyond that, it has been shown that cover-ups are a defining feature of the Chicago police Department, and a deliberate effort to sabotage audiovisual equipment to hide evidence of police violence would hardly be out of character.

The video of the brutal murder of Laquan McDonald was initially suppressed by the police, the mayor, the City Council and other forces, which hoped they could sweep the matter under the rug.

Officer Van Dyke and his partner provided a lying account of the shooting, claiming McDonald was shot once while lunging, not 16 times from a distance, as shown by the dashcam video. The event was also caught by a surveillance camera at a nearby Burger King. The police seized that tape and deleted 86 minutes from it, including the time when the killing happened.

After an anonymous whistleblower and the persistent actions of independent journalists Jamie Kalven and

Branden Smith revealed the existence of the police dashcam videos, top city and police officials fought to keep it secret. In April 2015, Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel's top attorney asked the City Council to approve a \$5 million settlement with the victim's family on the condition that the video would not be released. The City Council unanimously approved.

Despite the systematic character of the MacDonald cover up, of the 400 police shootings the city of Chicago's so-called Independent Police Review Authority has investigated, only one was found to be unjustified. One former member of the authority was fired in July 2015, after a seven-year tenure, when he refused to falsify the outcome of an investigation. He had previously received a performance review that accused him of having a "clear bias against the police."

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