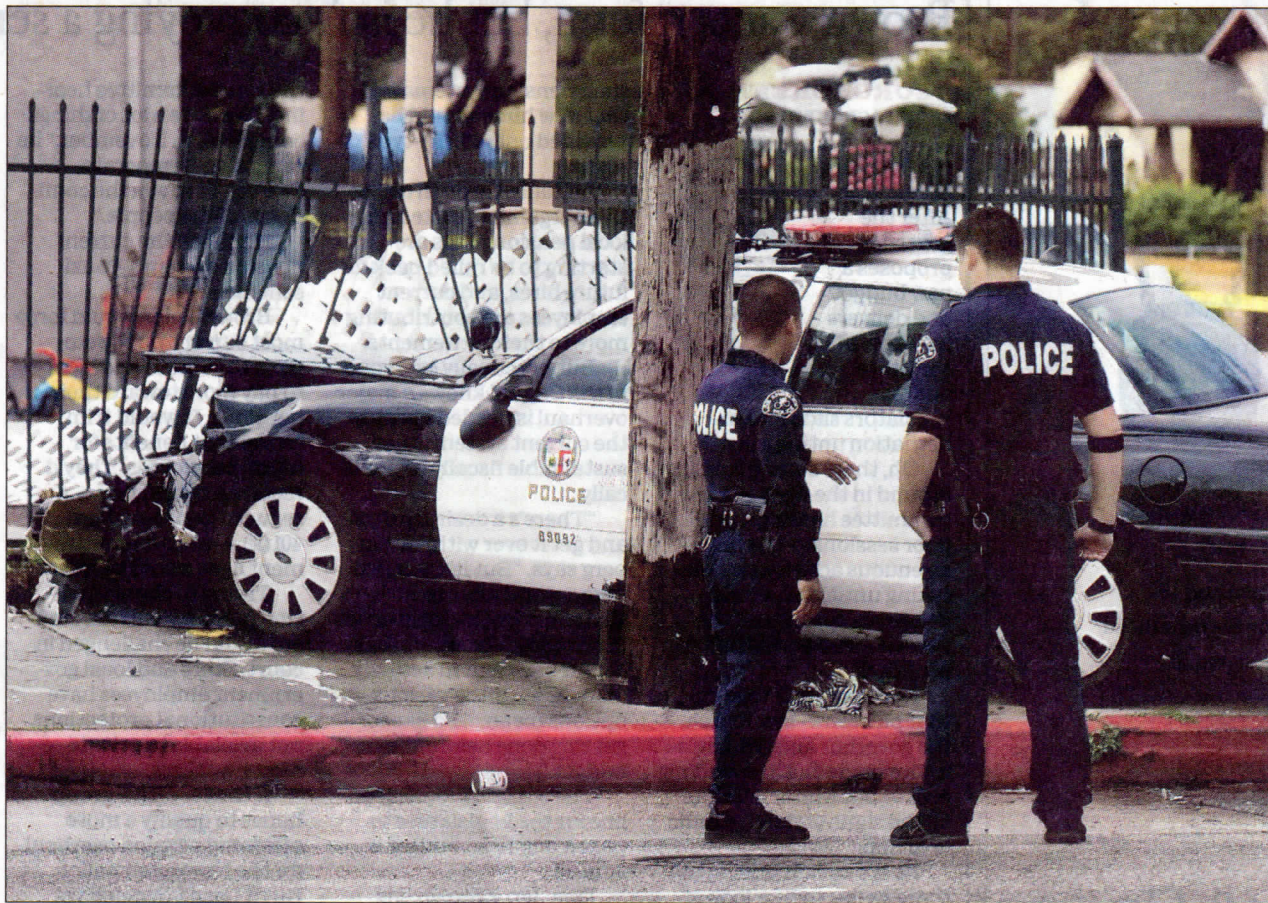


Los Angeles Times

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ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

THIS LAPD CRUISER was one of hundreds in police-involved crashes last year. In fact, the LAPD's numbers average out to about one crash a day. They're costly for the city — and, in rare cases, deadly for Angelenos.

Claims paid

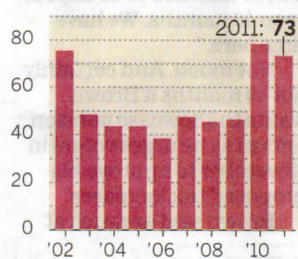
A breakdown of cases and legal settlements and judgments paid out by the city of Los Angeles for claims against the Los Angeles Police Department and other city agencies (2002 through Oct. 5, 2011, latest data available):

LAPD payouts by category

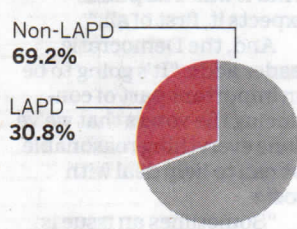
(In millions)



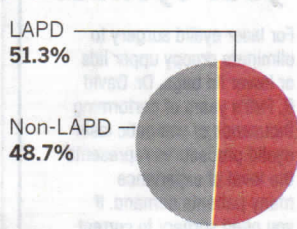
Number of traffic cases against LAPD



Percentage of all cases filed against the city



Percentage of all city payouts



Source: City of Los Angeles. Data analysis by **DOUG SMITH**

LAPD targets costly crashes

New policies aim at reducing cop-involved collisions, many of which result in suits.

JOEL RUBIN

At any given moment in Los Angeles, scores of police cars are out on the streets — either rushing to calls for help or prowling around in search of trouble.

Despite the training cops receive in how to speed safely through traffic, they are an accident-prone bunch. Po-

lice were involved in traffic accidents more than 1,250 times in the last three years — an average of about one a day.

Most of the crashes were minor, but some resulted in life-threatening injuries or totaled police cars, or were the result of the officer violating traffic laws, according to LAPD records. In at least two incidents, the driver of another car was killed.

And at a time when the Los Angeles Police Department is trying to stem the steady stream of lawsuits filed against officers that cost taxpayers millions of dollars each year, traffic ac-

cidents remain a significant and costly obstacle. They represent nearly one out of every four lawsuits filed against the department.

The city has paid nearly \$24 million in settlements or verdicts in about 400 LAPD traffic-related lawsuits over the last nine years and must contend with dozens more cases that remain unresolved, city records show. In all but a few of the closed cases, city officials opted to pay a negotiated settlement instead of taking their chances at a trial — a strong indication that the officers were in the wrong.

“It is a top priority for us

to get a comprehensive risk management plan in place, and addressing traffic accidents has to be a big part of that,” said Richard Drooyan, president of the Los Angeles Police Commission, the civilian board that sets policy for the LAPD. “We need to look at what kind of training, supervision and policies could be implemented to prevent these accidents.”

In a recent article, The Times highlighted a 2009 collision in which a 25-year-old woman was killed when her car was broadsided by an LAPD police cruiser

[See LAPD, A14]

LAPD aims to reduce costly, dangerous traffic crashes

[LAPD, from A1] without its emergency lights and siren on. The officers claimed that they were driving between 40 and 45 mph, but after data from an onboard computer showed the car had been traveling nearly 80 mph, the city settled last year with the woman's family for \$5 million.

And next month a civil trial is scheduled for another deadly crash involving an LAPD squad car. In that 2000 collision, 27-year-old Jovanna Lugo had backed her car out of her driveway onto the street at night and was hit by a police cruiser. Attorneys representing Lugo's young son and husband alleged in court filings that the officer was speeding without the car's headlights or emergency lights and siren on. Attorneys for the city did not respond to a request for comment.

Lugo's death spurred LAPD officials to reconsider the way the department investigates serious accidents

in which officers are suspected of negligence or other significant misconduct, said Cmdr. Andrew Smith. Such investigations now are treated like typical misconduct inquiries, but the department is considering whether to treat them similarly to officer-involved shootings. In shooting inquiries, officers are separated from each other at the scene to avoid collusion, and special teams of detectives spend months gathering evidence and witness testimony. The commission ultimately rules on whether the officers were justified in using force.

In nearly all traffic accidents, the officers are not accused of serious breaches of conduct but instead are faulted for being inattentive. With hundreds of such cases each year, the workload was a major drain on Internal Affairs investigators. So in late 2008, the department switched to a point-accrual system similar to the one the state Department of Motor

Vehicles uses for driving violations and accidents.

Under the LAPD's point system, in accidents determined to have been their fault, officers are assigned one, two or four points, depending on the seriousness of the crash. If an officer issued 3 points in a 24-month period, he or she is required to undergo driver retraining. Cops lose the right to drive for six months if they acquire five points over three years.

Commissioner Alan Skobin, who helped write the new procedures, said that beyond reducing the caseload for Internal Affairs investigators, the plan addresses a fairness issue. "Minor things happen, and we shouldn't always be taking a punishment mode," he said during a discussion of the plan at a recent Police Commission meeting.

Skobin added that he is hopeful the point system will lead to a reduction in the number of crashes caused by officers. With only a few

years of statistics, police officials said they cannot yet determine whether the points system is, in fact, contributing to a decrease in the number of accidents. The preliminary figures indicate it has done so, as the number of crashes each year appear to have declined between 2009 and 2011.

However, the point system appears to have done nothing to help the department as it tries to slow the number of lawsuits people file against it. In a three-year period since the point system was implemented, 205 traffic-related lawsuits were filed, according to city records. That is 40% more lawsuits than were filed in the three years before the points plan went into effect.

Drooyan said he plans a thorough review of the points system to determine whether more changes are needed.

Crashes account for about a quarter of the nearly 1,900 lawsuits brought

against the Police Department since 2002, city records show. Large numbers of lawsuits involve civil rights violations and workplace issues, such as harassment and retaliation, and can result in tens of millions of dollars in payments.

In cases that have been closed, the city has paid a total of \$138 million of taxpayer money in settlements and verdicts — more than the combined cost of resolving lawsuits brought against all other city departments. Elected officials have long criticized the LAPD for its inability to address problems that lead to lawsuits.

Repeatedly over the last year, Drooyan and Chief Charlie Beck have identified lawsuits as one of the most pressing issues facing the department. Beck has said the department needs to be better at identifying problem officers and correcting behavior.