



DEPARTMENT OF  
TRANSPORTATION

# Using Mobile Device Samples to Estimate Traffic Volumes

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Research Project  
Final Report 2017-49

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# USING MOBILE DEVICE SAMPLES TO ESTIMATE TRAFFIC VOLUMES

## FINAL REPORT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) needs accurate and comprehensive data about traffic volumes on a statewide basis. Traditionally, this need has been met by MnDOT installing permanent and portable traffic counting sensors on state roadways. However, the increasing use of mobile devices (e.g., consumer smartphones, personal and commercial navigation devices, fleet monitoring systems, etc.) begs the question: Can traffic flows be monitored by existing mobile devices already in the traffic stream, rather than the traditional model of MnDOT installing and maintaining its own traffic counting sensors?

MnDOT contracted with the Texas A&M Transportation Institute (TTI) in May 2016 to explore the concept of estimating traffic volumes from mobile device samples. In this research project, TTI worked with StreetLight Data, a geo-analytics company, to evaluate a beta version of its traffic volume estimates derived from global positioning system (GPS)-based mobile devices.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

TTI evaluated the accuracy of average annual daily traffic (AADT) volume estimates as well as average annual hourly volume (AAHV) estimates from Streetlight Data using actual volume counts from MnDOT traffic monitoring sites. The sites were grouped according to traffic volume levels since the magnitude of error appeared to be correlated to traffic volume (i.e., low-volume roads typically had higher estimation error).

The mean absolute percent error for the AADT estimates was 61% for all sites but ranged from 29% at high-volume sites to 68% at low-volume sites. The mean error was strongly influenced by numerous outliers in the lower volume categories. The median absolute percent error ranged from 20% at high-volume sites to 34% at low-volume sites.

The mean absolute percent error for the AAHV estimates was 39% for 69 publicly available sites and ranged from 16% at moderate-volume sites to 49% at low-volume sites. The hourly volume estimates were strongly correlated with actual counts, with  $R^2$  values of 90% for weekday hourly volumes and 95% for weekend hourly volumes.

TTI also evaluated the accuracy of AAHV estimates at 12 MnDOT sites at which the count data was not publicly available. The mean absolute percent error for the AAHV estimates was 49% for these 12 non-public sites, but these sites were mostly low to moderate-volume. The higher-than-expected error at these 12 sites was also largely influenced by several outliers that occurred on Sunday mornings at several sites.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Traffic volume estimation from mobile devices has potential, but analytic enhancements are needed to improve accuracy and granularity of estimated traffic volumes. Some of the traffic volume estimates from StreetLight Data were within acceptable error ranges (10% to 20% absolute percent error), but other estimates were significantly outside this acceptable error range (greater than 100% absolute percent error). Lower volume roadways had the highest errors, presumably due to lower mobile device sample sizes.

The evaluation results at 12 non-public MnDOT sites reinforce the need for analytic improvements, as these results showed higher error (49% mean absolute percent error) than the results at the 69 public permanent sites (39% mean absolute percent error).

Future evaluations of traffic-volume estimates from data providers could benefit from more control and greater specificity in selecting comparison locations. Due to several unanticipated changes and circumstances, this evaluation had several limitations that could be improved in future evaluations. For example, in Task 1 TTI defined an evaluation matrix with 100 high-quality comparison sites (permanent traffic monitoring sites). However, these permanent sites were used by StreetLight Data for calibration purposes, whereas over 8,700 short-duration monitoring sites were used for comparison purposes. Some of the high errors in this evaluation could have come from automatic roadway location identification procedures used by StreetLight Data to generate traffic volume estimates on a statewide basis. Therefore, manually selecting and controlling the characteristics of the MnDOT comparison sites could have led to lower estimation error and a better understanding of where algorithm improvements are most needed.

MnDOT should monitor ongoing research that has the same objective of using mobile devices for traffic volume estimation. The I-95 Corridor Coalition is conducting similar research to estimate traffic volumes from GPS-enabled mobile devices, with the research being conducted by the University of Maryland (UMD) and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). As of June 2017, the research is still underway, and traffic-volume estimates have been developed only in the states of Maryland and Colorado. Traffic-volume estimates for Minnesota were not available at the time of this MnDOT research project. However, there are plans for UMD and NREL to expand their traffic-volume estimates to other states (and perhaps nationally) in the future.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) needs accurate and comprehensive data about traffic volumes on a statewide basis. Traditionally, this need has been met by MnDOT installing permanent and portable traffic counting sensors on state roadways. However, the increasing use of mobile devices (e.g., consumer smartphones, personal and commercial navigation devices, fleet monitoring systems, etc.) begs the question: Can traffic flows be monitored by existing mobile devices already in the traffic stream, rather than the traditional model of MnDOT installing and maintaining its own traffic counting sensors?

MnDOT contracted with the Texas A&M Transportation Institute (TTI) in May 2016 to explore the concept of estimating traffic volumes from mobile device samples. In Task 1 of the research project, TTI identified several data providers that expressed interest in participating in the research project. All of the interested companies actively gather, aggregate, and analyze location data from global positioning system (GPS) mobile devices, and have the necessary mobile device data to estimate traffic volumes. However, in mid-2016, not all of the companies had a traffic-volume data product for sale (i.e., the product was still in research and development).

Because multiple companies expressed interest in providing traffic volume estimates in mid-2016, TTI proposed to be an independent evaluator that would conduct a fair and unbiased assessment of each data provider's traffic-volume estimates. The alternative approach was for TTI to work collaboratively with one of the data providers to develop and evaluate traffic volume estimation methods, but this approach was initially not selected because of multiple providers' interest.

By early 2017, two of the three interested data providers had withdrawn from participating in this research project. Their rationale was that, although they were developing a traffic-volume data product, they did not feel that it was ready for rigorous publicly reported testing and evaluation. Therefore, after discussions with the MnDOT Technical Advisory Panel, TTI pursued the alternative approach of working collaboratively with a single data provider – StreetLight Data – to develop and evaluate traffic volume estimates from GPS-based mobile device samples.

The rest of this report documents the analysis conducted to develop and evaluate the traffic-volume estimates from StreetLight Data. Also, Streetlight Data publicly announced the availability of its traffic volume product on June 6, 2017, (<http://blog.streetlightdata.com/introducing-streetlight-volume-2016-aadt-metrics>). The launch of this product was due, in part, to the development and evaluation activities in this MnDOT research project.

## CHAPTER 2: DEVELOPMENT OF TRAFFIC VOLUME ANALYTICS

In Task 3, Streetlight Data was responsible for developing nearly all of the analytics for estimating traffic volumes at no cost to this MnDOT research project. TTI did provide MnDOT traffic count data for model calibration purposes, as well as several suggestions for possibly enhancing the analytics. Therefore, the details of the traffic volume estimation models are the intellectual property of StreetLight Data and considered confidential. However, StreetLight Data has provided information on their overall approach to traffic volume estimation.

The Streetlight Data approach can be summarized in the following three generalized steps:

1. **Combine GPS-enabled navigation data with location based services (LBS) data.** These are two distinct datasets that StreetLight Data aggregates from source data providers, and more details on these two datasets are available on their web site.
2. **Normalize GPS and LBS mobile device data by US Census population estimates.** This provides the first scaling factor that attempts to account for the mobile device sampling.
3. **Calibrate the mobile device samples using public agency traffic volume sources.** This provides the second scaling factor that attempts to account for the mobile device scaling. The public agency traffic volumes typically come from permanent traffic monitoring sites, where there is greatest confidence in the traffic volume accuracy.

Analysts at StreetLight Data applied these three steps to develop traffic volume estimates for the MnDOT research project. TTI received the traffic volume estimates once they had been generated by StreetLight Data. Therefore, TTI was not involved in using or applying StreetLight Data's proprietary analytics to generate the traffic volume estimates.

StreetLight Data used traffic counts from 69 MnDOT permanent monitoring sites to calibrate the mobile device samples (Step 3 from above). These MnDOT locations had originally been identified by TTI for the purposes of evaluation/validation, since these 69 locations represented an ideal mix of location types, functional classes, and traffic volume levels (see Appendix A). Permanent monitoring sites with annual average daily traffic (AADT) volumes less than 300 vehicles per day were removed from the calibration dataset, due to very low mobile device sample sizes and correspondingly poor prediction results in subsequent steps.

StreetLight Data did provide TTI with unscaled and uncalibrated sample sizes to corroborate their analytic process. At the 69 MnDOT locations, the correlation between the MnDOT AADT values and StreetLight Data's unscaled and uncalibrated sample sizes was 79% ( $R^2=0.79$ ). StreetLight Data's scaling and calibration process improved the correlation to 85% ( $R^2=0.85$ ).

## CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS: EVALUATION OF TRAFFIC VOLUME ESTIMATES

### 3.1 EVALUATION OF AADT ESTIMATES

After calibrating their estimation model using the 69 MnDOT permanent monitoring sites, Streetlight Data generated traffic volume estimates (i.e., AADT values) on 7,837 short-duration count sites. AADT values were chosen as a starting point for evaluation purposes—that is, the desire was to ensure that suitable accuracy could be achieved on aggregate traffic statistics like AADT before developing and evaluating more granular traffic statistics like time-of-day counts for specific days or average weekdays of the month.

Based on StreetLight Data analysis, some short-duration count sites were removed from the evaluation:

- Very low volume sites (less than 300 AADT) were removed due to very low mobile device sample sizes and low confidence in prediction accuracy.
- Some frontage road locations were removed because StreetLight Data’s automated process to create “GPS travel gates” had inadvertently grouped these frontage road locations with the nearby adjacent freeway mainlanes. These “GPS travel gates” enclose a designated area around the roadway of interest, and the StreetLight Data analytics uses these gates to determine which mobile devices are assigned to a specified roadway. These gates can be manually re-configured in cases where multiple roadways are in close proximity (see Figure 3.1 as an example), but in this evaluation, the manual gate re-configuration was too time-consuming for the nearly 8,000 comparison sites, so StreetLight Data simply removed those suspect frontage road locations.

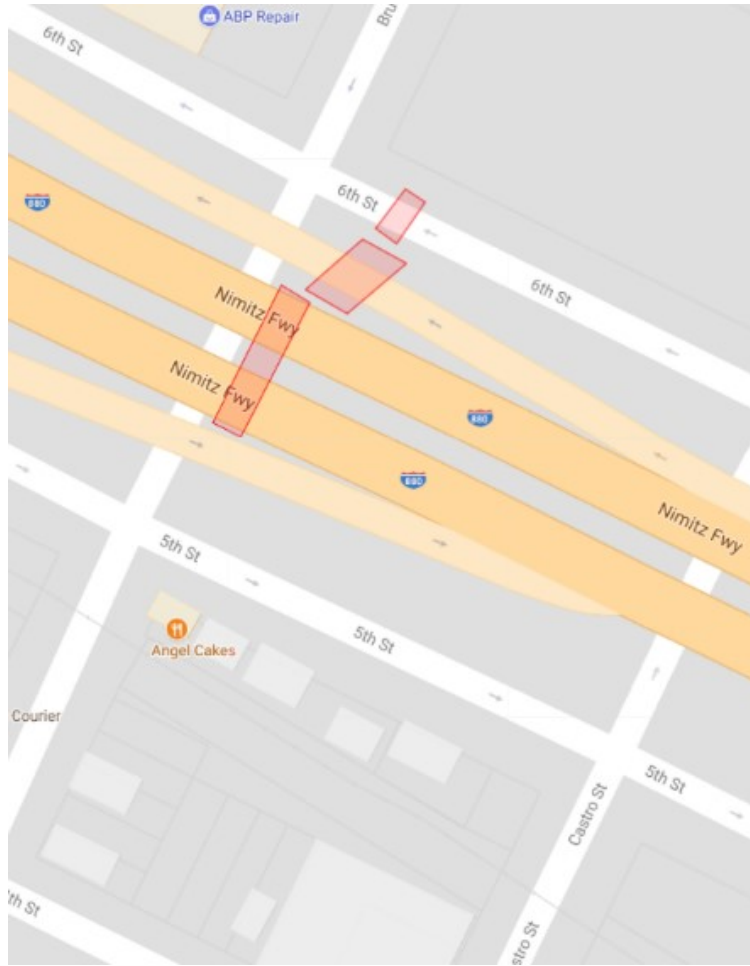
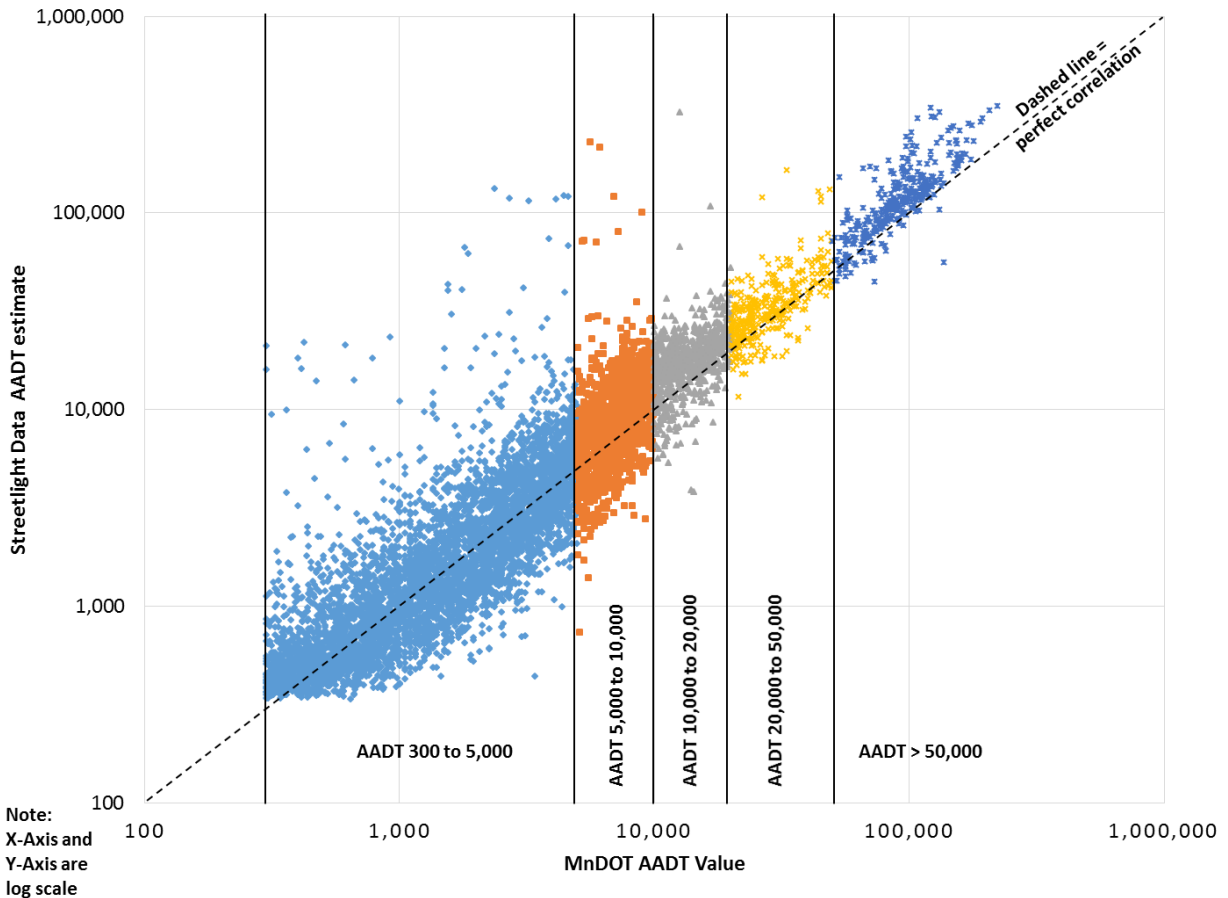


Figure 3.1 Illustration of StreetLight Data “gates” that have been manually re-configured where several roads are in close proximity.

Figure 3.2 shows a scatterplot of StreetLight Data AADT estimates as compared to actual MnDOT AADT values. For the purposes of this analysis, the results were divided into five traffic volume level categories:

1. AADT values from 300 to 5,000 vehicles per day.
2. AADT values from 5,000 to 10,000 vehicles per day.
3. AADT values from 10,000 to 20,000 vehicles per day.
4. AADT values from 20,000 to 50,000 vehicles per day.
5. AADT values greater than 50,000 vehicles per day.



**Figure 3.2 Visual comparison of StreetLight Data AADT Estimates to MnDOT AADT estimates.**

TTI calculated several different accuracy measures based on comparing the AADT values of StreetLight Data to those reported by MnDOT:

- Mean absolute percent error, MAPE (Equation 1)
- Mean absolute difference (Equation 2)
- Mean signed difference (Equation 3)

**Equation 1** *Mean absolute percent error, MAPE (%)* =  $\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{abs(x_i - \bar{x}_i)}{\bar{x}_i}$   
 where  $\bar{x}_i$  = MnDOT benchmark traffic volume for the *i*th comparison  
 $x_i$  = the *i*th commercial data provider traffic volume estimate  
 $n$  = number of estimate-to-benchmark comparisons

**Equation 2** *Mean absolute difference, MAD (vehicles)* =  $\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n abs(x_i - \bar{x}_i)$   
 where  $\bar{x}_i$  = MnDOT benchmark traffic volume for the *i*th comparison  
 $x_i$  = the *i*th commercial data provider traffic volume estimate  
 $n$  = number of estimate-to-benchmark comparisons

**Equation 3** *Mean signed difference, MSD (vehicles)* =  $\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x}_i)$   
 where  $\bar{x}_i$  = MnDOT benchmark traffic volume for the *i*th comparison  
 $x_i$  = the *i*th commercial data provider traffic volume estimate  
 $n$  = number of estimate-to-benchmark comparisons

Table 3.1 summarizes the accuracy measures for each traffic volume level category, then for all short-duration count sites combined.

**Table 3.1 Accuracy Measures for StreetLight Data AADT Estimates**

Traffic Volume Level Category	Number of MnDOT Sites	Mean Absolute Percent Error	Mean Absolute Difference	Mean Signed Difference
300 to 5,000 AADT	5,090	68%	1,155	+701
5,000 to 10,000 AADT	1,319	58%	4,023	+2,963
10,000 to 20,000 AADT	759	44%	5,885	+5,043
20,000 to 50,000 AADT	346	29%	8,578	+6,544
> 50,000 AADT	323	34%	34,112	+32,142
<b>All Traffic Levels Combined</b>	<b>7,837</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>3,782</b>	<b>+3,056</b>

There are several key findings regarding the comparison and resulting accuracy measures:

- **Traffic volume level is an important factor in estimation accuracy:** The accuracy results were better for higher traffic volumes than for lower traffic volumes, which could be explained by larger sample sizes (and sample rates) of mobile devices on roads with higher traffic volumes. Also, there were many more comparison sites on low-volume roads, which could skew the average accuracy measures from high-volume sites. Therefore, it is important to separately report accuracy measures for different traffic volume levels.
- **StreetLight Data AADT estimates are biased high:** The mean signed difference was positive in all traffic volume level categories, which indicates a positive bias. In other words, StreetLight Data AADT estimates were consistently greater than MnDOT AADT values.
- **Average error statistics in Table 3.1 are strongly influenced by numerous outliers in lower volume categories:** There are numerous comparison outliers (resulting in absolute percent errors exceeding 1,000%) that can be seen in Figure 3.2 that strongly influence the

average/mean error statistics in Table 3.1. For example, the median absolute percent error is markedly lower for the same categories as shown in Table 3.1:

- 300 to 5,000 AADT: **31%** median absolute percent error
- 5,000 to 10,000 AADT: **34%** median absolute percent error
- 10,000 to 20,000 AADT: **33%** median absolute percent error
- 20,00 to 50,000 AADT: **20%** median absolute percent error
- > 50,000 AADT: **23%** median absolute percent error

Figures 3.3 through 3.7 illustrate the wide range of error values in this initial comparison. These charts illustrate that a small number of comparisons had much higher error values than the majority of comparisons.

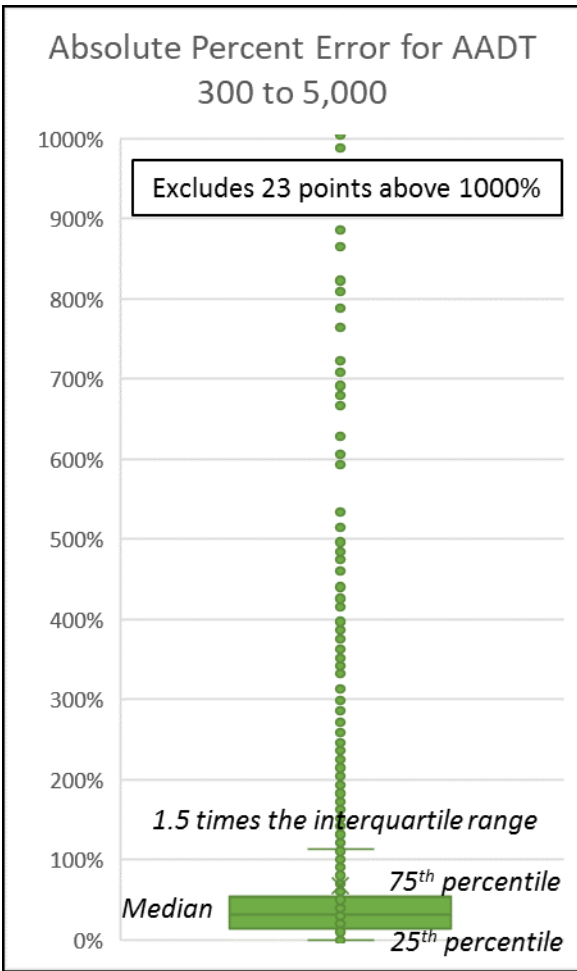


Figure 3.3 Box-and-whiskers plot for StreetLight Data error, 300 to 5,000 AADT.

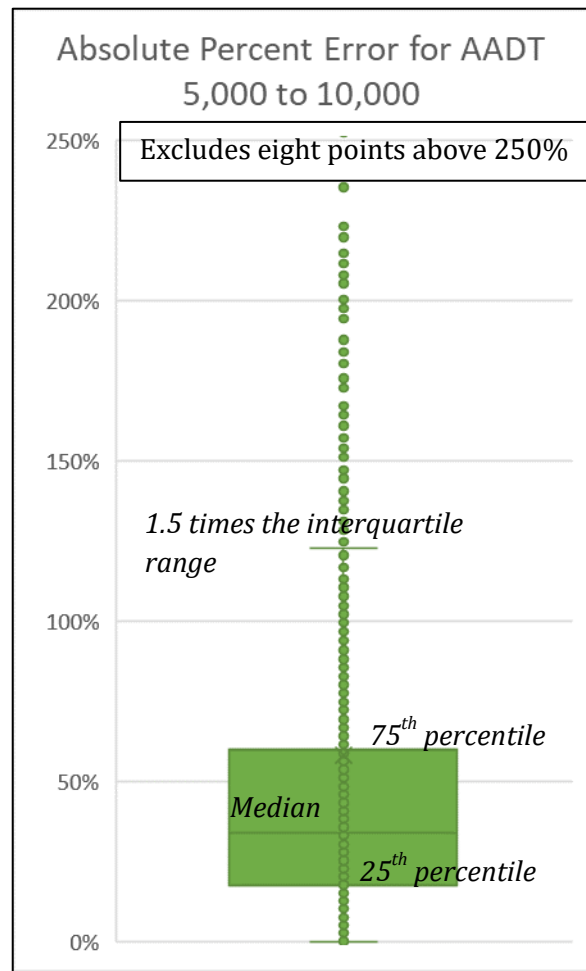


Figure 3.4 Box-and-whiskers plot for StreetLight Data error, 5,000 to 10,000 AADT.



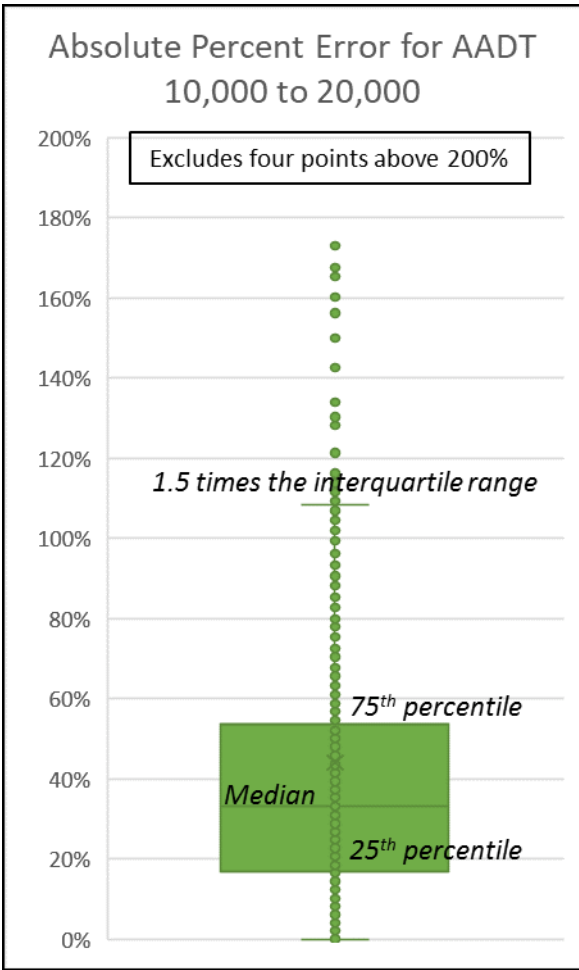


Figure 3.5 Box-and-whiskers plot for StreetLight Data error, 10,00 to 20,000 AADT.

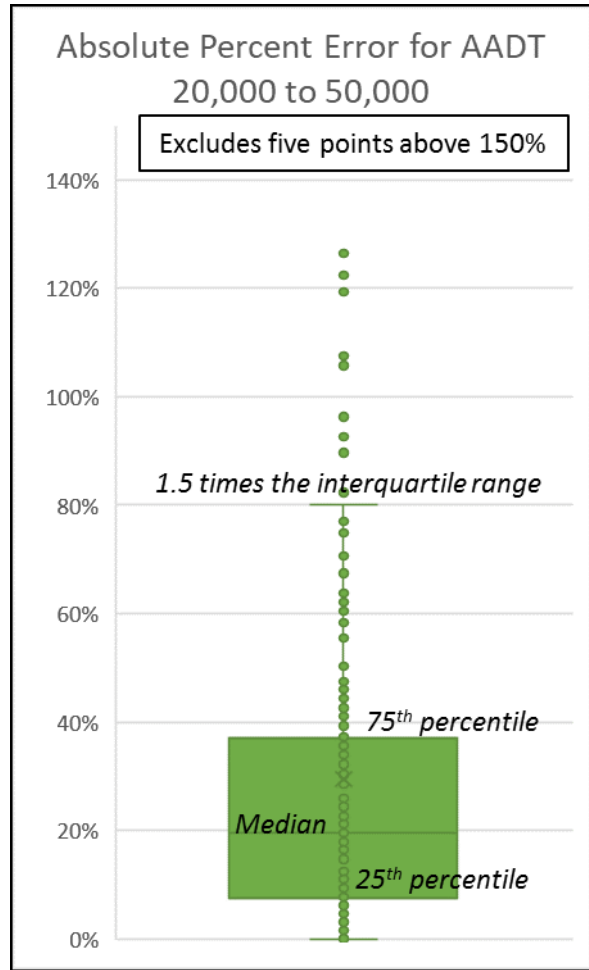
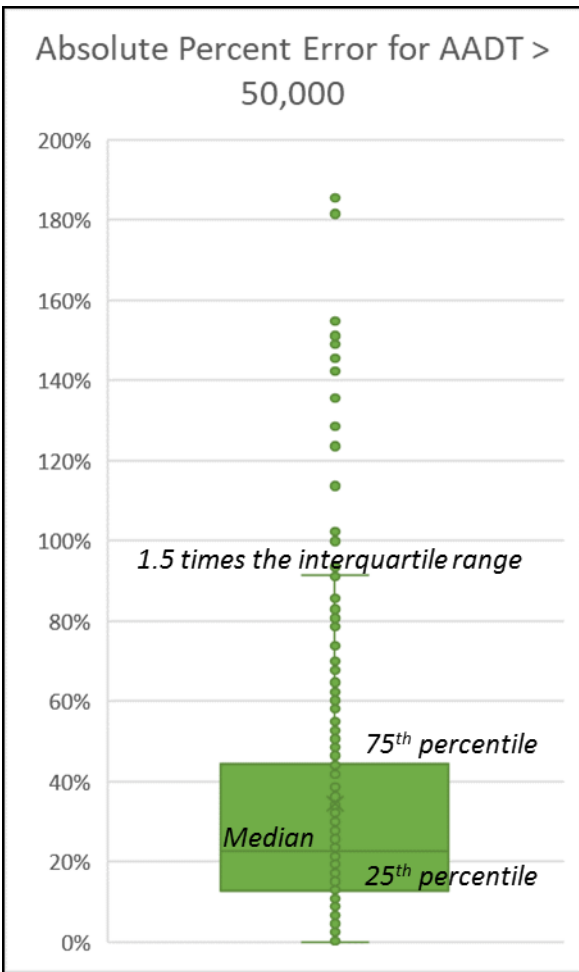


Figure 3.6 Box-and-whiskers plot for StreetLight Data error, 20,000 to 50,000 AADT.



**Figure 3.7** Box-and-whiskers plot for StreetLight Data error, Greater than 50,000 AADT.

### 3.2 EVALUATION OF ANNUAL AVERAGE HOURLY VOLUME ESTIMATES

StreetLight Data also provided average annual hourly volume estimates for weekdays and weekends for 69 MnDOT permanent monitoring sites (the same sites used to calibrate the AADT estimation algorithm). TTI then compared the StreetLight Data estimates to MnDOT hourly count values in a similar manner as the AADT comparison in the previous section.

Figure 3.8 shows a scatterplot of StreetLight Data hourly volume estimates as compared to actual MnDOT hourly volume values. The correlation of these hourly volumes is quite good—even better than the AADT estimates shown in Figure 3.2—with  $R^2$  values of 90% for weekday hourly volumes and 95% for weekend hourly volumes. Table 3.2 summarizes the accuracy measures for the hourly volume comparison, using hourly volumes instead of AADT values.

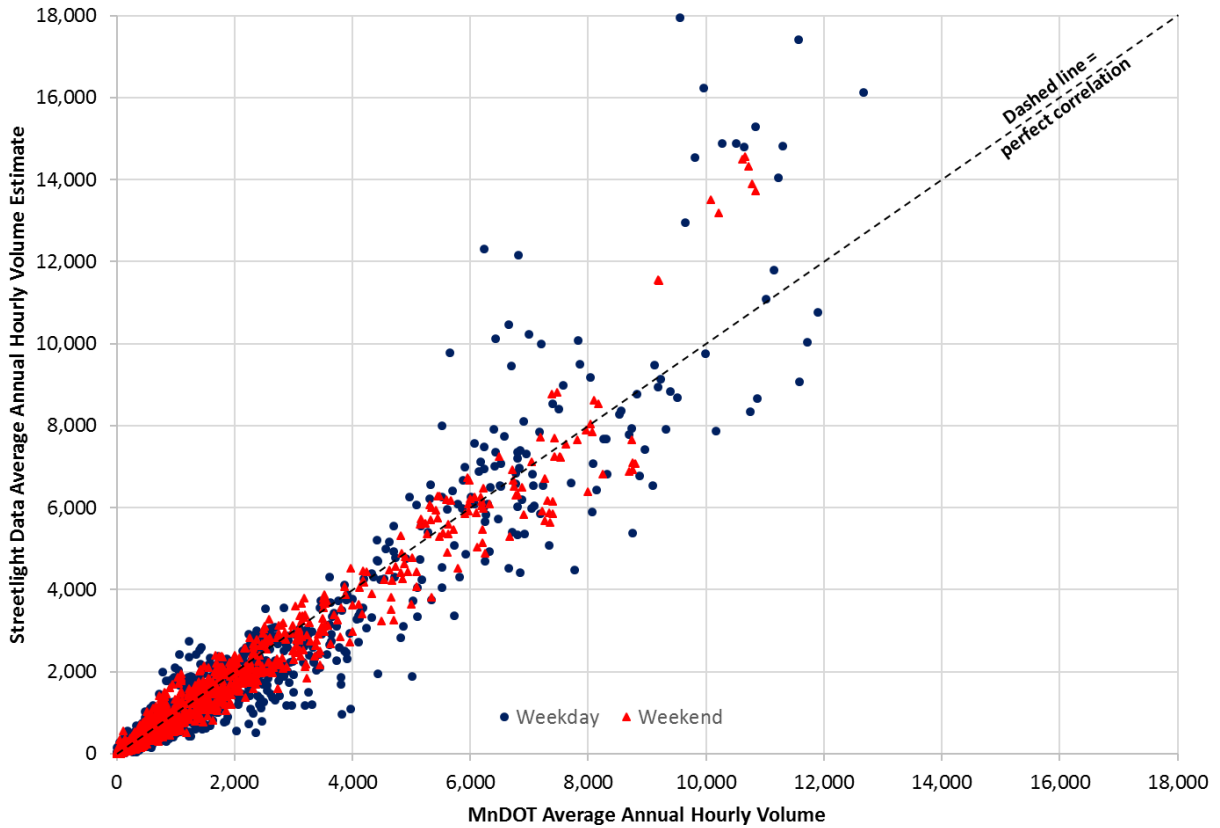


Figure 3.8 Visual comparison of StreetLight Data average annual hourly volume estimates to comparable MnDOT volume values (69 permanent sites).

Table 3.2 Accuracy measures for StreetLight Data average annual hourly volume estimates (69 permanent sites)

Traffic Volume Level Category	Number of Hourly Values	Mean Absolute Percent Error	Mean Absolute Difference	Mean Signed Difference
< 1,000 vehicles per hour (vph)	2,129	49%	82	-14
1,000 to 5,000 vph	868	21%	424	-202
5,000 to 10,000 vph	196	16%	1091	4
> 10,000 vph	23	28%	3041	1981
<b>All Traffic Levels Combined</b>	<b>3,216</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>-49</b>

In addition to the 69 MnDOT permanent sites, TTI requested that StreetLight Data provide hourly volume estimates at 12 monitoring sites where MnDOT had recently installed traffic sensors. At the time of the evaluation, MnDOT had not publicly released the hourly traffic counts at these locations. These additional 12 non-public sites had traffic volumes ranging from about 300 to 28,000 AADT.

The correlation between MnDOT average annual day-of-week hourly counts and the corresponding StreetLight Data estimates was lower at 12 non-public sites than at the 69 public, permanent monitoring sites (see Figure 3.9). The  $R^2$  values were 64% for weekdays and 40% for weekends (as compared to 90% and 95% at the 69 permanent sites). The mean absolute percent error for the 12 non-public sites were 42% for weekdays and 68% for weekends. Most sites had similar error levels, but Site 3371 (MN 25 northwest of Harding) had higher errors than all other sites (MAPE values of 59% for weekdays and 123% for weekends). Table 3.3 summarizes the error for the 12 non-public sites using a similar format as the 69 public permanent sites.

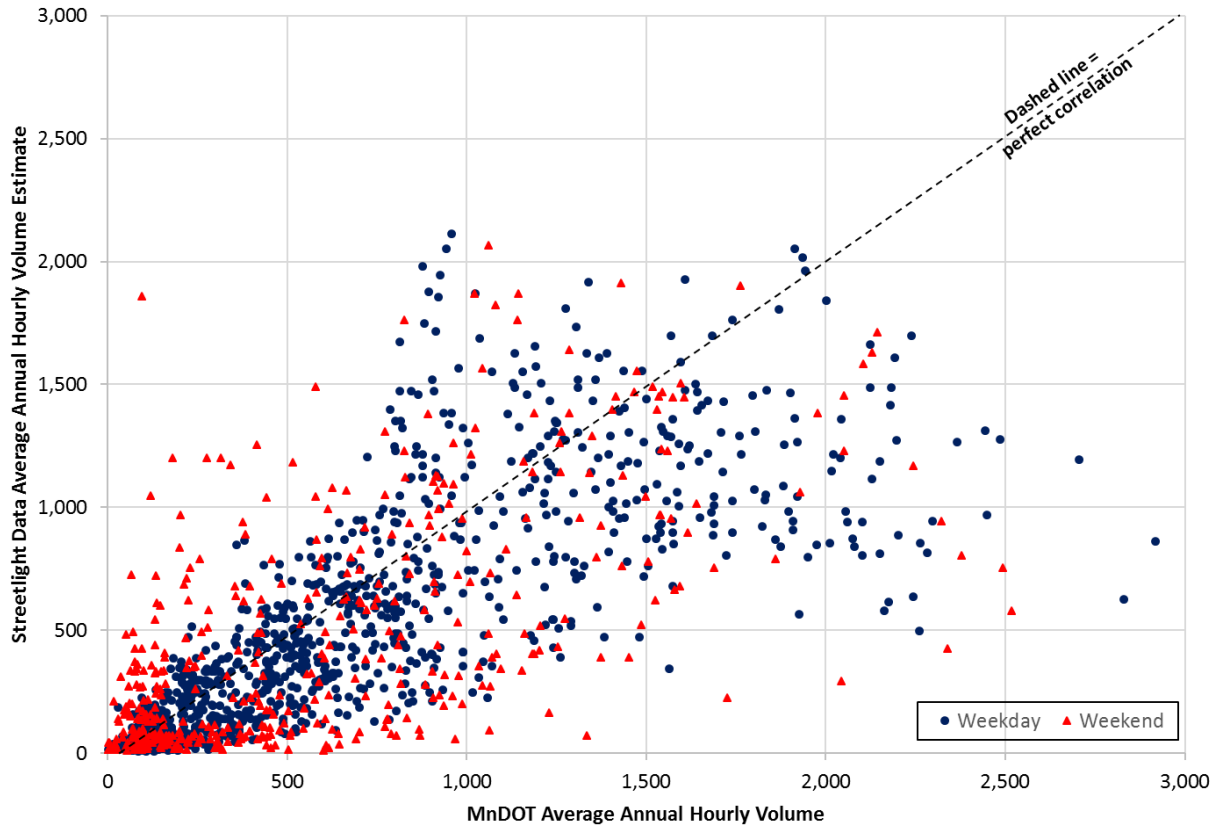
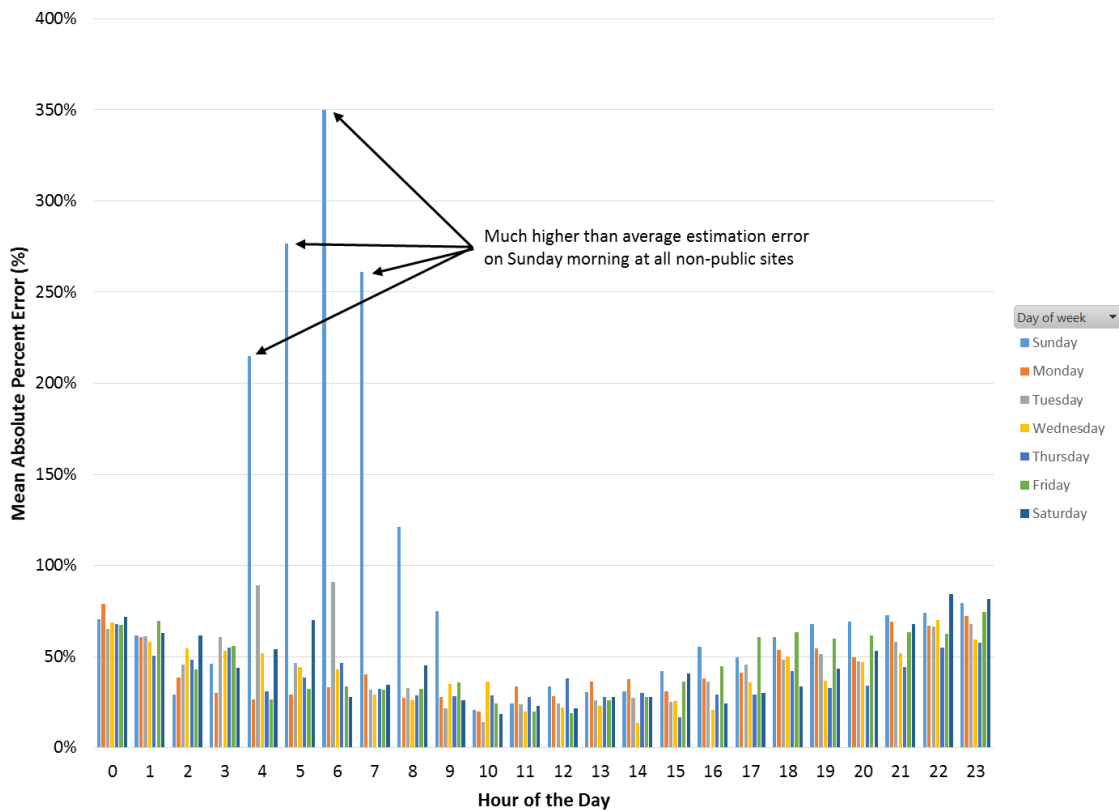


Figure 3.9 Visual comparison of StreetLight Data average annual day-of-week hourly volume estimates to comparable MnDOT volume values (12 non-public sites).

**Table 3.3 Accuracy measures for StreetLight Data average annual hourly volume estimates (12 non-public sites)**

Traffic Volume Level Category	Number of Hourly Values	Mean Absolute Percent Error	Mean Absolute Difference	Mean Signed Difference
< 1,000 vehicles per hour (vph)	1,247	53%	165	-63
1,000 to 5,000 vph	334	34%	535	-433
5,000 to 10,000 vph	0	-	-	-
> 10,000 vph	0	-	-	-
<b>All Traffic Levels Combined</b>	<b>1,581</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>-141</b>

The analysis at these 12 sites did reveal an oddity—all non-public sites displayed much higher than average estimation error on several hours on Sunday morning (see Figure 3.10). The cause of this much higher error is not understood at this time. However, even if one disregards this Sunday morning oddity, the average error value is 44% for all other days of the week and hours of the day (ranging from 17% to 79% for specific hours and days).



**Figure 3.10 Estimation error by hour of the day and day of week (12 non-public sites).**

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

This report summarized one of the first attempts to estimate total traffic volumes from mobile device samples on a statewide basis. Despite the withdrawal of two data providers that had tentatively agreed to participate in the project, TTI was still able to work with StreetLight Data to evaluate traffic volume estimates generated from its analytics. Most recently, Streetlight Data publicly announced the availability of its traffic volume product on June 6, 2017, (<http://blog.streetlightdata.com/introducing-streetlight-volume-2016-aadt-metrics>). The launch of this product was due, in part, to the development and evaluation activities in this MnDOT research project. The following sections provide conclusions for this research project.

### 4.1 EVALUATION RESULTS

Traffic volume estimation from mobile devices has potential, but analytic enhancements are needed to improve accuracy and granularity of estimated traffic volumes. Some of the traffic-volume estimates from StreetLight Data were within acceptable error ranges (10% to 20% absolute percent error), but other estimates were significantly outside this acceptable error range (greater than 100% absolute percent error). Lower volume roadways had the highest errors, presumably due to lower mobile device sample sizes.

Also, in this evaluation, StreetLight Data provided AADT and average annual hourly volume estimates for comparison to MnDOT traffic volumes. While AADT values are a very common traffic count statistic used in transportation planning, there is also a demand for more granular traffic volume data in many applications. However, it is expected that the analytics to estimate more granular traffic volumes will develop in the future.

The evaluation results at 12 non-public MnDOT sites reinforce the need for analytic improvements, as these results showed higher error (49% mean absolute percent error) than the results at the 69 public permanent sites (39% mean absolute percent error).

### 4.2 IMPROVING FUTURE EVALUATIONS

Future evaluations of traffic volume estimates from data providers could benefit from more control and greater specificity in selecting comparison locations. Due to several unanticipated changes and circumstances, this evaluation had several limitations that could be improved in future evaluations. For example, in Task 1, TTI defined an evaluation matrix with 100 high-quality comparison sites (permanent traffic monitoring sites). However, these permanent sites were used by StreetLight Data for calibration purposes, whereas over 8,700 short-duration monitoring sites were used for comparison purposes. Some of the high errors in this evaluation could have come from automatic roadway location identification procedures used by StreetLight Data to generate traffic volume estimates on a statewide basis. Therefore, manually selecting and controlling the characteristics of the MnDOT comparison sites could have led to lower estimation error and a better understanding of where algorithm improvements are most needed.

### 4.3 OTHER RELATED RESEARCH

The I-95 Corridor Coalition is conducting similar research to estimate traffic volumes from GPS-enabled mobile devices, with the research being conducted by the University of Maryland (UMD) and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL).<sup>1</sup> As of June 2017, the research is still underway and traffic volume estimates have been developed only in the states of Maryland and Colorado. Traffic volume estimates for Minnesota were not available at the time of this MnDOT research project. However, there are plans for UMD and NREL to expand their traffic volume estimates to other states (and perhaps nationally) in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Select *Volume and Turning Mvmt Project* tab at <http://i95coalition.org/projects/vehicle-probe-project/>.

**APPENDIX A:  
MNDOT PERMANENT MONITORING SITES USED TO CALIBRATE  
STREETLIGHT DATA ANALYTICS**



Location Category	Traffic Volume Category	MnDOT Site ID	2015 AADT Value
Urban, Typical Grid	Medium	36	39,557
		39	10,624
		45	12,105
		103	46,839
		110	24,769
		191	44,426
		208	29,827
		212	26,597
		335	47,344
		352	34,217
		365	41,523
		384	28,995
		388	20,097
		390	9,716
		402	19,902
		407	16,662
	425	21,990	
	High	40	52,679
		301	154,695
		303	122,659
315		120,436	
341		76,817	
354		82,853	
Urban, Interchanges or Closely Spaced Roadways	Medium	38	36,381
		389	41,268
		420	29,200
	High	305	104,928
		309	100,891
		321	144,576
		342	116,199
		405	90,603
Rural, Major Roads	Low	27	4,884
		34	3,198
		170	4,015
		179	2,170

Location Category	Traffic Volume Category	MnDOT Site ID	2015 AADT Value
Rural, Major Roads	Low	198	2,867
		210	1,141
		211	3,695
		219	3,793
		220	1,977
		221	2,992
		223	4,313
		225	2,855
	Medium	26	20,061
		29	8,355
		33	5,176
		35	5,902
		42	32,028
		43	17,095
		164	8,828
		175	23,709
		187	21,383
		200	44,899
		204	10,632
		227	9,399
353	22,069		
381	12,740		
382	30,341		
Rural, Minor Roads	Low	41	426
		51	496
		56	353
		199	1,487
		209	638
		214	404
		218	859
		222	1,743
		228	736
		229	1,115
		232	317