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Strategic and Tactical Approaches to Traffic Safety

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In the late nineteenth century, the New York Police Department (NYPD) faced a daunting challenge. At that time, many of the city's cyclists were exceeding the speed limit of eight miles per hour. In 1885, Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt created a bicycle squad. Soon this "scorcher squad" was charged with the additional responsibility of controlling the automobiles in the city. Their enforcement approach was novel: an officer in a booth would observe the speed of passing vehicles, and if he identified a speeder he would telephone another booth, and an officer on a bicycle would be dispatched to intercept the violator.

By 1908 New York traffic was snarled by a mix of pedestrians, horses, bicycles, and increasingly automobiles. Faced with this crisis, the NYPD assumed the principal responsibility for traffic management in the city. They wrote the first set of traffic regulations, manned traffic control posts, operated the first "stop and go" devices, and, of course, enforced the traffic laws.

In many ways the early traffic management activities of the NYPD and other similar activities in other communities foreshadowed the critical role that the police would play in traffic management and crash prevention. Although our approach to collision prevention and traffic management has changed dramatically in the past 100 years, some of the original challenges remain. Moreover, the rapidly changing environment of policing necessitates that leaders should systematically review and assess conventional approaches.

This article describes a new model for the delivery of police traffic services. This new model focuses on the use of strategic and tactical approaches to traffic safety, or STATS. The STATS approach has four goals:

- To enable law enforcement agencies to provide effective traffic law enforcement without depending on federal funding
- To use data-driven models for allocating enforcement resources
- To develop strategies for using traffic enforcement to reduce overall criminal activity
- To develop and train a new generation of traffic safety professionals

Traffic Law Enforcement and Federal Funding

If there is one common thread among law enforcement executives, it is that every one of these leaders must choose among competing demands for police services. The scope of services that police perform continues to increase; at the same time, law enforcement agencies face increased costs and shrinking budgets. This conflict between resources and priorities has been particularly harmful to traffic law enforcement. A 2001 study, for example, found that “there is an overall declining trend in the number of citations being issued for all types of traffic violations combined.”¹

In order to encourage state and local law enforcement agencies to spend more resources on traffic law enforcement, the federal government has offered substantial grant funding. These grants are typically used for equipment, training, and overtime pay. Although in many cases these funds have been used effectively, the system that provides the money has arguably caused long-term structural problems in three areas.

First, federal support for local law enforcement tends to emphasize federal, not local, priorities. For example, in recent years federal transportation initiatives have emphasized enforcement of seat belt and impaired-driving laws (the so-called Belts and Booze program). Admittedly, these are important program areas, but focus on these enforcement activities diverts attention from other areas such as speeding or running red lights.

A second concern about federal funding is that it tends to be narrowly focused. The Washington State Traffic Safety Commission (the agency charged with distributing federal highway safety grants in the state of Washington), for example, recently announced a special program for overtime funds to support “zero-tolerance” enforcement of nighttime safety belt violations. While data may suggest lower rates of belt use during the nighttime hours, it may be counterproductive to create strategies focused on encouraging officers to ignore other violations. One can also ask whether this problem is so significant that it must be addressed separately as an overtime mission. Why can't on-duty officers perform this activity?

The final problem related to federal funding might be called dependence. Certainly, it makes sense for the federal government to offer incentives to local governments to participate in traffic safety initiatives—but this relationship can be insidious. Many law enforcement agencies become adept at acquiring these funds on a regular basis, allowing such funds to become the de facto traffic enforcement budget. That is, local communities will not budget for traffic enforcement when they can reasonably expect the federal government to support it. If the funds are later reduced, or made otherwise unavailable, local governments may not have adequate funds to sustain these activities. Moreover, some law enforcement executives have come to expect federal support for nearly all traffic safety programs. When asked to participate in traffic safety activities some will ask, “Where is the money?”

Traffic Safety and Accountability

In most law enforcement organizations administrators pay careful attention to traffic enforcement. However, their principal focus is on officer productivity, not traffic safety. That is, many executives use traffic enforcement as a means to measure officer performance. This approach often leads to problems. Officers often consider that counting traffic citations is not a valid measure of performance. They may begin to see traffic enforcement as a mechanism to raise revenue for their communities. Unfortunately, they sometimes communicate this view to stopped motorists. But perhaps, more importantly, using traffic tickets as a measure of performance may

encourage officers to write tickets where it is easy to do so and not where the enforcement action will reduce traffic collisions. Every officer knows places in the community where one can obtain a month's expected performance in a matter of hours. This cycle leads to cynicism and weakens the traffic safety program.

Many law enforcement agencies are adopting a new approach to traffic safety programs. These programs worry much less about productivity and much more about results. These departments know that it is important to design collision prevention strategies and then carefully assess the extent to which these programs are working. One such program is LifeStat 1.0, created by the Ohio State Highway Patrol (OSHP). Modeled on the NYPD's CompStat program, LifeStat is OSHP's strategy for providing information that guides the effective assignment of traffic enforcement resources as well as the mechanism to ensure communication among personnel. There are five components of the LifeStat model:

- Completing the implementation of its new inspection process
- Incorporating a monthly teleconference (and video conference when developed) with district commanders to identify trends
- Incorporating trends into the monthly PowerPoint business plan
- Using corridor safety information as identified by the governor's task force on Ohio highway safety to implement local enforcement, education, and engineering solutions
- Using fatal crash information to post Web-based state and county maps denoting fatal crash locations, on a daily basis

In addition to the Ohio State Highway Patrol, several law enforcement agencies, including the NYPD, the North Carolina State Highway Patrol, the Washington State Patrol, and the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department have used this data-driven model to reduce collisions and save lives.

Traffic Enforcement and Crime

For over twenty years police executives, academics, and legal scholars have sought to better understand the effect of traffic law enforcement on the incidence of nontraffic crime. Like many issues in policing, this one has revolved around a curious mixture of research, law, police resource allocation, and politics. Police executives, particularly those interested in traffic safety, have encouraged the notion that traffic law enforcement should not be deemphasized, because traffic enforcement can produce residual crime control benefits. Critics of the police have suggested that when police officers use traffic enforcement to control crime, it is more likely to be directed at members of ethnic minority groups.

Much of our interest in the relationship between traffic enforcement and crime was generated by research conducted by James Q. Wilson and Barbara Boland in 1978.² Wilson and Boland examined the effects of traffic enforcement on robbery rates in 35 large cities and found that communities in which officers on patrol were more "legalistic" (measured by the traffic citations issued per unit) experienced lower rates of robbery.

Several more recent studies have examined these and other related questions. A National Highway Traffic Safety Administration-sponsored field experiment conducted in Dayton, Ohio, examined what happened when officers assigned to routine patrol increased the number of traffic contacts made during discretionary time. While there were no changes in crime, there was a statistically significant reduction in number of arrests for drugs and weapons in the experimental area, leading some observers to suggest that once offenders became aware of heightened police activity in the area,

they chose alternative routes for transporting these goods.³

A project sponsored by the National Institute of Justice suggested that traffic enforcement could play a key role in reducing firearms-related crimes. In the Kansas City Gun Experiment, police officers targeted a high-violent crime area for aggressive patrol. Officers assigned to this area were given special training in how to search automobiles for illegal firearms. During the six-month experiment gun seizures increased by 65 percent in the target beat. There was no increase in the comparison beat. Moreover, the target beat experienced a nearly 50 percent reduction in gun crimes, and there was only a slight change in the number of gun crimes in the comparison beat.⁴

Can a police executive who increases traffic enforcement activities by 10 percent expect a similar decline in crime rates? Does traffic enforcement have relatively similar effects on all parts of a community, or is it better suited to certain areas? Many of these questions were answered in two experiments conducted in Indianapolis.⁵ The most important findings follow:

- Traffic law enforcement can be an effective mechanism for disrupting organized criminal enterprises, particularly when these groups market drugs and illegal firearms. However, such strategies appear to be far more effective when used in high-crime areas.
- Traffic law enforcement can be an effective tool for increasing police visibility, thus increasing the perceived risk of apprehension. It is important, however, that there be a marked departure from normal practice. Simply increasing the marginal productivity of officers (e.g., increasing contacts from one to two a day) will probably not suffice to achieve this goal.
- When using a general deterrence approach, it is probably more effective to increase the level of enforcement dramatically (perhaps 10- or 20-fold) for a brief period of time, back off, and then return to the same level at a subsequent time. This will increase the residual benefit of the program.
- Using traffic stops as a mechanism to find narcotics, guns, and contraband can be effective as a general crime control strategy, but the likelihood of finding such items on a specific stop is extremely low.

Training a New Generation of Traffic Safety Leaders

There are numerous opportunities for police officers to learn the skills required to be an effective traffic enforcement officer. Scores of agencies offer training in topics such as collision investigation, speed enforcement, impaired-driving enforcement, and traffic direction and control. Unfortunately, although training is readily available at the operational level, there are far fewer opportunities for preparing law enforcement personnel for senior leadership positions in traffic safety. As a result, many of the individuals charged with directing traffic law enforcement activities have had relatively modest preparation.

It is important to think about what traffic enforcement leadership training programs might look like. At the very least they would include elements such as traffic accident analysis, enforcement strategies, resource allocation, public relations, information systems, grantsmanship, program evaluation, traffic engineering, and traffic incident management. These courses would provide the kinds of tools that every police traffic manager needs but that few now possess.

The role of the police in traffic safety will continue to grow and become more complex. The time is right for law enforcement leadership to closely examine its current approach and begin to build for the future. To this end, the Northwestern University Center for Public Safety, the Colorado State Patrol, and law enforcement executives from around

the United States will meet in Denver between September 9 and 11, 2007, to launch the STATS model. ■

Notes:

¹U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, "Executive Summary," in "A Trend Analysis of Traffic Law Enforcement in the United States," by Connie H. Wiliszowski, John H. Lacey, Elizabeth Cyr, and Ralph K. Jones (Winchester, Mass.: Mid-America Research Institute, 2001), www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/research/TrendAnalysis/exec_summary.htm, May 23, 2007.

²James Q. Wilson and Barbara Boland, "The Effect of Police on Crime," *Law and Society Review* 12 (Spring 1978): 367–390.

³See Alexander Weiss and Sally Freels, "The Effects of Aggressive Policing: The Dayton Traffic Enforcement Experiment," *American Journal of Police* 15, no. 3 (September 1996): 45–64.

⁴See U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, "Reducing Gun Violence: Evaluation of the Indianapolis Police Department's Directed Patrol Project," by Edmund F. McGarrell, Steven Chernak, and Alexander Weiss (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, 2002), www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/188740.pdf, May 23, 2007, 2.

⁵*Ibid.*

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