

FLEET MANAGEMENT

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The Budget Problem

FOR MOST LAW ENFORCEMENT AND EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES, THE costs related to the purchasing, equipping, operating and maintaining of fleets is the largest single recurring cost, outside that of personnel. The cost of acquiring vehicles, the costs associated with equipping and maintaining these vehicles, and escalating fuel costs have created difficulties for many departments—including police. In 1991, it was announced that Victoria Police had taken a number of cost-cutting measures, which included requirements for detectives to leave their vehicles at the office and for general duties vehicles to spend time stationary whilst on patrol to reduce the use of fuel.

Faced with reduced or tighter budgets, which have resulted in ever-increasing operation constraints for departments, administrators are confronted with the need to minimise the cost associated with operating fleets. There are a number of measures which can be taken in an attempt to reduce costs and these include:

- selection of more fuel-efficient vehicles which are capable of meeting police operational needs;
- purchase of vehicles at the lowest possible price or utilisation of package deals;

- development and implementation of fleet maintenance programs to ensure all fleet vehicles are in peak operating condition; and
- development and/or use of driver training programs aimed at improving the efficiency of fleet operations.

The question of what types of vehicles should be used by police is an important one and in 1991, perhaps more so than in the past, departments are having to carefully consider the intended use of their vehicles and select the most suitable vehicle while taking into account cost factors. Purchasing overpowered vehicles and/or over-equipped vehicles is not cost-effective and not good fiscal management. Economic reality should cause administrators to accept some commonly known facts concerning the operation of most police vehicles:

- in urban areas, most driving is done at or below the speed limit;
- situations calling for urgent duty (pursuit) driving are comparatively rare in the total driving experience, and it has been suggested that pacing the suspect vehicle and effective use of communications are the key to a successful pursuit;
- most police vehicles appear to be normally occupied by one person;
- there has been a reduction in the size of communications and other equipment and, therefore, a reduction in the space required in the vehicle;
- the need for high speed capability in emergency situations is limited—and of questionable value in most cases.

Management Systems

It has already been mentioned that the vehicle fleet is a major consumer of police budgets, and fleet managers have come under increasing pressure to reduce costs and, at the same time, improve or at least maintain the level of service. Some factors which can be considered include:

- a standardised fleet: this means less cost for spare parts, training of personnel, special equipment and tools (where departments maintain their own vehicles); and
- a fleet management information system: designed to afford management reliable information on every aspect of the fleet service operation (thus enabling each vehicle to be monitored from the time it enters the fleet until it is sold or traded).

Police Crashes and Driver Training

One issue to be decided by administrators is whether or not there should be a hierarchy of classes of driving authorities issued to its staff; that is, whether an officer should have to qualify for a special 'in-house permit' in order to be authorised to drive certain types of vehicles, in addition to the officer's regular driving licence. The issue which follows on from this, then, is to decide whether or not driver training should be provided to officers to qualify them to drive particular types of vehicles and, if so, what form should this training take. After all, it is accepted that an organisation's administration is responsible, under health and safety principles, for its staff to be provided with adequate training to enable them to carry out required duties.

It is evident from media reports that police vehicles are involved in spectacular collisions. It is interesting that there appears to be no consensus of opinion or empirical proof as to whether or not driver training leads to a reduction in collisions. When the author was the Assistant Commissioner for Traffic in Victoria, Victoria Police's administration was concerned about the number and percentage of police fleet vehicles which had been involved in collisions. The initial figures were discouraging, but closer analysis suggested that it may not necessarily have been as bad as first seemed. For example, a comparison was made with vehicles of other emergency services and government and semi-government departments which concluded that the police figures were not so bad—in fact they compared very favourably if the analysis addressed other factors such as distance travelled. Yet something still had to be done to reduce these accidents, but what? Many of the incidents in which the vehicles were damaged were avoidable. Was training the answer, or at least one of the answers?

Examples of training

The Louisville Police Department (Kentucky, USA), after providing driver training for its officers, found that in the first six months after the training their overall fleet collision rate had been reduced by 40.2 per cent and collisions caused by officers had declined by 42.8 per cent (Auten 1982, p. 22). While the Daly City Police Department (California, USA) found that, after implementing such a training program, they were able to reduce the ratio of property damage to miles driven from .057 cents per mile to .017 cents per mile in just one year. The savings of .04 cents per mile resulted in considerable savings over the period of a year (Auten 1982, p. 22).

On the other hand, a study which examined the effectiveness of a comprehensive fleet management package applied to drivers of a large Melbourne Transport company, which included two post-licence driver training courses, concluded that:

- the overall package of measures was successful in reducing the drivers' accident involvement; but

- it was not possible to tell whether the package would have been successful without the training course (Manders 1986).

Concerns involving police vehicle collisions

Why the concern about traffic collisions involving police vehicles? What are some of the spin-offs?

- damage to the vehicles: huge repair bills, vehicle not available for work;
- injury and death of members: many man-hours lost; careers, health and lives often ruined; and three times as many Australians die through police use of vehicles than police use of firearms (McGrath 1991, p. vii)
- damage to police image and police/public relations;
- reduction in the efficiency and effectiveness of policing.

Aims of police driver training

Police training driver training should have three aims:

- training to reduce the likelihood of being involved in crashes;
- training drivers in fuel-efficient driving techniques; and
- ensuring that drivers have the correct attitude about their driving responsibilities.

Police Pursuits

Responding at high speed to what are often referred to as urgent duty calls was found by the National Police Research Unit (NPRU) to be:

an entrenched part of the police culture [which] will be difficult to modify (McGrath 1991, p. vii).

Yet the NPRU went on to suggest a number of strategies which could be implemented:

- supervisors should be required to monitor and modify (where appropriate) the driving behaviour of those under their command;
- closer monitoring of police driving behaviour, supported by stepped monitoring through the command chain, would reinforce the message of driver and supervisor accountability (Risk Assessment Management Plan); and

- proposed national initiatives in police driver education should eventually lead to a change in police attitude towards urgent duty (pursuit) driving.

Factors which should not be overlooked when considering collisions involving police vehicles include:

- the age of the driver: in many cases the drivers of the vehicles involved in collisions are young officers with comparatively few years driving experience;
- all weather driving conditions;
- the driving environment and circumstances where the driver and other occupants are required to be especially observant of their surroundings for suspicious or criminal activities;
- the drivers of vehicles being pursued often intentionally crash into or cause police vehicles to crash.

Abuse of Vehicles

A disappointing aspect that seems to have been increasing in recent years is the abuse of vehicles. Often staff do not treat the vehicles with proper care, and it is not unusual to find fast food wrappers, remains of sandwiches, and empty cans or bottles in the vehicles, dirt on the dashboards where the passengers have been resting their feet, and a general condition that seems to indicate an attitude of 'who cares?'. This seems to reflect a number of issues, including a general lowering of supervision. Who is prepared to make 'on the spot inspections' and require some remedial action to be taken? How often are vehicles taken out on the road without any form of check? Who checks the pressure in the tyres? And what about the wheel nuts? Few drivers of departmental vehicles drive and treat the vehicles the way they do their personal vehicles. Why? And what is being done, or can be done about it?

What has to be remembered is that poor maintenance, lack of vehicle checks and abuse can result in reduced safety for the officers. How often are vehicles thoroughly checked by officers concluding duties or just about to commence? What about syringes, knives or other weapons which could be tucked down behind the seats?

Another aspect of vehicle abuse which adds considerably to departmental costs is the private use of departmental vehicles. Fortunately, this issue has started to be addressed in recent years. In some situations, jobs have been identified as entitling the Senior Executive Service (SES) officer to have a vehicle for personal use which, in some instances, is included in the officer's overall salary package. Police departments should require all vehicles, other than those especially exempted on defined criteria, to be clearly marked as 'police' vehicles. This can have a number of positive results including:

- greater police visibility on the roads resulting in a number of positive spin-offs;
- increased onus on the driver to drive more responsibly and treat the vehicle in a more appropriate manner; and
- less likelihood of private abuse of the vehicles.

The police administrator, today and in the future, is going to be very accountable for the management of the department's fleet and will need to ensure that maximum efficiency is obtained from the fleet budget vote. Change will be necessary to achieve this efficiency and savings in productivity, and this will require recognition of the importance of management and marketing to personnel of the role they—and every vehicle user in the department—will have to play to help achieve department goals.

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