

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Police Driving Skills:
The Need for Additional Training**

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ABSTRACT

The Pasadena Independent School District Police Department has been involved in twelve auto accidents since 1991. Eleven of those accidents occurred under normal driving conditions. The Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department should develop and implement a required training program for its officers for the day-to-day safe operation of its police vehicles. Developing such a program would create safer drivers and lead to fewer officer involved auto accidents.

INTRODUCTION

The Pasadena Independent School District (I.S.D.) Police Department has been involved in twelve auto accidents since 1991. Eleven of those accidents occurred under normal driving conditions. The Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department is not unlike other police departments in this country when it comes to driving skills. When discussing police-involved auto accidents, most people think of accidents resulting from police pursuits. These auto accidents are well publicized due to the drama involved with the chase itself. Auto accidents that occur while police officers are performing daily patrol duties however are far more numerous. These auto accidents can result in personal injury or death and also come with a large financial responsibility. Police officers in Texas are required by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE) to qualify at least once a year with their firearms. Currently, there is no such TCLEOSE requirement for driving an emergency vehicle and because there is no requirement, many police officers never receive any additional drivers safety training. Therefore there is a need to explore with the question: Is there a need for additional training in police driving skills?

The purpose of this research paper is to encourage the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department to implement a mandatory training program in the day-to-day safe operation of police vehicles for its officers. Since 1995, none of the twenty-three police officers commissioned by the Pasadena I.S.D. have attended any type of driver-training classes. Officers from this

department and others spend a large portion of their workday in vehicles filled with various pieces of equipment necessary to perform certain aspects of their jobs. These distractions and the amount of time patrolmen spend in their vehicles make them more prone to being involved in an accident.

Information for this research paper was gathered from books, magazine articles, interviews, training records and surveys. A review of the information gathered was done to determine if police officers who receive drivers training are safer drivers. The findings are anticipated to show police officers who receive classroom instruction on department policy and safe driving skills, along with training in the practical application of these skills, will be safer drivers and will therefore be involved in fewer auto accidents.

The results of this research paper will be used to support the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department requiring its police officers to periodically receive classroom and practical application training in driving safety. It is also theorized that the results will show that by providing this training, the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department will reduce the number of accidents, thus also reducing the amount of financial obligations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE OR PRACTICE

Most research on the topic of police driving centers on police pursuits. One does not have to look far to find volumes

of information on the topic. However, there is little published on the non-emergency operation of police emergency vehicles.

According to Sergeant Dan Masera, the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department takes it for granted that new police officers know how to drive when they are hired. The department only hires applicants who have already completed an accredited academy and have passed the State Peace Officer Exam. Currently, the police officer applicant's driving history is checked through TCIC/NCIC during the hiring process and follow-up questions are asked as necessary. The applicant is not asked about his or her academy training. At the time the police officer applicant is hired, the department does not know what kind of driving training the new officer has received. The department does not know if the new officer has had hands on driving training, classroom instruction only or a combination of both (D. Masera, personal communication, June 20, 2003).

Even beyond not knowing what kind of training the new officer has had, the department devotes little time to ensuring that a new police officer does in fact have good driving skills. Often a single veteran officer evaluates the new officer. This evaluation consists of the veteran officer riding along with a new officer for about a week and forming a subjective opinion of the new officer's driving skills. Sometimes several veteran officers may evaluate the new officer over a period of several weeks. The only driving skills the veteran officer or officers evaluate are the ones observed during the course of the time they spend with the new officer. This usually consists of normal

patrol driving and responding to low priority calls not utilizing emergency equipment. No system is in place to require an evaluation of the new officer's emergency driving or pursuit driving skills. No driving training is provided to new officers - just the veteran officer or officers' opinions of their driving skills (Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department Field Training Manual, 2001). In fact, of the more than 7,000 training hours the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department provided its twenty-three police officers from 2000 to 2003 none included any type of training in the safe operation of motor vehicles (D. Masera, personal communication, February 15, 2004).

Most professional law enforcement leaders understand that driving is as dangerous as the use of firearms. Many now believe that it is reasonable to expect officers to train as much in emergency vehicle operations as with firearms according to Whetsel (2001).

As shown in Table I, the number of accidental line-of-duty deaths surpassed the number of officers killed by felons in 1998, 1999 and 2000. The circumstances of the accidental deaths are also shown in table I. Automobile accidents account for at least half of the accidental deaths for each of these three years (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2001).

Table I

Officers Killed in Line-Of-Duty

Circumstances	199	1999	2000

	8		
Criminal actions	61	42	51
Accidental	81	65	84
Automobile accidents	48	41	42
Motorcycle accidents	3	6	6
Aircraft accidents	4	4	7
Struck by vehicles	14	9	14
Accidental shootings	3	3	3
Other (drownings and falls)	9	2	12

As Albrecht (2001) stated the focus of most line-of-duty deaths is on shootings but it is a fact that many officers are killed in auto accidents that have nothing to do with the event they are responding to. Albrecht (2001) further stated "it's easy to see the continuation of a long known and disturbing trend: Cops often die while en route to a call" (p. 54).

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (1994 as cited in Westmorland) police officers are ten times more likely to be involved in an auto accident than the average citizen. However, the misconception that most of these accidents occur during an emergency or pursuit situation was disputed by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 1995 study. The agencies involved in this study were grouped by state and municipal agencies. Fifty-three and a half percent of the injury producing accidents happened during normal patrol driving for state agencies and sixty-seven and a half for the municipal agencies. When studying fatal accidents, eighty-three

percent occurred during normal patrol driving for the state agencies and fifty-seven percent for the municipal agencies.

Another issue of paramount importance raised during the review of literature was liability. Emergency vehicle operations were one of the most highly litigated areas of law enforcement during the 1990s according to Beach (1993). This trend certainly continues today.

According to the Association of Professional Law Enforcement Emergency Vehicle Response Trainers (2001) the US Supreme Court's 1989 decision in *City of Canton v. Harris* (489 US 378) served notice that municipalities and their law enforcement agencies were liable and accountable for the critical law enforcement functions of their officers (p. 454). In this case the US Supreme Court ruled that the city of Canton had shown a "deliberate indifference" to a potential danger by failing to train officers in a particular duty. The duty was being able to recognize when someone was in need of medical attention. The court also found the need of training was obvious, and that the lack of training was likely to result in a violation of constitutional rights. The court held the city of Canton liable in this case. Governmental entities could also be held financially liable for their deliberate indifference in the case of officers improperly trained in the use of police emergency vehicles.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to determine whether or not the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department should develop and implement a

required training program for its officers for the day-to-day safe operation of police vehicles. It is hypothesized that research will support the need for a program in which the officers receive both classroom instruction and practical training. Improving officers' driving skills should create safer drivers and therefore reduce the number of police involved auto accidents and the department's financial burden caused by officer at fault accidents.

Some of the criteria used to evaluate the issue were obtained through two written one-page surveys completed by officers from various school, county, city, and state police agencies throughout Texas. The departments that the surveyed officers were employed with ranged in size from 4 to 3,500 officers. The first survey was completed in June 2003, and sixty-eight percent (15) of the twenty-two surveys were returned. In July 2003, a second survey was conducted. Eighty-three percent (19) of the twenty-three surveys were returned. In all thirty different agencies participated in the surveys. Four agencies participated in both surveys. The surveys questioned if the departments required additional driving training and if so, was it classroom instruction and/or practical application, and for how many hours. The questionnaires gathered such information as approximately how many fleet accidents occurred within a given time frame and under what conditions. Additional information acquired was how many hours officers spend each day driving and how many potentially distracting job - related pieces of equipment are installed in their patrol vehicles. The

information was analyzed to determine if there was a direct correlation between department-required driver training and a decline in the number of officer involved accidents as a result of the training.

The twenty-three police officers of the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department were also given different questions during a telephone survey in April of 2004. All the officers provided such information as to what type of driving training they received at their academy, if any, and if they had had any additional driving training since. Officers also stated how many fleet accidents they had been involved in, how many were at fault and also how many years they had been a police officer.

Additional information was gathered during a March 2004 interview with Officer Bill Stanley of the City of Pasadena Police Department. Officer Stanley had been assigned to the police academy as an instructor for fifteen years and was in his twenty-fourth year of service to the Pasadena Police Department at the time of the interview. Officer Stanley had completed numerous police driving classes and was largely responsible for the development of the Pasadena Police Driving Track, which opened in March of 2004.

FINDINGS

After reviewing the first survey which was conducted in June 2003, it was quickly discovered that the in-car distractions as it related to emergency vehicle accidents was a topic so large as to not be able to be adequately covered in this paper. The

original hypothesis was that radar, mobile data terminals, stolen vehicle tracking devices, video cameras, police radios and cell phones distract police officers and contribute to officer involved auto accidents. No conclusions about how the growing number of in car distractions relate to police involved accidents could be formed from the limited information gathered in the first survey.

At that time it was decided that the focus of the July 2003 survey should remain on how many departments required continuing education on police vehicle operations, how often they required the training and what type of training was provided.

An analysis of the first two surveys revealed that twenty of the thirty agencies surveyed required their officers to attend periodic driver training. Ninety-five percent (19) of the twenty agencies that required periodic driver training employed thirty officers or more. Only two of the departments surveyed who employed fewer than thirty officers, required periodic driver training.

When the frequency of the training was studied, it was determined that eight departments required yearly driver training and six departments required their officers to attend biannual driver training. Two departments required training every three years and one department every two to four years. Two departments had a one time training requirement and one department sent its officers as they deemed necessary.

The next issue studied was the type of training required. Three of the twenty departments only required classroom

instruction. The other seventeen departments required some combination of classroom and actual hands on driving instruction. Eight of the seventeen departments that required a classroom and hands on driving required more classroom time. Five departments required more driving than classroom and four had an equal amount of time for driving and classroom.

The number of hours spent on training varied from six to forty. The most common amount of time devoted to drivers training was eight hours. Thirty-five percent of the twenty departments (7) required eight hours and fifty-five percent (11) required between six and sixteen hours on the topic with the remaining ten percent requiring more.

The average driving time spent by officers from the thirty agencies surveyed was found to be 6.2 hours a day and 87% (26) of the departments surveyed had at least one accident in the previous year.

Two new questions were added to the July 2003 survey. Participants of the second survey were asked what type of driving activity they believed resulted in the most emergency vehicle accidents and if they felt police officers that attended driving classes were safer drivers.

Seventy-two percent (13) of the eighteen officers who responded felt most of the accidents their officers were involved in occurred while officers were performing normal patrol duties such as responding to low priority calls without the use of emergency equipment. Seventeen percent (3) felt most of their departments accidents occurred while officers were responding to

serious calls where emergency equipment was being utilized and eleven percent (2) felt most of their departments accidents occurred during pursuits.

Nineteen officers responded to the question "Do you feel police officers who have attended driving classes are safer drivers (involved in fewer auto accidents)?" Of the nineteen responses, seventy-eight percent (15) felt that attending a driving class did make police officers safer and felt they were involved in fewer accidents.

A review of the April 2004 survey of the officers of the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department, revealed forty-three percent (10) of the department received classroom and hands on driving instruction in their police academy. Forty-eight percent (11) of the department received classroom lecture only and nine percent (2) did not receive any type of driving instruction in their academy class.

Of the ten officers who received classroom and hands on driving instruction in their police academy, fifty percent (5) have had accidents while operating a police vehicle compared to ninety-two percent (12) of the thirteen officers who did not have hands on training during their police academy.

Of the twenty-three officers in the department, only six have received any driving training since attending their police academy. For four of these officers, this was the only hands on driver training they had ever received. Only one officer from the department had attended a driver-training course during the last ten years.

Pasadena I.S.D. police officers were also surveyed about how many accidents they had ever had as police officers and what type of driving activity they were engaged in at the time of the accidents. Seventy-four percent (17) of the department's twenty-three officers stated they had been involved in an accident while operating a police vehicle. The total number of accidents was forty-one. Eighty-eight percent (36) of the accidents occurred while engaged in normal patrol duties including responding to low priority calls without emergency equipment. Twelve percent (5) occurred while responding to serious calls with the use of emergency equipment.

Pasadena Police Academy instructor Bill Stanley was interviewed about where most police involved auto accidents occur and if he thought driving classes led to fewer accidents. Officer Stanley stated that most of the Pasadena Police Department's auto accidents occurred in intersections and while backing. When asked if driving classes decreased the number of officer involved auto accidents, he stated that without a doubt he believed driving classes led to fewer officer involved auto accidents. Officer Stanley used the San Antonio Police Department to support his beliefs. Officer Stanley stated the San Antonio Police Department was involved in one hundred and five accidents in intersections during 1999. The department then implemented a driving program that included vehicle interaction, classroom instruction and simulator training. In 2000, the number of intersection accidents involving the San Antonio Police

Department dropped to thirty-three and in 2001 again dropped to thirty (B. Stanley, personal communication, March 24, 2004).

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

Many police officers spend the majority of their shift driving, thus putting them at a higher risk of being involved in an auto accident. While the accidents that occur from police pursuits are publicly dramatized, the number of accidents that happen during normal patrol duties occur far more frequently. Although statistics support this statement, the exact cause of normal patrol related accidents cannot be determined due to non-standardized record keeping among those law enforcement agencies that do maintain meaningful records.

The question addressed in this research paper is whether or not additional training in police driving skills should be required in order to help reduce the number of fleet accidents and the liability they incur. If so, should the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department implement a mandatory driving training program?

It is hypothesized that officers receiving additional classroom training concerning safe driving skills and the practical application of such skills will be safer drivers therefore resulting in fewer accidents and less liability.

This research paper suggests that the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department should implement a driving program. The program should be at least eight hours long and be required either annually or biannually. The method of instruction should include classroom instruction and also require a practical application of

skills. The driving program should focus on normal driving skills with emphasis on intersections and backing maneuvers.

Implementing such a program would develop safer drivers thus leading to fewer officer involved auto accidents. Therefore, the findings of this research paper support that such a driving program would be beneficial to the Pasadena I.S.D. Police Department and would decrease liability. In fact, implementing such a program would be beneficial to any police department that does not currently require periodic drivers training.

Police officers driving marked patrol vehicles are extremely visible and citizens hold police officers to a higher standard than other citizens. They expect police officers to enforce traffic laws, investigate traffic accidents and to be expert drivers. When citizens witness officer involved auto accidents, their confidence in the police force is lessened. Therefore, fewer police involved accidents resulting from required driving training would promote a greater confidence in law enforcement and would benefit all citizens.

Police officers need better driving skills than the ordinary citizen and driving instructors recognize that training programs reduce officer involved auto accidents, according to Auten (1989). As Chacon (2002) reported, "training, whether remedial or refresher, is the key that makes officers better drivers" (p.4).

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APPENDIX 1
Survey I

Name: _____

Department: _____

Approximate number of Officers: _____

Time with the Department: _____

Does your department require any driving classes? Yes No

Is the program by: TEEX NAPD Developed by department

If so how often? _____

Number of Classroom hours: _____

Practical / driving hours: _____

What skills do the practical hours focus on:

Normal-driving Pursuit driving Combination of both

Has anyone in your department been at fault in a fleet accident in the *last 6 months*?

No Yes If so how many accidents? _____

Has anyone in your department been at fault in a fleet accident in the *last year*?

No Yes If so how many accidents? _____

Have you ever been in an at fault fleet accident?

No Yes If so how many accidents? _____

Estimate the average numbers of hours per day a Patrolman in your department spends driving.

Circle which of the following Patrolmen in your department have in their vehicles:

Mobile Data Terminals

Radar

Laptop computers

Video recorders

Cell Phone

Police radios

Mounted thermal imagers

Transport cages

Lo Jack

Gun rack

Other: _____

APPEXDIX 2

Survey I Respondents

Angleton I.S.D. P.D.

Athens P.D.

Cedar Park P.D.

Dallas P.D.

Del Rio P.D.

Flower Mound P.D.

Fort Bend County S.O.

Galveston County S.O.

Hitchcock P.D.

Katy I.S.D. P.D.

Midland P.D.

Seabrook P.D.

Texas Department of Public Safety

University of Houston - Clear Lake P.D.

Via Transit Authority P.D.

APPENDIX 3

Survey II

Department: _____

Approximate number of Officers: _____

Does your department require any driving classes? Yes No

If so how often? _____

Are the classes: Lecture only Practical/driving Combination of both

If class lecture is used, approximate number of classroom hours: _____

If practical application is used, number of practical/driving hours: _____

What skills do the practical hours focus on:

 Normal-driving Pursuit driving Combination of both

How many fleet accidents would you estimate your department has been in the last year?

What do most auto accidents your Officers are involved in result from:

 Pursuits Responding to serious calls Patrol/responding to low priority calls

Estimate the average numbers of hours per day a Patrolman in your department spends driving.

Do you feel Police Officers who have attended driving classes are safer drivers (involved in fewer auto accidents)?

Yes No

APPENDIX 4

Survey II Respondents

Athens P.D.*

Austin P.D.

Bedford P.D.

Brazos County S.O.

Clute P.D.

Conroe I.S.D. P.D.

El Paso Community College P.D.

Fort Bend I.S.D. P.D.

Galveston County S.O.*

Humble P.D.

Lancaster P.D.

Lubbock I.S.D. P.D.

Missouri City P.D.

Round Rock P.D.

Saginaw P.D.

San Antonio P.D.

Texas Department of Public Safety*

Via Transit Authority P.D.*

Waco P.D.

* Agencies participated in both surveys

APPENDIX 5

Survey of Pasadena I.S.D.

Number of years as a police officer?

Number of accidents involved in as a police officer?

At fault?

What type of driving activity were you engaged in at the time?

Type of driving training received in academy?

Have you attended any other driving classes? If so when?