

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD  
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE**

*Positive Aspects of Aggressive Traffic Enforcement*

**A Policy Research Project  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
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## **Abstract**

Traffic enforcement has long been a mainstay of the police profession. Yet, as the demands on local law enforcement agencies increase allocation of resources and personnel are often moved away from traffic enforcement issues. The value of traffic enforcement activities is often discounted. However, these activities often lead to the identification of unwanted criminals, evidence of other crimes, and can contribute to the overall safety of our communities. De-emphasizing traffic enforcement would seriously hamper the ability of the police to detect and solve crimes, apprehend criminals, prevent crashes, and save lives. Effective and ongoing traffic enforcement is a key factor in improving or maintaining a community's quality of life. The benefit to society through lives saved and injuries reduced or eliminated, and the associated cost savings, is of paramount importance. Law enforcement cannot solve all of society's problems single-handedly. Aggressive traffic enforcement is a viable means of protecting and serving the community, but it must be done within the parameters of educating and gaining public support of the positive results of such policing policies.

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## **Introduction**

In 1998, the City of Sugar Land's Police Department issued 7,318 traffic citations. In addition, 2,538 written warnings were issued. The need for traffic enforcement in the City of Sugar Land is an obvious necessity; however, do the motorists receiving these citations know the real reason they are getting them? It is likely that they do not. It is necessary, and thus the purpose of this paper, to educate the public on why Sugar Land Police Officers enforce traffic laws so aggressively.

Aggressive traffic enforcement has far-reaching and positive results, such as: reducing the number of traffic collisions in certain locations that result in property loss, injury or death, the seizure of narcotics and weapons, and the apprehension of fugitives. Each of these aspects has an impact on the overall quality of life in any given area. A study conducted by Sam Houston State University shows that 81% of the citizens of Sugar Land are greatly concerned with traffic related problems (Lyons and Myers 1). Aggressive traffic enforcement demonstrates to the citizens that their safety and quality of life are of great concern to their police agency.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how aggressive traffic enforcement has a positive impact on the standards of living in a community. It is intended to show the public not only that the Sugar Land Police Department is enforcing traffic laws aggressively, but the reasons and rationale for doing so. The information for the research comes from law enforcement publications, both locally and nationally; federal government sources; City of Sugar Land statistics; and, traffic enforcement protocol information from other law enforcement agencies.

The intended audience for this project is the Chief of Police of the City of Sugar Land. After the presentation of this information to the Chief of Police, the project contents will then be made available to the City of Sugar Land Police Department and City Council. Following their review of this information, it is the hope of the author that a public awareness campaign on aggressive traffic enforcement policies and procedures of the Sugar Land Police Department will be received by the citizens and motoring public. As a result, the community will identify the positive aspects of such and support an aggressive traffic enforcement protocol aimed at increasing the safety and quality of life for all citizens in the City of Sugar Land.

### **Historical or Legal Context**

Enforcement of traffic laws is a necessary and vital function of law enforcement agencies in our modernized and mobile society. Despite the necessity of effective traffic enforcement, public perceptions vary on the use (or abuse) of such methods. When asked about the “drive” behind traffic enforcement, a segment of the public has been known to equate traffic enforcement to revenue generation, while others believe a “quota system” exists. With this insight into traditional public opinion, it is not only imperative law enforcement agencies actively pursue the enforcement of traffic laws, but that they do so in a manner which perpetuates positive community support and understanding of such programs.

In a study conducted by the Department of Transportation, 191% more people were killed or injured in traffic accidents than those who were killed or injured from being murdered, robbed or assaulted (Booth, 6). The loss in property due to accidents is 62% greater than from the loss of property due to crimes such as burglary, theft, and

unauthorized use of motor vehicles (7). These statistics dramatically highlight and are evidence that the safety of a community, particularly an extremely mobile community as Sugar Land, must ensure the safety of its citizens by undertaking steps to carry out aggressive traffic enforcement. The goal of aggressive traffic enforcement is singular in purpose: prevent accidents, thus promoting ease of travel and safety within a jurisdiction.

Law enforcement agencies from across the United States are attempting to improve traffic safety in their jurisdictions. They hope to accomplish this by reducing the incidence of speeding and driving while intoxicated (DWI), increasing compliance with safety restraint laws, and enforcement of other motor vehicle codes. Although important, the effects of an enforcement program will be limited unless public awareness of the enforcement can be elevated (Guidelines for Developing a Municipal Speed Enforcement Program, 1). Significant achievements can be obtained when law enforcement and civilian[s]...work together toward the common goal of improved traffic safety (Guidelines...3). Again, the importance of aggressive traffic enforcement falls concurrently within the domain of legal practices and public awareness.

Aggressive enforcement of traffic codes and laws must be counterbalanced with a public awareness and understanding of the meaningful efforts of local law enforcement personnel in implementing and carrying out such practices. In short, traffic safety policies and programs need to have the support of the community they are intended to serve. If so, the public knowledge in itself becomes one of a general deterrence effort by increasing awareness of the enforcement program and other safety issues within a community.

The International Chiefs of Police Highway Safety Committee reports “failure to enforce traffic laws is bad public relations” (IACP, 30). It may also be concluded that failure to educate the public is too. Overlooking this essential component in an effective and aggressive traffic enforcement policy may have negative consequences, as depicted by events involving the Sugar Land Police Department in October 1997. Following directives to actively pursue traffic enforcement in the city, a sergeant tried to motivate his shift officers with an enticement ... a “fat steak dinner”. Local newspapers and various media outlets picked up the story for broadcast. Subsequently, the story hit the Associated Press Wire Service who distributed it nationally. The “contest” was deemed “a quota” by the many in the community.

The aim and purpose of motivating officers to aggressively enforce traffic laws was the result of citizens citing speeding and careless driving as problems in their Sugar Land neighborhoods. Sugar Land City Manager David Neely said, “traffic [is] the number one concern of the community, [and]...the city had received numerous calls from residents demanding that something be done about speeding on neighborhood streets.” Despite one Sergeant’s well-meaning intentions, public opinion swayed in opposition to the City of Sugar Land’s attempt to aggressively pursue traffic enforcement. This incident demonstrates the need for public awareness and education on traffic issues. An article published by the Traffic Institute of Northwestern University best sums up the correlation between the public and effective traffic enforcement:

“The extent of the true effect that law enforcement will have on the behavior of the drivers depends upon what the drivers think the police will do, or upon the

reputation of the police for taking enforcement action. Consistency and visibility are therefore important factors.”

Law enforcement agencies should not allow any information gap to develop with respect to safety strategies. Otherwise public perceptions are formed largely by media preoccupations on isolated law enforcement abuses (IACP 30).

### **Review of Literature and Practice**

The City of Sugar Land continues to grow rapidly. Rapid growth, residential and commercial, results in increased vehicle capacity on roadways. The increased number of motorists on public thoroughfares can be equated to higher incidences of traffic violations. In order to circumvent the problems arising from traffic incidents, the City of Sugar Land Police Department needs to be proactive, not reactive, in addressing the traffic concerns of the community. The City of Sugar Land is a mix of business, commercial and residential ingredients. The City of Sugar Land – located 20 miles southwest of downtown Houston – is one of the fastest-growing communities in the United States. Within the past 5 years, the population has increased from 36, 846 to 61,587 (refer to Attachment A). Again, the increase in population and street traffic can be equated to higher incidences of accidents. The (reported) accident total for 1994 was 571 incidents. To date, the City of Sugar Land Police Department has worked approximately 800 accidents. The projected total for the 1999 calendar year is expected to come upon 1284 accidents (refer to Attachment B). With these figures in mind, the City of Sugar Land Police Department is aggressively pursuing effective traffic enforcement. Using the same baseline comparison, 1994, the number of traffic assignments by the Sugar Land Police Department has increased 42.5 fold, from 153 to a



projected total exceeding 6,500. Currently, totals show an increase in numbers from 153 in 1994 to approximately 4,000 for the first 8 months of 1999 (refer to Attachment C).

During the conference of the First IACP Forum on Professional Traffic Stops, those in attendance declared, "proactive traffic enforcement is an effective strategy to protect the public from the devastation caused by street and highway traffic-related death and injury, drug abuse, illegal trafficking in and possession of weapons, continued freedom of fugitives, and to otherwise promote and maintain an orderly and law abiding society" (IACP 2). The contributions of pro-active enforcement are impressive:

- Studies have shown more illegal guns are taken off the street through traffic stops than any other tactic;
- The Drug Enforcement Administration estimates that 40 percent of all drug arrests in this country are the outgrowth of traffic stops; and,
- When the Traffic Enforcement Index goes up, the traffic death and injury toll often goes down.

(Information taken from the report on "Recommendations from the First IACP Forum on Professional Traffic Stops".)

One of the most effective tools in a law enforcement agency's repertoire is the alert patrol officer. Consider the following brief but impressionable facets of traffic enforcement. The Oklahoma City bombing case was solved as a direct result of a routine traffic stop. One of the largest marijuana seizures ever in Los Angeles resulted from a routine traffic stop from expired tags. Based on information disseminated by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration more people are killed every year in traffic crashes, a fatality every 13 minutes, than by murder, one every 21 minutes (1).

Some statistical quotes cite motor vehicle accidents claim one death every 11 minutes and an injury every 18 seconds (Sweeney 48). Captain Bob Collins of the Independence (Missouri) Police Department is quoted, "Americans seem to accept 40,000 traffic deaths a year as inevitable but are outraged that we cannot prevent 20,000 homicides yearly. Is dying in a motor vehicle 'less dead' than being murdered, or do we have a perception problem?" (NTHSA 14)

Citizens and police alike have traditionally viewed traffic control as an ancillary component of law enforcement duties and responsibilities. Some young officers "caught up in the crime fighter mystique" have shown disdain for traffic enforcement as not being "real" police work (Sweeney 48). This simply is not the case. Aggressive traffic enforcement is much more than simple ticket writing when calls for services are slow. Professional traffic enforcement is a vitally important tool that saves lives and reduces crime. Crash reduction and criminal interdiction are by-products of efficient traffic enforcement (NHTSA 5). There is a need to sensitize public officials, the media, and the public to the crime-deterrent effects of traffic enforcement (23). By the end of 1995, the FBI's National Crime Information Center was receiving 1,613,000 queries a day (1,120 per minute); about 90% of them from patrol officers (2). These statistics show the potential crime fighting ability, which may be directly correlated to traffic enforcement. Studies have shown that an aggressive traffic officer consistently makes more criminal arrests than his detective counterpart (Pilant 24). Public awareness of the vast benefits afforded by aggressive traffic enforcement needs to be brought to the forefront. This should become an aim of the public education component in the community policing

action. An aggressive traffic enforcement policy does not conflict with community policing principles, but can work in conjunction with them (24).

### **Discussion of Relevant Issues**

In order to successfully enforce an aggressive traffic enforcement program, it is necessary to establish parameters or guidelines for the program. Determination of a focus, or selection of a traffic issue or issues, is the first step in accomplishing this aspect. Next, a plausible course of action should be outlined. "If you don't know where you're going, you may end up somewhere else" (author unknown). This idea delineates the need for pre-determining specific strategies to use in aggressive traffic enforcement tactics. These tactics may include scheduling regular patrols for maximum visibility in the community, establishing specific radar monitoring sites, deployment of decoy vehicles, random or pre-determined safety restraint checkpoints, or any other number of traffic enforcement methods. Furthermore, specific enforcement zones or sites can be determined based on examining previous records of accidents, citations or similar traffic data.

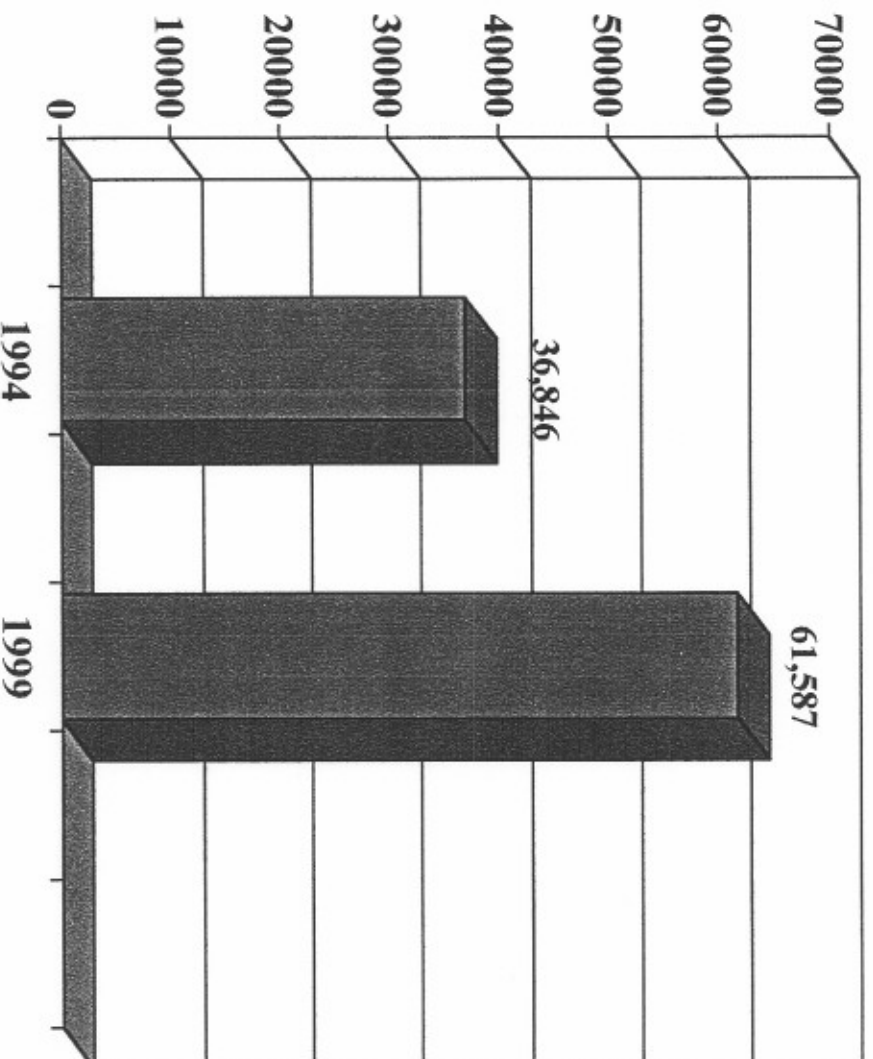
To maximize police efforts and foster an atmosphere of community support and awareness, a public information and education program should be implemented. Budgetary restraints should not hinder the success of an aggressive traffic enforcement program. In most communities, there are a great number of concerned citizens and civic leaders who have both the talent and resources required to develop and implement effective program support activities. Press conferences and public service announcements will assist in getting information disseminated to the community. Safety slogans and logos can be selected for various traffic enforcement programs. Most anyone

who hears the acronym M.A.D.D. automatically references Mothers Against Drunk Driving and their mission. Development of original ideas or collaboration with federal programs will be a distinction in the community and generate attention and awareness. Finally, collect relevant data for needs assessment and determination of program success.

### **Conclusion**

As the City of Sugar Land continues on its path of growth and diversification, the need for increased traffic enforcement in the community is evident. There is a need to develop strategies to maintain and improve traffic services in an effort to refocus traffic enforcement in response to changes within the community. It is important that the level of traffic enforcement keep pace with the increase in our population and number of vehicles on public roadways. The City of Sugar Land Police Department has 21 Directives in place under the Standard Operating Procedures pertaining to traffic enforcement. It is necessary to take these directives further – effectively and purposefully enacting upon them and educating the citizens about the positive aspects of doing so. “When the public eventually becomes aware that traffic crashes are the most serious threat to its personal and financial security, police agencies will be expected to provide more protection from the threat” (Seiler 27). The City of Sugar Land Police Department is aware of the need for aggressive traffic enforcement. The focus for the traffic safety program is all encompassing – speed, safety restraint, and DWI enforcement – in order to ensure the safety of all citizens in the City of Sugar Land.

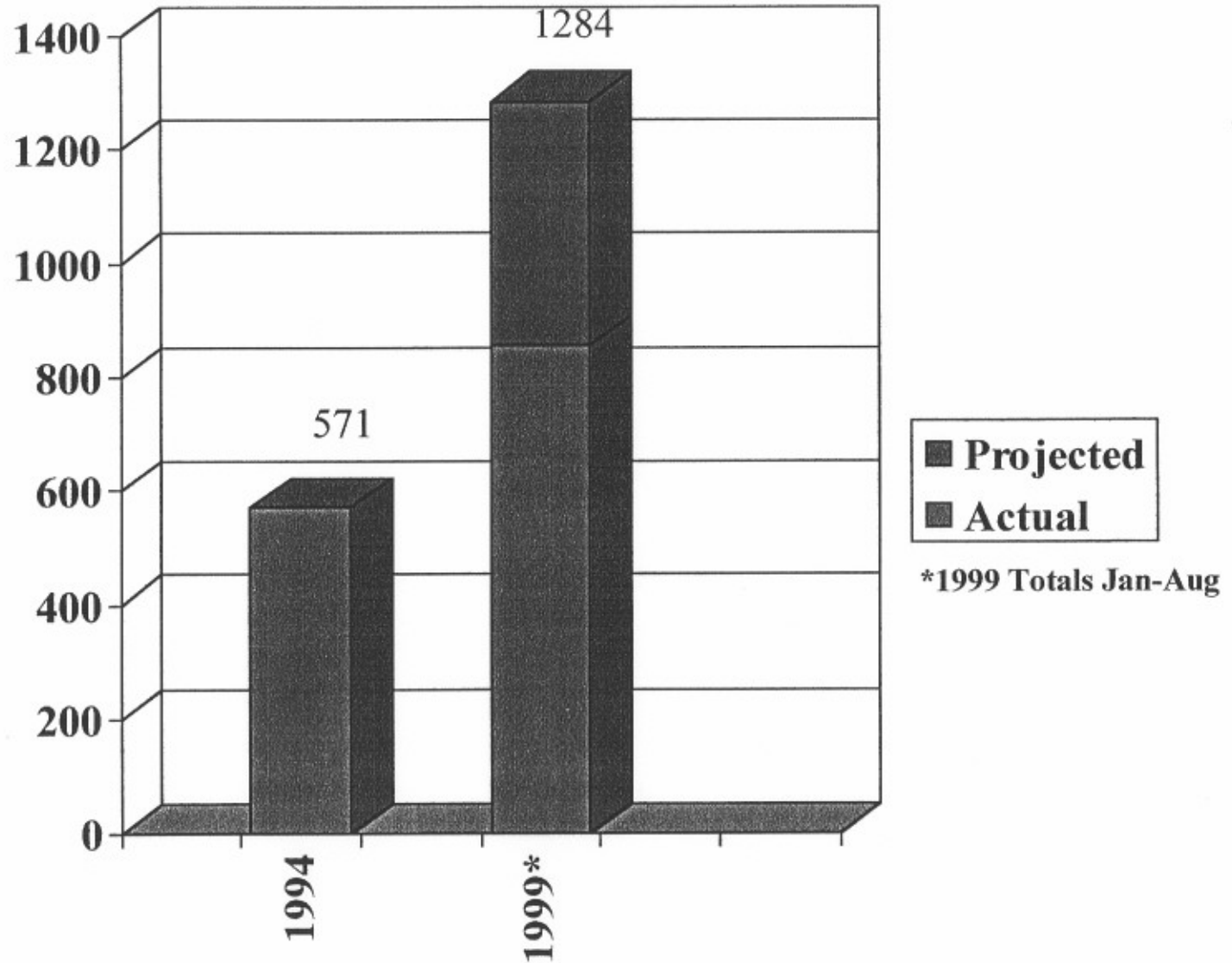
# Population



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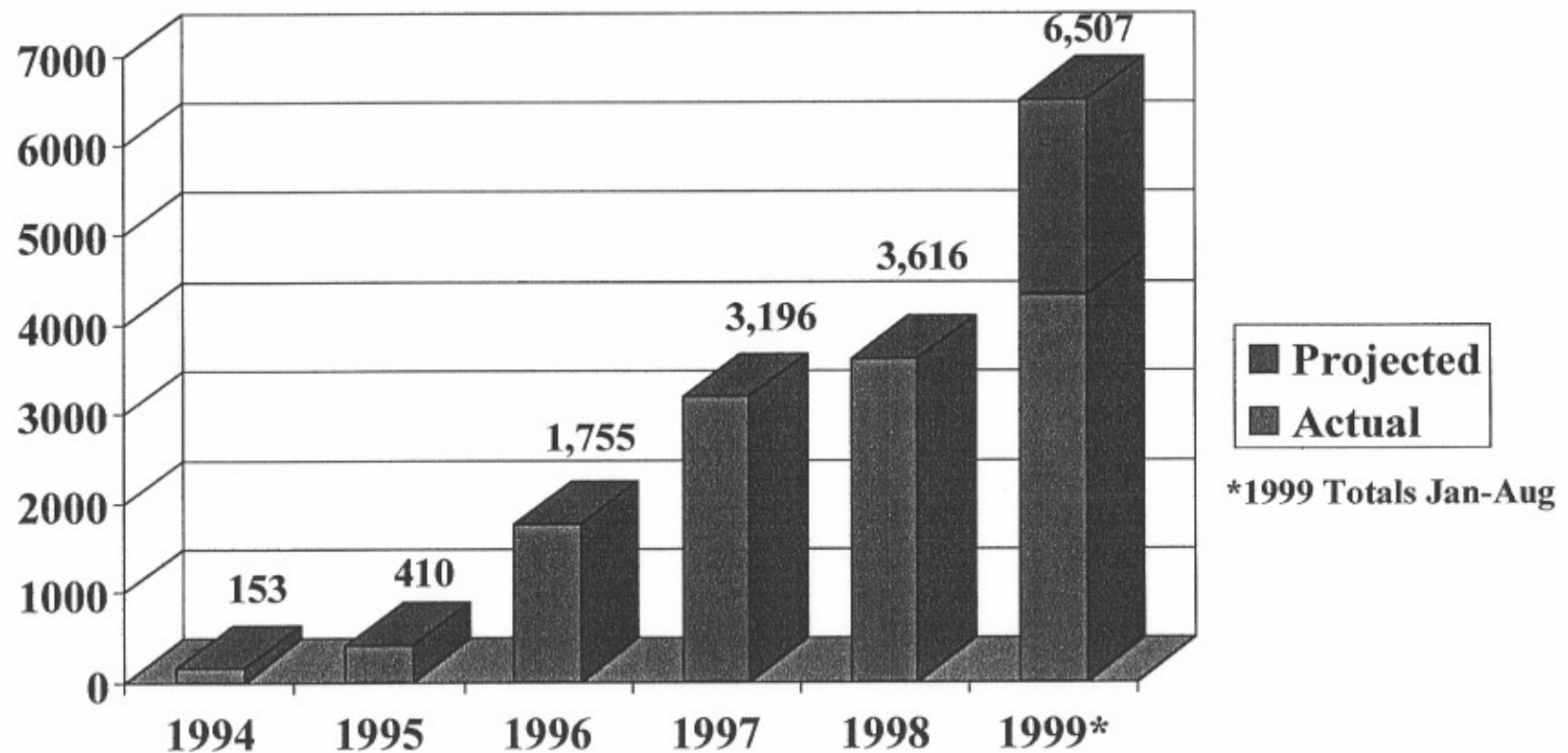
# ACCIDENTS

ATTACHMENT B



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# Traffic Assignments



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