

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

A STUDY OF THE COST EFFECTIVENESS AND
POLICY GUIDELINES OF TAKE-HOME PATROL CARS

A LEARNING CONTRACT
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
MODULE II

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KELLER, TEXAS

JUNE, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, police managers have been faced with problems that require innovative solutions. Two areas of concern have been a rising crime rate and increased demands for competitive benefits for personnel. College-educated police officers are requiring management efforts that meet the needs of department members. This, in turn, motivates the officer to work toward accomplishing the department's goals.¹

One method of addressing both the crime rate and the benefit package, has been take-home, or individually assigned, patrol vehicles. This system allows individual officers to be assigned a marked patrol vehicle as their personal car. The officer is allowed to take the vehicle home and use it for personal business while off duty.

The take-home car program has been positively received by the personnel involved as evidenced by the statistics that will be provided. It has also been accepted by management, due to the fact that programs which have been started continue to expand.

There are several variables and qualifiers regulating the use of these vehicles. These will be discussed within the body of this work.

CURRENT PROGRAMS IN USE

Five programs were located in researching information for this paper. They are: Jackson, Wyoming; Hobbs, New Mexico;

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Mesquite, Texas; and Denton, Texas.

Jackson, Wyoming started their program to combat crime by increased police visibility. Each of the city's thirteen officers are issued a vehicle for on-duty and off-duty use. Although no statistics were available, the city and citizens both feel that the program is successful.²

The program in Hobbs, New Mexico was implemented in 1978.³ It was begun as a result of the city's desire to enhance morale and increase police coverage during peak workload hours. The take-home car program was combined with a three day on/three day off officer shift schedule. Cars are assigned only to officers who live within the city limits of Hobbs.

The stipulation for personal use required officers to respond to certain types of calls while off-duty. Between April 1978 and April 1979, off-duty officers responded to 5,127 calls, 138 of which resulted in arrests.

This program has clearly been a success for both the city of Hobbs and its citizens. The visibility and effectiveness of the Hobbs Police Department was improved while giving the citizens an enhanced feeling of security.

Oklahoma City also began their take-home car program as a way to address crime through increased police visibility. Started in 1987, three phases were planned to implement the program. Phases 1 and 2 had officers working the evening and midnight shifts being assigned vehicles. Phase 3 is currently

in operation with day shift officers being assigned vehicles.

Like officers in the Hobbs program, officers participating in the take-home car program must live in the city limits and must respond to certain types of calls. Oklahoma City officers may also make traffic stops while off-duty.

Since August of 1987 off-duty officers in Oklahoma City have performed the following activities indicated in Table 1:⁴

Table 1

Off-Duty Officer Activity

Traffic Citations Issued.....	1,646
Accidents Investigated.....	83
Emergency Calls Responded To.....	4,296
Felony Arrests.....	378
Misdemeanor Arrests.....	328
Stolen Cars Recovered.....	52
Citizens Assisted.....	1,655

All indications are that the Oklahoma City program has accomplished the desired goals of increased police visibility and presence. The added results of lower maintenance costs and increased resale values have made the take home car program a success in Oklahoma City.⁵

Two cities in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex presently have take-home car programs. They are Mesquite and Denton. Both programs are identical with minor differences in reporting maintenance. For purposes of comparison these will

be the department programs discussed within the body of this report.

Both programs have been in effect for several years. Because of this longevity, off-duty response statistics are no longer maintained.

Both programs are controlled by department policy. The policy addressing the Mesquite program has been continually updated with the latest revision being January of 1990. Denton's policy is dated March of 1986.

Both programs issue vehicles based on job assignment, seniority, residency, and the best interest of the department. Mesquite officers must live in the city limits to participate. Participation by Denton officers require they live in the city limits, or within two miles of the city limits, but not in the city limits of another city. All take-home cars are assigned to officers working uniformed assignments, usually in the patrol division.

Both programs also list the same objectives.⁶ They are:

1. To enhance public safety through increased police visibility on the streets of the city.
2. To maximize the quality of vehicle maintenance.
3. To provide quick and effective response to disasters, disorders, or other incidents which may require the recall of off-duty personnel.
4. To enhance the ability of the department to provide police service commensurate with the

need for such service.

Officers are required to maintain radio communications while operating the vehicles off-duty. While not required to respond to calls when off-duty, it is encouraged that they do so. The use of emergency equipment is dictated by the same regulations as for on duty use.

Officers are required to meet a dress code for off-duty vehicle operation. Mesquite's is very vague and simply requires "appropriate attire that does not reflect unfavorably" on the police department. Denton's policy is more specific and describes both acceptable and unacceptable clothing.

Officers in both departments are responsible for their assigned vehicle's maintenance and upkeep. The policies are specific as to who is authorized to perform maintenance on city vehicles.

For purposes of analysis, this report will focus on the programs of the Mesquite and Denton police departments.

COST COMPARISON: POOL VS. ASSIGNED

There is a marked decrease in the cost of maintaining the individually assigned vehicles versus pool cars. This is mainly due to the fact that a person takes better care of equipment that he/she is personally responsible for. The Oklahoma City report stated that officers even performed minor maintenance chores, at their own personal expense, while off-duty.

Maintenance records from the Mesquite Police Department show a very definite gap in the cost of maintenance. Five vehicles from each group (assigned and pool) were selected and the maintenance records averaged over a three year period. All ten vehicles were identical 1984 Fords. Table 2 indicates the cost per year per vehicle.

Table 2

Mesquite Police Department

Average Cost Per Year

Year	Assigned	Pool	Cost Differential
1986	\$1670.52	\$2037.23	\$366.71
1987	\$1323.88	\$1862.71	\$538.83
1988	\$1450.05	\$4260.65	\$2810.60
Three Year Average	\$1481.48	\$2720.19	\$1238.71

As evidenced by the figures in Table 2, the cost escalates dramatically as the cars begin to age and the mileage increases. The pool vehicles are operated twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, which quickly increases the mileage and the wear and tear on the cars.

It should be noted that Mesquite replaces twenty pool cars each year with new cars. Any extra new cars are assigned to the take-home program along with the lower mileage pool cars. To control costs associated with purchase and maintenance, no more than fifty percent of the uniformed services officers may participate in the take-home car

program.

Denton's method of assignment and records keeping is a sharp contrast to Mesquite's. All new cars are assigned to the take-home program for three years. After three years the cars are rotated into pool service. Because of this system, the maintenance costs on the vehicles escalate sharply at the fourth year.

Long term maintenance records are not kept by fiscal year. Records are kept for the current year, and then added into a cumulative total. For this report, records for twenty cars were considered. Five cars each from year one, two, three, and four were used. Years one, three, and four are Ford LTD's, with year two vehicles being Dodge Diplomats.

Table 3 shows the average cost of maintenance for each group of vehicles. There would appear to be no discernable difference in maintenance of the Fords versus the Dodges.

Table 3

Denton Police Department

Average Maintenance Costs

Vehicle Year	Life-to-date	Current Year
Group	Costs	Costs
Year 1	\$661.41	\$297.23*
Year 2	\$1354.78	\$578.14
Year 3	\$3520.21	\$787.98
Year 4	\$5338.24	\$1749.18

* Vehicles were actually in service before October

1, 1989, which starts the current fiscal year.

As Table 3 indicates, the cost of maintaining a car rises sharply in the third and fourth years. It would seem that this system is self-defeating as it places older, higher mileage cars into pool service where they are operated twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. However, Denton's maintenance supervisor, Jack Jarvis, is a staunch supporter of the program. The money saved in years one through three apparently offsets the expenditures in year four and after.

If compared to Mesquite's figures from Table 2 it would appear that the Mesquite Police Department's program is more cost effective. The four year average for Denton's program is \$2,718.66 per unit. This is within \$2.00 of the \$2,720.19 cost of maintaining Mesquite's pool vehicles. This is based solely on maintenance funds expended and does not take into account other objectives of the programs.

DISADVANTAGES OF ASSIGNED CARS

There are three major disadvantages to these programs. They are usually the reasons given for not having one. These are not inconveniences to be eliminated, but are obstacles that must be overcome.

The first is that it is expensive to implement a take-home car program. The up-front cost of purchasing vehicles can be prohibitive due to today's equipment cost.

A new police vehicle with the "police package" (high performance engine, heavy duty suspension, oversized cooling

system, etc.) will range in cost from \$13,000.00 to \$15,000.00. Add to this up to \$6,000.00 for equipment such as radios, light bar, siren, and mobile computer, and the cost of a car can range from \$16,000.00 to as high as \$21,000.00 each.

For any sized department this can represent a sizable monetary investment. This leads to the second disadvantage, selling a program to a city council.

Because police departments compete with other city departments for budget funds, it can be difficult to sell a program such as take-home cars. Programs such as Oklahoma City's can run into millions of dollars in implementation costs. This requires careful fiscal planning on the part of administrators to be able to persuade a city council to agree to a program.

The third disadvantage is the potential for real and perceived abuse by officers who are assigned cars. Policy restrictions must be thorough enough to prevent abuse, and to deal with it adequately if it occurs.

Officers with both Mesquite and Denton reported that citizens are aware of the vehicles and watch how they are operated. Neighbors of officers with assigned cars like the cars being kept in the neighborhood but there are those citizens who will perceive most off-duty use of these vehicles as abuse. A careful screening and selection process of officers who will be assigned cars can reduce the probability

of complaints.

ADVANTAGES OF ASSIGNED CARS

The advantages are as strong in favor of having a program as the disadvantages are against.

First and foremost is the reduced maintenance costs. The data collected from both Mesquite and Denton indicate a high reduction in maintenance on the assigned cars. The information from the two cities would lead to a conclusion that a minimum reduction of thirty percent per assigned vehicle can be expected. Final figures would depend on the actual number of assigned cars involved.

One person drives and maintains the car, which limits responsibility for upkeep. It eliminates communication breakdowns that result in preventive maintenance not being performed. There is also a certain pride in an officer keeping "my car" in a well maintained condition.

Another plus is that officers are always prepared for duty and the prevailing weather conditions. Rain gear and coats are kept in the officer's assigned vehicle, rather than in the station locker room. All report forms, briefcases, and other equipment are accounted for by the officer and he/she knows what needs to be replaced or repaired.

A supervisor with Denton reported that some officers even buy additional equipment not provided by the department. This results in an officer being better prepared for their job because they have the equipment they feel is necessary for

competent job performance.

The increased visibility and availability are factors that must be considered in a positive light. While figures for Mesquite and Denton were not available, the ones from both Hobbs, New Mexico, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, prove that the off-duty use of the cars can produce results.

During major disasters/incidents these cars are very valuable. Off-duty officers called into service are ready for duty when they leave home. They respond directly to the incident scene without time lost reporting to the station first.

Of all the advantages listed, the ones that seem to bear the most consideration revolve around better maintenance and increased police presence, both real and perceived. It is safe to conclude that the average citizen is as secure as the police department makes him/her feel. If a perceived increase in police presence reinforces this security, and decreased maintenance saves tax dollars, then these reasons, when coupled with a better prepared police officer, make take-home cars an attractive program.

POLICY GUIDELINES FOR ASSIGNED CARS

As stated earlier, both Denton and Mesquite operate their programs based on a general orders policy. The individual policies are virtually identical, with only a few subtle variations regarding dress code and maintenance records.

Based on this information, the following areas should be

addressed by policy: Objectives of the program, vehicle assignment, off duty operation, and maintenance.

A statement of objectives is necessary to set the tone for the program. It should be clearly stated at the outset as to why the program exists and what is to be accomplished. The earlier listed objectives would appear to be sufficient.

Vehicle assignment is important to define. Some departments may, due either to budget restraints or choice, desire not to issue cars to all personnel.

The standard used by Mesquite would seem to be more easily defended. An administrator could have a difficult time defending the storage of any marked patrol vehicle outside of the city limits. Using the guidelines of job assignment, seniority, residence location, and the best interests of the department allows the department administrator to limit or expand the program as desired.

Off duty operation must be addressed because of the potential for abuse. The following areas should be included:

- A. Who is authorized to operate the vehicle.
- B. Safety and security of non-police passengers.
- C. Radio assignment of off duty personnel including when they should make themselves available for service.
- D. The use of all emergency equipment.
- E. Proper clothing to be worn while operating the vehicle.

- F. The use of alcohol before vehicle operation.
- G. Any operation that could be perceived as misuse, such as the number of units congregated in one location, use of cars on part time jobs, and local issues that may affect the public's perception of how the cars are being utilized.

The communication by available off duty officers to dispatch is of the utmost importance. Fair Labor Standards require that all personnel be compensated for time worked. Accurate records of off duty responses will allow department administrators to properly complete payroll records.

Maintenance should cover aspects such as who is responsible for ensuring the proper repairs are done, who makes the repairs, and how repairs are recorded. This section should also require supervisory inspection of both vehicles and records to monitor each vehicles operation and maintenance.

Records should be kept on the miles driven, both on and off duty. Extensive off duty use will increase mileage more rapidly and will require regular monitoring to determine when to replace a vehicle. A log of off duty incidents would be helpful in determining how much a car is being utilized.

All repairs or alterations to vehicles should be department approved. Officers should not be permitted to use unauthorized gasoline or oil additives as they may be detrimental to a proper maintenance program.

Last, the policy would place the supervision of off duty units with the on duty supervisor. This gives immediate accountability for all off duty responders and fixes the supervision authority. The on duty supervisor can decide how many responding units are needed and disregard any units that are unnecessary.

Any other guidelines included in a take-home car policy would be specific to the department involved. Some local issues may require the alteration or exclusion of the above-listed provisions. It is up to the department administrator to determine how lenient or restrictive the final policy is.

SUMMARY

A take-home car program can be extremely beneficial if properly administered. It bolsters personnel morale, enhances police visibility, and, with a proper officer attitude, will produce positive results in both maintenance and activity. It could best be described as a situation where everybody (police, city administration, and citizens) wins.

If poorly planned, a program can be costly to implement and operate. The initial cost of take-home cars is an expense that must be carefully considered. The cost will be directly related to the number of personnel living within the car assignment requirements.

Careful planning by police administrators will allow a program to be implemented in an efficient manner. Proper foresight of current and anticipated issues related to off

duty vehicle use will ensure that a complete and all-encompassing policy is put in place.

If the cost of cars and equipment continues to escalate these programs become cost prohibitive. If the cost can be contained, the maintaining of current programs, and the implementation of new programs, will continue to the benefit the cities that use them, and the citizens they serve.

NOTES

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2. Arthur G. Sharp, "Policing 'Two Season' Communities," Law and Order, 34 (1986): 28.
3. Productivity Improvement Techniques: Creative Approaches for Local Government, ed. John Matzer, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1986), 152-153.
4. Doug Shaeffer, Take Home Cars: A Program Evaluation, Oklahoma City Police Department, (1989), 25.
5. Ibid.
6. City of Mesquite, General Orders Manual, (1990), 87-88.
City of Denton, General Orders Manual, (1986), 109.00.

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