

**The Bill Blackwood
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Police Departments Should Allow Take Home Vehicles

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate why it is important and why departments should allow their officers to take home their patrol cars. There are arguments on both sides of the issue regarding the pro position and the not in favor position of the topic. The fact remains that there is more research to show that officer morale is higher, the wear and tear on city vehicles is less, and that the amount of miles registered on the patrol vehicle is far less. The research will show that the departments with a legitimate take home policy have fewer miles and less damage to the patrol fleet. The cars are better maintained if the officer has some ownership in the vehicle he drives. Some departments have even gone as far as to allow the officers to affix their name to the door.

In closing, the research will prove an argument to department leaders the importance and the reason for a take home policy. It will show the importance of fewer miles driven and less wear and tear. The research will comment on and address the opinions of several law enforcement professionals from around the country.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, a struggle within police departments exists today that deals with several different topics ranging from officer retention to officer satisfaction to budgets. The departments have a never ending issue with, for instance, officer retention. Departments, historically, have tried different ways to retain officers ranging from benefits, to better salaries, to certain perks that sometimes are just offered in the corporate world.

Some departments have experimented with the idea of offering sign on bonuses to entice officers to apply with their department. The sign on bonuses typically do not work well as the city leaders usually get involved and eliminate that item from budgets. The idea of offering an officer a substantial amount of money to work for them is not usually received well with the citizens and councils.

The budget, for example, is a constant struggle and one that has to be dealt with on an everyday basis in order to allow the department to run smoothly. The budget usually calls for line items from salary to benefits, to equipment to the never-ending cost of training. The salary for an officer typically ranges from the low \$40's to the mid \$50 thousand dollar range and this multiplied by however many officers a department may have is a lot of money.

Another aspect of the budget is the patrol vehicle or as it is known in the business, "the fleet". The department heads and the fleet managers are typically tasked with choosing a particular style of vehicle that will meet the needs of the officers and the department. The style of vehicle is quite simply a sedan type, pickup truck, or sport utility vehicle (SUV) type vehicle that is built on a truck chassis. The department heads

have to decide many different things when it comes to choosing the right police vehicle. For example, many departments in the north may have a need for a true truck type vehicle due to terrain and weather, while agencies in the south are well suited with a sedan. The needs of the department become a difficult decision when trying to choose a vehicle, which is not an easy one. Department managers have to decide what equipment and emergency lighting equipment will be needed and if it happens to be an SUV, it requires slightly more equipment. One of the final decisions and probably the one that generates the most discussion and sometimes stress is the cost of the vehicle and equipment.

The vehicle (Chevrolet Tahoe) typically costs, through state bidding, approximately \$38,000 dollars before equipment install ("A look at life cycle," 2010). The equipment, which ranges from emergency lighting, to interior computer, radios, radar, light controls, shotgun, M4 rifle, and accident investigation and miscellaneous gear in the back could cost as much as \$15,000 dollars. Pursuit Safety provides price quotes to purchasers upon request. Pursuit Safety is a provider of emergency vehicle equipment (www.pursuitsafety.com). When the build is complete, the vehicle could cost the city as much as \$55,000 dollars per unit.

When talking about how expensive a police vehicle costs, the next logical question has to be about how long the vehicle will stay in the police fleet and if maintenance and the cost of fuel price the vehicle is out of reach for most departments. According Nash (1995), an agency can anticipate the average life of a take home vehicle to be approximately eight years. Nash goes onto say a fleet vehicle is expected to last two to three years (Nash, 1995). The department has to develop a plan to

maintain the vehicles through a regularly scheduled maintenance program and up keep. The department will find that the initial cost of the fleet will be steep, but within 2-4 years the department will start to see the return on its money.

Police departments should allow its patrol officers to take home their police vehicle to and from the house. The take home program should create a sense of ownership and empower the patrol officer to better take care of his or her vehicle, thus reducing the cost of maintenance and excessive wear and tear on the patrol vehicle, also showing a return on investment. This has also proven to reduce crime in areas due to more visibility.

POSITION

A person must understand why police managers think the way they do and why they choose certain vehicles and equipment. The reason for the take home program is to increase officer visibility within the community. Often, citizens state that they never see the police. Allowing an officer to take his vehicle home and park it in the driveway places the vehicle in a neighborhood and the vehicle itself creates a sense of security and puts residents at ease (Yates, 1992).

Important to any take home police car program is the limited wear and tear on vehicles within the fleet. When a department agrees to start the program, one of the steering points for the program itself is how to maintain and keep these vehicles for a long time. Department managers assign each patrol vehicle to a particular officer and that officer is now responsible for its care and upkeep. The patrol vehicle is driven far less now that only patrol officer is assigned to the particular vehicle. These police

vehicles are better maintained so they require fewer repairs, thus saving money for the department and the community (Nash, 1995).

The take home program can and usually does increase officer morale within the department. The take home program increases officer satisfaction by allowing them to eliminate the cost of a second vehicle at home (Bennett, 2010). Department managers have found that patrol officers spend more time on the street and increase the chances of making arrest and issuing citations for traffic violations.

Lastly, it is important to know that department managers utilize the take home program as a recruiting tool to attract new officers (Klaskin Press, 2006). In today's times, it has become increasingly difficult to find well qualified applicants to fill the vacancies within the department. Steve Neubauer, the Tinley Park Police Chief stated that "Take-home vehicles are a positive recruiting mechanism in a competitive market" (Frankfort, 2015, p.1). Managers and HR Directors have become more and more creative in attempts to attract qualified people. One of those ways is explaining to potential new applicants that in addition to salary and benefits, they will receive a take home patrol car. The benefit to the new officer is that after a specified time and given certain criteria are accomplished, they could be in the seat of a patrol vehicle that will only be assigned to that particular officer and no one else. The specified time would likely be after successful completion of the FTO program. The criteria being that no discipline is administered within a certain time frame or whatever other ideas the administration may elect to mandate. Some departments may even go as far as to add decals to the patrol car with the officer's name on it. The thought of having the officers

own name on the vehicle is huge in the mind of a new recruit, especially with the ever increasing fuel cost.

COUNTER POSITION

The flip side to the argument is whether or not patrol officers should be allowed to take home their patrol vehicle. One argument is that the initial startup of the program is too large for any one department to be able to afford. Everyone knows that the cost per patrol vehicle could exceed \$50,000 dollars, including equipment (www.PursuitSafety.com). Agencies with take home programs have been challenged by the media to look at the overall cost of their take home vehicles. The increased cost of fuel cost could immediately ground the programs. Depending on how a department's policy is written, there may be no restrictions as to how far a person could live away from the city and still use a take home car. Many cities have place mile restrictions that vary from 5 miles outside the city limit to 30 miles outside the city limit (Plohetski, 2014). The further they live outside the city limit, the higher the fuel cost will be.

However, research as recent as 2010 showed that the startup may be expensive but departments have stated that they started showing a return in the initial investment within the first two years ("Is it cheaper," 2010). For example, in the Collin County Sheriff's Department, their managers have said that they were seeing less maintenance cost per vehicle because only one officer was driving the vehicle as opposed to two or three. Tires and brakes, along with fuel costs, have decreased ("What are the benefits," 2010).

Another study by Vincentric concluded that, for example, the Chevrolet Tahoe PPV had a lifecycle or life time that exceeded 5 years. The study looked at the vehicle

itself as a patrol vehicle in an urban setting and found that it had the lowest cost of ownership at \$.05 per mile ("A look at life cycle," 2010). With this information, managers are able to determine that with a low cost of ownership, reduced cost for maintenance and fuel, that it is a win-win for the department to start a take home program. An issue that came up in Denver regarding take home cars and distance was where a high ranking official was seen driving her vehicle outside the specified range or distance. An audit was conducted by an independent person during which her vehicle take home privilege was suspended by the Chief of Police until the audit was complete. The audit found that the vehicle was in fact secure, no burglaries were ever reported, and the department official had permission and a legitimate reason for a take home. The Chief reinstated the vehicle take home privilege and the citizen watch group was satisfied (Maass, 2011).

Another issue that was raised during the research portion was the possibility of increased fuel cost on the department to allow officers to take cars home. The argument being that the car is subject to more miles and would be too far for response. Considering the increase in fuel prices, gasoline is an inelastic resource. In other words, more miles means more fuel, which means more cost.

The research indicates that the officer is actually using less fuel because he is the only one driving the vehicle. In the past, multiple officers were driving the patrol vehicle on multiple shifts, thus using an increased amount of fuel. In the City of Des Plaines, a suburb of Chicago, a debate was started between city leaders and the police department as to the distance traveled with city vehicles and added fuel cost. The argument was quailed by explaining that the departmental policy was specific and

allowed for certain officers (detectives on call) to take the vehicles home after special approval by the department head was obtained (Gaines, 2014). The department heads have stated that there would be an increase in vehicle service and maintenance. The city budget, for example, would be severely impacted by the increase in wear and tear on a patrol vehicle. As the police Chief in Tinley Park, Illinois said, "Assigned cars are better maintained and last longer" (Frankfort, 2015, p. 1).

However, research indicates just the opposite, that the "wear and tear" would actually be far less than usual. When one officer is assigned to the particular patrol vehicle, it has been demonstrated that he or she has a sense of ownership and is empowered to care for the vehicle as if it personally belonged to the officer. Officers will wash and keep the car clean, drive less miles (only because one officer is operating it), and be responsible for the upkeep of the vehicle and its service. The upkeep mentioned above involved oil changes and various service intervals for that particular vehicle (Fisk, 1970).

Another argument against the increase is that as only officer is assigned to the vehicle, it will have a longer lifespan. The typical lifespan of a patrol vehicle driven two or three times daily seven days a week is usually only about a year and half to two years ("A look at life cycle," 2010). However, research now indicates that the vehicle is costing less because it is better maintained and is having a lifespan of closer to five years as opposed to two. Basically, this says that it takes longer for one officer to reach say hundred thousand miles than it would if two or three officers were assigned to the vehicle.

RECOMMENDATION

In closing, a list of arguments for and against why officers should be allowed to take their patrol cars home has been stated. Patrol cars are typically a huge portion of the department's budget and involve many different items. A decision such as this could either make or break a department, especially during tight budget times. One of the considerations for a take-home vehicle from an administrative stand point is the accountability of damage, not only wear and tear of the vehicle. Another issue is the on-duty supervisor having to determine who damaged a vehicle or why excessive wear is occurring.

For example, the need for an officer to be allowed to take a patrol car home is one of many different reasons. The officer is always available to respond to an emergency. For instance, a major incident occurs and the department needs all available officers on a critical response or incident. The officer has to spend less time going to the police station and loading a car with gear to respond to that emergency, when he can just respond from the house. The officer will typically carry more emergency response type gear inside the vehicle than when he is having to trade out cars every shift.

The officer has a sense of empowerment and ownership within the department. The officer has his own car that he shares with no one and can load whatever particular equipment he feels he is going to need in his daily activities. The officer is inclined to take better care of the vehicle because the sense of ownership.

Research has proven that the patrol car would incur less miles a year and last much longer than a vehicle used by several officers (pool cars) two or three times a day

seven days a week. Fleet managers find that those patrol cars where one individual officer utilizes the vehicle performs better with fewer visits to the service center. In creating a program where officers are permitted to drive patrol cars home, it develops a sense of ownership and officers tend to better keep the cars assigned to them.

Department heads have argued against the take home program, stating that the department would have increased initial cost for the fleet itself and also for the increase in maintenance and fuel cost. The increase fuel cost is actually a moot point as the officer is using far less fuel driving the vehicle by himself verses sharing the car with several other officers. The officer is logging less miles on the vehicle, thus extending the life of the vehicle. The maintenance has been shown to be reduced drastically as a better maintained car requires less maintenance. Officers typically would treat the car as their own and be more likely to schedule regular maintenance, rather than depending on someone else to schedule the service.

Take-home cars could be used as a reward for officers reaching a milestone in their tenure with that department. The officer who completes his Field Training Program and eventually graduates from probation could be issued a city owned patrol car as his own. Some of the criteria in achieving this milestone could include no discipline within a specified period, good attendance with little or no tardiness, or no misuse of the sick time benefit.

The increase in initial cost, while true, is typically an investment that shows a return within the first two to three years. Some larger fleets could take as long as four or more years. The initial startup is expensive; however, a vehicle that would normally last about a year or two is now lasting, in some cases, longer than five years. The

increased life of the vehicle fleet increases the likelihood of more budgets for other line items needed for the department.

For just a moment, take into perspective and imagine a scenario involving one's daily routine, whether it is the commute to work or the preparation and performance of their duties and responsibilities. An example would be an office worker assigned to a desktop computer in a cubicle and having to share that device and cubicle with several other employees. It would be inconvenient that if every time they returned to work, they had to continually address problems with their cubicle and desktop. Every time they arrived to work, they found their cubicle dirty and rearranged, their family pictures moved, and a half eaten sandwich on the keyboard of the computer. There would also be the programming and software issues that develop over time from misuse. The downtime spent having to submit work orders to the I.T. department, clean one's cubicle, and return pictures to their place on the desk, ultimately costing the company valuable work hours. A simple solution by the company could be the purchase of additional computers or take-home portable computers or individual cubicles to eliminate the sharing of the computer or cubicle. Consider this when evaluating whether or not take-home vehicles would be beneficial for the department.

In conclusion, the research shows that a patrol car take-home program is a beneficial idea for the department and the community as a whole. One idea is that the department considers the individual officer and his or her needs of officer satisfaction and empowerment within the department. An officer who feels satisfied and empowered has been shown to work harder and more efficiently. The officer is empowered because he/she has their "own" car and can take ownership in the vehicle

and its upkeep. The satisfaction comes from knowing the vehicle is well taken care of and serviced as it should be. The patrol car in the community demonstrates a strong sense of visibility and gives citizens the idea that more police presence is apparent. From a fleet services manager standpoint, the limited amount of wear and tear on the vehicle shows that the patrol car is being cared for and serviced. The reduced amount of stress on the vehicle actually lengthens the life of the vehicle. It has been shown that brakes, transmissions, and other items prone to wear from excessive operation have shown less abuse when driven by only one patrol officer. The initial startup of the fleet is going to cost more; however, it has been shown that over a period of time, the vehicles will last longer and maintenance wise cost less. This topic bears consideration and should have experiences from both sides of the debate from having a take-home verses not having one. Having a vehicle take-home program does benefit the department, and they (city and department) should allow their officers to take home vehicles.

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