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Police Motorcycle Units Are a Valuable Asset to a Police Department

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ABSTRACT

With a dramatic shift in the way modern policing is heading, some police departments may find themselves between a rock and hard place when it comes to the police motorcycle. The prestige and versatility that comes along with the police motorcycle is one that some departments embrace. They are capable of performing special functions such as parades, escorts, and demonstrations. They are able to respond quickly to accidents with congested traffic and provided medical care faster when roads are blocked.

The police motorcycle can come with its own challenges and major safety concerns. The police motorcycle officer has very little protection when it comes to crashes, and there are lives lost each year to police motorcycle crashes. These fatalities can be dramatically reduced with things such as proper training and protective gear. The police motorcycle officer can sometimes be considered a drain on patrol resources if they need to make an arrest. They are not able to transport and will take additional resources away from patrol in times where departments are already facing manpower issues.

There are many benefits that will be discussed. Research will show police departments should utilize the police motorcycle to improve the overall effectiveness of their police department. The research will show that the benefits outweigh the risks.

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INTRODUCTION

With change in police administration at police departments often comes new ideas and policies. Often, these changes are for the better, but sometimes changes will have a negative and unintended effect on the officers in the department and the community. This research paper will be targeted to chiefs, deputy chiefs, and any other command staff that will have a part in making a decision to disband a traffic unit motorcycle program or is faced with the decision to start one.

The purpose of this paper will be discussing the impact that the police motorcycle has on the community, the officers involved, and the department as a whole. Police departments should utilize the police motorcycle to improve the overall effectiveness of their police department. Today is a difficult time in law enforcement. Leaders are asked to do more with the same budget, personnel, and equipment, all while balancing safety.

The research will show that police motorcycles are more cost effective compared to the traditional police vehicle. They have an impact on traffic related problems such as traffic accident reductions and will have faster response to accidents in high traffic density areas. They are able to better address citizen complaints and increase the overall image of the police department within the community. The police motorcycle is more approachable than the traditional police car because it lacks traditional barriers like windows and doors. The motorcycle is highly versatile and can be used at special events throughout the community such as parades, funerals, and static displays at schools. There are many other community events in which a police motorcycle could be used as a way to improve community collaboration. Police departments should utilize the police motorcycle to improve the overall effectiveness of their police department.

Position

The Police motorcycle has been around for over a decade and can be traced back as early as 1905 in some of the nation's larger police departments (Bucholz, 1999). There are several opinions on who started the first organized motorcycle unit. In 1908, Detroit Police Department implemented four Harley Davidson motorcycles into their police department (Bond, 2014). One of the most famous police chiefs in history, August Vollmer, is also noted to have started one of the first motorcycle units in 1911. Chief Vollmer was employed by the Berkeley California Police Department (Berkeley Police Department, n.d.). The Berkeley Police Department was a trail blazer in the field of police motorcycle units by developing some of the first motorcycle training and policies (Bond, 2014). Departments began using the police motorcycle in order to keep up with the change in mode of transportation from horses to vehicles. Most departments were using horses and foot patrols but soon found that they could not keep up with the increased speed and traffic associated with the automobile (Bucholz, 1999).

The police motorcycle has been a mode of transportation that is substantially cheaper to operate than the traditional police car. This still is true today. The Ford Explorer, Chevy Tahoe and Dodge Charger have become a few of the most common types of patrol vehicles quickly replacing the Ford Crown Victoria. The 2017 Police Ford Explorer has a base MSRP of \$29,000 according to Ford Fleet website (Ford Corporation, 2017). A 2017 Police Chevrolet Tahoe has a starting MSRP of 32,000 (General Motors Fleet, 2017). In comparing the traditional police vehicle to the police motorcycle, one will see quickly that there is a considerable difference in price. Three of

the most common police motorcycles found around the country are the BMW R1200 RT, the Harley Davidson FLHP Road King and FLHP Electra Glide. The BMW R1200 RT has an MSRP of is \$18,145 (BMW Motorcycles, 2017). The MSRP of the 2017 Harley Davidson FLHP Road King is \$18,999 (Harley Davidson Motorcycles, 2017). These prices reveal that there is a about \$10,000-\$14,000 difference between the patrol SUV and motorcycles, making the motorcycle a better value for a traffic officer. There is a wide range of options when selecting a police motorcycle and a standard police cruiser, but these were just a few of the more popular ones. Most of the vehicles would still require additional standard police equipment such as radars and cameras which would add equal amount of money to the total cost of the vehicle.

Another area that needs to be considered when comparing the motorcycle and the traditional police vehicle is fuel economy. According to Korzeniewski (2008), motorcycle owners report an average of 56 miles to the gallon. This is considerably more than any standard police vehicle. With gas prices on the rise throughout the nation, and the national average for a gallon at \$2.347 on January 14, 2017, this could be a tremendous cost savings to a police department (AAA, 2017).

The main function of a motorcycle unit would be traffic enforcement and accident reduction. The maneuverability of a police motorcycle makes them highly adapted to this function. Due to the two-wheel configuration of a motorcycle, they are able to move more easily through high density traffic caused by events such as a major accident. When an event such as a major accident occurs on a major highway, all lanes of traffic are often blocked. It is essential for law enforcement officers to get the flow of traffic moving as quickly as possible to prevent further accidents and delays. A motorcycle

would be able to navigate these types of accidents more readily than a standard patrol vehicle that may be stopped due to the traffic conditions. There are several reasons that it is important for officers to be on scene of a major accident quickly. One of those reasons is the faster an officer is able to arrive on the scene of an accident; the faster medical attention can be applied. High congestion caused by the accident may prevent other medical services such as Fire Department and EMS from getting to the scene quickly. This puts the motorcycle officer in a distinctive role. Another important advantage to arriving on scene quickly is the ability of the motorcycle officer to be able to allocate necessary resources. Often special equipment such as tow trucks, EMS or additional police officers are necessary to assist in clearing an accident scene. The sooner that these resources can be contacted the sooner they can assist in clearing the scene.

Due to high congestion, a motorcycle officer may find himself in a unique position to more readily assist in a situation than a patrol car such as in red light operations or aggressive driving situations. According to US Census Bureau (2017) there has been over a 2 million population increase in Texas from 2010 to 2016. A motorcycle may be able to sit closer to a stoplight and be visible to traffic to assist in acting as a deterrence for traffic violators, or they may be able to respond more quickly to a violation (National Highway Safety Administration, 2017). Some agencies use the benefit of motorcycles to be able to maneuver in and out of traffic after violators. Motorcycles also have the benefit of size. Sometimes citizen complaints come in for some type of traffic problem, but there is no place to observe the traffic safely. Motorcycles have the unique ability to sit in small places such as small grassy areas or driveways.

Another tremendous benefit of a motorcycle unit is the ability to increase community relationships. The benefit of not having doors and windows opens the police motorcycle to a new world of community interaction. Doors and windows may prevent an officer from hearing a citizen calling them for assistance or stopping them just to talk. Being out in the open makes them more approachable to others and less intimidating. Motorcycle officers are often seen as the face of a police department due to the fact that they are often seen more often than the average patrol officer. They are usually posted in high traffic areas working traffic violations or responding to accidents. They can also be a vital tool in preventive policing according to Standberg (2013), who stated, "You can ride a patrol car through a community and it will be ignored. Ride a motor unit in there and they will be noticed" (Community Policing section, Para. 1). The police motorcycle officers are often requested at school events such as career days and touch-a-vehicle events. Mark Bond (2014) stated, "Motorcycle police patrol has a long tradition, and the reason for this longevity is the diversity and adaptability to current social trends that makes the motorcycle unit an indispensable and relevant part of any modern law enforcement agency" (The Future of Police Motorcycle section, Para.1). Motorcycles appeal to all ages and across diverse cultures. There seems to be a draw for children to want to sit on a motorcycle and adults to gaze over all the gizmos and gadgets of a fully equipped police motorcycle. Police motor units are often seen at motorcycle toy run events with motorcycle enthusiasts. They are able to perform two functions at these events. They are able to assist in traffic control, but more importantly, they are able to get out in the community and speak with the people. The community

comes to realize that they often have some of the same common hobbies and begins to look at the officers as people that have a job to do and not as officers that just write tickets all day long. These types of events open dialogue that may not have been established through other avenues of the police department. According to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) (2017), police motorcycles have even been utilized for safety presentations and civic groups throughout the community.

Motor units are often called to assist in funeral escorts and the escort of dignitaries and parades. Though these types of tasks require special and advanced training, they are a vital role in a motorcycle unit. Some of the tasks require very slow riding skills with lots of people while others require high speed driving with lots of vehicular traffic. Each of these requires a skill that can be learned through training and add benefits to the police department.

Counter Position

There are several counter positions that need to be addressed, the first one being safety. Motorcycles are often considered dangerous and have a higher injury and death rate than automobiles. In 2016, there were seven motor officer fatalities in the United States. Between 2010 and 2016, there were 34 total deaths (Officer Down Memorial Page, 2017). There is very little protection for motorcycle officers involved in crashes. They often may find themselves in serious accidents just trying to avoid an accident.

No one would disagree that motorcycles are dangerous, and they are less forgiving than a traditional patrol car or SUV when it comes to accidents. However, accidents could be prevented with additional training and education for the officers.

There is no way to prevent all future accidents from occurring, but there are ways to reduce the number of future accidents. According to Gary Howze (1998), the main cause of motor officer accidents has been due to the lack of training, and the majority of accidents involving motorcycles could be avoided. In addition, the NHTSA (2017) states that police departments should at minimum require an annual re-certification. They also recommend some type of in-service training that will keep the officers up to date.

Teaching defensive driving to motorcycle officers is another way to reduce injuries. A motorcycle officer must always assume that they are paying attention to the road and traffic conditions more than other drivers. The National Safety Council (2017) states that up to 26% of fatal crashes are caused by distracted drivers. So, if an officer learns to pay attention not only to how they are driving but what other drivers are doing they will in turn reduce accidents.

Another way to decrease injuries among motorcycle officers involved in crashes would be to increase their safety gear. In 2006, Wes Griffin of the Flower Mound Police Department conducted research and found that with little impact to a department's budget, an upgrade in safety gear was a viable option. With changes in equipment such as full-face helmets, tall boots and jackets with better protection, it is getting easier for departments to protect their officers if they are involved in an accident.

There are times in which a motorcycle unit becomes ineffective and may take more resources away from the city. When a motorcycle officer conducts a traffic stop and ends up having to make an arrest they are going to have to call for assistance. This is going to require a patrol officer to be pulled from the streets in order to transport

a prisoner for the motorcycle officer (Kariya, 2004). This may seem like a problem, but this can be overcome by the motorcycle officer completing all the required paperwork for the transport and assisting in covering calls while the patrol officer is unavailable. Previous research has shown that there was little other effect on patrol other than having to transport prisoners for the motorcycle officer (Edwards, 2000). These two small things will limit the time that the patrol officer is unavailable for calls and minimize the effect on the community.

Weather can contribute to motorcycle officer down time and is going to be unavoidable during some situations. According to NHTSA (2017), some motorcycle units that experience harsh winters have riding seasons that can range from March to November. Down time of the motorcycle may be unavoidable, but the motorcycle officer can be placed in alternative transportation so that the officer can still provide vital services to the department and the citizens.

RECOMMENDATION

With change in police administration often comes changes within the police department. Older departments may find their ways under attack with new and fresh ideas from a new chief or administrator, and the police motorcycle unit may find itself under the microscope. Administrators have to look at the future of the police department as a whole and weigh the pros and cons of each policy or unit. Police administrators need to look at the important points that have been previously discussed.

Motorcycle units are an important part of the police department and play a vital role in community relations. They are able to bring the community and the police department together through special events such as parades, static displays and

community motorcycle toy drives. There is an appeal for the motorcycle that crosses generations and draws in children and adults alike.

The versatility of a motorcycle is something that cannot be overlooked by police administration. They are able to move through heavy congested traffic with ease. They are able to position themselves in a place that is not always accessible to the traditional four-wheeled police vehicle. Being able to respond to accidents that have blocked roads can provide an unmeasurable benefit. If a fire truck, ambulance or police cruiser are not able to access the scene of a major accident, the police motorcycle officer becomes the only avenue of first aid and could be the difference between life and death. Being able to quickly arrive on scene affords them the ability to allocate resources and assist in clearing the scene quickly.

There are several negatives that have been discussed such as the limitation of the motorcycle to be able to transport their own prisoners which require additional personnel. However, the down time of a patrol officer can be reduced by the motorcycle officer completing the required paperwork and assisting with patrol calls while the patrol officer is transporting the prisoner.

Officer safety is the topic of discussion in most police departments and should be at the highest priority when it comes to the police motorcycle officer. All accidents are not avoidable, but accidents can be reduced through effective training programs. NHTSA (2017) stated that a minimum standard of re-certification should be conducted. But what is to stop a police department from conducting training quarterly or even a few hours once a month? Classes for defensive driving techniques should be emphasized and looked into at least annually.

Police motorcycles show a clear benefit to the community as a whole. Police motorcycles are not always the solution to the problems, but they have been found to have many clear benefits outweighing the negatives. Therefore, police departments should utilize the police motorcycle to improve the overall effectiveness of their police department.

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