THE ROLE OF THE POLICE IN HIGHWAY SAFETY

by

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In highway transportation, police have direct responsibility for traffic law enforcement, traffic direction, vehicle inspection, motorist services, public information, accident investigation, and traffic records. Auxiliary problems are of major interest to the police as they relate to other aspects of highway safety, for there is practically no state or highway activity that does not to some degree affect the police in the pursuit of their objectives. (Conversely, police traffic supervision affects the highway transportation efforts of other official agencies.)

I. State law enforcement agencies are charged with highway safety responsibilities ranging from the control of traffic on the highways, investigation of accidents, supervision of vehicle inspection, enforcement of laws, motorist services, accident records, and public information. Smaller community police agencies, by necessity, are performing basic traffic engineering services in addition to police duties.

II. Kentucky State Police recognize that their efforts alone will not provide the optimum in safe and efficient highway transportation. They recognize the need for: sound, realistic and balanced programs of traffic laws; highway, automotive and traffic engineering; driver licensing and driver improvement; traffic courts and prosecutors; safety and driver education; collection, analysis and use of traffic records; coordination of efforts in states and communities by all agencies with traffic responsibility; and most importantly a responsive community climate developed by public understanding and support.

III. The Role of the Police in Highway Safety

Three vital services are provided by police agencies to attain safe and expeditious movement of traffic:
Traffic Direction and Control - officers on the streets to expedite the movement of traffic.
Accident Investigation - officers at the scenes of accidents to determine the casual factors as well as facts which pertain to the law, including related follow-up activity.
Traffic Law Enforcement - administration of the laws by police officers as it relates to violations, including preventive patrol.

A. Traffic Direction and Control
The direction and control of traffic on the streets are traditional police traffic functions, and most vital ones. Essential functions of the police in traffic direction and control are to:
Answer questions, especially about local traffic rules and how to reach places or routes.
Indicate to drivers and pedestrians what to do or not to do, especially at congested points or where hazards make streets and highways dangerous or difficult to use.
Make emergency rules for the flow of traffic when the usual regulations prove inadequate to meet unusual or unexpected traffic conditions.

While the essential requirements of traffic direction and control are the same as in times past, they have become infinitely more demanding primarily because of the increasing volume and complexities of street traffic movement.

B. Traffic Accident Reporting and Investigating

On-the-scene investigation of traffic accidents is the chief means by which police and other officials with traffic responsibilities determine the facts of the accident. Herein lies the basis for sound official programs for traffic safety.

Traffic accident investigation by the police includes:
- Preventing accidents from becoming even more serious. This includes giving first aid, directing traffic to avoid additional collisions, extinguishing fires, and preventing theft.
- Preventing unnecessary traffic congestion due to the accident.
- Noting circumstances that will be useful in determining how and why the accident happened.
- Preparing an official report of the accident.
- Taking enforcement action if sufficient proof of a violation exists.

Great strides have been made during the last decade in the quality of accident investigation and recording. Greater improvements still need to be made. These can be achieved by an increasing awareness of the central importance of this police function and by continued thorough training of investigative personnel in the highly technical areas involved.

A distinction must be made between reporting and investigating. The purpose of accident reporting is to obtain minimum necessary information about as many of the accidents as possible. The purpose of investigating is to secure the maximum practical information about certain accidents for enforcement or other special purposes such as cause analysis.

All too frequently the poorly trained investigator overlooks the very occurrence which directly contributed to the accident situation. This points up the need for additional, well-trained, police accident investigators. It appears feasible that with extensive training and a thorough knowledge of accident causes, investigation could
be conducted on a sampling basis and comparative analyses made to determine methods of reducing the accident frequency.

C. Traffic Law Enforcement
The function of traffic law enforcement is to assure compliance with traffic laws and ordinances. It is impractical to expect attainment of the ultimate goal – voluntary compliance with all laws and ordinances by all users of the highway. Development of enforcement programs requires determination of the proper amount of enforcement which serves to provide for a measurable increase in general compliance with traffic laws, and at the same time, decrease the number of accidents. Quality of the enforcement effort is equally as important as quantity. The need for quantity in enforcement depends considerably upon the quality of action.
Selective enforcement is the police management process which provides for analysis and evaluation of these two elements. Selective enforcement offers guidance on the assignment of police manpower for enforcement purposes at the times and places of high accident frequency. Research programs and studies are conducted to determine patterns, trends and causative factors which appear most frequently in connection with the accident experience. All efforts in this respect are for the purposes of optimizing productivity of the police effort.

D. The Police - Court Relationship
No discussion of the quality of enforcement would be complete without mention of the all-important police - court relationship. Both the police and the courts must recognize the importance of working together if enforcement is to achieve its goals.
The police depend upon the policies and attitudes of the courts for setting the traffic-law-enforcement "style" of a community. The efforts of the police will be dissipated if they are working under one set of policies and interpretations of law while the courts work under another.
It is not the function of the prosecutor or judge to direct or interfere in the administration of police traffic law enforcement. Yet it is unquestionably in the best interests of good enforcement that judges and prosecutors concern themselves with the police enforcement program. This must prevail if an enforcement program is to achieve its objective of observance of law.

E. Research and Planning
The most serious situation faced by most police departments is the heavy demand on available manpower. Time is so largely exhausted in meeting routine daily requirements that little remains for planning, including the study of new and changing problems in cities and states and the re-allocation of manpower to deal with these problems. The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, and
the explosive growth of our suburban areas are examples of the expanding requirements.

F. Public Information and Support

Without delving too deeply into the fields of public information and support, it should be emphasized that the police have a responsibility for keeping the public informed about their aims. Of major importance is proper, full and effective liaison with local news media. The administrator should establish cooperative relationships with safety councils, business and civic groups, schools, churches, and other local support groups. If a safety council or similar citizen safety groups do not exist in a community, the police administrator should exercise his influence with other groups to get one established. Properly organized and financed, a citizen support group can become one of the department's most productive proponents; and when justified, one of its staunchest defenders.

Summary of Recommendations

Increasing the effectiveness of the police in their role of traffic supervision requires action. In order to satisfy the continuing needs and to attain certain goals, the following programs must be instituted.

Fuller application and more effective use of proven police traffic supervision techniques and procedures.

Improvement in quality of accident investigation and reporting as the basis for better enforcement planning and accident prevention activities of all official agencies.

Re-evaluation of enforcement performance periodically in light of current accident experience.

Impartial enforcement through elimination of ticket fixing.

Pedestrian protection measures commensurate with seriousness of pedestrian problem.

Strengthening of relationships between courts and police agencies to assure uniformity and continuity in the enforcement process.

Continuous attention to selection and recruitment of competent personnel, and to management factors that help maintain high officer morale.

Develop improved methods for determining police manpower needs and for evaluating the productivity of the police.