

RESEARCH NOTE SERIES: MARKED VS. UNMARKED PATROL VEHICLES



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Marked vs. Unmarked Patrol Vehicles – Research Note

There is no shortage of police science literature focusing on the patrol vehicle. While considerable research has been devoted to the crime reduction effect of patrol in general, the examination of one versus two manned vehicles, the color scheme of patrol cars, and even the feasibility of converting to propane, there is an absence of inquiry into the question of marked versus unmarked patrol cars. In fact, a meta-analysis of police patrol did not make a single reference to this issue (Larson and Cahn, 1985).

One of the rare exceptions is a thesis by Wagner (1978) that evaluated a patrol experiment in New Mexico in 1973-74. This project, among other objectives, examined whether units alternately deployed in marked and unmarked vehicles differentially affected property crime, whether the different units lowered a specific type of property crime identified in advance, and whether felony arrest rates varied between marked and unmarked units. The study did identify support for the hypothesis that unmarked units made more felony arrests for property crime than marked patrols, but the distinction was not statistically significant. Moreover, this study focused on increased police visibility as a crime prevention strategy and was not designed to compare the benefits of unmarked or marked patrol units. In another study, an analysis of overt and covert mobile radar operations by Diamantopoulou and Cameron (2002) determined that the use of unmarked patrol cars or a mix of marked and unmarked vehicles had a casual effect on crash reductions. A combination of overt and covert mobile radar enforcement was deemed to have the bigger effect than one or the other.

The debate on marked and unmarked vehicles, while not a topic of scholarly investigation, is quite prominent in the mainstream media and social networking. The mere use of unmarked cars to target traffic violators was newsworthy enough to warrant media coverage, as per this example in USA Today (8/10/2010:1),

Speeders beware: That innocent-looking Chevrolet Camaro, Ford Fusion or SUV you're about to blow past just might be the law. In their effort to reduce speeding — a factor in nearly one-third of all highway deaths — state and local police agencies around the USA increasingly are using unmarked patrol cars, sports cars and even "ghost" cruisers with obscured markings. "This is not about being sneaky," says Fargo, N.D., Police Chief Keith Ternes, whose department recently began using unmarked vehicles. "This is about trying to change people's habits and having them pay attention to their driving even when they don't think a police officer is watching."

One area that has received a plethora of musings is the fear of law enforcement impersonators using unmarked patrol vehicles to deceive citizens. According to another piece in USA Today (8/10/2010:2),

Each year across the USA, reports surface of drivers being pulled over by people who are impersonating police and intending to rob or assault them. The concerns are at issue now as many law enforcement agencies step up their use of unmarked patrol cars to catch speeders and other traffic law violators. "With a car that is not clearly marked, people are sometimes very apprehensive about pulling over," says James Baxter, president of the National Motorists Association, which helps members fight traffic tickets. "Obviously, an unmarked car could certainly cause people concern. Anybody can go out and buy a light of the regular variety and stick it on their car."

Consequently, there has been a number of news items instructing motorists concerned about being pulled over by an unmarked car with flashing lights. A column in the Mercury News (08/11/2011) offered advice to those in such a situation. Much of the concern over the fear of a police impersonator in an unmarked vehicle likely stems from an oft-repeated urban legend that has appeared in at least four countries including Canada (autos.aol.com 07/08/2010),

A 19-year old college girl named Lauren is the heroine of a sensational international urban legend. Her supporting cast includes a rapist posting (sic) as a police officer in an unmarked police car, real police officers in marked cruisers, and a police dispatcher. The location? An unlit road on the outskirts of town -- and that town could be anywhere, as this urban legend has had its location changed as it's

circled the globe via e-mail, from Virginia to Australia to Canada to Britain. (For more on this e-mail urban legend, visit Snopes.com.)

The story goes like this; Lauren is pulled over by an unmarked police car, but is suspicious and uses a special phone number to contact the local police to confirm that she is being pulled over by a genuine police officer. The surprised dispatcher tells her to keep driving because the car behind her is not a real police car. Within minutes, real officers intercept the impostor who, when arrested, turns out to be a rapist. While some urban legends are harmless, this tale adds unnecessary fear to the lives of solo drivers. Furthermore, it encourages people to believe three harmful falsehoods; there is an epidemic of criminals posing as police officers, officers in unmarked cruisers cannot be trusted, and there are unpublished, secret phone numbers that connect cell phone users to local police agencies.

The pros and cons of unmarked police cars are also a popular topic on police oriented Internet forums. "Police Link (The Nations Law Enforcement Community), Officer.com, and Blueline.ca have all featured threads devoted to the marked versus unmarked vehicle issue (please see the reference list below). Like most online forums, these consist primarily of chitchat, but do reveal differing opinions and departmental policies about the specific subject matter.

Clearly, there is a paucity of research in this field with virtually no literature whatsoever to provide guidance to resource managers and administrators. The only serious attempt to examine the differential effects of marked versus unmarked cars focused on mobile radar and did not address any of the concerns associated with general patrol.

References

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