Police take home vehicles — let’s end this controversy

In the collected works of the uniformed, people write in about what has been commonly referred to as “take home police vehicles.” It’s becoming like a fingernail on a blackboard to me. Those who are against it suffer from flawed assumptions. The antidote for flawed assumptions are facts.

I write to take this in hand and provide facts. As a former police commissioner and present Professor of Police Science, I taught at Scotland Yard, Oxford and the FBI Academy. I have been the lead investigator in many studies for the U.S. Department of Justice costing millions of dollars and looked into issues like this.

Unlike those who write in, I require facts for my opinion.

The most comprehensive study regarding take home vehicles was done by the city of Tacoma, Washington. They used the outside consulting firm of Mercury Associates. The lead analyst was a professor from the University of North Carolina. The consultant’s report compared a fleet of 30 assigned vehicles to a pool of 34 vehicles. The study covered an eight-year accounting period.

In this study they found the following:

1. Operating costs per mile were 30-percent lower for assigned rather than pooled vehicles.

2. Pooled vehicles had to be replaced every 20 to 26 months compared to an average of 60 months for assigned vehicles.

3. Officers who take vehicles home typically render a significant amount of service while off-duty.

4. One of the most significant reductions for assigned vehicles was due to lower accident and damage repair costs.

5. On average, when using a pool car it took between 28 to 40 minutes per day to check-out, load, and/or unload their pool car. On average a pool car was unavailable 5.6 days a month due to repairs, lost keys, etc. Changing to another car averaged 25 minutes, thereby adding an additional eight minutes per day to non-productive time. This equates to approximately 13 non-productive days per year. This does not include the paid time officers may take to get into uniform once they arrive at the station.

6. The city of Tacoma found it was better for deputies to have take-home cars. The analysis showed the city saved $200,000 a year by just not having to provide a secured parking facility for 263 police vehicles.

Additionally, the consultants provided a neighborhood questionnaire and survey to all of Tacoma’s neighborhood councils regarding take-home vehicles.

The responses indicated they believed the two most important benefits of an assigned take-home vehicle program were: quicker response and to deter crime.

When asked whether officers should have assigned or pooled vehicles, only 16 percent said they were opposed to assigned vehicles. Respondents believed both the officers and the city benefited more or less equally with assigned cars being taken home.

In summarizing the Tacoma study, an assigned vehicle program is much more advantageous to the city than a pool vehicle. The main reason, in addition to less maintenance, is the time saved by each officer each day in not having to check-out and check-in pool vehicles and transfer his or her gear. The cost of officer time is relatively high compared to cost of vehicles. For example, the cost of purchasing a timing belt for replacement in a personal car is a small, as compared to the labor cost of installing it. The same principle pertains to police vehicles. Equipment and maintenance costs of police cars are a small fraction of the salaries of the police officers who drive them. The study concludes overall the city

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saves about $1.4 million per year with the assigned vehicle program. One seldom sees a less ambiguous study.

For those of you who still maintain reservations about this issue, let me provide you with additional information from other studies using previous studies by other police agencies and independent third parties.

A Hampton Virginia Police Department study showed both maintenance costs and operating costs were lower for the take-home cars versus pool cars. The maintenance cost of take home cars was $0.16 per mile versus $0.19 per mile on pool cars, a 16 percent savings. They also found a 15 percent saving in operating costs, $0.17 per mile versus $0.20 per mile for pool cars. This study also found fewer accidents occurred with assigned cars.

The Daytona Beach Police Department operates a fleet of 340 vehicles. The fleet manager faced with cost cuts believes one of his biggest successes has been implementing a Take Home fleet vehicle program. Maintenance and repair costs have gone down on the program vehicles. Officers take better care of the vehicles than pool cars, because no one else can be blamed for poor care. They also don’t run the vehicles as hard, which is better for fuel mileage. He states “The user will keep the vehicle cleaner, inspect it on a regular basis, answer up to damage, and generally take more pride.”

There are additional advantages to take home police units:

* Take home programs result in more police units being driven on the streets as officers go to and from work, or other approved activity. Citizens will see a more visible police presence. So will potential offenders, offering a deterrent effect.

* Creates a rapid response to emergency call-outs. The officer doesn’t have to go to the district to get a vehicle prior to responding.

* Take home vehicles increases level of enforcement. Officers driving take-home cars off duty that observe serious violations and criminal activity are obligated to take enforcement action.

* Increases the back-up potential for officers on duty. In critical situations, while the nearest on-duty unit may be in another zone, an off-duty officer may be just around the corner from an emergency call for service, or another officer needing assistance.

* Surveys note officer morale is considerably higher with assigned vehicles.

Finally take home cars is an issue that candidates use to satisfy the whims of an uninformed voter. It strikes a nerve in the soul of a voter who feels that those in government have too many “perks.” Research should determine public policy and measured outcomes should be the only tool to change it.

Perks permit those in government to render service you don’t see quietly and efficiently. If the system works properly it catches those who abuse it and reduces corruption hazards. If I wrote this properly on this issue, it should:

1. Satisfy those who require evidence to support their position; and

2. Persuade those who feel that take home cars should be taken away from those who protect us to change their opinion.

If not — I wish stupidity causes pain.

Dr. Anthony Schembri