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Reduce Crashes by Incentivizing Better Vehicle Stops

By Larry Krantz

There are five basic benefits to a car stop: general and specific deterrence to moving violations, general and specific deterrence to criminal behavior, and intelligence-gathering.

DESPITE ALL THE MONEY SPENT on enforcement hours, citations, and arrests, crashes in Texas are still increasing and the state's Selective Traffic Enforcement Program (STEP) has lost one or two participating agencies every year.

STEP is a grant program that awards enforcement agencies points for tickets. If writing citations for motor vehicle violations reduces crashes, the number of crashes would have gone down by now.

One of the seven guiding principles of DDACTS (Data-Driven Approaches to Crime and Traffic Safety) is promoting high-visibility enforcement efforts in areas where crashes and crimes are historically overrepresented. Agencies that found ways to deliver a constant, high-visibility enforcement presence in these areas saw considerable reductions in crashes and crime by disrupting, displacing and diffusing criminal behavior.

At its core, STEP funding buys car stops. There are five basic benefits to a car stop: general and specific deterrence to moving violations, general and specific deterrence to criminal behavior, and intelligence-gathering. If the STEP program could incentivize making strategic car stops rather than traffic units working in "honey holes" to make numbers, Texas could start chipping away at its crash problem.

The first hurdle was changing a system that incentivized writing tickets as quickly as possible in areas of low compliance to one that incentivized making high-quality vehicle stops in high-crash areas. The second was helping agencies without their own analytical capabilities determine the location of crash hot spots. Moving from points to car stops per hour was straightforward. Mapping hot spots required a partnership between the Texas Department of Transportation and the Texas Department of Public Safety's Highway Safety Operations Center (HSOC). HSOC developed maps with three years of crash data and a companion analysis piece for each of Texas' 254 coun-

ties. If agencies could perform their own analysis and overlay crashes and criminal behaviors, then STEP-funded enforcement could reduce crashes and other social harms at the same time.

As it turns out, these two key changes are paying dividends even though the new rules for STEP do not take effect until October 1.

Showing agencies where crashes occur and helping them understand how to leverage maximum value from traffic enforcement has caused some agencies to begin shifting their standard operational concepts to reflect DDACTS principles. Their STEP enforcement will simply augment the strategies at no additional cost to the agency. Several law enforcement agencies are working to combine the DDACTS training and STEP enforcement while simultaneously developing or improving their analytical capabilities.

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