

Winter 1961

A Case for De-Specialization of Traffic Operations

Palmer Stinson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Palmer Stinson, A Case for De-Specialization of Traffic Operations, 51 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 561 (1960-1961)

This Criminology is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

POLICE SCIENCE

A CASE FOR DE-SPECIALIZATION OF TRAFFIC OPERATIONS

PALMER STINSON

Lieutenant Palmer Stinson has been a member of the Oakland Police Department for the last eleven years and is currently assigned to the Traffic Division. His career within the department has included various assignments as a patrolman in the Traffic Division as well as other police operations and as a sergeant and lieutenant in general line activities prior to his present assignment. Lieutenant Stinson recently completed a course at Northwestern University Traffic Institute and has had material published in their *Traffic Digest and Review*.—EDITOR.

PREFACE

A trend toward traffic specialization has continued at an accelerated pace over the last 25 years—a “jump on the bandwagon” trend—too often based on mimicry instead of analysis. In this report there is an attempt to show some cause to head in the opposite direction.

Protagonists of the specialized traffic division, particularly those with a vested interest, are certain to object vociferously to the changes proposed in the following pages. Although such protests are natural, anticipation of them prompts the writer to direct the reader's attention to a phenomenon inevitably associated with the creation of special agencies. This is the growth of a top-heavy hierarchy (which expands spontaneously for reasons best illustrated in the satire on Civil Service by C. Northcote Parkinson). The very existence of this group of “Empire builders” is the greatest obstacle to intelligent appraisal of the need for change.

There are emotional overtones involved in the “shift in emphasis” the writer proposes, and he pleads guilty to being party to these feelings. Although he has tried to be fair in his presentation, some subjectively flavored phrases are certain to creep into this report. No apology is meant by these lines—only candor. He would rather make it abundantly clear that every word represents his honest measure of the situation.

INTRODUCTION

In our municipalities there has been a sharp increase in the number and kind of tasks delegated to the police. Although the new duties are often only remotely connected to primary police pur-

poses, few enforcement officials successfully restrict the scope of police activity and as a matter of course the numerical strength of the patrol arm decreases. Chauffeuring, bicycle licensing, dog-catching, and parking meter maintenance are examples of the more prosaic duties pressed upon the police. A patrolman begins to feel concern about the availability of street sweepers in his city when he finds himself burdened with such tasks.

It is axiomatic that a police department's efficiency and reputation depend upon the vigor and skill of its patrol force. Consequently, necessity's sharp pinch has made manpower distribution a critical problem for many police chiefs. It has become imperative that the shrinking blue line of patrolmen be strategically deployed throughout a city for greatest utility.

Pressures for more services have also spurred many departments into aggressive nation-wide recruiting. Progressive departments which actively proselyte throughout the states have been handsomely rewarded by increased general competence. Men with qualifications unsurpassed anywhere in the world are now being attracted to the American police service. With this growing proportion of intelligent, trained, and hopeful members comprising the rank and file of our police forces, it becomes increasingly important that the patrolman's present role of report taker and door shaker be elevated to one commensurate with his present abilities.

Some police departments have learned through experience that proper structuring of the organization is essential to an effective program of service. Others have ignored the lessons to be learned,

living with their mistakes and often blissfully unaware of ways to improve their lot. In this paper some dominant factors affecting the degree and kind of traffic specialization are examined. There is no attempt to be exhaustive. Problems engendered by present specialized structures are reviewed with attention mainly confined to Accident Reporting and Traffic Law Enforcement. It is in these areas of police work that the tail begins to wag the dog. It is hoped that the discussion of these matters will stimulate readers to review conditions as they are in their own departments and possibly to modify their attitudes toward specialized traffic activities.

HISTORY OF TRAFFIC SPECIALIZATION

As far back as 1939, *all* cities over 250,000 inhabitants had special traffic divisions in their police departments. Smaller cities were quick to follow the lead of the big urban areas. Today it is not uncommon to find a police force of only 20 or 30 men with the responsibility for traffic functions invested in a special unit of three to five men; while larger departments generally assign 11 to 14 percent of their total employees to the traffic unit. These units are usually manned by transfers from the patrol division with resulting depletion of that force.

Traditionally, the traffic problem has been met by building up expensive traffic divisions; yet the problem has grown faster than the abilities of the specialized units to cope with it. Police managers have adopted specialized traffic units with little regard for factors unique to their situation. With the myriad degrees, kinds, and arrangements possible, it is strange to observe most all municipal police departments still embracing the stereotype of a traffic division designed twenty-five years ago. It becomes readily apparent that police administrators have failed to tailor their organization to their needs. They have been content to let "contests" and "inventories" mold their department into a shape that—in many instances—lessened the functional efficiency of the force as a whole.

In the traffic division patterned after the classic model, all traffic operations—with the occasional exception of a few fixed traffic posts—become the responsibility of the special unit. The patrol divisions, as a consequence of mass transfers to traffic, very naturally exhibit great disinterest in traffic law enforcement and accident reporting. In

a few cities, it is true, administrative attention has generated—mainly through exhortation—some action by patrolmen in enforcing traffic statutes. At the same time, however, special traffic training for the patrol forces has been minimal, and to date a great potential remains untapped.

On the positive side, it must be recognized that fine quality training for members of the special enforcement squads has helped make our city streets safer. Compliance with traffic regulation has become "stylish" and unlawful behavior "unrewarding" as a result of enforcement by hard-working traffic specialists.

The value of a police accident "investigation" program is less amenable to critical judgment. The never-ending statistical summaries, so often submitted as "proof" of extravagant claims, are without value as determinants of efficiency. Even the complimentary appraisal of special enforcement efforts in a preceding paragraph depends upon empirical and necessarily subjective observation rather than statistical validation.

There is pressure now toward acceptance of the line power idea, where the total line resources of the department are made available for meeting traffic problems when and where necessary. This concept—supported by men who have contributed most to American police thinking for 20 years—provides the framework of a strong case against total traffic specialization.

It is worth noting here that Franklin Kreml—probably the most articulate of the proponents of the specialized traffic division—acknowledged (in his Beecroft Lecture) that the traffic division might be only a transitional device; an apparatus to be used as a stop gap measure pending the development of general line competence.

Without regard to their value, it must be acknowledged that large urban traffic divisions have operated virtually unchanged in structural form for at least twenty years. The time has come for a long, hard look at the alleged need for specialization. A re-weighing of values in terms of *today's* needs is in order.

THE POLICE ROLE IN TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

One of the strongest arguments put forward by the advocates of specialization in investigating accidents was based upon the complexity of the task and the importance of determining the causes

of accidents. They held that such investigations were too sophisticated for the lowly patrolman, and therefore we had to train only the highest calibre men for the job. It is true that the specialists stripped patrol of some of their most promising young men for accident investigation, but their success in finding useful accident causes was largely illusionary.

For two decades, traffic police administrators generally have deluded themselves with extravagant claims of benefits reaped from their accident "investigations." They envisioned a horde of researchers, educators, sociologists, psychologists, and economists breathlessly awaiting the mass of non-digestible and largely useless data being continually ground out by the thousands of specialized traffic units. This statistical apparatus can be likened to a huge sausage factory—with the same product—baloney. Actually, scientists working on research projects have found the data from police "investigations" of auto accidents very crude and grossly lacking in refinement. An engineer¹ who is one of the world's foremost research authorities in the traffic accident field has categorically stated that police accident investigations do *not* determine the *causes* of accidents with any *useful* degree of certainty and that it is not economically practical to investigate—in the full sense of the word—all accidents that come to the attention of the police. This strong statement is not introduced as a criticism of police accident programs, but rather as an attempt to strip some of the tinsel from a basically sound police product, the accident report.

Law enforcement administrators must recognize the limitations of police accident investigations and design reporting procedures that facilitate attainment of the following legitimate objectives:

1. Identification of the principals.
 2. Prosecution of violators (within economically justifiable limits).
 3. Recording a *limited* amount of data that has been closely scrutinized as to its usefulness.
- In this manner accident reporting can be simplified. The important police objectives will then be attained; yet less time will be spent by the patrol officer in handling this activity.

¹ In a conversation with the author—naming him in print would embarrass him since his wages are paid by an institution dedicated to perpetuation of traffic specialization.

TRAFFIC STATISTIC USES—AND ABUSES

Both traffic and safety officials have a great affinity for statistics. They rely heavily on them to "prove" the value of their programs. Unfortunately, the confidence they place in their "facts and figures" is not equally shared by most statisticians and great caution must be exercised in interpreting the mass of figures that have their origin in police accident reports.

There are two principal defects in traffic accident statistics. First, the published figures often do not mean anything. They may be superficial, obscure or too complicated to be of value. For instance, several hundred city traffic units and 17 state traffic agencies in the United States collect, on a continuing basis, statistics relating to vision obscurement noted in accident investigations. The presence of trees, signboards, buildings, etc. is often recorded without regard to their contribution to the accident. They also diligently summarize year after year figures on race, sex, age, and occupation of the drivers. This kind of information is trivial and unimportant (in the usual summary form) to the collecting agency. This type of information is occasionally used to "prove" relationships or conditions already known with accuracy sufficient for all practical purposes.

Secondly, some figures do not tell the whole truth. Causal factors, not obvious to the non-expert reader, that should be to the competent statistician are not mentioned. The most common example of this abuse occurs in connection with fatality rates. Rates will often drop and safety officials quickly claim credit for their schemes. Entirely ignored will be changes in the environment unrelated to the safety program. The development of new drugs such as the antibiotics, improvements in communication, new surgical and medical techniques, weather, and plain chance are just a few of the important factors for which allowances must be made.

The ultimate use of traffic accident data importantly affects the method of collecting the figures. Most standard statistical presentations are based on a little information about a lot of accidents. On the other hand most analysis requires a lot of information from what must necessarily be a few accidents because of the cost involved. The sampling technique was developed to reduce the cost of data collecting, but it has not been

widely used by the police. Accident reporting is adequate for collecting general traffic accident statistics, but investigation on a sampling basis is the only economically feasible method of gathering more sophisticated data relating to cause or other special problems of concern to police management.

SPECIALIZATION AND STAFF ASSISTANCE

Although popularly located in the line, the traffic unit—in the opinion of police experts such as O. W. Wilson and V. A. Leonard—should be regarded primarily as a planning agency. They considered it administrative error to give a specialized unit large field strength and clothe it with the main responsibility for carrying its plans into action.

Authoritative writers on police administration, universally advocate the use of a special staff unit responsible for planning and coordinating activity related to traffic operations; the product of their efforts being fed in appropriate form to the uniformed patrol force. As a matter of fact, in actual practice, the concept of staff assistance seems to get lost in an operational traffic unit. Occasionally, enforcement studies may be made in a traffic division, but the conclusions, if any, seldom are distributed for application by the patrol divisions.

The traffic division command becomes too busy just managing its operations to provide assistance to the other line functions. Consequently, coordination of effort is minimal. Sad examples of this are the one-sentence mimeographed "blurbs" in the Daily Bulletin epitomized by the following: "Wednesday's high frequency accident location—Lowe St. and East 14th St."

SPECIALIZATION AND EFFICIENCY

As in all police work, the distribution of manpower by time and place assumes great importance to a traffic division commander. However, attempts to predict accident frequency as well as their location have been successful only in a gross sense. As a consequence, specialized accident investigation teams are often idle for long periods of time. The most pronounced example of this occurs on the early morning watches. Accident investigation specialists must be on duty because the regular patrolmen are not considered capable of handling the occasional accident that happens during the early morning hours. Any AI man can

testify to the many watches that slip by without the occurrence of a single accident.

It may be argued that the special units perform a useful patrol function through their presence on the streets, but experience has shown that problems of coordination of effort and supervision always develop. Friction between regular patrol elements and the special units over the handling of report details is common when two different line units work on the same incident.

Opposite the sterile periods of no accidents are extremes posing even greater problems. A sudden rainfall will precipitate a volume of accidents far beyond the capacity of the special units. In spite of careful assignment of the man, based on ingenious statistical procedures, chance—in the form of weather or other environmental changes—continually works to disrupt the finely worked out plans. Those responsible for assignment of accident investigators might just as well refer to a crystal ball as their charts and tables.

To restate this point for emphasis, it must be recognized that accidents are capricious in the order of their occurrence. It is therefore less efficient to maintain a corps of specialists on a contingency basis than it would be to spread the responsibility for accident reporting over a broader base, that is, the patrol force.

SPECIAL ENFORCEMENT UNITS

The "speed cop" is almost as American as the "hot dog." To suggest that he has outlived his usefulness is to risk burning at the stake for heresy—or at least banishment from the police community.

Nevertheless, statements by competent observers of the police scene cannot be ignored. One of the most respected leaders of police thought, Bruce Smith, suggested in 1950 that we had reached the point of diminishing returns from special enforcement efforts per se. He was critical of conventional traffic law enforcement with its emphasis on specialization and selectivity, and he advocated its application on a more equal basis to everybody, everywhere. August Vollmer—internationally celebrated for his contributions to police practice—was especially critical of special enforcement units. He often commented on the enormous duplication of effort and waste of man-hours resulting from splitting traffic tasks into little islands of responsibility.

A preceding section on the history of specialization contained a reference to the lack of interest in traffic enforcement by patrolmen. Apathy on the part of these officers is directly related to lack of training and motivation. Another effective factor is the morale problem created by special pay and status afforded the motorcycle elite. Special enforcement squads are justified only to the extent the administrator is unwilling or unable to train and motivate the general line units.

SPECIALIZATION AND TRAINING

Leonard, Wilson, and Clift have declared that a department should resort to specialization only where the load exceeds the capacity of the patrol force. It seems that police management has seen fit to follow the advice of the authorities in reverse. The patrolman seldom was first given adequate training and then the opportunity to handle accident investigation and traffic enforcement.

The F.B.I. has long advocated training each member of the police force to a high level; recognizing that excessive attention is often given to a selected few officers to the detriment of the regular patrolman. Bureau spokesmen have stated that achievement of professional status awaits the time the line officer becomes a whole policeman—equipped with the skill and knowledge to do the job. If we are to increase the efficiency of the patrol forces, we must permit them, whenever practical, to do tasks now performed by specialized units.

New mechanical aids and structural reorganization are relatively easy to introduce into the police service. It is the upgrading of the human element through training that presents the greatest challenge to police administrators.

SPECIALIZATION AND EMPLOYEE NEEDS

Satisfaction of the employee's needs should be a matter of prime concern to all management. Although the conventional approaches by progressive organizations have been adequate in respect to the physiological, safety, and social needs; a modern school of thought postulates that there is another cluster of needs with greater significance to both management and man himself. These are called the ego needs, and they involve two areas of the personality. First there are needs relating to a man's confidence and respect in himself; a person needs to believe in his self-reliance, com-

petence, and skill. Next are those needs relating to reputation, as represented by the desire for status and respect from one's peers.

Unlike the more basic needs, these are rarely fully satisfied; moreover they do not appear in any appreciable degree until the lower needs are gratified. The typical police department offers few opportunities for the satisfaction of these egotistic needs to people at the operational level, for the practice of organizing policework along highly specialized lines gives little heed to these aspects of human motivation. If the police administrators deliberately tried to thwart these needs—which of course they do not—they could hardly accomplish this purpose better than they do.

The obvious remedy is to provide greater variety, interest, and status to the patrolman's job.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The arguments presented in this article are not a defense of any particular norm or degree of specialized activity, only a case for a shift in emphasis. It is not logically possible to attack or necessary to defend specialization in principle, for it is an integral part of every organized group. The critical question concerning specialization is not "Yes or No," but "How Much?"

Police management should be concerned with the amount of traffic specialization currently in vogue and its effect on functional efficiency. Because the specialized traffic division is a well entrenched institution, its hierarchy will be certain to resist changes that represent a threat to their vested interest. The line power idea must therefore be slowly and tactfully introduced so as to minimize friction among the personnel affected. Patrol officers in most modern departments today have the competence to handle tasks presently assigned to specialized units. Training is the catalyzing agent needed to effect a program of despecialization. With the development of skill the regular line officer can be assigned responsibility—under adequate direction—for many traffic activities now mainly handled by specialists.

A review of the classic pros and cons of specialization does not provide much guidance when structuring a police organization. Each department is unique and the generalizations—mostly subjective in tone—have little value in solving their problems. What one author considers a dis-

advantage will be praised by another as an advantage. A more useful approach is to "systematically challenge the obvious." It is simply good business to evaluate periodically all reasons for traffic specialization. When reviewing and weighing the pertinent factors, it should be remembered that specialization may be indicated in one area of traffic operations; yet not be warranted in another.

In conclusion some general suggestions are made:

1. Teach Traffic Law Enforcement and Accident Reporting—in some depth—to *all* patrolmen. In addition to the traditional method of teaching, the field-coach system of training should be used. The existing specialized units contain a ready-made supply of these coaches.

2. Revise and simplify the Accident Report. This will require the development of procedures identifying the standard accident situations that involve easily prosecuted violations. An excessive amount of time should not be spent in documenting and building up weak cases.

3. Use the most competent traffic men in a small staff unit. Its responsibility is to conduct

analytical studies and coordinate traffic activities of the patrol force.

4. Assign to the patrol divisions the responsibility for reporting all routine traffic accidents.

5. Re-assign special traffic enforcement officers to the patrol divisions as regular patrolmen.

Each of these suggestions would need detailed study and development before being put to use. Nevertheless, a department truly interested in increasing efficiency through despecializing traffic operations should be able to build effective procedures around the above recommendations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CLIFT, RAYMOND E. *A GUIDE TO MODERN POLICE THINKING*. Cincinnati: W. H. Anderson Co., 1956.
- GRIFFIN, JOHN L. *STATISTICS ESSENTIAL FOR POLICE EFFICIENCY*. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C Thomas, 1958.
- KREML, FRANKLIN. *The Specialized Traffic Division*. *THE ANNALS OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE*, Vol. CCXCI, January, 1954.
- LEONARD, V. A. *POLICE ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT*. Brooklyn: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1951.
- SMITH, BRUCE. *POLICE SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949.
- WILSON, O. W. *POLICE PLANNING*. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C Thomas, 1957.