

Take Home Cars An Overview



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In a 1993 Survey by the Bureau of Justice Statistics¹, it was reported that of the 614 police agencies across the United States that responded, 263 (43%) allowed their police officers to drive marked vehicles for commuting purposes. Of those 263 agencies, 111 (42%) also allowed their officers to use the vehicles off-duty for private use. In another report, 90% of state police agencies used take home fleet plans. Clearly, take home car plans have become an employee benefit for many of our members, and more would like to join the ranks of officers who enjoy them. However, like any benefit improvement, one must determine exactly what costs are involved and be ready to justify them. There are a number of significant benefits to both your agency and your members in establishing a take home car program. In this overview we will try to touch on those benefits, as well as on a couple of the negative aspects of a take home car plan. We hope you will have a better overall understanding of the impact of take home car plans should you wish to initiate, or retain, such a plan in your police department.

Comparing Costs

Comparing fleet costs of departments with take home car plans to the costs of departments utilizing traditional fleet programs is a difficult job at best. There are a good number of variables that significantly impact a vehicle's cost per mile. These include such considerations as initial cost, salvage value, fuel costs, and maintenance expenses. Each of these considerations can vary greatly depending on the approach your department takes.

For instance, in a recent comparison done between a state highway patrol agency and a major city police department, the cost per mile for the state cars was determined to be \$0.27 per mile versus \$0.40 per mile for the city fleet. The Highway Patrol owns their fleet of 3,400 cars. They replace those vehicles every 95,000 miles. Their cars averaged 3,550 miles per month and had a life expectancy of 26 months. They use a pool concept and the cars are run 2 or 3 shifts a day. Before selling their vehicles, the highway patrol agency removes all the police equipment and cleans, details and paints each vehicle at a cost of \$550 to \$750 per vehicle. Their resale value is then customarily between \$6,000 and \$7,000. When they are purchased, the highway patrol pays approximately \$17,800 for the vehicles, which includes the price of an extended warranty which covers the drive train for up to 100,000 miles.

Highway Patrol Fleet Model

Cost	\$17,800
Salvage	(6,500)
Refurbish	650
Net Cost	\$11,950
Maintenance & Fuel	\$13,300
Total Cost	\$25,250
Mileage	9,500
Cost Per Mile	\$0.27

¹ "Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics, 1993: Data for Individual State and Local Agencies with 100 or More Officers," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ-148825, ©1995.

The city department leases its fleet from its department of general services. The lease rate includes all the maintenance, repairs (except accident damage), and fuel costs. When the vehicles reach between 60,000 and 80,000 miles, they undergo a major overhaul of drive components (the General Services Department spends approx. \$3,450 per vehicle for the overhaul). The vehicles are auctioned off when they reach 120,000 miles. The majority of the cars in the fleet are assigned to officers who use them on duty and for commuting to and from work.

City Model

Avg. Miles Per Month	1,459
Mileage	120,000
Life Expectancy (Months)	82
Monthly Lease Rate	\$580
Total Cost	\$47,704
Cost Per Mile	\$0.40

The analysis noted that among the city's opportunities for saving money were purchasing rather than leasing the cars and looking at selling off their cars sooner. It noted that the city was paying \$0.09 per mile (for miles between 80,000 and 120,000) by rebuilding the vehicles. At the same time, it cost highway patrol less than \$0.01 per mile to purchase the extended warranty and trade the car off earlier. Consequently, they controlled their maintenance costs and obtained a significantly higher resale value.

Again, the point of the above discussion is to raise awareness of the many issues involved in the costs of police fleets. A take home car program may become much more affordable if other costs related to fleet management can be lowered. Opponents to take home car programs are quick to point out the costs involved in purchasing the additional cars. You must be ready to counter those claims by being informed of all the issues related to fleet costs.

Advantages and Disadvantages

There are other savings to be had by initiating a take home car program. In a study reported in The Police Chief magazine², a survey of 416 Tennessee law enforcement officers found that officers assigned vehicles on a take-home basis were involved in fewer accidents than those who used fleet vehicles. One can speculate that these cars were better maintained, that officers were more familiar with their operation and also drove with more care having a "sense of ownership" in the vehicles. The obvious benefits are lower vehicle maintenance costs and lower liability claims.

The Newport News (Virginia) Police Department began phasing take-home police cars into its fleet in 1984 as part of their Community-Oriented Police Patrol. Cars were issued to officers living within the city limits. They determined that the benefits of the program included enhanced visibility and service, improved vehicle care and reduced maintenance costs, and improved officer job satisfaction. The take home car program also serves as an inducement to remain a resident of Newport News.

Another study done in 1986 by the Hampton (Virginia) Police Department further supports the benefits of take home fleet programs. The study showed that both maintenance costs and operating costs were lower for the take home car fleet vehicles than for pooled cars. The maintenance costs for take home cars was \$0.16 per mile versus \$0.19 per mile for pool vehicles, a 16% savings. Operating costs for 55 take home cars was \$0.17 per mile versus \$0.20 per mile for the 24 pool vehicles, a 15% savings. Like the Tennessee study, the Hampton Police also found a significant drop in motor vehicle accidents involving take home police vehicles. Although take home cars made up a sizable majority of the police department's fleet, out of the twenty (20) preventable accidents involving police cars, only four (4) were take home cars.

² "Police Vehicles," Police Chief, Vol. 50, No. 1, January 1983, pg. 25-27.

Take home cars also add additional police units and protection to a community. The Hampton Police study also found, in 1985, that officers participated in 1,231 service calls, 38 arrests, 21 misdemeanor summonses, and 152 traffic summonses while off-duty. This represented 3,777 off-duty hours of protection provided to citizens and which acted to supplement on-duty personnel.

This extra police presence is also noted and supported by citizens. Hampton Police also surveyed citizens to determine community satisfaction with the take home car plan. In analyzing the responses of 320 citizens surveyed, Hampton Police found that 83.8 percent felt more secure with a patrol car in their neighborhood, 84 percent wanted a car in their neighborhood, and 88 percent felt the program should be continued.

A May 1992 article in Law and Order magazine³ noted a number of other benefits. The article notes that about 90 percent of all State government law enforcement agencies use this system. Police use the vehicles for commuting and in return are responsible for keeping the vehicles clean and well maintained. The author notes that the advantages to the agency include having effectively two shifts on the road during shift changes, faster response times to emergencies, and simpler routines for call-outs. The article acknowledges that initial start-up costs can be of concern, but that net savings occur due to lower maintenance costs and extended vehicle life. It also notes that the costs of the increase in fleet size begin to be offset by lower maintenance costs by the second year of the policy. In the fourth year, vehicle replacement costs drop significantly because the take home cars accumulate fewer miles, extending their service time.

Take home car plans have their down sides, too. From a political standpoint, they give your chief, city manager, mayor, city council members, state representative and the like a very powerful bargaining chip that many use shamelessly. The threat of abolishing a take home car plan, where one has been in effect, can cause members to lose a good deal of enthusiasm when your organization is involved in a contract fight. A take home plan also can undermine officer camaraderie to a degree. Officers who might have once met after work at the station and gone out socializing no longer meet at the station. Instead, they are driving directly home with their patrol cars. Also, you will have small groups of citizens and politicians who will constantly be harping about this rich benefit that other workers do not enjoy. These are not insurmountable problems by any means and most would agree that the benefits of a take home car program far outweigh such concerns. However, it is important that you be ready to address the benefits to the community when these and other issues arise.

Clearly, take home car plans have a number of very attractive features. It also has some components which cause concern and some, like costs, which are complex. We are attempting to gather some more detailed cost analyses from departments which currently have take home car plans. We are also looking for a good analysis of take home car costs versus pool cars. In the meantime, I hope we have been able to give you a good start in your assessment of take home car plans and whether they make sense for you and your department.

³ "Take Home Cars: After the First Shock There Are Benefits," Law and Order, Vol. 40, No. 5, (May 1992), pg. 88-91.