

Highways to the danger zone

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The growth of India's highway system over the past 25 years has been tremendous, but the increase in road deaths has been equally large. Yet, through all these changes, one thing has remained the same: the policing of India's highways. It is time for traffic enforcement on India's highways to evolve into an efficient, modern system of highway patrolling that can keep pace with burgeoning traffic and expanding road networks to provide a safe environment.

India has a road network of 4.3 million kilometres. National highways constitute about 1.7 per cent of that. However, this 1.7 per cent carries approximately 40 per cent of India's vehicular traffic and is growing rapidly. Last year, about 8,000 km of new national highways were awarded; this year this figure is likely to be in excess of 9,500 km. With this expansion in the highway network and vehicle traffic has come an equally large increase in accidents. As per the latest report of ministry of road transport and highways, more than 1.25 lakh persons lost their lives in road accidents in India in 2009. Road accident deaths have consistently been on the rise since 2001.

The system of highway policing in India remains much the same as it was 40 years ago. Policing each section of a national highway remains the sole responsibility of the state police, particularly the district in which it lies, and police stations along highways have few additional resources to handle their substantial additional duties. This lack of resources can have a great cost when it comes to human life and property. Since these police stations must handle criminal investigations and law-and-order maintenance as well as highway patrols, their resources are spread very thin. Police vehicles and staff busy investigating crimes or controlling public order cannot respond quickly to accidents on the highway. Further, police personnel who spend all day working on other duties may not have the time or energy to carry out the necessary night-time traffic law enforcement.

Recent research by the Rajasthan police, in collaboration with J-PAL at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, proves the benefits of dedicated police teams for traffic law enforcement on highways. Two types of police teams were assigned to enforce an anti-drunk driving crackdown on checkpoints in 182 randomly selected police stations across 11 districts of Rajasthan. Half the teams were drawn from the police stations, as is the current norm. The other half were chosen from the police lines to form dedicated special teams. These special teams were monitored by GPS trackers in their police vehicles and intended to provide a test of how a dedicated highway patrol would compare to the current traffic law enforcement system.

The results show that the special traffic enforcement teams performed better on every parameter compared to the team from the local police station. They were 28.4 per cent more likely to show up to perform a sobriety checkpoint, and 24.7 per cent more likely to arrive on time if they did show up. Further, it seems these differences were not simply due to the GPS monitoring. Once the teams reached the checkpoint itself (where the GPS monitoring did not matter), the special teams still performed better; they stopped an average of 8.6 per cent more vehicles per checkpoint than teams from local police stations. Given that dedicated teams both stayed longer and stopped more vehicles, it is not surprising that they caught 1.8 times more drunk drivers per checkpoint than the police station teams, roughly double the amount.

One might be concerned that this better performance would be negated if the staff of the dedicated teams drawn from

district police lines are less accountable to the local community and engage in more corrupt practices at the checkpoints. To study this, researchers recorded the number of drivers appearing in court to pay the penalty for drunk driving by both teams. They found no difference between the two police team strategies: the dedicated teams caught more drunk drivers and also sent more of them to court.

What, then, explains why special traffic enforcement teams performed so much better? Two factors may have been decisive. First, the special teams faced stronger incentives; because they were monitored more closely, their performance could lead more directly to positive recognition from senior officers. Second, the special teams may have been more focused on their work, and less prone to the distractions of other police duties.

A permanent highway patrol police could incorporate both advantages and also technology and expertise unavailable in the above mentioned experiment. Indeed, such a system has already been adopted by many countries, including France, Germany and Japan, and even for traffic police in major Indian cities. A system like the Central Motorway Police Groups in Britain, combining the police forces of many districts and states along the same national highway for dedicated policing services, might be adapted to Indian conditions. Enforcement is a key ingredient for a safe road environment, and specialised highway patrol police are crucial to providing effective enforcement and keeping India's national highway system safe and protected.

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