THE DETERRENT EFFECTS OF SOBRIETY CHECKPOINT PROGRAMS IN THE U.S.

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This paper reviews the evaluative literature concerning police sobriety checkpoints in the United States. It reaches the conclusion that, although most of the studies contain important methodological weaknesses, the cumulation of evidence supports the hypothesis that checkpoints reduce impaired driving. This hypothesis is derived from theoretical reasoning that the key element in deterrence is the perceived likelihood of punishment for impaired drivers, and that checkpoint programs, by multiplying the occasions of interaction between the driving public and law enforcement personnel and by liberating this interaction from a link to manifest driving errors, foster this perception.

Nine studies were reviewed; the literature is relatively brief and most of the interventions are limited and cautious, reflecting the existence of doubts concerning the constitutionality of checkpoints, prior to the 1990 Michigan v. Sitz case, in which the Supreme Court determined that they did not violate the U.S. Constitution. Moreover, the literature as a whole suffers from common methodological problems in the areas of measurement and inference.

A serious weakness is the use of inadequate measures of impaired driving, most notably alcohol-related accidents as defined by the police. This index has a large subjective component, and the police decision process is potentially subject to political influence. Even more problematic are those studies that use self-reported drunk driving from telephone surveys as their sole or chief measure. Furthermore, the interventions themselves tend to be badly described, and they are often complex, involving numerous components other than checkpoints which may independently or in interaction with checkpoints be responsible for changes that are attributed to the checkpoints alone.

Although checkpoint campaigns, like other enforcement interventions, are generally expected to produce immediate effects and therefore can be analyzed by interrupted time-series methods, several of the studies employ inherently defective before-and-after comparisons with weak or nonexistent controls. Alternative explanations in terms of independent events, general trends, random fluctuations, and the tendency of unusual conditions to return to normal, exist as threats to the validity of conclusions in these studies.

However, the weaknesses of individual studies appear to be adequately overcome by the accumulation of positive findings for visible and well-publicized checkpoints. The accomplishments have been demonstrated only in the short run, mainly because most of the programs were either new when evaluated or were deliberately limited in time. The only evidence of relatively long-term deterrence from something like checkpoints comes from New South Wales, Australia, and that intervention is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from typical U.S. checkpoint programs. The Australian experience can be regarded as suggestive, but not demonstrative, of what can be achieved by the kinds of programs experienced here.

The review raises the following issues, among others:

1. Why, given the overall favorable experience with checkpoint programs as deterrents of drunk driving, do so few police departments employ them? Why have some of those which have used them and experienced favorable results nonetheless abandoned them when outside funding was no longer available?

2. How can necessary publicity be maintained over the long run, as would be required with the institutionalization and routinization of checkpoint programs?

3. How do the results of investments in checkpoint programs compare with those of investments in alternative forms of drunk-driving law enforcement?

4. What role would checkpoint and alternative programs assume in a maximally effective deterrent policy?