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Improved DWI Enforcement Program Involved In A 25% Decline In Alcohol-Related Fatalities in Austin, Texas



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IMPROVED DWI ENFORCEMENT PROGRAM INVOLVED IN A 25% DECLINE IN ALCOHOL-RELATED FATALITIES IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

There are nearly 1.5 million Driving While Intoxicated (DWI) arrests each year in this country, making impaired driving one of the most frequently committed crimes. Law enforcement agencies must address this serious problem in their local communities, while facing dwindling resources.

Mid-America Research Institute conducted a research study for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to examine one community's efforts to improve their DWI enforcement program, with the goal of streamlining their arrest process, and ultimately, decreasing alcohol-related fatalities.

Austin, Texas modified their DWI program in 1999. A key feature of Austin's program was the development of a full-time team of DWI specialists. These officers patrol the streets in two-person teams, looking for impaired drivers. They are also available to assist general patrol officers in processing DWI offenders - thus relieving the burden on those officers so that they can return to their patrol duties.

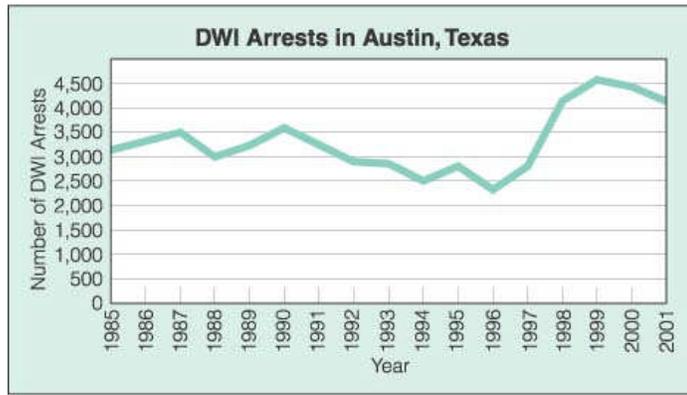
Austin's program includes enhanced training for officers in DWI enforcement. Rookie officers now accompany members of the DWI team for four weeks to gain hands-on experience in identifying and processing DWI suspects.

Another change in their program is assigning liaison officers to work with the courts to track DWI cases. The liaison monitors court schedules and calls in the arresting officer only when the officer needs to testify. Austin also offers administrative license revocation (ALR) hearings by telephone.

DWI Arrests

The number of DWI arrests had been trending down from about 3,500 in 1990 to only 2,200 in 1996, and had been holding steady from 1994 through 1997.

With the start of a part-time DWI task force in 1998, arrests increased to 4,077, an increase of 48 percent over the 2,747 arrested for DWI in 1997. A further increase to 4,500 occurred in 1999 during the transition from the task force to the full-time DWI unit. The arrest rate remained at a high level in the following two years, with only a slight dip in 2001.



DWI Arrests in Austin, Texas, y-axis, "Number of DWI arrests" - 0 - 4500, increments of 500, x-axis "Year", 1985 - 2001

Convictions

Conviction rates for DWI cases adjudicated in county courts in Travis County (where Austin is located) increased from approximately 70 percent in 1996 to 77 percent immediately after the start of the program. This 7 percent increase in conviction rates remained in effect through the year 2001.

Impact on Fatalities

Mid-America analyzed Austin's fatality data using an interrupted time series data analysis. There was a statistically significant 25 percent reduction in alcohol-positive drivers (that is drivers with a blood alcohol concentration [BAC] of .01 or above) in fatal crashes ($p=0.037$), compared to what would have been expected without the enforcement program. Analysis of data from the rest of the state showed no significant change, leading to the conclusion that the improvements in the DWI enforcement system were likely responsible for the decrease in alcohol-positive drivers in fatal crashes.

DWI Processing Time

The average time to process a DWI offender did not decrease, remaining in the 2.5- 3.0 hour range. A possible explanation is that a new jail facility opened during the time frame of this project, which involved processing requirements outside of the Austin Police Department's control.

HOW TO ORDER

For a copy of *Evaluation of the Austin, Texas Police Department DWI Enforcement Unit* (29 pages) report write to the Office of Research and Technology, NHTSA, NTI-131, 400 Seventh Street, SW, Washington, DC, 20590, or send a fax to (202) 366-7096. Amy Berning was the project manager for this study.

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