

# IT'S A CORRUPT SYSTEM THAT MAKES VICTIMS OF US ALL! SO WHY DON'T WE CHANGE IT?

The traffic ticket system in the city of Denver extorts money from the innocent, especially from those who can least afford it. It turns a patrolman into an official mugger who is too busy writing traffic tickets to catch real criminals. So it leaves the victims of real crimes to fend for themselves while the major part of the "justice" system pursues the taxpayer's wallet.

Every month Denver patrolmen write about 11000 traffic tickets. These tickets produce 4 million dollars a year in city revenue. That is the whole purpose of the system and everyone involved with it knows it, if they are honest enough to admit it to themselves. The only legal justification for traffic tickets is public safety but not one in a thousand of those receiving traffic tickets is actually endangering anyone. Most of them are safe and careful drivers who make the kind of driving mistakes we all make. Actually, if patrolmen ticketed each other the same way they do the average driver, they would all have a bundle of tickets to pay.

Every patrolman on the street is under pressure to write a large number of tickets every week. His job, his promotions, his assignments depend on it. If he never catches a criminal, he'll never hear about it. But if his ticket writing falls off, he'll hear about it and very soon.

They say it isn't a quota system. True, it isn't that a patrolman has to write exactly 40 tickets a week. But if he only writes 35 tickets a week (while others are averaging 40) he had better write 45 the next week or he may find himself patrolling a part of town nobody likes very much.

The result is that the major part of a patrolman's day is spent looking for chances to unload traffic tickets (and also parking tickets—as many as 100 a day!) So unless you drive like you are the first car in a funeral procession, unless you study every turn for five minutes before you make it and whistle a bar of Home on the Range at every stop sign—there are people who drive like that; they endanger everyone, but they never get tickets—you are bound to get tickets. The lights are timed faster than the speed limit on a long open boulevard—and the patrolman is waiting for you because he needs to write another half dozen tickets by the end of the shift. You don't notice the NO LEFT TURN sign until you've already made your turn. A lot of other drivers don't notice it either—that is why the patrolman always parks on that corner. The system permanently sours the relationship between the police and the people they are supposed to serve and protect. The driver who gets a ticket rightly feels that he is being victimized by an unjust system, and that the patrolman is competing with the thieves instead of trying to catch them. As soon as you get out of your car, the mugger is stalking you. As soon as you get back in your car, the patrolman is stalking you.

It isn't the patrolman's fault really. Like all of us, he does what he has to do to keep his job. But the patrolmen could have a major role in changing the system if they got together. In October, 1977, the Denver Police Union called for a slowdown in ticket writing to protest an inadequate pay raise. They would do it again if they had the backing they need from the rest of the city.

Suppose there were no pressure on patrolmen to unload tickets. They would still go after the dangerous drivers—people driving drunk or out of control—but they would ignore the ordinary mistakes people make and just give warnings to people who inadvertently violated traffic rules without really endangering anyone.

Where would the city make up the lost revenue? If there were an honest tax, fairly applied, instead of this random tax disguised as law enforcement, we would all be better off. A tax of about \$3 per person per year for everyone in the metropolitan area would raise the same amount.

The major benefit is that the patrolman out on the street would be looking for real crime instead of chances to unload traffic tickets. Instead of treating law-abiding citizens like criminals, he would pursue criminals with as much energy as he now uses in pursuit of citizens.

Considering the change only in terms of money, we would get back many times the value of the lost revenue. The metropolitan area has about 20,000 burglaries every year. Figuring an average of \$500 per burglary, these crimes cost us about 10 million dollars a year (of course the real cost in personal trauma can't be calculated in dollars). In a typical year, these 20,000 burglaries lead to less than 500 arrests and, eventually, maybe 5 people go to jail! Why?!

One of the main reasons is that only the most desultory police work is done on any burglary. Basically a burglary, like many other crimes, is filed and forgotten. The "strategy"—if you could call it that—is the expectation that the burglar will mess up eventually—usually after he has committed 200 or so burglaries—and they will catch him in the act finally. (it isn't that there are 20,000 burglars out there, the same guys pull hundreds of jobs because they never get caught.) Among the things the police don't do: they don't dust your house for fingerprints even though the burglars may have left them all over the place; they don't go door to door in your neighborhood and ask your neighbors: "Did you see anyone going into that house yesterday?" Of course these chores are beneath the dignity of a detective. But, suppose that, instead of writing tickets all day, the patrolman was assigned to do such follow-up work? You would see a drastic reduction in the number of burglaries—they'd catch the guy the 2nd time or even the 20th time instead of the 200th.

The same could be true of other kinds of crime. About 10,000 cars are stolen here every year. They may turn up eventually but the patrolman has very little time to look for them. A woman is kidnapped and the description of the kidnapper's car is broadcast. Are the patrolmen out there on the alert, looking for the car? Well, yes—as much as they can while they are watching for ticketable traffic offenses.

So all of us are the victims of this system: the driver who makes a mistake; the policeman, trained to deal with criminals and then handed a book of tickets; the victim of a criminal who could have been caught long before, if the police spent the time looking for him that they spend writing tickets.

## WHY DON'T WE CHANGE IT?

If you agree with this paper, if you are willing to join an informational picket line or otherwise help out, get in touch with us.

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