

Trooper Trap

By Christy Whitehead



With headlines like, “Suspect steals cop car, officer injured” or “Handcuffed man steals patrol car” in newspapers on a frequent basis, fleet managers have a reason to be concerned. One police officer at a scene can’t do it all. And if there isn’t a cage to separate an inmate from the front seat, who’s to say the inmate will sit still while you search his car? And if you do have a cage, prisoners could still unbuckle and kick out a window and make a run for it.

While it is hard to track the actual number of prisoners who escape from a patrol car each year, research has shown that there is at least one major prisoner transport escape every day. But a large number of departments fail to acknowledge this as a problem, even though it has potentially devastating legal consequences for the police departments involved.

Personal Mission

Alan Beaty, an Oklahoma Highway Patrolman, cringes when he reads headlines about police who have had a prisoner escape out of a patrol car, or worse, when the patrol car is stolen by the escapee. He knows what it’s like and he is on a mission to keep other police officers from having their patrol cars stolen.

In October 2000, Beaty arrested a woman and put her in the front seat of his patrol car while he inventoried her

truck and talked with the passenger. The arrested woman didn’t sit still for long. She unbuckled her seat belt and managed to slip off her handcuffs and maneuver herself into the driver’s seat, taking off with Beaty’s patrol car.

A narcotics officer had arrived on the scene a few moments before, so Beaty and the narcotics officer jumped into his vehicle and went on a high-speed pursuit. The pursuit reached speeds of about 120 mph before the woman crashed Beaty’s 3-week-old patrol car into a utility pole. The woman took off on foot, but Beaty caught up and found her hiding in some nearby bushes. He may have caught his criminal, but his car was totaled.

In the aftermath of the incident, Beaty got an overwhelming number of emails from other officers who wanted to share their own similar stories. But instead of putting Beaty at ease, it only made him want to find a solution. Beaty became a man on a mission to make sure this incident would never happen again. He took matters into his own hands and built his first Trooper Trap.

Nowadays, when Beaty gets into his patrol car, a small black box attached to the underside of the dashboard near his

left leg lights up. When a subject is arrested, Beaty handcuffs and searches the prisoner. Then the prisoner is placed in his patrol car and the switch near the steering wheel is turned on arming the Trooper Trap.

Then Beaty is free to talk to another subject or search a vehicle without constantly monitoring the handcuffed prisoner. If the prisoner attempts to escape by removing the seatbelt, an extremely loud external alarm will sound to alert Beaty that the prisoner has unfastened the seatbelt.

Beaty created the device to allow officers the ability to monitor a prisoner without physically watching him. “I don’t have to worry about where my prisoner is,” Beaty said. “The other trooper has to stop and squint and look for his prisoner. I know my prisoner is safely secured.”

Beaty recalls a recent drug bust where he strapped a guy into his backseat while he went to deal with the female passenger. Suddenly Beaty’s lights and sirens went off, signaling that his prisoner had unbuckled and was trying to escape. Beaty ran back to his car and found the prisoner dumbstruck with awe at all the commotion that had

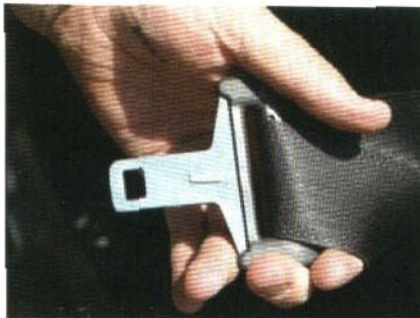


begun in the car as a direct result of unbuckling the seatbelt. Beaty was told later that this particular suspect always runs when he is arrested. But because of Beaty's invention, he didn't get the chance to run.

The Details

Trooper Trap allows an officer to arm the two back seats and the front passenger seat all at the same time or individually. The box goes under the dashboard and is approximately the size of an external CD drive for a laptop; it can be mounted wherever it is convenient for the department.

Trooper Trap has three LED switches and three sensors. Each switch controls a separate seatbelt so that one prisoner can be released while the



other prisoners are still monitored. The switches are lighted for ease of operation and have different colors so that an officer will know the status of each belt. When the light is off, the sensor is off.

When the light is either amber or green, the switch is activated. An amber light means the seatbelts are in the automatic mode, waiting for someone to be buckled in. A green light tells the officer that the system is monitoring a seat belted prisoner. The light changes to red and the alarm sounds when a prisoner tries to unbuckle his seatbelt.

The device is wired through the seatbelt and uses a magnetic sensor to advise when a prisoner is attempting an escape. The device is set up so that if a prisoner were to find the device's wires and try to pull them out, the Trooper Trap would sound.

Beaty said that it would take about an hour for an officer to install a Trooper Trap device. But he said that if a department got used to installing them, the time could probably be dropped to about 30 minutes a piece. Written operation and installation instructions are provided with the unit which also includes small window stickers, much like what you get when you buy a car alarm.

Beaty charges \$300 for Trooper Trap which can be purchased from Surface Mount Depot in Oklahoma City. Several departments across the country have purchased some after having experienced a stolen patrol car. Beaty will also send one to any

department who would like to test the product.

No department should have to worry about when a patrol car will be stolen, especially when the department could be held liable for any damage that results; Beaty noted several cases where police departments had to pay out large sums to families of victims who died because of a stolen police car killing them.

Protecting yourself

Beaty is now looking at creating a similar invention to monitor patrol shotguns. The Oklahoma Highway Patrol does not have a locking system in their patrol cars to secure officers' shotguns. In Beaty's car, there is a shelf that hangs from the ceiling behind the front seat, and inside it is his shotgun which is secured in with Velcro®. This situation is another reason why Beaty wants to make sure his prisoner is seat belted in and not going anywhere or messing around in Beaty's car.

Beaty warns that the Trooper Trap is not meant as a restraining device, but merely as an advance warning system for police officers. But Beaty admits that it doesn't hurt that the alarm is loud enough to scare a prisoner into changing his mind about attempting to escape either. Beaty says the device just makes his job a little easier and safer. Plus, he figures that it saves him from ever having to explain to a superior officer how a suspect could steal his brand new patrol car while he was standing nearby.

For sales, information, or to try a Trooper Trap out, departments can contact Zack Keas at zkeas@smd-okc.com, or call 1-800-405-8763.

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