

Speeders Spring Their Own Trap



The mike on the officer's belt is a valid witness.

by Chuck Carner

"BUT OFFICER..."

These words of protest have probably been uttered at one time or another by every American who has ever driven a car.

If anyone ever doubted it, he can now be assured that it's true. The Indiana state police have been recording—unknown to the drivers—on-the-scene conversations with persons stopped for traffic violations. Since October, 1957, more than 1,000 such interviews have been taped on miniature recorders, and several conclusions about the motoring public have been reached.

Not all motorists react the same, of course, but they can definitely be typed. Some get defiant and flinty-eyed, some become nervous, others bluster and, contrary to popular belief, men are just as talkative as women when trying to avoid an arrest slip. But practically all drivers have one thing in common: almost no one ever admits he's wrong.

In the 1,000 taped interviews, only five drivers admitted to being at fault, accepted the ticket without protest, and confessed he felt the officer was doing a good job to safeguard the motoring public on the highway.

The percentage of willful drivers—motorists who deliberately violate traffic laws—is small. Unfortunately, death and injury statistics make no distinction between deliberate infractions or mental lapses by normally careful drivers.

Many motorists are the dreamer or preoccupied type. To them driving becomes mechanical, and their personal problems occupy their minds. These can be dangerous—like the trucker whose heavily loaded vehicle was caught passing in the wrong lane at 60 m.p.h. on deadly U.S. 20. Aghast, the state trooper asked why.

"Oh, I've been worried," the trucker groaned. "My best friend was killed yesterday."

"How?" asked the officer.

"In a truck crash!"

The most frequent offender is the irresponsible motorist who generally believes himself to be a superior driver and able to stay out of trouble. An estimated 93 percent slip into this category at least occasionally. And of this group, those who drive after drinking are the biggest offenders.

A trooper stopped a weaving auto one night and found two inebriates in the front seat. Both heatedly denied they'd been drinking.

The officer, realizing he'd reached an impasse, left his tape recorder in their car, then went to the rear on the pretext of searching the trunk.

The two went on talking nearly five minutes, discussing how to hide a whiskey bottle, with the recorder whirring away. When confronted with their own slightly off-center voices at the station, the pair quickly confessed to drunken driving.

One man was arrested for speeding during his lunch hour. He was hurrying to return to work after getting an estimate on some body damage to his car—incurred in an accident the week before!

ONE OF THE LARGEST single groups is the "con man" category—the person who hasn't committed any wrong (he tries to convince police) and attempts to avoid a ticket through his own cleverness. It seldom works.

One interviewed motorist missed a turn in the highway, traveled off the road, over an embankment, across 200 feet of loose sand beach, then 30 feet out into Lake Michigan where he just missed a moored cruiser. State police estimated he couldn't possibly have been going less than 100 m.p.h. The bland-faced motorist said he was "only doing 20."

A school-bus driver, stopped for speeding while carrying a load of children, fits into this slot, too. He pooh-poohed the speeding charge for about five minutes until he finally and inadvertently admitted: "I have been ahead of schedule all the way today." He'd been wondering why, he said.

The blusterer frequently becomes charged with attempted bribery, because of his taped voice.

One night an officer pulled a trucker over for going 60 m.p.h. in a 45-mile zone. The trucker started squirming and finally said, "Look, pal, it's worth \$10 if you'll cut the charge to 50 m.p.h. I've got a tough boss. He'll sit still for 50, but I'll get fired for 60."

"Are you trying to bribe me?"

"Call it what you like," the trucker muttered. "The sawbuck is yours—"

"No dice," said the officer, "and I've got news for you: this talk is being tape recorded." He showed the tiny mike.

"Oh, brother," the trucker groaned. "Me and my big mouth—"

During the entire series, only one driver has questioned the troopers about the equipment.

Spying the tiny sleeve mike, he asked, "What's that thing?"

"My hearing aid."

"Oh, sorry," he apologized.

The tapings have enabled police to come up with several hints on how motorists can keep out of

In a unique experiment, Indiana state police use hidden tape recorders to study reactions of traffic violators.



Adaptable, the recording unit fits snugly into a jacket pocket (top) with its wire leading to mike on cuff (left), and it can be set up for use in the patrol car as seen below.



trouble on the nation's highways:

1. Obey traffic laws.
2. Concentrate on driving, not on personal problems. You won't solve them at 70 m.p.h.
3. Don't become belligerent when stopped by a trooper. He's merely doing his job. A much wiser practice is trying to understand the policeman's position. One motorist did this.

"Yes, sir," he told the trooper. "I appreciate your stopping me. Why it was my own life I was endangering. Thanks, officer."

The amazed trooper was so shocked he let the motorist go—and without a ticket.

Only once has a recording backfired. An officer brought the recorder home one night after making an arrest of a woman driver. He played it back to demonstrate to his new bride how the machine worked.

The tape opened with the officer at the speeder's car, politely explaining the offense and asking her for her driver's license. Soon, in a sultry Marilyn Monroe voice, the woman said, "Why not get in my car? It's warmer—and very comfortable."

Then dead silence!

"You know," the officer said, "I had a heck-of-a-time explaining to my wife that I just happened to run out of tape at that point!"