

## The Fuel Efficiency of Law Enforcement Vehicles

**Author :** Jeff Welty

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I live in Durham, where the ELF is built. The ELF is a pedal-and-electric-powered reverse tricycle with an egg-shaped body and a solar panel roof. It is certainly unique. A 360-degree view is available [here](#). Organic Transit, the company that builds the ELF, states that it “gets the equivalent of 1800 m.p.g.”

What does this have to do with criminal law? Well, the company recently introduced the [Tactical ELF](#), designed to “give[] [law enforcement agencies] the tactical advantage for community policing.” An endorsement from Duke’s campus police comments that “It’s like a small patrol car.” I doubt that the ELF is going to be a mainstream law enforcement vehicle anytime soon, but it did get me thinking about the fuel efficiency of law enforcement vehicles generally. This post summarizes what I learned.

**The Crown Vic is a gas guzzler.** Historically the most popular law enforcement vehicle has been the Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor, last produced in 2011 and still in use in many agencies. The 2011 model is EPA rated for 16 m.p.g. in city driving, but due to the large amount of idling inherent to police use, many agencies see more like 6 to 8 m.p.g.

**More recent options aren’t much better.** Whether you’re concerned about government spending, climate change, or dependence on foreign oil, 6 to 8 m.p.g. isn’t too good. Yet despite occasional claims that newer police vehicles are designed for fuel economy, the current top sellers are not much different from the Crown Vic:

- The best-selling law enforcement vehicle last year was the [Ford Police Interceptor Utility SUV](#), based on the Explorer. It is EPA rated for 16 m.p.g. city, just like the Crown Vic, and its highway rating is actually lower than the Crown Vic’s, 21 m.p.g. compared to 24 m.p.g.
- Ford’s law enforcement sedan offering is the Interceptor Sedan, EPA rated for 18 m.p.g. city and 25 m.p.g. highway.
- GM’s offerings include the Tahoe Police Pursuit Vehicle, rated for 16 m.p.g. city and 23 m.p.g. highway, and the Caprice Police Pursuit Vehicle, rated for 18 m.p.g. city and 26 m.p.g. highway with a V-6 engine, less than that for the V-8). [Here’s](#) the GM brochure.

Some of the new models purport to be more efficient at idle than the Crown Vic. But any improvement in efficiency looks to be evolutionary, not revolutionary.

**There are alternatives.** In 2013, the Urban Institute issued [this report](#) about reducing fuel consumption in law enforcement vehicles. It argues that hybrid vehicles could save law enforcement agencies \$4,323 per vehicle per year compared to conventional gas-powered vehicles. The report identifies a number of jurisdictions that have begun using hybrids. Specifically, it notes that New York City already has over 1,000 hybrid patrol vehicles on the road, returning triple the gas mileage of gas-powered vehicles and apparently receiving good reviews from officers. The NYPD seems to have continued to move towards hybrids, as [this 2014 city report](#) notes that there are now over 1,500 police hybrids, and that they have been more reliable and less expensive in total operating costs than comparable non-hybrid

vehicles.

There are fewer all-electric vehicles in police use, but there are a few. [Here](#) is a story about a Nissan Leaf used in Kingsport, TN. The Los Angeles Police Department [is evaluating](#) electric motorcycles. And Atherton, CA, a Silicon Valley town with a median home price of \$6.7 million, is [at least thinking about](#) getting Teslas for the police. Things are different in California!

**Reasons to stay the course.** Agencies may prefer traditional, large, gas-powered vehicles for a variety of reasons, including lower initial purchase costs, familiarity, interior volume, perceived collision safety, and speed. Also, officers may prefer the perception that comes with patrolling in a large SUV rather than, for example, a Toyota Prius.

**Some North Carolina agencies are making the switch.** According to news reports, several North Carolina agencies have determined that it is worthwhile to move to more efficient vehicles:

- [Asheville](#) has a Chevy Volt patrol car that is returning 130 m.p.g.
- [Raleigh](#) has multiple propane-powered patrol cars.
- [Buncombe County](#) has also converted several Crown Vics to propane power.
- As noted above, Duke has an ELF

I didn't see any news reports about hybrid police vehicles in the state, which surprised me. But I suspect that there are many agencies with efficient vehicles that aren't included on the list. Feel free to post a comment if you're aware of others.

**Local governments generally are changing vehicle types.** For non-law-enforcement use, local governments are moving quickly towards hybrids and other efficient cars. The parking lot here at the School of Government is a constant flow of city- and county-owned Chevy Volts, hybrid Ford Fusions, Nissan Leaf electric vehicles, and others. (I haven't seen an ELF here yet, but perhaps that day will come.)

Readers, what do you think? Should law enforcement agencies move towards more efficient vehicles, or are large conventional vehicles necessary for police duty? Is the best option a combination of the two? Have any agencies made, or are any agencies considering making, a major commitment to more efficient vehicles? What have officers' experiences been?