

**A HEAVY PRICE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF
TRAVEL EXPENSE FRAUD**

November 2022

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Editor’s note: This article is part of a series. [*Click here*](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/overtime-abuse-in-public-safety-a-problem-lying-in-wait) for the previous article.

Gordon Graham here! This year has been an odd one from a financial perspective. On the one hand, we have a booming job market contributing to higher wages and better financial positioning for many families. On the other hand, we have factors like inflation, high gas prices and high mortgage rates that are proving challenges for families, businesses and municipal organizations—including public safety agencies. After a windfall of COVID-related funding over the past two years, we’re likely to see the purse strings tighten and an increased focus on “where every dollar goes” and “what can we do to reduce costs and expenses?” So this article about [Family Nine of the 10 Families of Risks](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/the-top-2-financial-problems-facing-public-safety-agencies) is indeed timely.

In my last article, I wrapped up my [thoughts on overtime](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/overtime-abuse-in-public-safety-a-problem-lying-in-wait) and the importance of control measures (read: policies, procedures, the key role of the supervisor, and the audit function) to address overtime fraud in public safety agencies. In this piece I want to focus on another form of theft of government funds—travel expense fraud in public safety agencies.

Every public safety employee needs to be fully reimbursed for allowable and legitimate expenditures caused by work-related travel. Reimbursement is only right and fair when you are required to travel for your department.

Take, for instance, an out-of-state extradition assignment. In the mid-70s I was waved down by a fellow at Washington Boulevard and Hoover Street in downtown Los Angeles. His car had been stolen from a car wash. The attendant drove it from the wash area to the drying area and left the keys in the switch and a young fellow jumped in and drove it off. The owner of the car told me his story and I took a stolen vehicle report, which was ultimately entered into the various databases. And that was the end of it—I thought!

About a year later I get a subpoena (always better than a summons; there is a big difference) for a court proceeding and I learn from the prosecutor that the young fellow who stole the car was arrested in Alabama in the stolen car. Here is an old school view of things: The arrest was made by the sheriff of the involved county, and he drove the suspect from Alabama (whose state motto is “We Dare Defend Our Rights”) to Los Angeles in a marked unit. That is close to 3,000 miles (which means it was not a day trip unless he was going really fast) so my guess is it required several nights in some motel.

The capper of this event was when I thanked the sheriff for catching this guy and I asked why he drove to Los Angeles rather than using some other form of extradition. I learned he brought his wife and kids with him because “they always wanted to go to the original Disneyland.” My guess is that was one heck of a travel expense claim—and my guess is he was the person who prepared it, reviewed it and approved it.

I don’t think that would happen today, but who knows?

When I was a young cop, my first travel expense claim involved in-service training. The California Highway Patrol is a state agency—the training academy is 400 miles north of Los Angeles—and travel expenses were allowed. It was only a day trip, but if you used your personal car you could build for mileage and meals. Once you arrived at the Academy there were no personal expenses as they provided a dorm and meals. (Side note: Not everyone drove their personal vehicles. Back then the CHP used officers to transport “runout” patrol cars—80K miles was the cap then and the used patrol car was auctioned off at the motor transport unit. At the end of the week you drove a new patrol car home—that is how the new patrol cars from motor transport were delivered to field operations. More on that later.)

So I drove my personal car, at the time a 1970 BMW 2002ti (the “ti” meant Touring International; this was not the fuel-injected “tii” or Touring International Injected, but the dual Solex carb “ti”). I recall selling that car for $2,000 to another cop and what a mistake that was—a good 1970 2002ti now commands about $50,000—but everyone reading this has a similar story about selling a car you should have kept, so enough of that.

About a week after I returned to Los Angeles I was interviewed by Internal Affairs. Their focus was on two cops from West Los Angeles Area. I later learned the officers were both fired (and later reinstated with the discipline reduced to time off) for “violation of travel expenses.” They drove up together in one car, but both officers submitted mileage claims. I am sure today—post [*Brady*](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/truth-lies-and-video-reassessing-the-bradygiglio-rule-in-the-era-of-video-evidence/)—this dishonesty would cost them their jobs. And for what? $100 of gasoline? You give up a million-dollar pension for $100?

This is not isolated. Travel expense fraud in public safety happens, and too often. As a sergeant I approved travel expense claims and through a series of flukes I learned one of my cops had his own restaurant receipt book he used to claim payment for meals he did not consume while traveling. This idiot was submitting “receipts” from his receipt book, not realizing there were sequential numbers on the receipts. He submitted a receipt numbered 123456 in January for travel to the Academy and three months later submitted a receipt numbered 123457 for lunch on an out-of-county court case. And when confronted, he lied about it—with the receipt book in his office locker!

It goes on and on and on. On a side note, I have heard about cops taking irons from their motel rooms, taking spare tires out of rental cars, claiming mileage when they flew on a free flight on Southwest Airlines to Sacramento, siphoning gas out of rental cars and a hundred other variations on a theme. No matter how you frame it, this is [intentional misconduct](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/its-coming-from-inside-the-house-internal-intentional-misconduct-in-public-safety/). It is not “I made a mistake” but rather a deliberate attempt to defraud—it is a big deal and can end up in termination and possibly a criminal filing. Again, for what?

Time to close this out. But earlier I mentioned the auctioning of patrol cars that reached their end-of-service mileage. How much would you pay for a two-year-old patrol car with 80,000+ miles on it driven by a bunch of young cops jumping curbs and bottoming out in pursuits, slammed into park at 20 mph and generally misused and abused during its lifetime? In the 80s they were going for about $1,000—these cars were beat, seriously beat! Most of the purchases were by taxi companies—you young kids will have to Google that in this age of Uber—and then driven another 500,000 miles by some cabbie in Manhattan.

Well, how about if the office auto tech (the person in charge of the office fleet) at the 75K mark put in a new engine and a new transmission and new tires—all on the state dime—then wrote down the sequential of the VIN and told a compatriot (how do you spell “criminal conspiracy”?) to go to the auction and look for a certain VIN during the pre-auction inspection and buy it for a thousand bucks when the state had just spent four times that much for all the work? Yes, that happened and they got caught and prosecuted and a substantial change for the worse in their life—and for what?

“Without the public trust we have nothing.” That was true then and it is true now. Please take travel expense claims seriously. Get a good policy in place and make sure your supervisors are not just signing requests for reimbursement for travel expenses without critically reading them.

In my next article, I will address another critical financial issue: asset seizure and forfeiture money.

**Timely Takeaway—**Between now and next month, please use your favorite search engine and check out “law enforcement asset seizure and forfeiture scandals” for a primer on this huge national issue. Please do this on duty while at work because “travel expenses are not authorized for this activity.”

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