

HOW

IT

WORKS

2009 DODGE CHARGER POLICE EDITION

WITH THE RIGHT MODS, AN OFF-THE-SHELF POLICE CAR CAN BE A HYPER-EFFICIENT SURVEILLANCE MACHINE.

→ **The typical cop car isn't born**—it's slapped together. Traditionally, this involved taking a production vehicle, bolting on a reinforced bumper and adding some lights and a divider between the front and back seats.

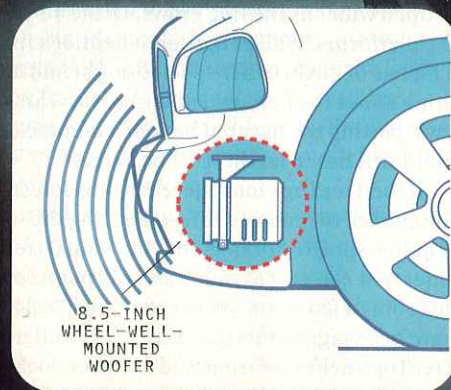
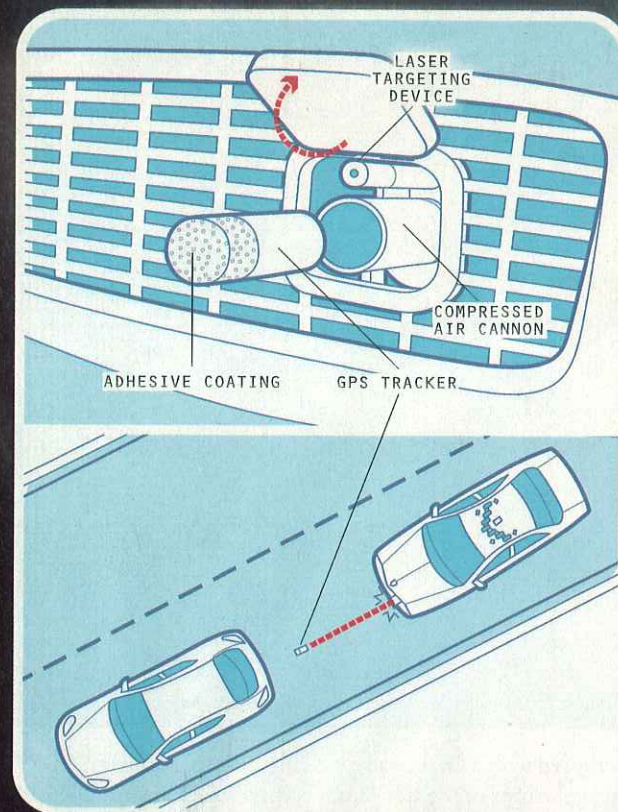
But as law enforcement agencies update their fleets, the police car is evolving. The Ford Crown Victorias of the past half-century are losing ground to more powerful models, like the Dodge Charger. (Dodge was in financial limbo at press time, but we're not giving up on the Charger just yet.) And these cars are being outfitted with gadgets that add extra eyes and ears to a policeman's arsenal.

Not all of this gear is on the road yet, but the trend is toward turning the police car into another node in an omnipresent network of surveillance sensors, capable of tracking even people who have done nothing to arouse suspicion. And this has civil liberties groups worried. "These devices allow for the forensic reconstruction of much of your life," says Lee Tien, senior staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation. "The police could go back through GPS data and plate records and know when you visited a strip club or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, or which political rallies or gun shows you drove to."

But those who have used the new technology say it could help protect civil liberties. "When a license plate camera looks at a plate, it's not looking at gender, race or ethnicity," says Sgt. Daniel Gomez, a member of a Los Angeles Police Department division that tests new technologies. "All it's looking for are numbers."

Whether the next generation of police cruisers will be a breakthrough for investigators, a step toward a surveillance society or a little of both, the era of the crime-fighting cab is screeching to a halt. Here's what cop cars of the future may look like. — ERIK SOFGE

ILLUSTRATION BY DON'T WAKE ME UP



1 GPS CANNON

A StarChase compressed-air cannon behind the grille could eliminate high-speed pursuits. Officers target a suspect's vehicle with the cannon's laser, then fire an adhesive, cellphone-size GPS tracker from up to two car lengths away, enabling dispatchers to remotely monitor the route. The LAPD is conducting field tests.

2 EARTH-SHAKING SIRENS

Distracted drivers and loud music can make it difficult for sirens to clear a path through traffic. The intersection-sweeping twin 8.5-inch woofers of the Rumbler system deliver a deep, rolling growl that can be heard (and felt) up to 200 feet away. The system is already deployed in Washington, D.C., and New York City.



3 V-SHAPE LED LIGHTBAR

The lightbar has evolved from a straight line of flashing lights to a wedge of low-power LEDs. The V-shape formation is easier to spot from odd angles, reducing the chance of a collision as the squad car burns through intersections.

4 LICENSE-PLATE CAMERAS

The surveillance equivalent of a street cleaner: roof-mounted cameras that suck license plate data from every car they pass (more than 8000 per 10-hour shift). "It can take a brand-new officer and make him a stolen-vehicles expert," the LAPD's Gomez says. An onboard computer compares the plates to a database of outstanding warrants.

5 THERMAL-IMAGING CAMERAS

If a suspect is hiding under cover of night, roof-mounted thermal cameras cut through total darkness, giving officers the night-vision edge of a police helicopter pilot. Advanced systems can pan and tilt, covering a full 360 degrees around the vehicle.

6 BELT-FRIENDLY SEATS

Car seats aren't made to accommodate bulky equipment belts. When Atlanta-based Carbon Motors' E7 cop car goes into production in 2012, it will come with specially shaped bucket seats that keep guns and gear from digging into officers' midsections.

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- FEATURES:
- Unibody steel construction
 - Multistage driver and front-passenger airbags, optional side-curtain airbags
 - Interior lights shine white or red (for use with night-vision equipment)
 - Rear-wheel drive

- ENGINE SPECS:
- 5.7-liter Hemi V8
 - Horsepower: 368
 - Torque: 395 lb-ft
 - Fuel Rating: 16 city/25 hwy