

Shadow Taxes

by

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caveat lector

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Speeding Tickets

Suppose that there was a highway on which the posted speed limit was 55 miles per hour. Suppose that every motorist on the highway routinely drove 75 miles per hour. Suppose that a highway patrolman worked all day on the highway stopping motorists and writing speeding tickets. Suppose that he was able to stop one motorist out of every thousand. Suppose that all of the other motorists continued to drive 75 miles per hour and that those apprehended drove 75 miles per hour again after getting their tickets. It's reasonable to ask, "What's the highway patrolman doing?"

Clearly, he isn't enforcing the speed limit.¹ Clearly, he isn't enhancing people's respect for the police. So, what's he doing? There's only one answer. He's collecting a tax. He isn't a highway patrolman. He's a tax collector. He raises revenue for the government. In addition to the tax burden already imposed by the legislature, the speed limit legislation places another tax burden on the people by taxing yet another commodity: speed.

The government often enacts legislation fully expecting it to be routinely violated. The plan isn't to successfully regulate something but to collect revenue and information from the violators. I'll bet that you can think of some other examples besides the speed limit. If so, then send them to me and I'll add them to this essay.

¹ The only way that I can think of to do that is to drive four cops abreast at 55 miles per hour.

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