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Hot Pursuits Are a Deadly Matter

Experts: Almost 40 percent of police chases result in accidents

By Dave Malaska



A spate of deaths in the area during police chases has renewed both local and national concerns about how and when officers should pursue suspects in vehicles.

The most drastic incident, which ended late at night on March 16 with the deaths of a 33-year-old West African taxicab driver and his blind passenger, has already been noted by national advocates and pointed to as a reason why police pursuit policies need changed.

In that crash, police were chasing a stolen SUV driven by a man with a history of fleeing police. Mark Gerth, who had led Fort Mitchell police on a chase a decade ago, this time led Cincinnati police on a chase that wound its way through Corryville and the edge of downtown. There, police broke off their pursuit but Gerth continued on at speeds over 60 mph, ultimately running a red light on Sycamore Street and clipping one car before going airborne and slamming into a taxi.

The cab, driven by Ould Mohamed Sidi, was hit broadside, immediately killing both him and his passenger, Tonya Hairston, a 39-year-old woman on her way to catch a bus to New York for a visit with her mother. Gerth had hit the cab with such force that Hairston was thrown from the vehicle.

In the accident's aftermath, Sidi's distraught wife, Kathy, was left with myriad thoughts.

"If the cops had just let them go," she wept on local television, still trying to grasp the loss of her husband, who had become a U.S. citizen just months before. "Instead of stealing a car, they stole my husband and another lady's life."

In the following days, as the Police Department determined its officers had followed its pursuit policy, Candy Priano was sent an article about the crash.

Priano, whose 15-year-old daughter was killed in a California pursuit nine years ago, could only shake her head. Now the executive director of Voices Insisting on Pursuit Safety, a nonprofit group she founded soon after her tragedy which calls for changes in national pursuit policies, Priano says it's a scenario she has seen played out time and time again.

"Local law enforcement officers have the right to pull over anyone, but my first thought always is, if you're driving a stolen car, or if you have warrants outstanding, how likely is it that you're going to pull over?" she says. "The more likely response is flight, and these tragedies will continue to happen. They repeat themselves over and over."

It's a reality that's being proven true as national studies continue, weighing the danger police pursuits pose to innocent bystanders and the police officers themselves, along with the drivers fleeing police. But it's also apparent locally, where just a few weeks after the downtown crash, an April 7 chase in Clermont County ended with a crash that killed the driver, 31-year-old Christopher Saunders, who was wanted on theft warrants.

Just this week, a Warren County sheriff's deputy was killed in Turtlecreek Township early May 10, deploying barbed "stop sticks" to end another chase. The deputy, 36-year-old Sgt. Brian Dulle, was killed instantly when the fleeing car struck him after forcing another deputy's car off the road. The driver, not yet identified at press time, was being pursued for a traffic violation — his car didn't have working tail lights.

The mounting death toll, both locally and nationally, is sparking the debate about such pursuits.

According to recent National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTS) data, between 300 and 400 people are killed each year nationally in police pursuits, with innocent bystanders accounting for nearly a third of that number.

According to study, which has looked at deaths from 1982-2008, nearly 40 percent of all police pursuits culminate in accidents. Those pursuits have led to more than 6,000 crashes and 7,500 deaths — including almost 2,000 deaths of innocent bystanders.

As striking as those numbers are, they likely only tell a fraction of the tale, says Geoffrey Alpert, a professor of criminology at the University of South Carolina, who pioneered the study of pursuit dangers in the early 1980s.

"In reality, the deaths — especially of innocent bystanders — are probably two to three times as large" as the NHTS reports, Alpert says. "First, there is no official body that collects that information. What numbers we have are only from departments who voluntarily track and report statistics."

Cincinnati Police, for one, doesn't track accidents related to pursuits, according to the department's spokeswoman, Sgt. Danita Kilgore. But last year, CPD was involved in 53 pursuits. Already this year, the department has been involved in 13.

According to Alpert, there's difficulty getting an accurate picture from even departments that do track accidents because there is no standard definition of when pursuits end.

For example, he points out, CPD had reportedly broken off its pursuit of Gerth shortly before he crashed into Sidi's taxi. Because they were no longer chasing Gerth, some departments wouldn't consider the crash pursuit-related, Alpert explains.

"The system just isn't set up to report these numbers accurately," Alpert says. "There's no standard definition. Drivers aren't going to slow down the moment police break pursuit. So, when does the pursuit end? A minute? A mile?"

Other situations, like when death happens after a long hospital stay or when crashes lead to permanent injuries, are not accounted for in most tracking either, Alpert says.

Despite vague statistics, police departments nationwide have long been concerned with pursuits. Most departments now have guidelines that dictate when to chase or not to chase, when to break off pursuits and how to conduct chases as safely as possible.

The Cincinnati Police policy, in place since the early 1990s, was revised just this past February and undergoes periodic review. Last year, it was updated to eliminate pursuits for traffic violations, which accounted for nearly half of all its pursuits. The policy also denies pursuits of non-felony suspects or in cases when the suspect can be positively identified and arrested later.

Similar policies could have prevented Dooley's death in Warren County on May 10.

Other parts of CPD's policy instructs officers to obey all traffic signals during pursuits, and break off when safety becomes an issue. Other local departments — like Covington and Newport south of the river, and most departments north of the river — have similar restrictions in their books.

But training is also part of the CPD policy. All officers are required to undergo pursuit training biannually, consisting of a two-hour course that includes reviews of policy and an hour of practical exercise. Alpert has seen CPD's policy, and says it's one of the most restrictive — and safest — he's seen. He also praises its attention to training.

Smaller departments, though, often don't have the resources to focus on it.

"Most departments have what's called EVOC — emergency vehicle operator course — training, which teaches them how to chase, but the important part of training is the decision-making process ... when to initiate a pursuit," he says. "It's like firearms training. All cops are taught how to shoot, but the important part of training is when to shoot."

Meanwhile, groups such as Voices Insisting on Pursuit Safety are continuing to call for more restrictive pursuit policies, allowing chases only as a last resort.

"We believe in pursuits only in cases in which there is no other way to apprehend the driver, or they pose an imminent threat to safety," Priano says. "In cases like (the deaths of Sidi and Hairston) — a property crime — it just isn't worth it. Is a stolen car really worth two lives? The deaths that continue to happen in cases like that are not only predictable, but they're preventable."

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