

High-speed police pursuits: Dangers, dynamics, and risk reduction

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High-speed police pursuits and the inherent risk of injury and death that can result constitute an important law enforcement and public safety issue. Police pursuits are dangerous. Available data indicate that the number of pursuits continues to increase, as well as the number of pursuit-related injuries and deaths. A traffic accident constitutes the most common terminating event in an urban pursuit,¹ and most people agree that these pursuits should be controlled. Yet, researchers note a widespread lack of accurate data on the subject.

Officers face the basic dilemma associated with high-speed pursuits of fleeing suspects: Do the benefits of potential apprehension outweigh the risks of endangering the public and the police?² Research indicates that too many restraints placed on the police regarding pursuits can put the public at risk.³ On the other hand, insufficient controls on police pursuit can result in needless accidents and injuries.

The Dangers of Pursuit

The interpretation of the term "pursuit-related crash" represents one common police practice that affects accuracy of reporting. Often, police officers or their agencies will make the determination that a crash occurred right after a pursuit was "terminated," hence the crash is not pursuit-related. Agencies immediately can determine if this occurred by replaying tapes of radio transmissions during the pursuit, even days after completing a comprehensive accident investigation or reconstruction. Either way, the process can be very subjective.

Some research indicates that police pursuits result in about 350 deaths per year and the number of pursuits increases each year.⁴ One organization estimates that about 2,500 persons die each year as a result of police pursuits and that another 55,000 are injured.⁵ Although some law enforcement sources argue that these

estimates are exaggerated, they concede that the 350 figure may be too low.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reported that 314 people were killed during pursuits in 1998. Of this total, 2 were police officers and 198 were individuals being chased. The remaining 114 were either occupants of unrelated vehicles or pedestrians.⁶ The total was higher in each of the 4 previous years.

The lack of a mandatory reporting system hampers attempts by NHTSA to track pursuit fatalities and results in the collection of as little as one-half of the actual data.⁷ Typically, only 90 percent of states report pursuit fatality data to NHTSA. By extrapolating the 5-- year totals to include 100 percent reporting, calculations would show an average of 375 deaths per year. Even conservative estimates by various researchers recalculate the actual number of fatalities between 400 to 500 deaths per year.

Police pursuit records provide some frightening statistics. First, the majority of police pursuits involve a stop for a traffic violation.⁸ Second, one person dies every day as a result of a police pursuit.⁹ On average, from 1994 through 1998, one law enforcement officer was killed every 11 weeks in a pursuit," and 1 percent of all U.S. law enforcement officers who died in the line-of-duty lost their lives in vehicle pursuits.¹¹ Innocent third parties who just happened to be in the way constitute 42 percent of persons killed or injured in police pursuits.¹² Further, 1 out of every 100 high-speed pursuits results in a fatality.¹³

Research indicates that pursuits become dangerous quite quickly. For example, 50 percent of all pursuit collisions occur in the first 2 minutes of the pursuit, and more than 70 percent of all collisions occur before the sixth minute of the pursuit.¹⁴

Although the public sympathizes with the law enforcement community's position on pursuits, they do not want to be placed in harm's way. Public support for pursuits decreases as the severity of the offense that led to the chase decreases.¹⁵ One study found that 58 percent of people interviewed reported that police act correctly when they pursue a motorist who does not stop.¹⁶ When asked if the police act correctly when the pursuit endangers public safety, support decreased by one-half to 29 percent. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of respondents said that they felt police overreact sometimes or very often when pursuing motorists who do not stop.¹⁷ To decrease the dangers associated with pursuit, agencies must increase training and ensure that they have clear pursuit policies.

Training and Policy

A lack of training can increase risks of pursuit-related injuries. Only recently has classroom instruction included training on vehicle pursuit tactics, policy, and liability. Previously, agencies taught pursuit-driving techniques behind the wheel without accompanying classroom training. Officers learned how to pursue but not when to pursue. Inadequate or inapplicable training often resulted, and officers rarely followed training in actual practice. Law enforcement must approach pursuit training similar to firearms training. For example, for every hour agencies spend on training officers how to shoot, they also spend several hours teaching when to shoot.¹⁸

The training deficiency trend has changed in the past few years. Although many agencies have increased or added pursuit training, most have done so only for new officers at the police academy. Therefore, most veteran officers, with their academy days far behind them, lack contemporary pursuit training.

Training should teach officers the phenomena present while they pursue. Tunnel vision makes them oblivious to what is going on around them. Some 96 percent of officers involved in a pursuit focus on catching the violator "if it's the last thing (they'll) ever do."¹⁹ Research shows that this holds true for many officers.²⁰

While effective pursuit training can curtail certain dangerous situations, policy constitutes another important aspect in police pursuits.²¹ An overwhelming majority of police agencies implemented their pursuit policy in the 1970s.²² Although most of these same agencies modified their policies in the past 2 years by adding restrictions due to liability, problems remain. Insufficiencies still exist in data collection, reporting procedures, and accompanying accountability.²³

One comprehensive study shows that officers can use termination as an effective option to reduce the risks of pursuits.²⁴ This study involved interviews of 146 jailed suspects who had been involved as drivers in high-speed chases. More than 70 percent of the suspects said that they would have slowed down if police had terminated the pursuit or even backed off a short distance.²⁵ Fifty-three percent of the suspects responded that they were willing to run at all costs from the police in a pursuit, and 64 percent believed they would not be caught.²⁶ While 71 percent said that they were concerned for their own safety, only 62 percent said that they were concerned for the safety of others.²⁷ Clearly, the police must be concerned with public safety during pursuits because the suspects are not.

An integral part of pursuit training involves giving officers a clear understanding about the decision to terminate a pursuit. The Arkansas State Police recently created new pursuit training for state and local officers that stresses keeping pursuits under control and advises that termination is an option.²⁸

Alternatives to Pursuit

The most effective way to reduce risks is to terminate a pursuit. Clearly, too many pursuits continue that officers obviously should have terminated. Research on pursuit data and statistics show that termination dramatically could reduce traffic accidents, fatalities, and injuries. Police must reevaluate their thinking and mission.²⁹ Agencies rarely can justify endangering the public to pursue a violator.

Although many electronic devices still are being evaluated for effectiveness, technology also can decrease pursuit risks. Officers can carry spiked strips (or "stop sticks") in their trunks and deploy them in the path of a fleeing suspect. The strips create a controlled loss of air (not a blowout) from the suspect's tires. Once the violator crosses the strips, the deploying officer quickly pulls them from the roadway to allow pursuing police vehicles to pass. Agencies have begun to use these strips with increasing effectiveness. For example, departments in Cincinnati, Ohio, successfully used them after they sought risk reduction techniques following a string of pursuit tragedies.³⁰ Similarly, the Ohio State Highway Patrol, the Utah Highway Patrol, and the Pennsylvania State Police also are reporting recent successful use of the spiked strips.

One electronics company is testing a radar warning system that police can activate that sends a signal to any motorist with a radar detector of an approaching police pursuit. Motorists then can pull over to the side of the road or otherwise get out of the way.

Other technological ideas include an ultrasonic device that shoots a burst of microwave energy at a fleeing suspect. This causes the suspect vehicle's electronic system to fail, thus immediately disabling the violator." Experts are studying a similar technology in which a robot-like cart jettisons from the front of the primary police pursuit vehicle. The cart then attempts to overtake the fleeing vehicle and electronically "zaps" the engine out of service. Researchers also are testing radio-technologic devices (similar to stolen car tracking systems) that electronically would disable the fleeing vehicle.³²

Agencies have used helicopters with good results in pursuits, in parts of California and in cities, such as Baltimore, Maryland; Miami, Florida; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The versatility, range, and vantage point of the helicopter allows ground officers to decrease the use of high-speed pursuits and increase apprehension rates.³³ With a helicopter observing the suspect, ground units can slow down and retreat to reduce accident risks. While most agencies cannot afford their own helicopter, they can develop regional interagency assistance plans.

Most experts agree that increased criminal penalties also will reduce pursuits. Individuals who elude and flee the police should face severe criminal penalties. Consequently, some states have made eluding a second-degree crime.³⁴

Conclusion

High-speed police pursuits constitute an important public safety issue. Research clearly indicates the dangers associated with these pursuits. While some are necessary, many are not. Curtailing unnecessary pursuits can reduce the inherent risks associated with this dangerous practice.

Law enforcement agencies should provide appropriate pursuit training to recruits during their instruction at police academies, as well as to seasoned officers. Additionally, police administrators should ensure that their department's pursuit policy provides clear guidance and they should make use of available technology that can aid in safer pursuits. Taking such initiatives can help departments increase the effectiveness of pursuits while simultaneously reducing the risks involved to citizens and officers.

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