

CAPITALISM MAGAZINE

IN DEFENSE OF INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

High-Speed Car Chases By The Police

by Thomas Sowell (September 12, 2007)

Article address: <http://www.CapMag.com/article.asp?ID=5019>

Summary: High-speed car chases by police on highways, or even on residential streets, have become a staple of television news. An estimated 500 people died as a result of high-speed car chases last year.

[CapMag.com]

High-speed car chases by police on highways, or even on residential streets, have become a staple of television news. An estimated 500 people died as a result of high-speed car chases last year.

Nearly half the people killed were innocent third parties.

The police have some tough choices to make when deciding when to chase and when to let the driver continue on his high-speed way. Innocent people can get killed either way.

Too many people in the media do not want to face up to any tough choices. Whenever some innocent driver or pedestrian is killed as a result of a high-speed chase, editorials are sure to appear, saying that this would not have happened if the police had just let the high-speed driver go on his way without pursuing.

We have no way of knowing whether reckless speeders will slow down if the cops don't follow them when they try to get away. The people they can kill when there is no police car following them will be just as dead as some innocent person killed as a result of a car chase.

Moreover, once there is a known policy of letting speeders escape, there will almost certainly be more speeding to get away from being arrested for either a traffic violation or a more serious crime.

Life's choices are seldom as easy as they may seem to people writing in the safety and comfort of an editorial office.

Nothing is easier than taking cheap shots at the police, and there are journalists and politicians who do it regularly, as well as community activists who make a career out of it. But the police are the last line of defense for the law-abiding population.

Universal sainthood is not the norm in law enforcement, any more than in any other walk of life. But police abuses require punishment for those who commit those abuses, not blanket condemnation for policemen in general or rules that tie their hands when dealing with criminals.

Recently a man in Ohio was shot and killed by a policeman he tried to run over with the car he had stolen. That driver had led the police on a high-speed chase and, when he was finally cornered, rammed one of the police cars and tried to ram a policeman.

A passenger in the car with the speeding driver said that the shooting was not justified. "For a car, it's not worth a life."

The man who said this had a long criminal record, as did the driver who was killed, but no doubt there are those who will take him seriously.

The issue is not whether the crime for which the driver is being pursued deserves the death penalty. It is the driver's choice whether to put his life -- and other people's lives -- at risk.

No doubt there is much to be said for bringing high-speed chases to an end quicker, and especially before the speeder can get off the highway and go speeding through city streets, endangering both other motorists and pedestrians.

But the only way of ending high-speed chases sooner that many critics seem to favor is by letting the reckless drivers get away.

Some of these high-speed chases on a highway might be brought to a quicker end before reaching a populated area, if the police were freer to use force, instead of being hemmed in on all sides by restrictive regulations.

We are not talking about using force against someone who just happens to exceed the speed limit. We are talking about people who refuse to pull over and speed up to try to outrun the police, in utter disregard of the dangers they are creating for others.

When there is a police helicopter overhead, a shot straight down would have little chance of hitting some innocent bystander. Maybe the speeder is just someone out joy-riding but that does not make a reckless driver any less dangerous.

Moreover, this would not have to happen more than a few times before leading the police on a high-speed chase would lose a lot of its attractions -- and some of those hundreds of innocent lives lost every year as a result of high-speed chases could be saved.

Maybe if the courts would put some heavy jail time on people who go speeding away from the police, that might stop some of them. But they have to be stopped, one way or the other.

About the Author: Thomas Sowell has published a large volume of writing. His dozen books, as well as numerous articles and essays, cover a wide range of topics, from classic economic theory to judicial activism, from civil rights to choosing the right college.

Please contact your local newspaper editor if you want to read the [THOMAS SOWELL column](#) in your hometown paper.

Copyright 2008-1997 **Capitalism Magazine**. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.