

Police Pursuits: Risk vs. Benefits at the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office

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Abstract

This paper studies the risk and benefits of police pursuits. There are very few areas of police work involving higher stakes than pursuits. Most progressive law enforcement agencies will use training, supervision and discipline to manage the risk and balance the need for pursuits. A good pursuit policy will outline the balance of protecting the public and apprehending criminals. This paper compares the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office pursuit police to other Tampa Bay Area law enforcement agencies.

Introduction

Law enforcement in general is considered a dangerous profession just by the nature of the duties, responsibilities, and possibilities. High speed pursuit driving creates an enormous civil liability exposure for all law enforcement officers and their agencies which could result in criminal prosecution for all involved. Few areas of police work involve higher stakes than pursuits. The need to conduct high speed pursuits is obvious to most people. Equally obvious is the need to protect the public and law enforcement officers from unnecessary risks created by indiscriminate high speed chases. Today, progressive law enforcement agencies use policy, training, supervision, discipline, and technology to manage these risks and balance the need for criminal apprehension with the need to protect the public in a larger sense (Nichols, 2004).

This research paper will access police pursuit policies in the Tampa Bay Area. It will focus on member training, pursuit guidelines, and tools and equipment used for stopping pursuits. The goal of any pursuit policy should reduce the risks and increase the benefits of all police pursuits.

This information will then be compared to the pursuit policies and practices of the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office.

Literature Review

Most law enforcement agencies have different philosophies when it comes to pursuits. The department's top administrator will establish the guidelines and responsibilities of all policies and procedures for their agencies. Some administrators will allow their members to pursue violent felonies only. Other more aggressive administrators will allow their members to engage in pursuits for some non-violent felonies, such as Driving Under the Influence or Vehicle Burglary. Despite the obvious dangers, most agencies continue the practice of vehicle pursuits. Obviously the function of crime control and apprehending criminals is the main reason why vehicle pursuits continue, however,

agencies must balance the need to apprehend criminals versus the danger that is placed on society. Several court cases through the years combined with an increased awareness of the dangers of police pursuits have caused more police agencies to restrict their pursuit policy (Yates, 2009).

The safety of the citizens, the officer, and the suspect should be one of the main objectives for all pursuits. There is a little or no controversy around the fact that during a pursuit, the fleeing law violator created a serious threat to himself or herself, the public, and the police by not stopping their vehicle for an officer who displayed emergency lights and/ or sirens (Morris, 1993).

In 2000, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) constructed a database to provide law enforcement leaders with information that facilitates effective pursuit-related training and policy development. The database contains over 2,200 police pursuit records and is utilized by over 40 agencies. The following information was retrieved from the database on police pursuits:

Pursuit Duration/ Pursuit Distance

- 60% of Pursuits end in three minutes or less.
- 67% cover three miles or less.

Termination reasons

- 35% suspects stop in pursuits.
- Police voluntarily end 1 in 5 pursuits.

Location Description/ Traffic Condition/ Light Conditions/ Road Conditions

- 95% of pursuits occur on dry roads.
- 77% in light traffic.
- 76% of pursuits occur in urban areas.

Maximum Pursuit Speeds

- 22% of pursuits exceeded 91 mph
- 57% of pursuits never exceeded 70 mph
- 25% of pursuits never exceeded 50 mph

Injury Statistics

- 99% of pursuits end with no injury to law enforcement or uninvolved persons
- 95% of pursuits end with no injury to suspect

Reasons for initiating a pursuit:

- 53% of pursuits were initiated for traffic violations
- 10% of pursuits were initiated for violent felony crimes (Nichols, 2004).

High-Speed Police Pursuits: Dangers, Dynamics, and Risk Reduction.

High-speed police pursuits and the inherent risk of injury and death that can result from police chases constitute an important law enforcement and public safety issue. Police pursuits are dangerous. Available data indicates that the number of pursuits continues to increase, as well as the number of pursuit-related injuries and deaths. A traffic crash constitutes the most common terminating events in urban pursuit, and most people agree that these pursuits should be controlled. Do the benefits of potential apprehension outweigh the risk of endangering the public and the police? Research indicates that too many restraints placed on the police regarding pursuits can put the public at risk. On the other hand, insufficient controls on police pursuits can result in needless accidents and injuries (Hill, 2002).

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. The total was higher in each of the 4 previous years. Police pursuit records provide some frightening statistics. First, the majority of police pursuits involve a stop for a traffic violation. Second, one person dies every day as a result of police pursuits. 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 (Hill, 2004).

Although the public sympathizes with their law enforcement community's position on pursuits, they do not want to be placed in harm's way. Public support for pursuits decreased as the severity of the offense that lead to the chase decreased. One study found that 58 percent of people interviewed reported that police act correctly when they pursue a motorist who does not stop. 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 overact sometimes or very often when pursuing motorist who does not stop. To decrease the dangers associated with pursuits, agencies must increase training and ensure that they have a clear pursuit policies (Hill, 2004).

A lack of training can increase risk of pursuit-related injuries. Only recently has classroom instruction included training on vehicle pursuit tactics, policy, and liability. Officers learned how to pursue and when to pursue. Law enforcement must approach pursuit training similar to firearms training. Although many agencies have increased or added pursuit training, most have done so only for new officers at the academy.

Most veteran officers with their academy days far behind them, lack contemporary pursuit training. While effective pursuit training can curtail certain dangerous situations, policy constitutes another important aspect in police pursuits. Clearly, the police must be concerned with public safety during pursuits because the suspects are not (Hill, 2004).

High-speed police pursuits constitute an important public safety issue. Research clearly indicates the dangers associated with these pursuits. While some pursuits are necessary, many are not. Curtailing unnecessary pursuits can reduce the inherent risk 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 risk involved to citizens and officers (Hill, 2004).

Pinellas County Sheriff's Office Pursuit Policy (2007)

In 2007, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office made amends to their General Order 15-2. The Discussion: Pinellas County Sheriff's Office vehicles in pursuit operations shall at all times consider the law enforcement objective to be achieved, the safety of the member operating the vehicle, and the safety of members of the public. All members will receive training in the proper use of emergency and safety equipment

prior to issuance of a vehicle so equipped. Members must strive to determine whether or not a pursuit is reasonable. This is based on the imminent danger to the public should the suspect remain at large being greater than the danger to the public created by the pursuit (2007).

A sworn member engaged in an authorized vehicle pursuit shall immediately plan to end the pursuit as soon as possible and/ or practical. In keeping with agency guidelines, the member may use approved methods and/ or devices such as P.I.T. (Precision Immobilization Technique), Tire Deflation Device and Boxing-In or relinquish to air support to accomplish this task. All of the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office deputies receive traditional classroom instruction on tactical defensive driving, Precision Immobilization Technique (P.I.T.) and Boxing –In technique and Stop Stick training during the initial stages of field training. All certified members are also required to drive a pursuit course during annual in-service training.

Methods

15 Tampa Bay area Police Departments and Sheriff's Offices were interviewed on their pursuit policy and practices. The following agencies were contacted to participate in the interview: Pasco Sheriff's Office, Tampa Police Department, Polk Sheriff's Office, Manatee County Sheriff's Office, Clearwater Police Department, Largo Police Department, St. Petersburg Police Dept, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Lakeland Police Department, Pinellas Park Police Department, Sarasota County Sheriff's Office, Sarasota Police Department, Bradenton Police Department, Citrus County Sheriff's Office and Hernando County Sheriff's Office. Each agency has 100 or more law enforcement officers. Each of these agency's training departments were asked details on their pursuit policy to include training for members, pursuit guidelines, and tools and equipment for stopping a pursuit.

Results

There were 28 surveys sent out to the above listed agencies. The survey contained **11 Yes/No** questions (See Appendix A). The survey resulted in a **64%** response rate of those who were surveyed. The survey results revealed that **100%** of the respondents have a policy on pursuits. **83%** of those surveyed indicated that the members can initiate a pursuit without prior approval from a supervisor. **22%** allowed their members pursue for misdemeanor charges or traffic. **50%** of agencies issue their patrol members **Stop-Sticks**. **72%** of agencies surveyed train their members on pursuit driving. **77%** of the agencies allowed their members to use **Boxing-In Techniques** to end a pursuit. **72%** of the agencies will allow their members to use **The Precision Immobilization Technique (P.I.T)** to end a pursuit. **67%** of the agencies **do not** have a plan in place to end a pursuit as soon as possible/practical. **50%** will review all pursuits for policy

compliance. **89%** will track the number of pursuits each year. **83%** of all agencies did not institute or change their pursuit policy because of a law suit.

Discussion

Research data indicates that all agencies surveyed understand that pursuits are a necessary part of the job. Pursuits are considered important for all agencies, therefore all members should have specific guidelines when engaging in pursuits. Most officers are giving the latitude to initiate a pursuit based on their discretion without prior approval from a supervisor. The officer's discretion to pursue for a misdemeanor charge is still restricted by most agencies. More agencies are using other means to end pursuits such as Stop-Sticks, P.I.T and Boxing-In Techniques. Due to the high liability that could occur from high speed pursuits, more agencies are training their members in pursuit driving.

The survey results clearly show that most agencies have a self-assessment in place to review all pursuits to ensure that they are in compliance with department policy. Most agencies pursuit policies are in place because of safety measures and not because of any civil litigation. It is clear that most agencies will allow their members to pursue for various reasons to include misdemeanors to felonies. Because of the safety measures in place to include things such as pursuit driving training, pursuit review boards and tool such as Stop-Stick, Precision Immobilization Technique (P.I.T) it is obvious that the safety of all citizens is a main goal for all members engaged in a high speed pursuit.

Adrian Arnold has been with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office since 1993. He has served in the Patrol Operations Bureau, Streets Crime Unit, Community Policing and DUI Traffic Units. As a Sergeant, Adrian worked in Patrol Operations and Human Resources. He currently serves as an Administrative Lieutenant for the Central District station and a member of the Major Accident Investigation Team serving as assistant team leader and team leader. Adrian has a Bachelor's Degree in Criminology from Springfield College and a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Cincinnati.

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(APPENDIX A)

Executive Future Studies Program Pursuit Survey

My name is Lieutenant Adrian Arnold with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office. I am conducting a research project for the Executive Future Studies Program at Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE). My research project will compare the pursuit policies for agencies within the Tampa Bay region. Your participation in this survey will help me with completing my research project. The survey results will show that your agency participated in the survey; however, the results will be listed as a group and not individually. The results of the survey will be available to all participants once the project is completed. If you would like a copy of the survey results please indicate such and I will send the result directly to you. As a courtesy I would ask that you please complete the form by placing an X behind the appropriate response, and return the survey on or before **April 9, 2010**.

1. Agency Name:
2. Does your agency have a policy on pursuits?
Yes: No:
3. Is supervisor approval required before initiating a pursuit?
Yes: No:
4. Are pursuits allowed for misdemeanor charges?
Yes: No:
5. Does your agency issue patrol members Stop-Sticks?
Yes: No:
6. Does your agency train members on pursuit driving?
Yes: No:

7. Does your agency allow members to use Boxing-In Techniques to end a pursuit?
Yes: No:

8. Does your agency allow members to use The Precision Immobilization Technique (P.I.T) to end a pursuit?
Yes: No:

9. Does your agency have a plan in place to end a pursuit as soon as possible/practical?
Yes: No:

10. Does your agency have a pursuit review board to review all pursuits for policy compliance?
Yes: No:

11. Does your agency track the number of pursuits each year?
Yes: No:

12. Did your agency institute or change their pursuit policy because of a law suit?
Yes: No: