



# National Institute of Justice

## Research in Brief

Jeremy Travis, Director

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### Issues and Findings

**Discussed in this Brief:** Research on police pursuit issues, particularly policies and training. Data were gathered through a national survey of police agencies; case studies of three police departments; and surveys and interviews with police officers, supervisors, recruits before and after training, members of the public, and jailed suspects who had attempted to elude police.

**Key issues:** Pursuit driving is a dangerous activity that must be undertaken with due care, only after an understanding of the specific risks as well as the need and realistic methods to apprehend a fleeing suspect. Law enforcement agencies developing policies may wish to address this question: For what offenses and under what conditions should police risk accidents and injuries to pursue fleeing suspects?

#### Key findings:

- Most agencies had written policies governing pursuit but many had been implemented in the 1970s. Of those that had updated them, most had made them more restrictive to control risk.
- As the severity of the crime increases, more law enforcement officers, supported by their supervisors and public opinion, said they are willing to risk the dangers of pursuit to chase suspects.

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## Police Pursuit: Policies and Training

by Geoffrey P. Alpert

The basic dilemma associated with high-speed police pursuit of fleeing suspects is deciding whether the benefits of potential apprehension outweigh the risks of endangering police officers, the public, and suspects in the chase. The issues addressed in a comprehensive National Institute of Justice (NIJ) study of police pursuit echo those discussed in research on police use of deadly force: On the one hand, too many restrictions placed on police use of pursuit could place the public at risk from dangerous individuals escaping apprehension. On the other hand, insufficient controls on police pursuit could result in needless accidents and injuries.

Until now research on police pursuits has focused on in-depth studies of single agencies or studies based on limited data from multiple agencies. The recent comprehensive NIJ study included information from:

- Surveys of 160 police recruits before training and 145 of them after training—as well as selected interviews—in South Carolina and Miami, Florida.
  - Public opinion interviews with 300 people in Omaha and 255 in Aiken County.
  - Interviews with 146 jailed suspects who had been involved as drivers in high-speed chases in Columbia, South Carolina; Omaha, Nebraska; and Miami, Florida.
- Results of the study indicate that law enforcement personnel and members of the public focused on the severity of the offense committed by the suspect when supporting a pursuit. The second most important factor was the risk to the public (as defined by traffic, road conditions, and the weather). This Research in Brief discusses these and other major findings of this study and their implications for policy and training issues.

### Results of the national survey

A sampling of 800 municipal and county police agencies was selected, consisting of 40 percent large agencies and 60 percent smaller jurisdictions (population fewer than 100,000). Of the 737 agencies contacted, 436 provided usable data, 284 reported that they could not provide the

## Issues and Findings

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- Increasing the number of vehicles involved in police pursuits increased the likelihood of apprehension, but also the chance of accidents, injuries, and property damage.
- There is a lack of initial and continuing training for law enforcement on the specific risk factors and benefits of pursuit driving. The survey of police recruits before and after academy training indicates that such education can have a major impact on attitudes.

These and other study findings indicate the need for agencies to develop a clear and understandable police pursuit policy delineating departmental requirements within the context of State laws and the police mission and to create and implement specific training to support the policy.

**Target audience:** State and local policymakers, law enforcement supervisors and officers, criminal justice trainers, and researchers.

necessary information because it had not been collected, and 17 declined to participate.<sup>1</sup>

**Policies.** Ninety-one percent of the 436 responding agencies had written policies governing pursuits, but many of them were implemented in the 1970s. Forty-eight percent of the agencies reported having modified their pursuit policy within the past 2 years, and most of those (87 percent) noted that modification had made the policy more restrictive than before.

Although most (89 percent) reported that routine followups to pursuit incidents were mandated by their agencies, most said they were either informal supervisory reviews (33 percent) or incident reports prepared by pursuing officers (47 percent).

**Data collection.** Municipal and larger agencies were more likely than county or smaller agencies to collect pursuit information routinely. The majority of the 135 agencies that collected pursuit data routinely did so voluntarily (fewer than 5 percent of the States represented by the survey respondents reported that their data collection programs were State mandated). Although this means only 31 percent of the respondents had data collection programs, 308 agencies (71 percent) were able to provide the number of pursuits their officers had engaged in during 1993.

The number of pursuits reported ranged from none to 870 during the 1-year period, with large agencies reporting higher numbers of incidents than small ones. One-quarter of the responding agencies indicated that officers used force to apprehend a suspect after a pursuit during 1993.

**Training.** Many departments acknowledged taking only limited steps to train their officers on skills and procedures re-

garding pursuits. For example, although 60 percent of the agencies reported providing entry-level driving training at their academies, the average time devoted to these skills was estimated at less than 14 hours. Once in service, the amount of additional training offered averaged only slightly more than 3 hours per year and focused on the mechanics of defensive and/or pursuit driving rather than on issues that should be considered when deciding to continue or terminate pursuits. Respondent agencies may have spent at least some time teaching officers how to pursue, but training devoted to when—or why—to pursue appears to have been minimal or nonexistent.

## Implications of the national survey

These findings point to several issues for consideration by State and local law enforcement agencies:

- *Create and maintain systems to collect information on pursuit driving.* Without this information, the impact of local policies on police pursuit cannot be determined.
- *Review and update pursuit policies.* The fact that most agencies had policies was favorable, but the quality and direction of those policies was questionable as departments had instituted them as long as 20 years ago, although many have updated them recently to make them more restrictive.
- *Evaluate the need for pursuit-specific training.* Officers cannot make proper and appropriate decisions with minimal or no training.
- *Support written policies with training and supervision.* A written policy may mean little if officers are not both carefully trained to implement it and held accountable for abiding by its provisions.

- *Require that officers justify their actions or have a supervisor evaluate the pursuit (afteraction reports).*

When actions are found to be inappropriate, officers may not be receiving meaningful discipline for problem pursuits.

### Results of case studies in three jurisdictions

While the national survey provided a panoramic snapshot of pursuit policies and practices, the cases studied provided data for indepth analysis. Researchers reviewed case records of more than 1,000 pursuits conducted by Metro-Dade (Miami), Florida, officers between 1990 and 1994; 229 pursuits conducted by officers in Omaha, Nebraska, between 1992 and 1994; and 17 pursuits conducted in Aiken, South Carolina, between 1993 and 1994 (see table 1).

**Risk of injuries.** Pursuit-related accidents were found to occur more frequently when pursuits were conducted for felonies than for nonfelonies, when they

occurred on surface streets rather than on highways or freeways, and when they happened in urban and suburban areas rather than in rural areas. The likelihood of accidents also increased as the number of pursuing vehicles increased.

The prediction of personal injury resulting from a police pursuit depended primarily on four variables in Metro-Dade: the greater the number of police cars the greater the likelihood of injury. Involvement of other police agencies also increased the likelihood of injury. High-speed chases resulted in more injuries than low-speed pursuits, and chases in residential areas resulted in more injuries than those conducted in nonresidential areas.

In Omaha, pursuit-related property damage occurred in 40 percent of pursuits. In Omaha also, the pursuits least likely to end in an accident were those initiated because of vehicles being identified as “suspect.”

**Apprehension vs. escape.** In Metro-Dade, the likelihood of the suspect’s

escape was found to depend on the number of police vehicles and police departments involved in pursuit (increasing the number of vehicles decreased the likelihood of escape), the location of the pursuit (fewer suspects escaped in business districts than in residential or rural areas), and the time of day (fewer suspects escaped during daytime hours than at night).

In Omaha, the likelihood of escape was related to supervisory assistance (the lack of supervisory assistance increased the likelihood of escape), the number of police cars involved in the chase (pursuits with one police car resulted in more escapes than chases with more than one police car), the speed of the chase (chases conducted at higher speeds resulted in more escapes than those at lower speeds), the location of the pursuit (chases in residential areas resulted in more escapes than those in rural areas), and the level of traffic congestion (chases in light traffic resulted in more escapes than those in heavy traffic).

**Table 1: Number of, Reasons for, and Results of Police Pursuits**

Reasons for Pursuit	Number (Percentage) of Incidents		
	Metro-Dade (Miami) Florida	Omaha, Nebraska	Aiken County, South Carolina
Traffic violations	448 (45%)	112 (51%)	5 (36%)
DUI/Reckless driving		8 (4%)	1 (7%)
“Suspect” vehicle		7 (3.5%)	2 (14%)
Driver known from previous incident		3 (1.5%)	
<b>Felonies</b>	<b>344 (35%)</b>	<b>89 (40%)</b>	<b>6 (43%)</b>
Armed robbery	117		2
Vehicular assault	67		
Aggravated assault	37		
Stolen vehicles	37	36	3
Burglary	24		
Other felonies	62	53	1
<b>Accidents</b>			
Personal injury	428 (41%)	31 (14%)	2 (12%)
Property damage	213 (20%)	91 (40%)	4 (24%)
<b>Arrests</b>	<b>784 (75%)</b>	<b>118 (52%)</b>	<b>14 (82%)</b>

In Omaha, pursuits initiated for reckless driving or driving under the influence (DUI) were the most likely to end in an arrest (75 percent), while pursuits initiated because a vehicle was “suspect” resulted in the smallest proportion of arrests (43 percent). Officers were most likely to terminate the pursuit voluntarily when it was initiated for suspect vehicles (29 percent), and least likely in chases initiated for felonies (16 percent).

**Implications of case studies**

**Policy.** Like the national survey, the findings from these sites point to similar implications for policy and training. In addition, the case study findings allow for more specific analyses. For example, although the national survey shows that most of the agencies that had updated policies had made them more restrictive, findings from both Metro-Dade and Omaha show the strong effects of policy changes. When Metro-Dade adopted a “violent felony only”

pursuit policy in 1992, the number of pursuits decreased 82 percent the following year. In 1993 Omaha changed to a more permissive policy, permitting pursuits for offenses that had previously been prohibited; the following year, the number of pursuits increased more than 600 percent (see table 2).

Implications of other case study findings are not as clear. For example, the data reveal that the more police cars involved in a pursuit, the more likely a collision will result. However, data also show that the more police cars involved in a pursuit, the more likely an apprehension will be made. One implication could be that in violent felony situations, it may be reasonable to take the risk of causing traffic accidents by increasing the number of police vehicles in the chase in order to improve the likelihood of apprehension. Such a policy would not endorse the uniform increase of police units involved in a pursuit; instead it suggests that policymakers

might rethink the use of police vehicles to block civilian vehicles from entering intersections. The supervisor might be given the authority to assign cars to specific locations to travel at reasonable speeds (i.e., within the speed limit) and without emergency signals in addition to directing primary and secondary units.

**Training.** Any change in policy requires development of rules and regulations and then training for supervisors to enable them to recognize when to take the risks of accidents to achieve the desired result of suspects’ apprehension. Similarly, in interjurisdictional pursuits, officers must know how to assess a situation and make sure that the pursuit is within their agency’s policy before providing support for other officers.

**Police officers’ and supervisors’ views**

**Conditions for chases.** Police officers and supervisors in four police departments (Metro-Dade; Omaha; Aiken County, South Carolina; and Mesa, Arizona) were asked whether they would engage in or approve a pursuit under low- and high-risk conditions (see tables 3 and 4). The major finding is that the percentage of all officers willing to engage in a pursuit, and of all supervisors willing to approve a pursuit, increases as the severity of the crime increases. In other words, the need to immediately apprehend a dangerous suspect is the most important concern for law enforcement personnel. Police said that the most important risk factors to consider during a pursuit were traffic conditions and weather. Advances in technology could lead to changes in risk factors (see “Technology and Pursuit Driving”).

**Table 2: Numbers of Police Pursuits Before and After Policy Changes**

Jurisdiction	Nature of Policy Change	Before Change	After Change
Metro-Dade, Florida	more restrictive	279	51
Omaha, Nebraska	more permissive	17	122

**Table 3: When Police Officers Say They Would Engage in Pursuits**

Violation	Level of Risk*	
	Low	High
Traffic Violation	43%	10%
Property Crime: Misdemeanor	42%	17%
Property Crime: Felony	64%	34%
Stolen Vehicle	65%	37%
DUI	70%	43%
Violent Felony: No Death	87%	80%
Violent Felony: With Death	96%	95%
Officer Shot	96%	95%

\* Risk was defined by level of traffic congestion, weather conditions, type of road (e.g., whether surface street, highway, or interstate), and area of pursuit (e.g., whether urban, rural, or commercial). In filling out the questionnaire, respondents themselves determined whether they felt their risk was high or low.

The fluctuations between and among agencies in relation to the type of law violation reveal distinctions that have implications for policy and training. Although there is widespread agreement about officers' willingness to pursue when a fellow officer has been shot or when violent felons have committed murder, there was wide variation within and among agencies regarding other situations:

- The more experienced officers in Omaha and Aiken County were more likely to engage in pursuit of misdemeanor property crime suspects under high-risk conditions than their less experienced counterparts.
- Officers in Mesa, Arizona, with more than 5 years of experience were nearly twice as likely to pursue suspects of traffic violations under low-risk conditions than the less experienced officers.

These findings suggest that some officers, especially veterans, may need re-training on the dangers of pursuit.

**Results of pursuits.** The risks of pursuits were seen in the officers' responses to the results of their efforts (see also "Sanctions," page 7) Seventy-three percent had been involved in at least one pursuit during the previous 12 months:

- Forty percent reported that a pursuit in which they were driving the primary vehicle resulted in an accident.
- Forty-five percent felt physically threatened by the suspect in the pursuit.
- Thirty-three percent reported that from about one-fourth to one-half of all pursuits resulted in use of force to apprehend the suspect. Slightly more than half of the officers

described those more likely to use excessive force as "aggressive" or "hotheaded."

### Recruits' opinions

Similar to the results obtained from the officers and the supervisors, the percentage of recruits who were willing to engage in a pursuit increased as the severity of the crime increased. The importance of the risk factors also decreased as the seriousness of the offense increased.

Data collected from recruit classes both before and after training at four locations (see table 5) show that the

training had an effect on altering some opinions reported by the recruits. For example, prior to the training course, 77, 79, and 86 percent of recruits at each of three locations (St. Petersburg, South Carolina Highway Patrol, and Metro-Dade) were willing to engage in pursuit for a stolen vehicle under low-risk conditions. After the training, the percentage decreased to 59, 70, and 73 percent respectively. At Metro-Dade, before training, 100 percent said they would pursue a DUI suspect under low-risk conditions; after training, 73 percent said they would. These results indicate that training programs can be designed to support policy objectives

**Table 4: When Supervisors\* Say They Would Approve Pursuits**

Violation	Level of Risk**	
	Low	High
Traffic Violation	31%	7%
Property Crime: Misdemeanor	38%	13%
Property Crime: Felony	59%	27%
Stolen Vehicle	59%	23%
DUI	71%	38%
Violent Felony: No Death	91%	77%
Violent Felony: With Death	98%	94%
Officer Shot	97%	96%

\* Supervisors' responses are from the three largest departments surveyed.

\*\* For an explanation of risk level, see Table 3 (page 4).

### Technology and Pursuit Driving

The data from this study show that a suspect who does not know he or she is being pursued will drive in a reasonably safe manner, and suspects who know they are being pursued and drive dangerously will slow down after the police terminate their pursuit.

Continued improvements in technology to slow or stop a vehicle may reduce risks in pursuits. The use of helicopters or fixed-wing airplanes, while expensive, al-

ready can allow law enforcement to monitor a fleeing suspect unobtrusively and alert ground units when he or she stops. The spike belt, a strip of spikes that slowly deflate a vehicle's tires when run over, has been available for several years; nets and barricades are being developed to bring vehicles to a stop; and emerging technology promises remote-control devices to allow police to shut down a car's electrical system.

and that jurisdictions could assess whether or not their training programs are meeting their goals.

### Public opinion

Interviews with 555 residents of Aiken County and Omaha indicate support for police in apprehending individuals suspected of violating the law. The public agreed with law enforcement personnel that the seriousness of the offense increases the need to pursue suspects, but the level of risk to the public decreases that need. Although some differences in opinion were found between races and socioeco-

omic levels for some law violations, no differences were found for serious felony offenses.

Media coverage of pursuit-related issues may have an effect on public perceptions. In Omaha, the print and electronic media covered pursuit driving regularly, with stories that included changes in policy, accidents, injuries, and proposed legislation. In Aiken, only minimal coverage was reported on a few tragedies. More research is necessary both to determine the relative risks the public is willing to allow for the apprehension of suspects and to compare the opinions of

community members who are aware of the risks and benefits of pursuit.<sup>2</sup>

### Suspects' opinions

A unique feature of this study was the information received from those who fled from the police. One hundred forty-six interviews were conducted in jail cells in three cities: Omaha, Miami, and Columbia, South Carolina.

More than 70 percent of the suspects<sup>3</sup> said that they would have slowed down “when I felt safe,” whether the pursuit was on a freeway, on a highway, or in a town. The phrase “when I felt safe”

**Table 5: When Recruits Say They Would Engage in Pursuit**

#### Before Training (T)

Offense	Metro-Dade (Miami) (N=33)		St. Petersburg, Florida (N=31)		South Carolina Criminal Justice (N=45)		South Carolina Highway Patrol (N=51)	
	Low Risk	High Risk	Low Risk	High Risk	Low Risk	High Risk	Low Risk	High Risk
Traffic Violation	71%	15%	58%	7%	78%	43%	56%	26%
Property Crime: Misdemeanor	41%	11%	58%	13%	69%	24%	49%	14%
Property Crime: Felony	69%	22%	73%	10%	82%	55%	77%	43%
Stolen Vehicle	86%	43%	77%	35%	94%	75%	79%	57%
DUI	100%	68%	81%	57%	98%	96%	93%	84%
Violent Felony: No Death	100%	86%	87%	76%	89%	81%	91%	88%
Violent Felony: With Death	100%	100%	97%	90%	96%	96%	95%	100%
Officer Shot	100%	100%	97%	97%	96%	98%	95%	100%

#### After Training (T2)

Offense	Metro-Dade (Miami) (N=29)		St. Petersburg, Florida (N=30)		South Carolina Criminal Justice (N=38)		South Carolina Highway Patrol (N=48)	
	Low Risk	High Risk	Low Risk	High Risk	Low Risk	High Risk	Low Risk	High Risk
Traffic Violation	46%	7%	24%	0%	83%	24%	54%	11%
Property Crime: Misdemeanor	33%	7%	17%	10%	63%	22%	46%	11%
Property Crime: Felony	67%	20%	52%	3%	96%	49%	57%	30%
Stolen Vehicle	73%	33%	59%	0%	94%	62%	70%	49%
DUI	73%	52%	57%	10%	93%	100%	84%	73%
Violent Felony: No Death	79%	57%	90%	70%	96%	83%	84%	69%
Violent Felony: With Death	97%	84%	100%	97%	100%	100%	97%	100%
Officer Shot	94%	94%	100%	100%	100%	100%	92%	97%

## Sanctions

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oday, in many jurisdictions, fleeing and eluding a police officer is a minor offense, which is often dropped or plea bargained. Officers in this study reported strong opinions on sanctions for suspects fleeing and eluding the police:

<i>Sanction</i>	<i>Percentage Agreeing</i>
Incarceration	90%
6–9 months in jail	40%
1 year in prison	53%

was interpreted by the respondents as outdistancing the police by 2.2 blocks on surface streets, 2.3 miles on highways, and 2.5 miles on freeways.

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. However, 71 percent said they were concerned with their own safety and 62 percent stated that they were concerned with the safety of others while engaged in a chase.

These data from suspects provide the foundation for an information base about suspects who run from the police and the reasons for their flight.

## Conclusion

Police pursuit driving remains a controversial and dangerous activity. For generations the conventional police wisdom was that effective law enforcement demanded that officers apprehend suspects, even at great social costs. The tragic accidents that have resulted from pursuits testify to their danger.

**Policy.** The study indicates the importance of the perceived severity of the offense committed by the fleeing suspect as the major factor in determining whether or not police should engage in or continue a chase. Therefore, policy might focus first on the type of offense and second on risks to the public, especially traffic patterns

and congestion. A balance of these variables indicates that an appropriate policy would limit chases to violent felons.

Specific rules and regulations would guide determination of the balance between risks of pursuit and the goal of apprehension of fleeing suspects. This study asked police for their responses to high- and low-risk situations. A policy would be based on formulating categories of risk and standards so officers could make distinctions during the heat of the chase. For example, criminal activities could be given a ranking, and risk factors could be scored in categories of high and low. From these scales, a chase matrix could be created that would give officers specific standards for decisionmaking and rules for the beginning stages of a pursuit.

At the same time, more research is necessary to develop a thorough understanding of the impact of one variable on another. That is, univariate analyses of factors such as speed or type of vehicle being chased may mask the impact of other variables such as traffic and road conditions or the lack of training or supervision.

**Training.** Although many police officers and supervisors recognize the inherent dangers of pursuit and are making efforts to control them, this study reveals a lack of initial and continuing training on the issues involved.

A critical component of police training should be an analysis of the specific risk factors as well as the benefits of pursuit driving. This education requires careful training in departmental policies and the reasoning that underlies the more recent, restrained philosophies and policies.

## Notes

1. The respondent sample included 149 agencies (34 percent) that had 1 to 25 sworn officers, 97 agencies (22 percent) that had 26 to 150 sworn officers, 100 agencies (23 percent) that had 151 to 500 sworn officers, 49 agencies (11 percent) with more than 500 sworn officers, and 41 agencies (10 percent) that did not report the number of officers among their personnel. It should be noted that the sample respondents overrepresent large police departments. For example, based on Bureau of Justice Statistics surveys, 79 percent of police departments have 25 or fewer sworn officers (vs. 34 percent in this sample) and fewer than 1 percent have 500 or more (vs. 11 percent in this sample).

2. See Picolo, Stephanie, “Attitudes Toward the Use of Hot Pursuits by the Police.” Master’s thesis, University of Maryland, 1994.

3. The average age of fleeing suspects in this study was 26.2 years and ranged from 18 to 40. In ethnicity fleeing suspects were 56.8 percent white, 36.3 percent African American, and 6.8 percent Hispanic American. Ninety-four percent of fleeing suspects were male and 6 percent were female.

## Additional references

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write NCJRS, 1600 Research Boulevard, Rockville, MD 20850; or e-mail askncjrs@ncjrs.org; ask for NCJ 164833.

Also available is a 60-minute videotape of Dr. Alpert's discussion of this research, which was prepared as part of NIJ's Research in Progress series. The tape *Police in Pursuit: Policy and Practice* includes questions from the audience of researchers and practitioners. It can also be ordered from NCJRS; ask for NCJ 161836. Costs per tape, including postage and handling, are \$19 (U.S.) or \$24 (Canada and other countries).

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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