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PUTTING THINGS OFF

Pursuits hurt and kill innocents. What are the options?



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. As police pursuits go, it's an appallingly familiar scene. Two vehicles lie shattered after their violent collision at an urban intersection. On the right, a white Nissan that [a fleeing thief assertedly drove](#) at “nearly 90 miles per hour” on city streets. On the left, the blue BMW occupied by his victim, Marianne Mildred Casey, 67. She didn't survive the crash.

Why was Anthony Michael Hanzal running from police? His reason has a familiar ring. An undercover cop observed the “second-striker” shoplift “boxes of Legos” at a grocery store. A black-and-white was called in. High on drugs, and with two prior convictions for theft ([Orange County Superior Court](#) cases 19HMO1127 and 23NM11569), when those red lights started flashing the chronic thief and drug abuser probably feared that it was indeed “game over.”

Coincidentally, his life-changing behavior took place on the very day – December 18, 2024 – that [California Proposition 36](#) took effect. Enacted due to widespread disgust over the thievery and shoplifting that beset retailers, it made a third conviction for a misdemeanor property offense a “wobbler” [punishable as a felony](#). Whether Hanzal knew of the toughening hasn't been said. Bolting from the cops, he promptly rear-ended another car and hopped on the freeway. An extensive, high-speed pursuit by multiple agencies wound up back on city streets. Hanzal soon ran a red light and struck an innocent car, killing its elderly driver (photo above).

Hanzal was charged with gross vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated, evading a peace officer causing death, and theft with two prior convictions. ([Orange County Superior Court](#) case# 24NF3264.) He pled not guilty; trial is pending.

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Hanzal's pursuit was your stereotypical, "all hands on deck" police chase. (Click [here](#) for the *ABC News* story and video.) Police lost his trail several times, but "backing off" – that, by the way, [is the title of one of our posts](#) – was obviously not in the cards.

Two days after that tragic ending came the arraignment, in the same court system, of another Southern California evildoer. On December 20, 2024 a "documented White Supremacist gang member with six prior strikes" appeared in [Orange County Superior Court](#) to answer for six felonies, ranging from evading a police officer to murder (case# 24WF3411). According to the [D.A.'s press release](#), Timothy Bradford Cole II, 43, fled from police after torching the home of his sister's fiancée. Cole was supposedly retaliating against his sister, whose call to child protective services allegedly caused him to lose custody of his kids.

Cole set the fire by dousing the home's shrubbery with an accelerant. When cops arrived, he took off. Officers promptly set chase. But they didn't have to go very far. Traveling at an estimated speed of 90 mph, Cole soon ran a red light and smashed into a BMW occupied by three innocents. One passenger, a 25-year old Vietnamese foreign exchange student, was killed. (For *NBC L.A.*'s comprehensive account click [here](#).)



It's not just Orange County. Police pursuits are commonplace throughout Southern California. L.A.'s *FOX News 13* [offers an online chronicle](#) of notable local chases by the CHP and local police (its earliest posted account is of a pursuit on [April 4, 2019](#).) We selected pursuits between April 1, 2024 and March 31, 2025. Keeping in mind the entries' limited scope and accuracy, they do offer insights into episodes that seemed particularly newsworthy. Here's a brief overview:

- *FOX* lists 139 chases over those twelve months. A dozen involved trucks and buses (nearly all had been stolen.) Eight involved motorcyclists. Thirteen of the fleeing vehicles – including a motorcycle – were clocked at speeds exceeding 100 mph.
- Many pursuits weren't prompted by traffic infractions. Nine involved carjackings. Thirty-two were of reportedly stolen vehicles. [In one notorious example](#), a stolen car occupied by four youths, ages 12-14, crashed while being pursued by sheriff's deputies. Each child was seriously injured; two, critically.

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- At least twenty-one fleeing motorists were wanted for a recent crime. Several were armed (one reportedly had a stockpile of guns). Four encounters ended in gun battles; one suspect was killed. No innocent persons or officers were reportedly wounded or killed.
- Sixteen chases involved or ended in collisions between fleeing cars and innocent motorists. Six fleeing vehicles collided with police cars. Several crashed into buildings, abutments and other fixed obstacles.
- Virtually every crash produced injuries. Five occupants of the vehicles being pursued were killed. Four innocent persons also died: three were motorists; [one was a bicyclist](#). In that episode, LAPD officers had been trying to stop a man who burglarized a parked car. During a brief, high-speed



chase the suspect's vehicle struck a bicycle. It then collided with several other cars and flipped over. A small tent (pictured) was erected where the cyclist lay.

Ill-fated chases don't only beset Southern California. Updates in ["Is it When to Chase? Or If?"](#) chronicle a host of pursuits with tragic outcomes. This March [a pedestrian and two occupants of innocent vehicles were killed](#) when struck by cars being pursued by Hyattsville, MD police. In January, an officer in a small Mississippi town [chased an SUV beyond his city's limits](#). That vehicle soon crashed into another; the SUV's driver and both occupants of the car it struck were killed.

Policies that govern pursuits vary widely across the U.S. Our local major agency, LAPD, has a relatively permissive approach. Here's an extract from its [current manual](#):

555.10 INITIATION OF A VEHICLE PURSUIT. Officers shall not initiate a pursuit based only on an infraction, misdemeanor evading (including failure to yield), or reckless driving in response to enforcement action taken by Department personnel.

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Officers may pursue felons and misdemeanants, including law violators who exhibit behaviors of illegally driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. If reasonable suspicion or probable cause exists that a misdemeanor (with the exception of misdemeanor evading or reckless driving in response to enforcement action by Department personnel) or felony has occurred, is occurring or is about to occur, employees may pursue a suspect vehicle.

At the start, officers are cautioned against prodding motorists to flee (the phrasing is nearly impenetrable, but its intent seems clear.) Chases are otherwise allowed when there is “reasonable suspicion” that a crime – felony or misdemeanor – was committed or seems “about to occur.” Ordinary traffic offenses such as speeding and expired registration are only “infractions,” thus off the table. DUI, reckless driving and hit-and-run, though, are misdemeanors. Ditto shoplifting, petty theft and all assaults. So for those, the chase is on!

But even LAPD has its limits. Those are buried in yet [another volume](#) of its massive manual:

205.17 CONTINUATION/TERMINATION OF THE PURSUIT. Officers involved in a pursuit shall continually evaluate the necessity for continuing the pursuit. Officers must determine whether the seriousness of the initial violation or any subsequent violations reasonably warrants continuance of the pursuit.

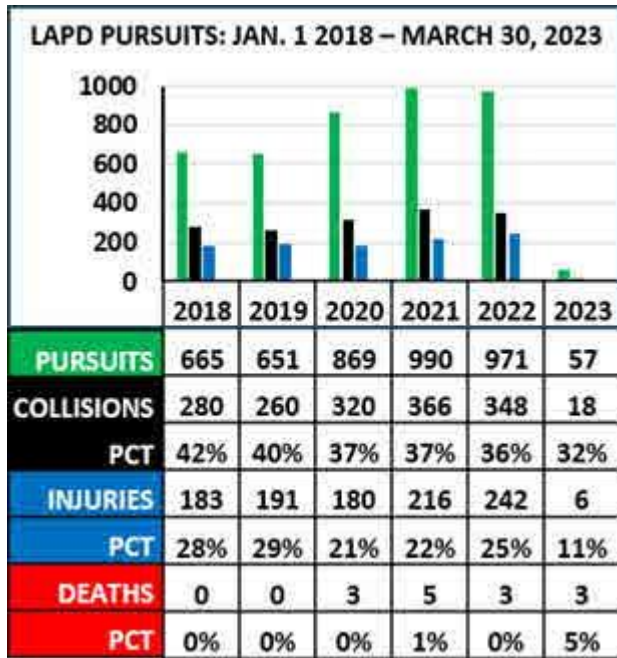
That “evaluation” comprises thirteen factors. Here are the first four:

- Whether there is an unreasonable risk of injury to the public's safety, the pursuing officers' safety or the safety of the occupant(s) in the fleeing vehicle
- Whether speeds dangerously exceed the normal flow of traffic
- Whether vehicular and/or pedestrian traffic safety is unreasonably compromised
- Whether the suspects can be apprehended at a later time

A seemingly fundamental reason for chasing – “The seriousness of the crime and its relationship to community safety” – is in seventh place.

As it turns out, in L.A. (and seemingly, across the U.S.) the primary justification for conducting a chase is that the vehicle being pursued was reportedly stolen. [According to LAPD](#), that was the reason for 44% (1,862 of 4,203) of its chases between January 1,

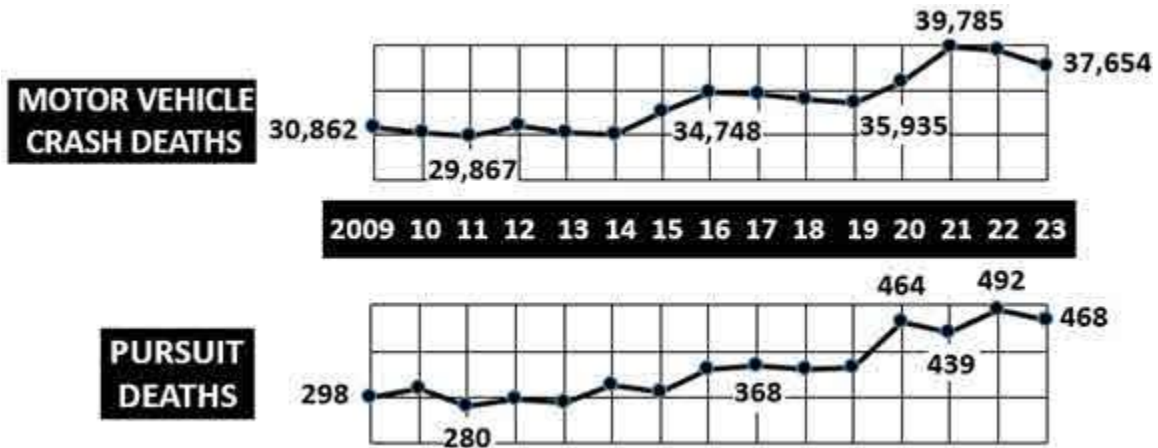
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2018 and March 30, 2023. Drunk driving (17%) placed a distant second and reckless driving (11%) came in third. Violent crimes were further down. ADW (6%) was fourth; carjack/robbery (5.7%) was fifth. LAPD also reported that 38% of pursuits (1,592) resulted in a collision. Of these, 1,032 (65%) caused injury or death. Check out our graphic. Between 36%-42% of LAPD pursuits conducted during full-year periods ended in a crash. Using pursuits instead of crashes as a basis, between 25%-29% ended with a crash-related death. And as one would expect, as the number of pursuits increased, their overall consequences worsened.

Those “consequences” aren’t just a problem in L.A. According to [The City](#), a major nonprofit news outlet that monitors doings in the Big Apple, [N.Y.P.D. pursuits soared in December 2022](#) when John Chell took over as chief of patrol. Thanks to an aggressive anti-crime approach, pursuits jumped from 32 to 53, then “surged” to 133 one month later. But in January 2025 newly-installed Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch (literally) [slammed on the brakes](#). Her decision to restrict chases to instances that involved “suspected felonies or violent misdemeanors” was likely influenced by a profusion of pursuit-related crashes, with “[more than one a day](#)” during the preceding year.

Data collected by [NHTSA](#), America’s highway safety agency, confirms that the consequences of pursuits haven’t only beset L.A. and New York City. (Caveat: NHTSA crash data is incomplete. For example, between 2009-2023, “fatal crashes with pursuits” and “persons killed in fatal crashes with pursuits” lacked entries for L.A. in 2016 and 2018, and for N.Y.C. in 2016, 2017, and 2019-2021.) Keeping such glitches in mind, we assembled a graphic overview:



In 2020 pursuit deaths reached a then-historical high of 464. One year later, the toll was “only” 439. That improvement is consistent with the more restrictive chase policies that accompanied the kinder and gentler approach to policing that was brought on by the 2020 murder of George Floyd. But only one year after that, pursuit deaths reached a new high of 492. What happened? Last April *Stateline* [published an account](#) that suggests the Floyd imbroglio caused many jurisdictions to implement restrictive pursuit policies. But the increase in crime that soon followed led agencies that had tightened the reins on cops to reverse course. That “reversal” happened in even the “Bluest” of places. Say, the District of Columbia and San Francisco:

In the District, officers will be able to begin pursuits if vehicle occupants pose an imminent threat to others. And in San Francisco, officers can initiate pursuits for any felony or “violent misdemeanors, including retail theft, vehicle theft and auto burglaries.”

Are pursuits worth their costs? Two years ago DOJ’s COPS office issued [a comprehensive 146-page report](#) that analyzed pursuit policies across the U.S. “Vehicular Pursuits – A Guide For Law Enforcement Executives in Managing the Associated Risks” closed by endorsing a standard that would require “having reasonable suspicion that the suspect is wanted for a violent crime and presents an imminent threat to the community.” That’s far, far more restrictive than L.A.’s policy. Really, if this approach is used, pursuits would rarely take place.

So what does the [IACP](#) think? America’s premier organization of police executives [issued a guide in 2019](#). However, it’s only intended to help agencies *develop* pursuit policies – it offers no specific recommendations of its own. However, we came across an IACP “model” vehicular pursuit policy [dated December, 2015](#). It’s not on their website, but it seems genuine. Here’s a brief outtake:

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...Pursuit is authorized only if the officer has a reasonable belief that the suspect, if allowed to flee, would present a danger to human life or cause serious injury. In general, pursuits for minor violations are discouraged...Unless a greater hazard would result, a pursuit should not be undertaken if the subject(s) can be identified with enough certainty that they can be apprehended at a later time...

That second sentence really caught our eye. Officers face that “unless a greater hazard would result” conundrum whenever someone flees, or acts as though they might. To be sure, arresting a “not-so-model citizen” is always risky. But abandoning a chase places evildoers on notice and gives them an opportunity to prepare for the Mounties to arrive. Setting up to make an ostensibly safer snatch can also consume prodigious amounts of police time and resources. Meanwhile a potentially dangerous person remains free to run around and misbehave.

Bottom line: there is good reason why officers nearly always prefer to hook someone up when the opportunity first presents itself. To make that task safer, “[*Forewarned is Forearmed*](#)” recently recommended that police deploy advanced technologies so that cops can be instantly informed about the criminal backgrounds of persons they encounter. Still, there is a balancing act. Pursuits *do* hurt and kill innocents. So in policing, as elsewhere, “putting things off” is sometimes called for. But it’s not always the best choice.