

Posted 9/27/09

THE CHASE IS ON

Are foot pursuits prone to result in bad shootings?



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Two weeks ago Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies were looking for two robbery suspects when they spotted a pair of possible candidates. As they approached the men one ran off. A deputy gave chase. What happened next isn't clear, but it seems that at some point the fleeing man made a motion that the deputy considered threatening, leading him to fire three times, twice through a wooden gate. [Darrick Collins](#), 36 was fatally wounded. It turned out that all he had on his person was a cell phone and twenty-four tablets of an illegal street drug.

Collins was not one of the robbers. He had been recently arrested on drug charges and probably ran to avoid getting busted again.

Collins was the tenth person fatally shot by LASD deputies in 2009. An uproar led Sheriff Lee Baca to pledge that an inquiry would be completed in ninety days. A career law enforcement officer, Baca isn't particularly loved by his troops, who generally consider him far too liberal for their tastes. On the other hand, Baca enjoys excellent rapport with community groups, and his promise to promptly resolve the matter helped defuse things. He's also [commissioned a panel of experts](#) to look into deputy-involved shootings. Whether to change foot pursuit policy is one of the issues they're to consider.

Baca's moves were welcomed by Michael Gennaco. Head of the [Office of Independent Review](#), the county agency that oversees complaints against the Sheriff's Department, Gennaco has criticized delays that leave the public in the dark about

shootings for eighteen months or more. It now seems that at least in “mistaken fact” incidents, where deputy error is evident, administrative and criminal inquiries will run simultaneously.

Less than a week after Collins’ death LASD deputies [shot and killed three more persons](#). These unconnected incidents brought the number killed by deputies this year to thirteen, more than twice the number for all of 2008, when five persons fell to deputy gunfire. But if there was a positive side to the most recent shootings, it’s that they differed from the Collins killing in one critical respect: this time each suspect was armed.

- 9/19/09. A 17-year old gang member who had evaded deputies was shot and killed when he pointed a loaded handgun at officers during a later encounter.
- 9/20/09. A robbery suspect exchanged gunfire with deputies, wounding an officer in the leg before he was shot and killed.
- 9/20/09. A reputed gang member was shot and killed when he pulled a loaded handgun while struggling with a deputy in a motel parking lot. The man was being questioned for acting suspiciously.

[As we’ve said before](#), the environment of policing has a profound impact on how officers perceive and respond to threats. To get a better perspective on what L.A. County’s deputies face we looked up the remaining nine fatal shootings in the *Los Angeles Times* index on ProQuest, an online database. All but one were found. (Keep in mind that the accounts were sketchy and based mostly on official reports.)

- [8/8/09](#). Deputies encounter a wanted parolee. When they move in to make an arrest he tries to grab a deputy’s gun.
- [8/7/09](#). Deputies break up an out-of-control party at a private residence. For unknown reasons one of the partygoers draws a gun.
- [8/1/09](#). Deputies responding to a 911 call are attacked by a man wielding two meat cleavers. He had just broken into a woman’s apartment.
- [7/10/09](#). Deputies respond to a 911 call from a woman who says she was threatened with a gun. They pull over a parolee leaving the area. He runs off and is pursued on foot. *A deputy shoots him, apparently mistaking a cell phone for a gun.* A loaded gun is found in the suspect’s car.

- [7/5/09](#). Deputies confront several teen gang members. One runs off and is pursued. He allegedly points a gun at the deputy. A loaded handgun is recovered at the scene; however, bystanders say there was no gun.
- [4/26/09](#). The robber of a fast-food restaurant points what turns out to be a replica pistol at deputies.
- [3/15/09](#). Deputies responding to a 911 call are attacked by a drug-crazed man wielding a machete and a baseball bat.
- [1/24/09](#). Gang deputies confront a gang member carrying a gun. He runs away, tries to hide, then allegedly points a gun at officers.

It's a mixed bag. Yet there are some common threads. Obviously, each of the deceased would still be alive today had they complied with deputies. As one might expect, the influence of guns and gangs is clearly evident. Sheriff Baca's concerns about foot pursuits are also borne out. Four shootings took place during foot chases, including both instances where deputies killed in error.

Cops know that foot pursuits can be a recipe for disaster. Chases place officers in unfamiliar surroundings. Often alone, lacking access to the normal tools of policing, they get wholly dependent on their guns for survival. Pumped up on anxiety and adrenaline, with little opportunity to observe or reflect, it's inevitable that their split-second decisions will occasionally prove to be tragically wrong.

Training only goes so far. When decades of study and experimentation yielded no discernible gains in the ability to safely pursue vehicles, most police agencies wound up forbidding car chases except under tightly specified and controlled circumstances. Foot pursuits are even more difficult to calibrate. They don't happen along clearly demarcated roads. Neither can they be choreographed with the assistance of radios and aircraft. Unless academies can produce Supercops who are unaffected by stress and fatigue and can see in the dark, prohibiting one-on-one foot pursuits may be the only option.

It would be informative to compare the characteristics of LASD's fatal encounters with those reported elsewhere. LASD is but one agency, and there might be something about it and its officers that could use fine-tuning. For example, deputies must spend years working the jails, so they accumulate far less field experience than their municipal police counterparts. What's more, in 2008 the Office of Independent Review issued reports chastising the [LASD training academy](#) and the department's [background investigation process](#) for yielding less-than-sterling recruits.

Improvements in selection and training are always welcome. There may also be substantial differences in officer propensities to shoot (see, for example, the case of [Cleveland officer Jim Simone](#).) But there will always be a certain elephant in the room. Unincorporated inner-city areas such as those patrolled by L.A. County deputies brim with gangsterism and violence, frequently leading to encounters that any officer, not matter how well trained, would be hard-pressed to peaceably resolve. In the mean streets of SoCal, tragic conclusions to police-citizen encounters aren't all that surprising. [We've said it before](#) and it bears repeating: unless we can convince citizens to act kindly and gently, getting cops to do so may be out of reach.