

Duty Bound or Ego Driven

The high-speed chase dilemma

The Illinois State Police (ISP) has adopted a [new policy](#) that will affect all of their Troopers involved in emergency response situations. The policy takes effect January 1, 2009, and is in direct response to a tragic accident in 2008 that took the lives of two sisters. Briefly, the incident occurred when an ISP Trooper, driving in excess of 125 miles per hour (mph), lost control of his cruiser and crossed over the median on I-64. The vehicle that the two sisters were travelling in was struck by the Trooper's car and became engulfed in fire. Both sisters died at the scene.

The aftermath of the tragedy includes a civil suit filed against the ISP and the Trooper in the amount of \$24 million, and the officer has been relieved of duty and charged with reckless homicide. As a result of those two deaths, an ISP review panel recommended a new four tiered

response system. One of the changes in the new policy includes: troopers will be allowed to exceed the posted speed limit by 20 to 30 mph only under certain circumstances. This is draconian in comparison to the former guidelines that required only that officers exercise due care at all times and constantly evaluate the situation.

On November 21, 2008, during a press conference, ISP Director Larry G. Trent said the following: "Having served law enforcement in four decades, I have never been part of such a dramatic change in the policing culture than we are about to implement."

I don't know what the ISP Troopers think of the new restrictions, but my first inclination is that most will think that their effectiveness will be diminished. Further, that the bad guys will view the new policy as a "get out of jail free card," the cops can no longer chase them. Will this new policy mean more people running from the police? Time will tell.

But the accident mentioned above is not an isolated one. We routinely see reports all over the nation of high speed chases ending in injuries and deaths. Is the answer to discontinue them completely? Where do we draw the line? Should the street supervisor ultimately be held accountable? These are all very cogent questions that need answering by departments around the country.



Stop and consider the myths surrounding police chases. We all assume that it's the career criminals that tend to run...cons and junkies. But more often than not it's people wanted for traffic only, minor misdemeanors, or kids in a stolen vehicle. Do those violations warrant the danger inherent in a chase?

Then there's the belief that if we don't chase, everyone will run. According to the [Fatality Analysis Reporting System](#), in 2007, 424 people died from injuries received in police pursuits—296 were in the vehicles being pursued, 98 people were in other vehicles, nine were police officers, and 21 were non-occupants (pedestrians). That's a lot of folks losing their lives over incidents that many times don't even warrant a night in jail.

Consider also the "ego-driven" chase. You know what I mean—when someone runs from the police it often times becomes personal. *How dare they run from me!* Once that genie comes out of the bottle, it becomes very difficult to get him back inside. I know; I've done it.

But this chase phenomenon is ameliorated to some extent by advances in technology. The "stop sticks" that are widely used, and more aerial surveillance which allows ground units to follow safely, are welcomed techniques in the battle against those who would disregard the blue lights behind them.

In October, General Motors (GM) announced that it began a [new program](#) utilizing its OnStar navigation system. Citing a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration statistic that indicates nearly 300 people die each year as a result of 30,000 police chases, GM said that it will add the capability to more than one million 2009 models equipped with OnStar. This new technology allows for a signal to be sent to a stolen vehicle's engine that will gradually slow the car down, allowing for the police to make the stop. I've yet to learn of the mechanics and protocol involved to activate such a system, but the potential impact of this new police tool is tremendous; it could save hundreds of lives.

The question still remains however, should the decision to chase a fleeing vehicle be left to the individual officer on the street? If not, why not? Do we not trust our cops to make rational, real-time judgments? And if we hand that decision regarding whether to chase or not over to the supervisor, what's next—whether a cop can use deadly force? We may find that by lightening the load of the beat cop, we've placed a tremendous burden on our first line managers, loading them down with too much accountability. Think about it...

Stay safe brothers and sisters!