



THE DANGER OF TIRE DEFLATION DEVICES IN POLICE PURSUITS

KELLY COUCH

was again saddened recently by the death of a police officer who was killed while deploying a tire deflation device to end a vehicle pursuit. These tragedies occur far too often, and many times are attempts to stop pursuits that are occurring for traffic infractions, minor crimes or property crimes like stolen vehicles. No stolen vehicle is worth the life of an officer or the protracted impairment that can be caused by being struck by a vehicle. Sadly, many of these tragedies could be avoided by adequate training in the deployment of tire deflation devices and comprehensive policies governing vehicle pursuits.

Early in my law enforcement career in California, police agencies would pursue an offender merely because they fled. We would commonly hear things like, “Well, they must have done something serious if they are fleeing.” The fact is the data does not support this. Data shows that most people fleeing from officers are doing so for minor reasons, such as driving a stolen vehicle, having arrest warrants for low-level crimes, possessing a suspended license or other similar minor issues. Only 9.4% of drivers in a 2018 CHP report to the Legislature were charged with a serious crime. Another startling fact is that between 30% and 50% of people injured in police pursuits are not the fleeing driver, but uninvolved parties.¹

In recent years, there is a trend toward managing the risks of pursuits by more restrictive pursuit policies and heavily weighing

the severity of the crime known to have occurred and balancing that with the risk to the public. Remember the “Graham factors” from the academy? If not, it’s advisable to review your academy training materials and take a quick refresher, because that is how your decision to pursue will be evaluated by your agency and potentially the courts if something goes wrong.

There have also been efforts recently to prevent a pursuit from occurring though the use of pre-emptive measures. Pre-emptive measures like a precision immobilization technique (PIT), tire deflation deployment and pinning or boxing-in a suspect have proven to be successful in taking suspects into custody with minimal risk to the public. If an officer knows that they are behind a stolen vehicle and there is a great likelihood that it will flee, why wouldn’t an agency seek to prevent the pursuit from occurring? Pre-emptive measures, when properly trained, can result in the arrest of an offender with minimal risk to officers and the public.



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REFERENCES

¹ CHP Report to Legislature 2018; 2015 *USA Today* study; and 2024 *San Francisco Chronicle* study.



The Portland Police Bureau in Oregon has seen enormous success with these pre-emptive strategies and trains its officers in these tactics regularly.

Despite all our best efforts, sometimes pursuits will happen and can be justified to make the arrest of a dangerous person. Tire deflation devices are a great tool to slow and hopefully reduce the risks of high-speed pursuits, but proper training in their deployment is necessary. As an emergency vehicle operations (EVO) trainer, I saw our program in Oregon grow and change during my tenure as the state's lead EVO instructor. We made these changes because of the stories we kept seeing about officers killed and severely injured deploying these devices. The program continues to adapt to changing data and trends, but I can share the key training points we teach recruits in Oregon.

First, we emphasize to only deploy these devices when there is adequate time to do so safely. Vehicles approaching at high speeds cover lots of ground quickly. Second, we train officers to only deploy these devices from behind hard cover. Hard cover does not include a patrol car. Hard cover includes concrete barriers, bridge abutments, substantial trees that can take the impact of a vehicle, buildings in urban areas and similar objects. Darkness and stealth are also an officer's friend. Park away from where you are deploying and turn off overhead emergency lights during a deployment. Pre-plan so you know where these areas of hard cover exist in your patrol area before a pursuit happens. We also strongly discourage the throwing of the devices even from cover because of the risk of an officer entering the roadway. Manufacturers of these devices

Continued on page 22



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TIRE DEFLATION DEVICES

Continued from page 21

recommend deploying them on the roadway shoulder and using the string or cord to pull the device into the roadway as the suspect vehicle approaches. Ensure the cord remains low and drop the cord or device handle as recommended by the manufacturer. Even in training, I have seen these devices picked up by vehicles and torn from the hands of officers numerous times. Also, don't forget that good communication is essential to avoiding the embarrassment of sustaining flat tires of pursuing patrol cars. As a pursuing officer, when you hear where these devices are deployed, back off to allow for safe retrieval after the target vehicle hits the device.

In closing, be smart when managing pursuits, follow your agency

policy related to pursuits, develop strategies to end pursuits quickly and train properly in pursuit termination techniques, including the safe deployment of tire deflation devices. Also, advocate for your agency to train in pre-emptive measures like deflation device deployment, PIT or pinning before a pursuit begins. No officer's life should be jeopardized for the recovery of a stolen vehicle or an arrest for a minor offense.

About the Author

Kelly Couch is a retired California police officer from the Bay Area and a retired law enforcement trainer. He still provides training in emergency driving and patrol tactics as a part-time instructor for the State of Oregon's law enforcement training academy (DPSST). Couch is a PORAC RAM member. ☆

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