




THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO
M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: November 18, 2024
TO: Scott Wahl, Chief, San Diego Police Department
FROM: Gloria Tran, Chair, Commission on Police Practices 
SUBJECT: Pursuit Policy Recommendations Supplementary Report

Executive Summary:

Whereas the mission of the San Diego Police Department (SDPD) is *to maintain peace and order by providing the highest quality police service in response to community needs*, the City of San Diego Commission on Police Practices convened an Ad Hoc Pursuit Policy Committee with the purpose of examining San Diego Police Department Procedure 1.03—Pursuit Procedures with a philosophical understanding that San Diego Police vehicular pursuits should aim to protect human life. Pursuits, particularly at high speeds, present significant risks to residents, officers, bystanders, suspects, and property. The primary purpose of San Diego Police Department's pursuit procedures should focus on protecting lives and safety. San Diego Police Department's vehicle pursuit purpose, policies, and procedures should prepare officers to effectively respond to high-speed chases while, to the extent possible, minimizing risk of injury or death to the public and themselves.

SDPD's pursuits increased 46%, from 439 in 2019 to 640 in 2021, according to data from the California Highway Patrol (CHP). Those statistics also showed collisions resulting in injuries saw a 37% upward trend, from 43 in 2019 to 59 in 2022. Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that only 30% of pursuits result in arrests, and an even smaller percentage lead to convictions, underscoring potential inefficiencies versus the high risks involved. Seventy-five percent of collisions in pursuits cause injuries to one or more individuals.

In San Diego, Black residents make up 6% of the population, and Hispanic or Latino residents make up 35%, while White residents account for 55%. However, data from the Commission's Outside Counsel investigation titled *Pursuit Data and Analysis of SDPD Pursuits Report to the Commission 2019-2024*

Totals shows that more than 50% of SDPD pursuits involve Black or Hispanic suspects and only 16% involve White suspects, highlighting a notable disparity in pursuit demographics relative to the City's population distribution. Sixty-one percent of these pursuits were initiated for infractions, with a quarter of them resulting in collisions.

The same report shows the speeds of highway pursuits were above 100 miles per hour in more than half of San Diego police chases. The maximum reported surface street speed was 140 miles per hour, with nearly half topping 50 miles per hour on San Diego roads. This reflects the blatantly significant dangers posed by these high-speed chases.

Policing incidents that result in injury should be viewed as a public health concern justifying deeper analysis. The future we envision with these recommendations is one where police pursuits are well-justified and less common, where community safety is paramount, and where tragic incidents are significantly less likely to occur. These CPP recommendations are intended to refine current policies and increase transparency to ensure pursuits are handled in the safest manner possible. To increase public oversight and improve policy, we propose the creation of a Vehicle Pursuit Review Board that would regularly publish data and reports on SDPD's pursuit activities. By implementing these changes, we hope to foster a climate of trust and safety that reassures the community that their voices are heard and their lives valued.

Research/Methodology:

In developing these recommended changes, the Ad Hoc Pursuit Policy Committee examined various law enforcement reports and strategies. Our research evaluated the San Diego Police Department's pursuit policies against the latest best practices endorsed in the [September 2023 report by the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Services \(COPS\)](#), [California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training \(POST\)](#) and the [2022 Police Executive Research Forum \(PERF\) Report of Police Pursuits](#). Our approach was both thorough and multidimensional, involving a closer examination of data concerning pursuit-related incidents and their outcomes. In addition to statistical evaluation of [Racial and Identity Profiling Act \(RIPA\) data](#) and a review of [California state laws](#), the committee conducted a review of vehicle pursuit policies from 17 California agencies and seven nationwide.

Police Executive Research Forum 2022 Report

The PERF report was developed with contributions from leading experts such as Dr. Geoffrey Alpert, Professor at the University of South Carolina and chair of the working group; Chief Jason Potts of the Las Vegas Department of Public Safety; and Colonel Matthew Langer of the Minnesota State Patrol. Their

collective expertise, along with insights from other seasoned law enforcement professionals and researchers—including those from PERF staff like Executive Director Chuck Wexler and COPS Office specialists like Nazmia E.A. Comrie—provided a robust foundation for best practices in police pursuits. Our comparative analysis also drew upon wisdom from the PERF report, which considered the policies from 48 different departments and utilized more than 150 reference material, all stemming from a variety of professional studies on police practices, city reports, and city policy documentation. This comprehensive review was instrumental in highlighting disparities and identifying areas ripe for reform and could not have been done without the hard work from many communities all over the United States.

California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training

The guidelines established in this report focus on the importance of vehicle safety and protecting the public. In 2018, California was fourth in the country in pursuit-related fatalities with 26 deaths. While things have improved, California has a complicated history with police pursuits. The following recommendations are designed to modernize the SDPD pursuit policy and procedures.

U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) of the U.S. Department of Justice discusses making institutional reforms that can be evaluated to reinforce a sustained effort. The report defines community policing as “a philosophy that promotes organizational change strategies, which support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues, such as crime, disorder, and fear of crime.” The recommendation to create a Vehicle Pursuit Review Board that integrates the Commission on Police Practices utilizes this philosophy (**Recommendation 5**). San Diego voters agree that community policing works, advocating for the oversight body, that we know as the Commission on Police Practices, with a commanding 75% affirmative vote.

Pursuit Recommendations from the City of San Diego Commission on Police Practices + Explanations

(**Recommendation 1**) (SDPD Procedure 1.3, Section I) We strongly recommend revising the purpose statement to explicitly include the commitment to safeguarding the lives and safety of both the public and officers. The current purpose statement in the SDPD Pursuit-Policy Procedures reads: “This Department procedure establishes guidelines to enhance the effectiveness of a pursuit and reduce the likelihood of incidents that could lead to potential

liability.” This statement focuses primarily on operational effectiveness and limiting liability but fails to mention the critical aspect of community safety and the protection of life. The Purpose should add, “to protect the lives and safety of the public and officers.”

This recommendation would update the Pursuit Purpose to read: *“This Department procedure establishes guidelines to protect the lives and safety of the public and officers, to enhance the effectiveness of a pursuit, and to reduce the likelihood of incidents that could lead to potential liability.”*

Including community safety in the purpose statement reinforces the Department's dedication to the well-being of the public, which is essential for building and maintaining trust between law enforcement and the community. Emphasizing community safety aligns the Department's policies with its core mission to protect and serve and demonstrates a proactive approach to building community trust.

(Recommendation 2) (SDPD Procedure 1.3, Section IV) SDPD should seek clear and consistent guidelines on how a pursuit is defined, particularly regarding incidents that occur after a pursuit has been officially terminated. The SDPD definition of a pursuit should be identical to the CHP definition of pursuit to ensure uniform reporting standards. We suggest removing the highlighted section below:

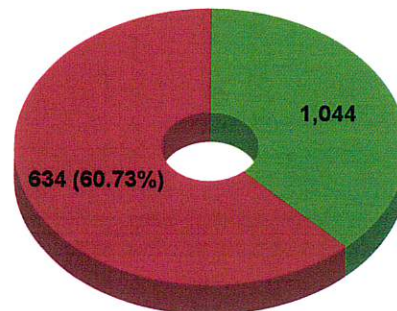
(SDPD) Vehicle Pursuit – an event involving one or more law enforcement officers, who are operating an authorized emergency vehicle, attempting to apprehend a suspected or actual violator of the law in a motor vehicle while the driver is using evasive tactics to avoid arrest, such as highspeed driving, driving off a highway, turning suddenly, or driving in a legal manner but willfully failing to yield to the officer's signal to stop (emergency lights and siren).

(CHP) Vehicle Pursuit – an event involving one or more law enforcement officers attempting to apprehend a suspect operating a motor vehicle while the suspect is attempting to avoid arrest by using high-speed or other evasive tactics such as driving off a highway, turning suddenly, or driving in a legal manner but willfully failing to yield to the officer's signal to stop. (Also referred to in the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training Vehicle Pursuit Guidelines).

(Recommendation 3) (SDPD Procedure 1.3, Section V) SDPD should add a section that outlines restricted actions and situations that do not justify a pursuit. Certain types of offenses generally do not warrant the risks of a pursuit. Officers may only initiate a pursuit when they reasonably believe that failing to apprehend the suspect poses an immediate and significant threat to public safety. This determination should be based on observable behaviors—such as violent actions or credible threats—not merely on reckless driving while fleeing from law enforcement. Pursuing officers should avoid acting on speculative

threats, ensuring that their decision reflects real, present dangers. Law enforcement experts emphasize that "imminent threat" should be measured by the suspect's actual actions (e.g., armed robbery or attempted assault), as opposed to hypothetical risks.

Infraction Violation Observed By SPDP Before Initiating Pursuits



● TOTAL # OF PURSUITS ● % OF PURSUITS INITIATED DUE TO AN INFRACTION

CPP Outside Counsel report: *Pursuit Data and Analysis of SDPD Pursuits: Report to the Commission, 2019-2024 Totals. 2024.*

Pursuits should be avoided for the following circumstances (SDPD Procedure 1.3, Section V):

Infractions: Officers may not initiate a pursuit for infractions.

Property Offenses: Crimes such as automobile theft or the operation of a stolen vehicle typically do not warrant a pursuit unless other aggravating factors, such as armed resistance, are present.

Misdemeanors: Pursuits for misdemeanor offenses, including failure to yield, should be rare unless there is clear evidence that the suspect poses an immediate danger to the public.

Traffic Violations: Unless reckless driving creates a direct and severe threat to public safety, traffic violations should not lead to pursuits. The pursuit of traffic violators often creates more danger than the initial infraction.

Non-Violent Warrants: Pursuing individuals wanted on non-violent warrants should be avoided, as these cases generally lack an immediate threat to public safety.

The decision to initiate or discontinue a pursuit should always prioritize public safety above all else. By adhering to strategic guidelines and restrictions, officers can ensure that they are making informed, well-calculated decisions in high-pressure situations. These restrictions are designed to minimize the risks inherent in police pursuits while ensuring that suspects who pose genuine threats to the community are apprehended effectively.

If a vehicle is being driven in an erratic or dangerous manner, such as in cases of suspected driving under the influence (DUI), officers may initiate a pursuit if they believe the suspect poses an immediate and serious risk to the public. However, even in these situations, a risk assessment should be conducted, and supervisory oversight is crucial. Pursuing a DUI suspect, for example, might be justified if the driver is swerving dangerously through a crowded area, but the pursuit should be terminated if it endangers more lives than it protects. Every pursuit poses risks, both to the public and those involved in the chase. Per existing SDPD procedures, officers benefit from conducting a risk assessment, which includes considering factors such as traffic conditions, time of day, the presence of pedestrians, and weather conditions before initiating or continuing a pursuit. The potential danger of the pursuit itself should be lower than the danger posed by allowing the suspect to remain at large.

(Recommendation 4) (SDPD Procedure 1.3, Section VIII (C)) SDPD should require verbal/physical acknowledgment of pursuit termination. All officers involved in a pursuit should acknowledge its termination over the radio while performing an action, such as pulling over to the side of the road, to ensure that every officer is aware of the termination of the pursuit, eliminating any potential confusion.

(Recommendation 5) (SDPD Procedure 1.3, Section V) SDPD should establish a Vehicle Pursuit Review Board that includes at least one member of the Commission on Police Practices. The board would publish a quarterly public report detailing SDPD vehicle pursuits and conduct a comprehensive review of pursuit data, including trend identification, tactical evaluation, and recommended policy improvements. This review board would conduct post-pursuit reviews and analysis of each Pursuit Report and provide feedback to division Captains where needed and findings to the Commission on Police Practices. SDPD should ensure that lessons learned and key outcomes from high-profile vehicle pursuits are shared with all personnel to improve future tactics and decision-making. This aligns with the COPS/PERF recommendation (4.5, 4.6), with New Orleans having a very clear post-pursuit process.

The Vehicle Pursuit Review Board should distribute lessons learned and outcomes of high-profile vehicle pursuits to all personnel. This dissemination

of information fosters a culture of continuous learning and improvement, enabling officers to apply insights from past pursuits to enhance future responses. By conducting thorough reviews and providing training summaries, outcomes, and overviews, the Department can prevent the recurrence of similar incidents and improve overall response strategies. The Vehicle Pursuit Review Board also should provide statistical pursuit data on a quarterly basis, comparing current data to the prior year's activity. The Commission requests to receive this data on a quarterly basis once compiled. Additionally, if past quarterly reports are available, the Commission requests to receive those for the last 5 years.

(Recommendation 6) (SDPD Procedure 1.3, Section V/ Section VI /Section XVI) SDPD should include any incident that results in injury, death, or property damage following a pursuit—whether it was initiated, terminated, or re-engaged—in SDPD's traffic accident investigation reports and official CHP187A/SDPD Pursuit Data Sheet form for accurate data collection and accountability. When completing a report for a traffic accident involving a vehicle that had been the subject of or participated in a pursuit—whether active or terminated—prior to the accident, the investigating officer must include that information in the report. For example, the California Highway Patrol (CHP) includes a provision for injuries and fatalities sustained after a pursuit in their reporting. SDPD should ensure consistency and clarity in its own pursuit definitions.

(Recommendation 7) SDPD should familiarize and integrate CPP staff and Commissioners with SDPD Training Curriculum. SDPD should develop a system to provide CPP staff and Commissioners with a comprehensive understanding of the SDPD's training curriculum, enhancing their ability to assess and provide oversight on Departmental practices. This would ensure that CPP's future evaluations and recommendation are well-informed and rooted in a comprehensive understanding of what officers are taught. This would lead to more accurate and constructive oversight. Moreover, a shared knowledge base between SDPD and CPP would improve communication and collaboration.


(Recommendation 8) SDPD should explore Advanced Technologies for Pursuit Management. SDPD should explore the use of technologies such as GPS tracking, drone surveillance, pursuit management software, and training simulations or virtual reality to improve the monitoring, control, and safety of vehicle pursuits. Advanced technologies may be able to give law enforcement a broader view of various incidents and aid in deciding whether to continue or terminate a pursuit. Researching advancements would demonstrate a commitment to modernizing law enforcement practices and improving efficiency.

(Recommendation 9) SDPD should pursue accreditation through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). This accreditation would not only enhance the Department's standards and practices but also demonstrate a commitment to excellence in law enforcement. CALEA membership requires members/departments to perform yearly vehicle pursuits analysis. Pursuing an accreditation provides a structured and informed path toward procedural excellence.

Applied Policy/Procedure Implications:

The Commission on Police Practices' nine recommendations prioritize the protection of lives and safety, emphasizing the need for law enforcement officers to carefully consider several key factors before initiating or continuing a pursuit. With these balanced recommendations, SDPD is expected to reduce unnecessary risks to both the public and officers, minimize the number of high-speed chases, and lower the likelihood of collisions and injuries.

These recommendations ultimately help SDPD deliver higher quality and responsive service that aligns with the needs and concerns of the communities they serve by supporting officers in assessing critical factors before initiating a pursuit. By placing safety at the center of pursuit policies, SDPD can provide a more measured approach to a variety of incidents. This will ultimately strengthen community trust by improving the standard of service to the public, thus improving the reputation of the San Diego Police Department. By collaborating with the Commission on Police Practices in efforts to review pursuit data, policy, and procedures regularly, SDPD can be at the forefront of public safety standards.



Gloria Tran, Chair
Commission on Police Practices

cc: Mayor Todd Gloria
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