**Police Pursuits**

*What should be done?*

(This article ran in the Philadelphia Inquirer)

On May 5th, a 13 year old boy died while being chased by police in a stolen vehicle in Coatesville. This incident, made all the more tragic by the death of someone so young, has wider implications, under what circumstances should the police conduct vehicle pursuits?

Police work by its very nature is messy. How any one event will play out is unknown with no guarantee of a safe outcome for all involved. This is obviously what occurred in Coatesville. Our hearts should go out to the officers involved as they must deal with this tragedy and live with the consequences. Personally, it harkens back to when I was a new police officer working in NYC. I along with other officers was involved in a vehicle pursuit that resulted in the death of two people uninvolved in the chase. We followed proper procedure and I do not think we had any other choice; but the senselessness of the deaths remained with me for the rest of my career.

When analyzing police pursuits, what is often overlooked is the fact that the vehicles involved are actual weapons that can kill. Annually, in excess of three hundred people die in police pursuits, with about one third of those fatalities involving innocent bystanders or police officers themselves. Each police agency has a duty to enact regulations that specify under what conditions police vehicle pursuits may be conducted. The investigation in Coatesville will undoubtedly look into the police department’s policy and whether if it was followed or not.

Philadelphia Police Department in the fall of 2008 had to review its pursuit procedures after tragically losing one of its officers in a vehicle pursuant. Police Officer Isabel Nazario succumbed to her injuries when her police vehicle was struck by a stolen vehicle. The driver of the stolen vehicle was sixteen. After this and other incidents, the Philadelphia Police Department increased the threshold of when vehicle pursuits could be conducted.

As can be seen, properly regulating police pursuits is not only protecting the public from a potentially hazardous situation but it is also self preservation - it is not to give criminals a free pass.

Although each police agency must develop their own specific rules, theses rules must have one overriding principle. When the dangers from the pursuit outweigh the dangers that the fleeing person present to the public by remaining at large, the pursuit must be terminated.

A typical example of a pursuit that should be allowed to continue under this principle is the armed fleeing felon as this person represents a continued threat to the public if not captured. Conversely, if a person refuses to stop for a minor traffic infraction (such as failing to signal when turning) this does not justify an all out vehicle pursuit to stop this person. Not everyone who flees from the police has been featured on America’s Most Wanted. Some people panic and do stupid things, and we should not make an error in judgment into a potential homicide.

As for other cases, it is mostly a judgment call based on the known facts. Factors to be considered include the crime involved, speeds involved, road conditions and time of day, among other issues. Unfortunately, if things go wrong, second guessing can occur such as why did you let that person get away or this pursuit should not have occurred (Second guessing is one of the occupational hazards of police work that is apparently unsolvable).

If police terminate a pursuit is this tantamount to allowing a suspect to escape. Well, no. All it is saying is that we are not capturing you now. Police departments conduct follow-up investigations. Most who elude immediate capture can be found at a later date and time without the inherent danger of a vehicle pursuit.

Police work does not always lend itself to happy endings. It is also stressful and dangerous, with vehicle pursuits playing a large part in this equation. When a tragedy occurs, such as the incident in Coatesville, all in law enforcement should take time to evaluate what happened there and learn from it as it is in the public interests for which they serve.