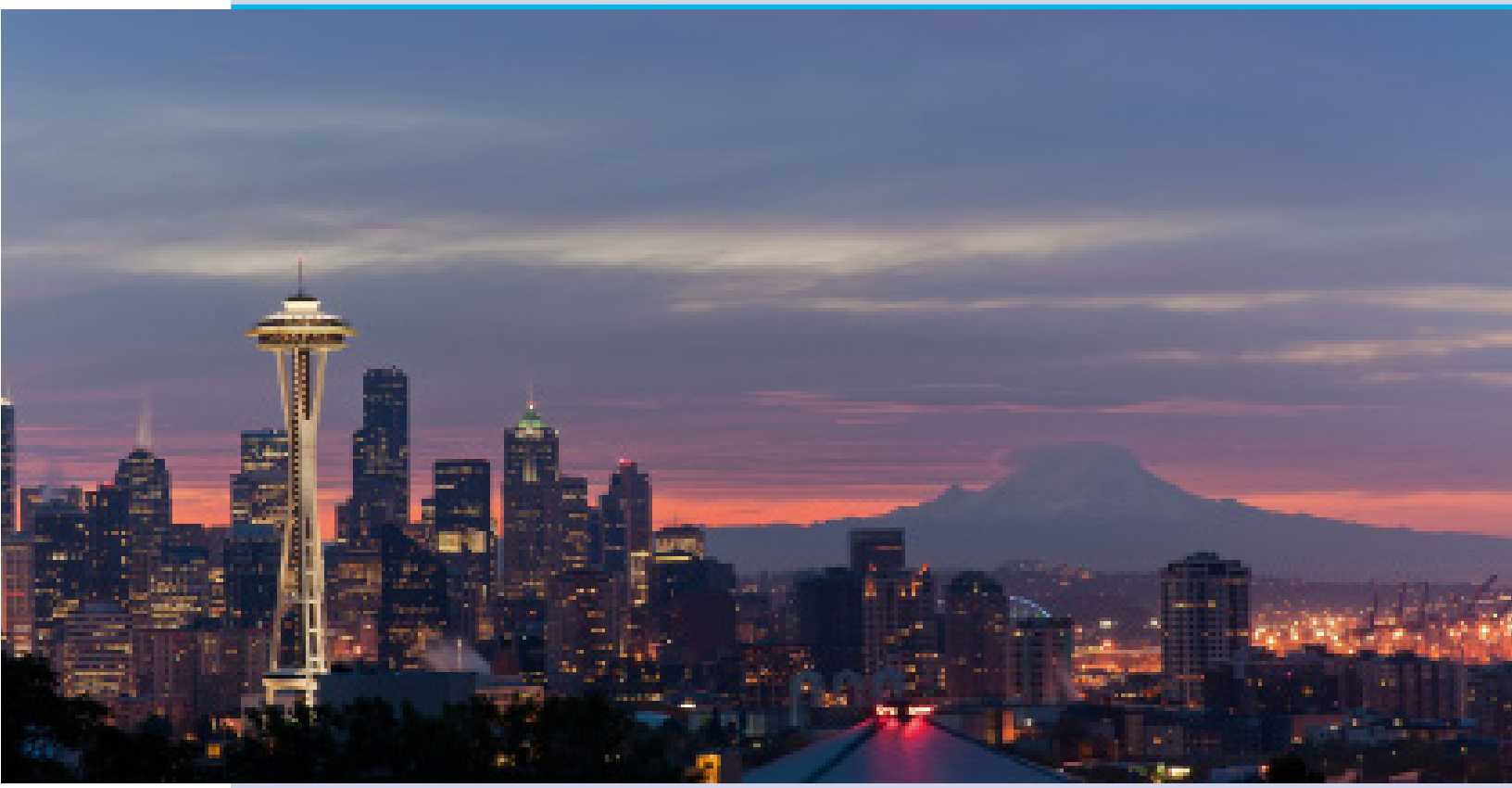
Seattle Office of Inspector General



Source: Dave Morrow, “Seattle Sunrise”. Www.DaveMorrowPhotography.com

Audit of SPD Vehicle Pursuits

A Review of SPD Vehicle Pursuits From Feb 2021 - Jul 2024

December 5, 2025

Contents

Audit Objective

This audit had three main objectives:

- Determine whether Seattle Police Department (SPD) vehicle pursuits were effective at apprehending suspects,
- Identify negative outcomes resulting from vehicle pursuits, and
- Determine whether the process for documenting and reviewing pursuits was timely, thorough, and accurate.

Audit Scope

The City of Seattle Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a review of all SPD pursuits occurring between February 19, 2021, and July 1, 2024. Over this roughly 3.5-year period, SPD engaged in 91 reported vehicle pursuits. For each pursuit, OIG reviewed pursuit reports, supervisory review documentation, in-car video, and additional documentation as needed.

Audit Standards

OIG conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Executive Summary

Key Findings

- SPD apprehended fleeing suspects in roughly half of vehicle pursuits during the audit period, but most of these resulted from the suspect crashing or abandoning the vehicle rather than police intervention. No major injuries were reported.
- SPD policy does not provide guidance on whether the justification for pursuit diminishes over time, and OIG observed disagreement between supervisors over whether pursuits should be initiated for offenses committed days or weeks prior.
- SPD has two approved tactics for ending a pursuit: Pursuit Intervention Technique (PIT) and stop sticks. Officers can also disengage from the pursuit for any reason. Officers used PIT in 6 pursuits, 4 of which were successful. SPD did not deploy stop sticks during the audit period.
- The King County Sheriff's Office (KCSO) helicopter is often unavailable to provide aerial support, leaving SPD without reliable and widely available alternatives to monitor or apprehend fleeing vehicles.
- SPD has implemented a pursuit reporting system that is generally complete, accurate, and timely.

Recommendations

1. SPD should update the pursuit policy to provide guidance about the elapsed time between a pursuit and the pursuable offense, and require pursuing officers and authorizing supervisors to include intervening time in their assessment of ongoing danger justifying the pursuit.
2. SPD should acquire or expand available technologies that provide alternatives to pursuit. Such alternatives should be readily available to officers engaging in a pursuit.
3. SPD should update the pursuit reporting form in IA Pro to prompt officers for sufficient descriptive information required by policy.
4. SPD should regularly analyze data on pursuits and eluding incidents to better understand outcomes, risks, and trends related to vehicular pursuits.

Background

Definition of Vehicle Pursuit

Washington law defines a vehicle pursuit as:

"*an attempt by a uniformed peace officer in a vehicle equipped with emergency lights and a siren to stop a moving vehicle where the operator of the moving vehicle appears to be aware that the officer is signaling the operator to stop the vehicle, and the operator of the moving vehicle appears to be willfully resisting or ignoring the officer's attempt to stop the vehicle by increasing vehicle speed, making evasive maneuvers, or operating the vehicle in a reckless manner that endangers the safety of the community or the officer.*"[1]

1 RCW 10.116.060

SPD Policy

Pursuit policies can vary widely by law enforcement agency. Some agencies allow officers to pursue at their discretion, while a small number of agencies disallow pursuits entirely. Under SPD policy, an officer may pursue a fleeing vehicle if the following requirements are met:

- **Training** – the officer must have taken an emergency vehicle operator's course within the last two years and be certified in the use of a "pursuit-ending option."
- **Violent or sex offense** – the officer must have reasonable suspicion that a person in the pursued vehicle has committed or is committing a violent or sex offense.
- **Threat of death or injury** – The person must pose a threat of death or serious physical injury to others where the risk of failing to apprehend or identify the person is greater than the inherent risk of pursuit driving.
- **Supervisor authorization and monitoring** – A supervisor must be immediately notified and must be actively monitoring the pursuit.

Pursuits are Inherently High-Risk

Vehicle pursuits present significant risk of collision and injury when eluding drivers operate outside of normal traffic patterns. National data from Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) for 2009 to 2013 found there were two serious injuries and ten minor injuries for every 100 pursuits. Between 2015 and 2020, national data from Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) show an average of 370.5 fatal crashes per year related to police pursuits. Understanding and managing risk is an important element of an agency's pursuit policy.

SPD has Implemented a Robust Reporting and Review System for Pursuits

SPD policy requires that all sworn employees driving vehicles involved in a pursuit must complete a pursuit report. The reports and in-car video (ICV) of the pursuit are then reviewed by at least three additional levels of command. Each time a new review happens, the reviewer describes what they observed and comments on observed issues related to policy and training. OIG observed that these discussions were generally timely, rigorous, and effective in evaluating the issues involved in each pursuit.

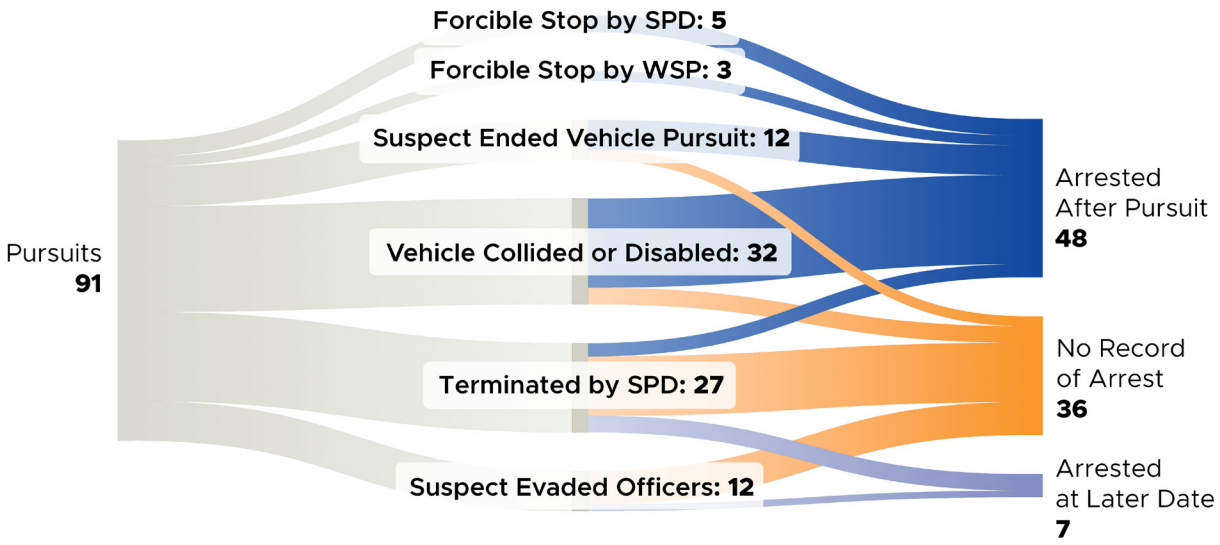
Section One: Pursuit Outcomes

SPD averaged 27 pursuits each year between 2021-2024.[2] Over this period, the number of yearly pursuits varied but increased overall. SPD is on pace for a significant drop in pursuits for 2025. As of October 2025, SPD had recorded only nine pursuits for the year.

Officers Apprehended Fleeing Suspects in More Than Half of Pursuits[3]

OIG conducted a review of all pursuits occurring between February 19, 2021, and July 1, 2024. Over this roughly 3.5-year period, SPD engaged in 91 reported vehicle pursuits. Results of these pursuits are described in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Pursuit Conclusions and Apprehensions



SPD apprehended the eluding driver at the conclusion of 48 of the 91 (53%) pursuits. SPD records show an additional seven drivers were arrested at a later time by SPD or another law enforcement entity working with SPD. Only 17% of apprehensions were the result of law enforcement intervention to end the pursuit. Most arrests resulted from the suspect crashing, disabling,[4] or abandoning their vehicle.

OIG found no national standards or statistics for apprehension rates against which to measure SPD's performance. Furthermore, variance in pursuit policies between jurisdictions makes direct comparison challenging. For example, a police department with a low-threshold for pursuit may engage in more pursuits for low-level crimes, and drivers fleeing for low-level crimes may not accept as much risk as those fleeing for more serious crimes, possibly resulting in a higher apprehension rate. The closest comparison OIG found was the San Francisco Police Department, which has similar pursuit criteria and a 39% apprehension rate over a recent 4-year period.

2 Yearly pursuit totals for years 2021 through 2024 were 20, 30, 23, and 36 respectively.

3 An apprehension occurs when a pursued subject is caught by law enforcement and placed under arrest.

4 For this report, a suspect disabling their vehicle refers to an event that reduces or removes the fleeing vehicle's driving capability. For example, a vehicle may hit a curb with enough force to deflate a tire or cause damage to the underside of the vehicle, causing it to slow or stop.

Fleeing Suspects Collided with a Bystander Vehicle or Object in Roughly One-Third of Pursuits

OIG observed 22 pursuits that involved the suspect vehicle colliding with another vehicle, and an additional ten pursuits that involved collisions with roadside objects such as buildings, traffic barriers, and trees.[5] Approximately 48 uninvolved vehicles were damaged to some extent in pursuit-related collisions, although two pursuits alone account for 21 of those damaged vehicles. OIG did not assess the cost of damage to the uninvolved vehicles, but snapshots from officers' in-car video systems are provided in Appendix B of this report for illustration.

SPD records reflect that eleven collisions in the review period resulted in minor injuries and there were no fatalities. Notwithstanding this, fleeing drivers caused several serious accidents, including rollovers and high-speed crashes at intersections. In total, suspects were injured in nine pursuits, bystanders were injured in two, and an officer was injured in one.[6]

In nine pursuits, SPD (or in one case, Washington State Patrol) used a vehicle to attempt to stop, disable, or pin the suspect vehicle. Five pursuits resulted in damage to SPD patrol vehicles totaling $42,680.90 in repairs.

Supervisors Made Timely Decisions to Terminate Pursuits Due to Risk or New Information

If a pursuit does not meet requirements outlined in policy or the risks are determined to outweigh the need for immediate apprehension, the pursuit must be terminated. Any involved sworn employee (drivers, passengers, or supervisors) may terminate a pursuit for any reason. When a pursuit is terminated, sworn employees must return to normal driving patterns and deactivate emergency equipment. Officers may still travel the same path as the fleeing vehicle, but they may not reinitiate the pursuit unless a new violent crime occurs or a supervisor issues a new authorization.

A termination does not necessarily indicate success or failure and may be the desired outcome to avoid the risk of injury or property damage. 28 (31%) of the reported pursuits were terminated by SPD. 89% of terminations were issued by a supervising sergeant or lieutenant. The table below shows the main reason given for each termination in pursuit documentation.

5 This report defines a collision as any form of contact between a vehicle and another object or vehicle, regardless of appreciable damage.

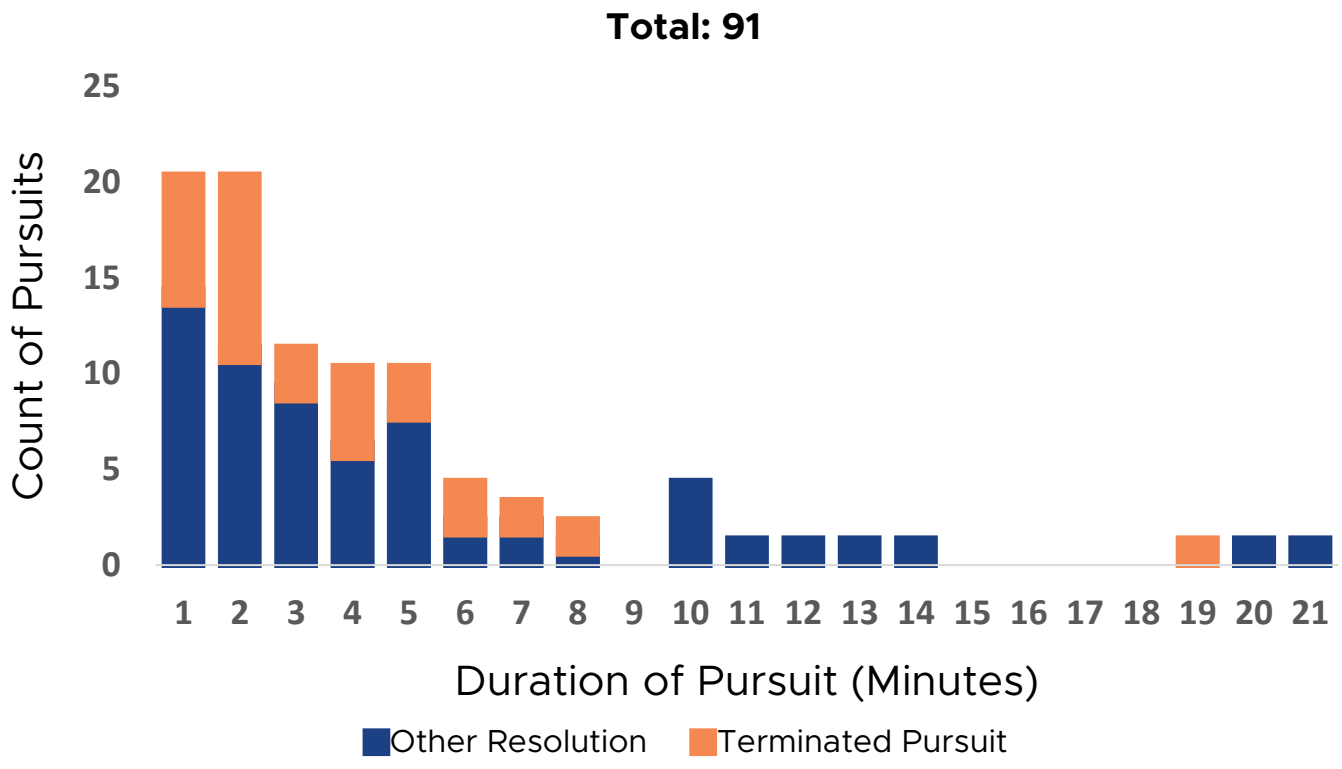
6 These counts only include injuries that likely occurred from pursuit driving, not injuries that occurred before an officer began pursuing or after the vehicles stopped. OIG notes that in one pursuit, the driver bailed from the vehicle and was apprehended. A passenger in the vehicle got into the driver seat and fled, but officers did not pursue. This person was fatally injured in a crash roughly four miles away.

Table 1: Reasons Officers or Supervisors Terminated Pursuits

Reported Reason for Termination	Terminated by Supervisor	Terminated by Officer
Pursuit did not meet policy requirements	9	1
Terminated due to risk	7	2
Terminated after new information	4	0
Pursuit deemed unnecessary for apprehension	1	0
Transfer to Guardian 1	2	0
Unclear	2	0
Grand Total	25	3

54% of terminations occurred within the first two minutes of pursuit driving. Not all termination decisions can be made early on, as conditions and risks may evolve. However, OIG found that patrol supervisors generally made quick decisions to terminate when provided with necessary and timely information. For example, six of the nine pursuits terminated for being out of policy occurred within the first two minutes of the pursuit. Figure 2 demonstrates the duration of all pursuits OIG reviewed and how quickly termination decisions were made.

Figure 2: Pursuits Terminated, by Duration

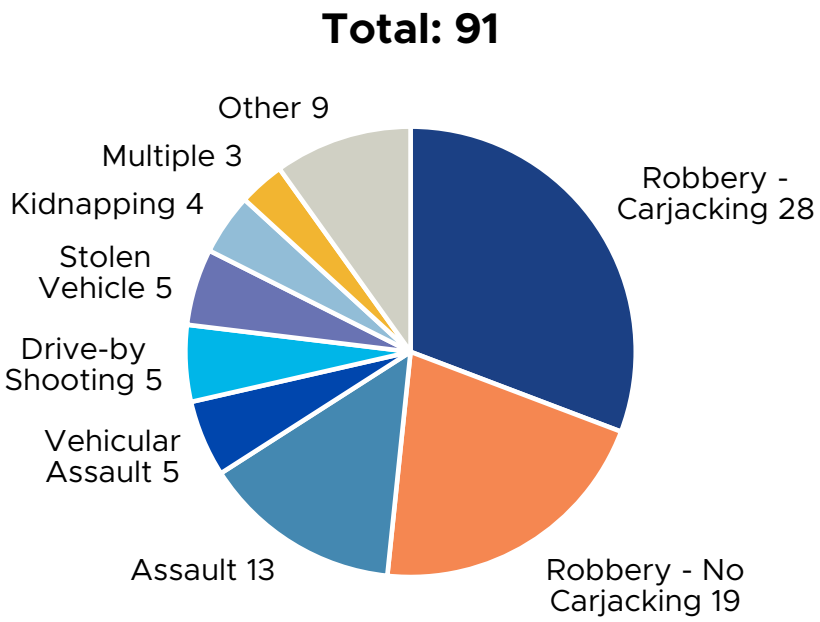


Section Two: Pursuit Initiation

Most Pursuits Were Initiated for Carjacking, Robbery, and Assault

Pursuits were initiated for a variety of offenses, but more than half of vehicle pursuits were for robbery, including robbery of a vehicle (commonly called a "carjacking"), which accounted for roughly a third of pursuits. Assault and vehicular assault accounted for roughly a fifth of pursuits.

Figure 3: Number of Pursuits Initiated by Offense Type



'Other' offenses include murder (1), vehicular homicide (1), drive-by shooting (1), intimidation (1), reckless driving (1), traffic violation (2), and no offense (2). The category 'Multiple' includes pursuits featuring more than one pursuable offense. These combinations were assault and kidnapping, assault and robbery, and kidnapping and rape.

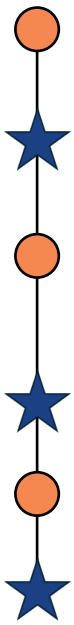
Eleven Pursuits Were Initiated for Non-violent, Non-sexual Offenses

OIG identified eleven pursuits that were initiated without a violent or sex offense, but each instance was addressed by additional investigation or training. Seven were reviewed by the Office of Police Accountability (OPA). The remaining four pursuits contained documentation of supervisor review in the form of coaching, roll call training, or an entry in SPD's Performance Appraisal System.

Pursuit Policy has Changed Several Times in Recent Years Due to Changes in State Law

Both state law and SPD policy on authorizing vehicle pursuits have changed several times since 2021, re-balancing the inherent risks of pursuit driving with a need to apprehend criminal suspects (see figure 4 for key changes in pursuit law and policy since 2021).

Figure 4: Changes to Washington State Law and SPD Policy 2021-2025



2021: House Bill 1054 raised the standard for vehicular pursuits from "reasonable suspicion" to "probable cause" and restricted pursuits to violent offenses, sex offenses, and escape offenses.

2021: Mirroring state law, SPD raised the standard for vehicle pursuits to incidents where an officer had probable cause someone in the vehicle committed a violent and/or sex offense.

2023: Senate Bill 5352 reverted state law back to the reasonable suspicion standard and added a requirement that pursuing officers must have completed an emergency vehicle operator's course (EVOC) in the last two years and be certified in a pursuit intervention option.

2023: SPD issued an interim policy to meet new state requirements for EVOC training and pursuit intervention options, maintaining the probable cause standard for pursuits.

2024: Initiative 2113 loosened pursuit standards to allow them for any violation of the law.

2024: SPD issued a pursuit policy update lowering the standard for pursuit to reasonable suspicion and adding requirements for "vehicle follows," which apply to events where a law enforcement officer is attempting to detain a fleeing driver who is failing to yield to audio and/or visual signals, but is not operating the vehicle recklessly.

SPD policy continues to require consideration of an ongoing threat of violence to be balanced with other factors to initiate a pursuit (see Figure 5 below for a side-by-side comparison).

Figure 5: Comparison Between State Law and SPD Policy for Initiating Vehicle Pursuits (as of April 2025)

State Law (RCW 10.116.060)	SPD Policy (13.031-POL-2)
There is reasonable suspicion a person has **violated the law**	There is reasonable suspicion to believe that a person in the vehicle has **committed or is committing a violent offense or sex offense (RCW 9.94A.030)**
The person poses a threat **to the safety of others**	The person poses a threat **of death or serious physical injury to others**
The safety risks of failing to apprehend or identify the person are considered to be greater than the safety risks of the vehicular pursuit	The public safety risks of failing to apprehend or identify the person are greater than inherent risk of pursuit driving

OPA Received Several Allegations Related to Pursuit Initiation from the Chain of Command

Over the review period, OPA received 55 allegations related to whether the officer was permitted to initiate or maintain a pursuit. Nearly all the allegations came from the officer's chain of command. 25 allegations resulted in a training referral or supervisory action and eight were sustained as misconduct.[7] Other allegations were designated as 'unfounded,' 'lawful and proper,' or remained under investigation at the time OIG compiled the data. OPA also issued two recommendations to SPD leadership to clarify the pursuit policy.

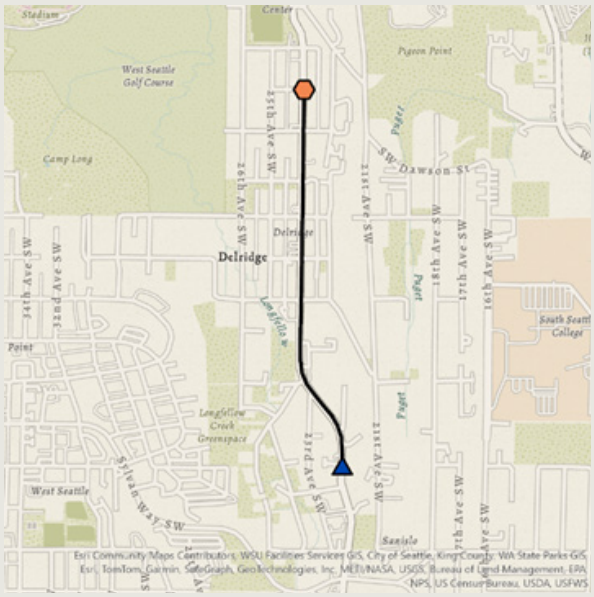
There Was Frequent Disagreement Regarding Pursuit of Suspects for Offenses Committed Days or Weeks Prior

OIG observed repeated disagreement during the pursuit review process over whether officers should have initiated a pursuit based on an offense that occurred days or weeks earlier. In at least four instances, an officer initiated a pursuit for a crime that was at least two days old. These cases generated varying responses from reviewers.

In each case, a reviewer questioned the decision to pursue based on "cold" information, e.g. information that is old and may be out-of-date. They generally reasoned that as time passes, the likelihood that the driver of a vehicle is the same person that was involved in the armed carjacking diminishes, as well as the evidentiary basis for the pursuit (probable cause/reasonable suspicion) and the threat of harm to other members of the public.[8] The following examples highlight how these arguments were made and when other reviewers disagreed:

Cold Pursuit 1: Two Days After Carjacking

An officer initiated a pursuit after identifying a vehicle taken in an armed carjacking two days earlier. The officer waited for additional units before making a stop and pursued when the suspect fled. The pursuit was terminated by a lieutenant who inferred that the carjacking was not recent, and officers couldn't be certain that driver or occupants of the vehicle were the same as the carjacking suspects. In their review, the officer's captain concluded that the pursuit was in policy because the policy does not specify a time limit on information or when a suspect is no longer considered armed and dangerous. However, the captain recommended that SPD policy should not allow for pursuits based on information reported days prior.



7 Training Referrals and Supervisory Actions are both intended for an officer's supervisor to provide a non-punitive, documented, coaching conversation to address performance issues. Training Referrals occur after OPA completes an investigation, while OPA issues Supervisory Actions instead of opening a full investigation.

8 Reviewers made these observations when the evidentiary threshold under SPD policy was probable cause for a violent crime and that the person poses a "significant imminent threat of death or serious physical injury." These have since been reduced to reasonable suspicion of a violent crime and "threat of death or serious physical injury" respectively. However, the potential for differences in interpretation remain.

Cold Pursuit 2: Three Days After Carjacking

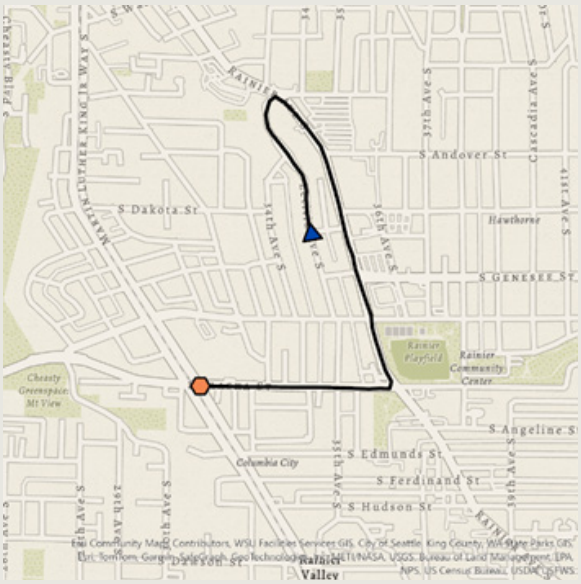
Officers initiated pursuit after attempting to stop a vehicle stolen in an armed carjacking. The vehicle had a distinctive license plate, and the officers observed a driver that matched the suspect description from the original crime. The pursuit lasted ten minutes and involved a significant collision with a bystander vehicle midway through the pursuit before officers lost sight of the vehicle. The suspect vehicle crashed a short time later, but the driver was not found. The reviewing lieutenant argued probable cause that a driver of a stolen vehicle is the same person who stole it diminishes over time. The lieutenant concluded the three-day difference between the violent crime and the pursuit meant the officers only had probable cause for possession of a stolen vehicle and eluding, neither of which are pursuable. The reviewing captain disagreed, arguing that the license plate, the matching suspect description, the proximity to the original crime, and the evasive reaction of the driver meant it was more likely than not the driver was the suspect from the armed carjacking.

Cold Pursuit 3: 18 Weeks After Carjacking

An officer identified a stolen vehicle and verified it was taken in an armed carjacking. When the officer attempted a stop, the driver eluded and led officers on a nineteen-minute pursuit. The pursuit was terminated by a sergeant when they determined there was no clear way to end the pursuit. Washington State Patrol took over and followed the vehicle until it crashed just after exiting I-5. During review, a lieutenant noted the pursuit occurred eighteen weeks after the original crime and therefore it was unknown whether the subject presented an articulable imminent danger to the public and highly unlikely the officer had established probable cause that the driver was the person who committed the original armed carjacking. The reviewing captain agreed there was no probable cause for a violent crime and was not within policy. The captain concluded it was an honest misunderstanding of how to apply the policy and directed precinct supervisors to hold additional training with officers.

Cold Pursuit 4: 13 Days After Carjacking

An officer identified a stolen vehicle and verified it was taken in an armed carjacking. The officer attempted a stop and initiated a pursuit when the driver fled. As the pursuit progressed, the monitoring sergeant evaluated the original robbery report and determined it occurred thirteen days previously and the suspect description did not match the driver currently in the vehicle. The sergeant terminated the pursuit, listing the suspect description and increasing risk factors from pursuit driving as factors in their decision. The sergeant noted that key information including a suspect description and the timing of the crime at the outset of the pursuit was not presented to officers when running the license plate and recommended that the Department update the license plate readout to include this information.



In each of these pursuits, one or more of the pursuit reviewers concluded that the evidentiary basis for the pursuit had been diminished by the days that had passed since the original offense. SPD policy prompts officers to consider several factors before deciding to pursue, but not the timing of the pursuable crime. It appeared that in some of the pursuits officers either did not know or did not consider when the original crime occurred.

In 2023, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) published a federally funded report to serve as a guide to managing pursuit risks. The report includes the following recommendation for the issue described above: "agency policy should articulate the point at which a vehicle involved in a violent crime, such as a carjacking, is no longer considered 'fresh' because of the amount of time that has elapsed since the crime and should be treated as a stolen vehicle for the purposes of the vehicle pursuit policy." The report offers as an example a policy used by Illinois State Police, which allows pursuit of a carjacking suspect only if the act occurred within the last twelve hours. Adopting similar policy language could provide more clarity to officers and supervisors for when officers may pursue.

Recommendation 1 — Add Consideration of Pursuit Timing to Policy

SPD should update the pursuit policy to provide guidance about the elapsed time between a pursuit and the pursuable offense, and require pursuing officers and authorizing supervisors to include intervening time in their assessment of ongoing danger justifying the pursuit.

SPD Response

■ Concur □ Do Not Concur

Section Three: Pursuit Ending Tactics and Alternatives

Officers Have Limited Options to Forcibly End a Pursuit

Washington State law requires that "*As soon as practicable after initiating a vehicular pursuit, the pursuing officer [or] supervising officer […] shall develop a plan to end the pursuit through the use of available pursuit intervention options, such as the use of the pursuit intervention technique, deployment of spike strips or other tire deflation devices, or other department authorized pursuit intervention tactics.*"[9] State law also mandates that an officer must be certified in at least one pursuit intervention option to participate in a pursuit.[10]

Consistent with this requirement, SPD policy provides two forcible pursuit ending options for officers: stop sticks and the Pursuit Intervention Technique (PIT). SPD policy defines and permits additional vehicle-related tactics but they are generally to prevent a pursuit from restarting (pinning or blocking[11]), require high-level approval (roadblocks[12]), or are only permitted in exigent circumstances (ramming[13]). None of these options are an approved pursuit-ending tactic.

Stop Sticks: Difficult and Risky in Seattle's Urban Environment

All patrol officers are trained to use stop sticks as a pursuit intervention option. Stop sticks are 3 feet long triangular strips that contain a series of 36 steel-tipped quills designed to puncture a fleeing vehicle's tires. To use the device, officers determine a suitable area for deployment, place the stop sticks on one side of the road, position themselves behind cover on the opposite side of the road, and pull the device onto the road in the path of the fleeing vehicle as it approaches using an attached rope. Stop sticks are one of two tire deflation devices (TDDs) used by SPD (more on the second TDD option, terminators, below).

9 RCW 10.116.060(d)

10 RCW 10.116.060(e)

11 Pinning and blocking are defined maneuvers in SPD policy. Pinning is the use of a police vehicle to prevent another vehicle from moving through constant contact. Blocking is the intentional positioning of a police vehicle to prevent escape, without making contact.

12 A roadblock is the intentional use of a police vehicle to block a roadway with the intent of stopping a fleeing vehicle.

13 Ramming is the use of a police vehicle to strike another vehicle with the intent to interrupt or incapacitate it.

To use a stop stick, an officer must be ahead of the pursuit and predict where the eluding vehicle will travel. They can be dangerous for officers if they cannot find a safe location to pull the stop sticks into position. A nationwide review of the risks associated with tire deflation devices like stop sticks conducted by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF) found 42 cases where officers were killed attempting to deploy the devices between 1996 and 2023, often because officers did not have effective cover. In ten of seventeen cases analyzed by NLEOMF, officers had only their patrol vehicle as cover, which is not effective at stopping a vehicle approaching at speed and can create a false sense of security.[14]

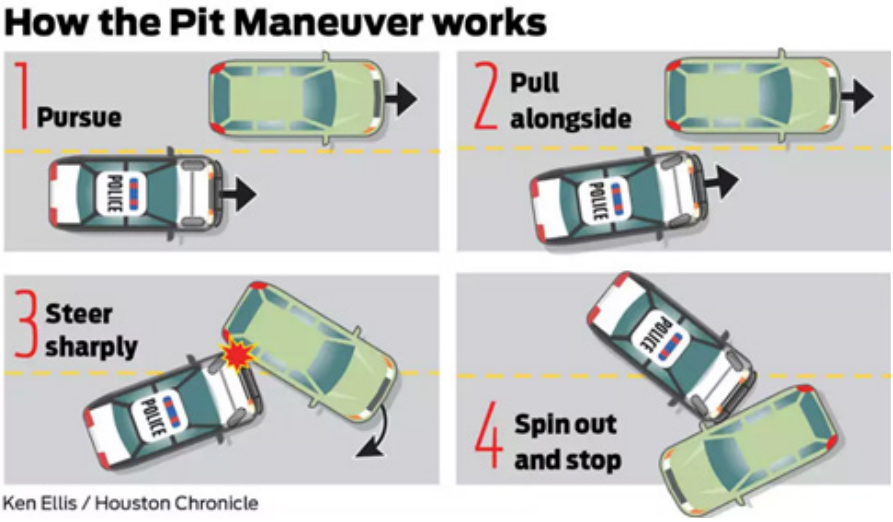
Despite being the default pursuit ending option for patrol officers, SPD did not deploy stop sticks during the audit period.[15] Following implementation of the RCW requirement to develop a pursuit ending plan, OIG observed that roughly a third (29%) of pursuits involved a discussion of using stop sticks. None of these plans were initiated before the pursuit ended.

In discussions with OIG, SPD leadership expressed concerns about the risk and utility of stop sticks in an urban environment. Stop sticks carry additional risk in densely populated areas, and it can be difficult to choose a location for deployment, as the number of possible routes a target vehicle may take is much higher than in a rural or highway setting. Currently, only SPD sergeants keep stop sticks in their patrol vehicles.

Pursuit Intervention Technique (PIT): Effective Under the Right Conditions

The Pursuit Intervention Technique, or PIT maneuver, is the forced rotational stop of another vehicle. In a PIT maneuver, the officer positions the side of their vehicle's front bumper against the rear side bumper of the fleeing vehicle while both vehicles are in motion. The officer then turns into the fleeing vehicle, causing the fleeing vehicle to rotate in the opposite direction. When applied correctly, a PIT causes the vehicle to spin, causing the driver to quickly lose speed.

SPD policy only authorizes the PIT maneuver for officers who have been trained in the technique and directs officers to obtain authorization before performing a PIT, if feasible. Not all SPD officers are trained in the PIT maneuver. Some specialty units such as SWAT, Community Response Group (CRG), and Canine require officers to take PIT training, but it is not required for patrol officers.



14 Tire Deflation Devices Risk Versus Reward: A Ten-Year Examination of Law Enforcement Fatalities. https://nleomf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Tire-Deflation-Device-Paper-NLEOMF-9.27.23.pdf

15 Washington State Patrol deployed stop sticks in 2 pursuits and King County Sheriff's Office deployed stop sticks in 1 pursuit.

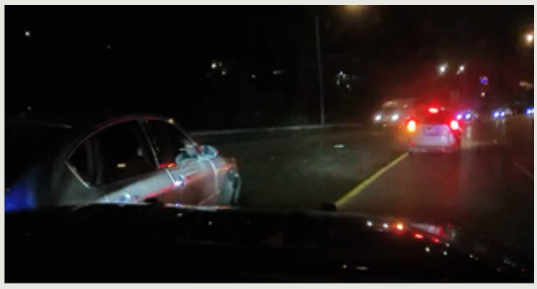
Most SPD officers that are PIT certified receive training through the King County Sheriff's Office. The training highlights several considerations that can increase the risk of a PIT maneuver, including:

- Size of the eluding vehicle (a PIT is considered deadly force when used against a motorcycle)
- Blind curves
- Bridge abutments/overpasses
- Major obstacles on the roadside
- Oncoming traffic
- Pedestrians

During the audit period, SPD officers engaged in six PIT maneuvers, four of which successfully ended the pursuit. OIG did not observe an authorization for a specific PIT maneuver in any case, but in three instances a supervisor stated prior to the pursuit that PIT maneuvers were authorized if a pursuit occurred. In the remaining three pursuits, OIG did not observe an attempt to seek authorization to use a PIT maneuver. None of the PIT maneuver attempts caused significant injury of which OIG is aware.[16]

PIT Maneuver 1: Unsuccessful, Suspect Subsequently Crashed and Evaded

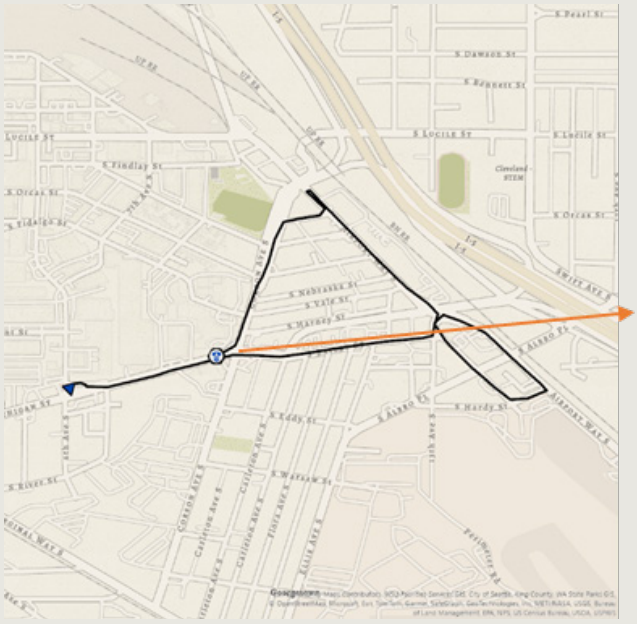
Suspect fled an initial stop in South Seattle before driving North on I-5 and exiting on S Columbia Way, where the pursuing officer attempted a PIT maneuver at roughly 25 mph. The SPD vehicle made contact with the back right bumper of the suspect vehicle, but the vehicle had slowed to make a U-turn over a median and was able to escape the maneuver. The fleeing driver continued on the onramp to I-5 south, where they made contact with a bystander vehicle, causing the bystander vehicle to roll. Officers lost sight of the vehicle heading south along E Marginal Way, but the car was reported a few minutes later as involved in a crash. The suspect was not located.

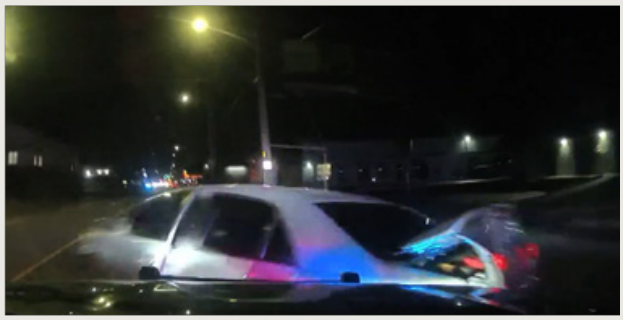


16 OIG does note that in 2018, a PIT certified SPD officer used a PIT maneuver on a vehicle, causing it to travel into an oncoming vehicle in the opposite lane, causing significant injury and damage to multiple vehicles. This was deemed an improper use of the PIT maneuver by OPA.

PIT Maneuver 2: Successful, But No Authorization Sought and Officer Not Certified

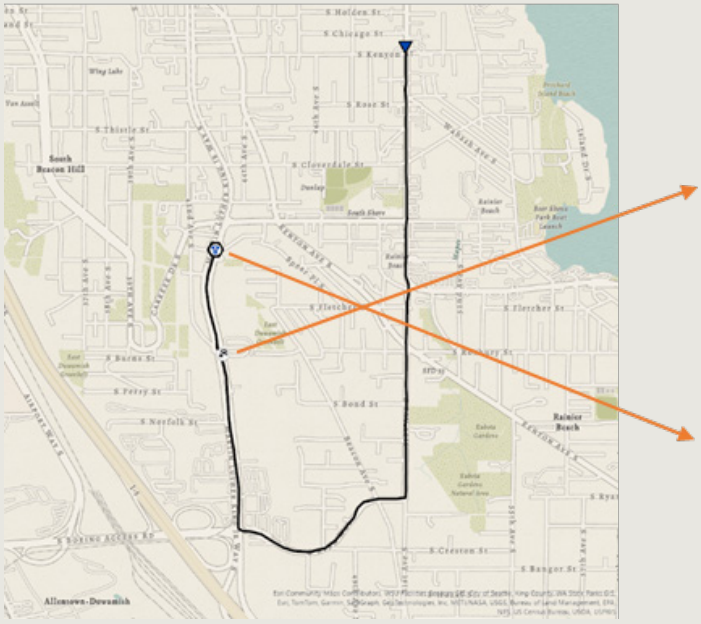
Officers pursued a driver through Georgetown, briefly losing the suspect before reacquiring the vehicle and pursuing on Airport Way, Corson Avenue, and then Michigan Street heading westbound at approximately 30 mph. At that time the lead pursuit officer executed a successful PIT maneuver against the back left bumper of the suspect vehicle. The suspect vehicle was turned and pinned in place by a second SPD vehicle. Officers were able to pull the suspect from the car and make the arrest. Although the maneuver was successful, OIG did not observe via video or in the officer's report that an authorization for the PIT maneuver was sought. The chain of command later noted that the officer was not certified to perform a PIT.

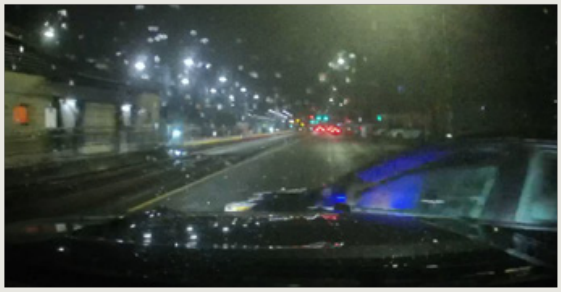




PIT Maneuver 3: Successful, Multiple Suspects Arrested

A vehicle with multiple passengers fled from an SPD stop and reached up to 85 mph as it went through Beacon Hill, running through stop signs, red lights, and into oncoming traffic before turning northbound on Martin Luther King Jr Way S. When the vehicle came to an intersection already blocked off by SPD for a separate incident the suspect slowed and drove up onto a sidewalk to maneuver around traffic. The fleeing vehicle clipped the front of a bystander vehicle before continuing northbound. The pursuit continued for another 30 seconds before officers caught up, at which point the fleeing vehicle quickly slowed and officers took the opportunity to execute a pre-approved PIT maneuver at lower speeds. Suspects fled the vehicle on foot and three of four were arrested.





PIT Maneuver 4: Successful, But Not Reviewed as a PIT Maneuver

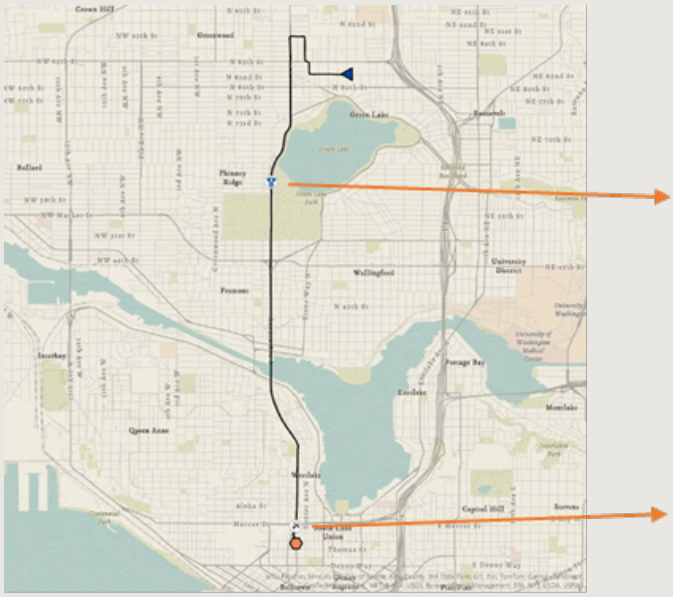
Officers attempted an arrest on a stationary vehicle with terminators.[17] The driver of the vehicle fled and was able to achieve speeds of over 45mph with two deflated tires. The suspect vehicle veered in and out of oncoming traffic on Leary Way and several vehicles can be seen taking evasive action to avoid collision. When there was no oncoming traffic and speeds were approximately 30 mph, the lead officer used a PIT maneuver to end the pursuit. The fleeing vehicle spun into a tree on the opposite side of the road and the suspect was arrested. Similar to PIT Maneuver 2, OIG did not observe authorization for the tactic and found that the officer was not certified to perform a PIT Maneuver. Lack of authorization or certification were not identified as issues in the chain of command review because they considered this tactic 'ramming'.[18]

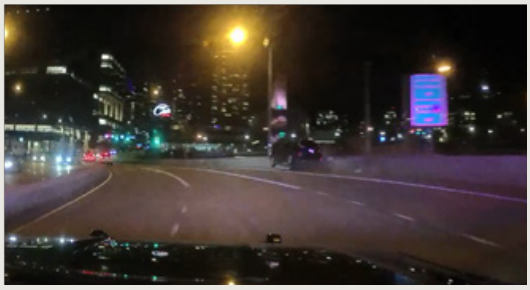
17 A terminator is a tire deflation device similar to a stop stick that is used on stationary vehicles. More information on terminators can be found later in the report.

18 Issues with identification of PIT Maneuvers 2 and 4 are addressed in a Matter for Consideration at the end of this report.

PIT Maneuver 5: Unsuccessful, Suspect Later Lost Control and Crashed into Barrier

A suspect vehicle fled a police stop north of Greenlake and traveled southbound on Auroura Ave N through Greenwood, Fremont, and Queen Anne neighborhoods at speeds reaching over 100 mph along Aurora Ave. The lead officer announced over the radio they were PIT certified and would perform the maneuver if they got a chance. The suspect slowed in an area where there was no median barrier and no oncoming vehicles and the lead officer took the opportunity to execute a PIT maneuver. However, the officer narrowly missed making contact with the fleeing vehicle's bumper. The pursuit continued for another two minutes before the suspect lost control in another soft turn going approximately 90 mph. The vehicle became disabled and officers arrested the suspect after a foot pursuit.





PIT Maneuver 6: Successful, Suspects Arrested

The vehicle pursuit went southbound on Airport Way then northbound on I-5 reaching speeds over 100 mph before going through the Beacon Hill neighborhood. The lead officer announced they would perform a PIT maneuver if they had a chance and approached the vehicle in a first attempt going approximately 70 mph through the Central District. As the officer's vehicle approached, the suspect sped up through a red light, causing the officer to cancel the attempt. The pursuit continued onto a busy neighborhood street where the suspect drove onto a sidewalk where a pedestrian had to stand aside from the suspect and police vehicles. After continuing the pursuit through the International District at speeds up to 50 mph, the lead officer made a second attempt to PIT. This was successful in spinning the suspect vehicle, which then reversed before being pinned by other officer vehicles. The suspects were then pulled from their vehicle and arrested.

Officers Generally Created a Plan to End Pursuit, but Most Pursuits Ended Before the Plan was Enacted

Consistent with state law, SPD policy requires officers and supervisors to formulate a plan to end a pursuit using a pursuit-ending tactic as soon as practicable, or else they must terminate the pursuit. SPD adopted this policy on May 19, 2023, and it applied to 31 pursuits during the audit period.

OIG observed discussion of pursuit-ending tactics in sixteen (52%) of the applicable pursuits. In four pursuits, officers used the planned pursuit-ending tactic, with two successfully ending the pursuit. Most pursuits with plans ended before the plan was enacted. Of the remaining fifteen pursuits, OIG noted potential factors that may have prevented or delayed a plan from forming, including:

- Officers did not realize their actions constituted a pursuit, and it wasn't designated as such until the incident was reviewed by a supervisor,
- The pursuit ended quickly, such that officers had little time to plan, or
- The subject was lost and re-acquired, shifting the focus of communication.

Plans were often created with simple discussions of available pursuit-ending tactics, such as whether a pursuing officer was PIT certified. OIG observed only one case where a lack of pursuit ending options appeared to be the determining factor in terminating a pursuit. Otherwise, termination decisions appeared to be based on comparison to pursuit requirements, risk, or changes in information. OIG does not find a compliance issue on the part of officers, but rather a reflection on the lack of viable options for SPD to comply with the state law.

Pursuit Ending Tactics Could be Expanded Beyond Use of Force

State law provides two examples of pursuit-ending options that both involve the officer using force to stop the vehicle.[19] OIG interprets pursuit-ending options to include remote tracking tactics that allow officers to disengage from a vehicle pursuit while continuing to track the suspect. When asked for an opinion, SPD leadership agreed that remote or aerial tracking could qualify as a pursuit ending option. Given current state law and the elevated risks of performing forcible stops in an urban environment, it is necessary for SPD to develop widely available and reliable alternatives to pursuit.

SPD Officers Currently Have No Reliable Alternative to Pursuit

SPD policy requires officers to consider alternatives to pursuit and a range of factors that could increase pursuit risk. During the scope of this review,[20] OIG identified SPD officers used the following alternatives with the goal of avoiding or disengaging from a vehicle pursuit:

- King County Sheriff's Office (KCSO) Guardian 1 helicopter – A helicopter unit that provides a range of aerial support services to regional law enforcement agencies.
- Tire deflation devices – also known as "terminators," tire deflation devices are placed under the wheel of a stationary vehicle and will puncture and deflate the vehicle's tires if the driver decides to flee.
- 3rd party tracking software – Some vehicles owners have purchased software

19 RCW 10.116.060 (2) (d) provides the PIT maneuver and tire deflation devices as examples of pursuit intervention options, as well as "other department authorized pursuit intervention tactics."

20 Starchase, a technology for avoiding police pursuits recently acquired by SPD, was not available to officers at the time of review. More information on Starchase is available later in this section.

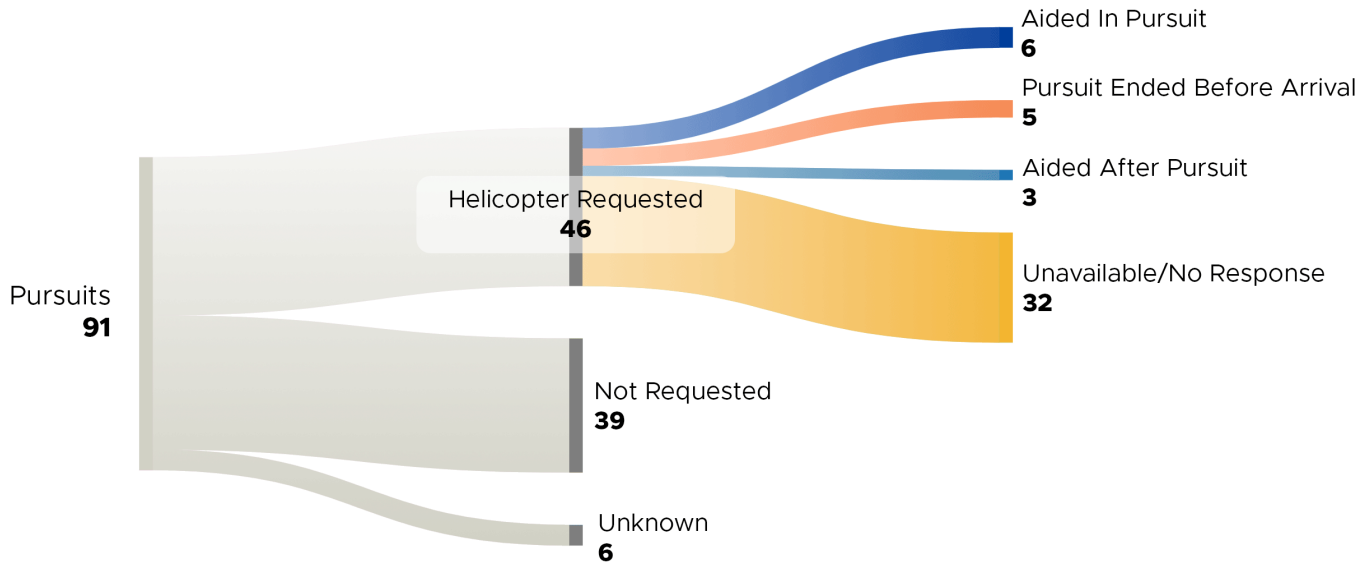
(OnStar, LoJack, etc.) that can provide real-time GPS location data to police if the vehicle is stolen.

KCSO Guardian 1 Helicopter: Effective but Frequently Unavailable

KCSO has an air support unit that specializes in, among other things, aiding law enforcement in pursuing suspects in vehicles. SPD and other law enforcement agencies in the region can request the assistance of a helicopter (known by its call sign "Guardian 1") for pursuits. Guardian 1's mobility allows it to follow suspects more easily than a police vehicle, decreasing the ability for a suspect to evade law enforcement. OIG observed SPD use the helicopter as both an alternative to pursuit and a pursuit aid. As a pursuit aid Guardian 1 provided updates during active pursuits and searched for suspects that fled their vehicle.

SPD vehicle pursuits that received support from Guardian 1 were generally successful; five out of six resulted in apprehension.[21] However, Guardian 1 was unavailable 70% of the time SPD made a request.

Figure 6: Guardian 1 Requests and Outcomes

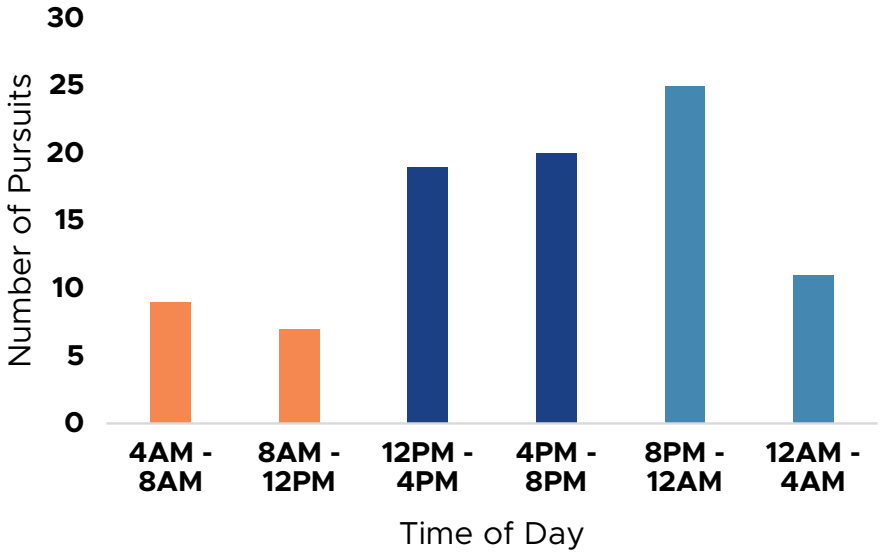


According to KCSO, Guardian 1 availability is limited primarily by staffing. The helicopter has limited service on weekends and at night. More than half of the pursuits reviewed by OIG occurred outside of Guardian 1's standard operating hours.[22] Additional limitations include poor weather and time for Guardian 1 to arrive at a pursuit.

21 While few, these numbers are in line with other studies that have evaluated the effectiveness of law enforcement helicopters in pursuits. An evaluation of pursuits in Baltimore and Miami-Dade County found that pursuits with helicopter support had an 83% and 91% arrest rate respectively – "Helicopters in Pursuit Operations." National Institute of Justice Research in Action

22 Standard operation hours were provided to OIG, but specific times are not included in this report.

Figure 7: Pursuits by Time of Day



Most pursuits do not last long enough for a helicopter to arrive. 57% of pursuits reviewed in this audit lasted three minutes or less. When SPD requested and received pursuit assistance from Guardian 1, arrival took between four to 22 minutes. Guardian 1 was dispatched to eight pursuits where it did not arrive before the pursuit ended. Officers can preemptively request Guardian 1 if they anticipate a pursuit may occur, but planning is not always possible.

OIG compared aerial support across a mix of ten city law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and found that most had department-operated aircraft that could support active pursuits or track fleeing suspects from above.[23] SPD was an outlier among major city police departments surveyed by not having an in-house air support option.

Terminators: Vehicles with Deflated Tires are Easier to Follow but Create New Risks

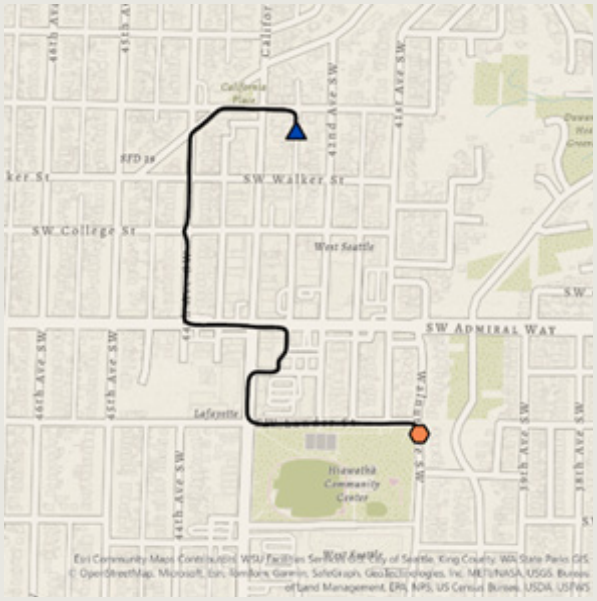
Terminators are stationary spike strips that can be placed under a vehicle's tire, causing it to deflate if the suspect flees in the vehicle. Sworn employees can deploy them during a traffic stop, or during a targeted arrest if the suspect is a flight risk using a particular vehicle. An officer can also use the terminator as a deterrence tactic and warn the suspect that their vehicle's tires will be deflated if they attempt to flee.

OIG reviewed three pursuits preceded by the successful deployment of terminators. Flat tires diminished the affected vehicle's driving ability, but created unique challenges, as demonstrated in the following examples:

23 OIG found that Portland, Denver, San Francisco, Tucson, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston all operated one or a mix of drones, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircrafts. Only Bellevue (which also utilizes the KCSO Guardian 1 helicopter) and Tacoma depended on county-operated air support.

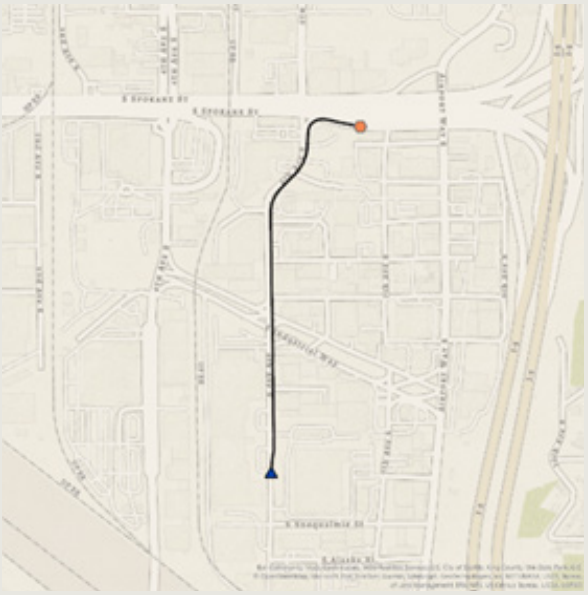
Tire Deflation Pursuit 1: Officer Disengaged After Two Minutes

Officers attempted an arrest of an unresponsive person in the driver seat of a stolen vehicle. Before engaging the suspect, officers placed terminators behind the vehicle's front driver side tire and rear passenger tire. After officers announced their presence the suspect fled, puncturing three tires. Officers began pursuing the vehicle and requested authorization to pursue, which was promptly denied by a supervising sergeant. Despite denial, the officer continued following the vehicle closely, writing in their report that they assumed the vehicle was going to stall at any moment, but the suspect vehicle persisted for two minutes before the officer disengaged. The vehicle was involved in an accident shortly after the pursuit. The officer was suspended for five days after OPA found the officer's actions were out of policy.



Tire Deflation Pursuit 2: Struck Occupied Tents

Officers attempted to arrest an unresponsive person behind the wheel of a stolen vehicle. The suspect awoke, reversed into a patrol vehicle, and drove over three deployed terminators. As the vehicle fled, it struck multiple occupied tents, injuring two bystanders and creating probable cause for a new crime: vehicular assault. An officer pursued, reaching speeds of 40-50 mph. The suspect vehicle managed to stay ahead of the officer, even after losing a tire. The suspect bailed out of their vehicle after a minute of pursuit and was apprehended.



Tire Deflation Pursuit 3: Dangerous Driving Stopped by PIT

Officers attempted to arrest an unresponsive person in the driver's seat of a stolen vehicle in a parking lot. The suspect awoke and fled, deflating at least two tires and striking an approaching police vehicle. The fleeing vehicle left the parking lot and traveled southeast on Leary Way, where it was able to reach speeds of over 45 mph. In-car video shows the suspect vehicle veering in and out of oncoming traffic on Leary Way before an officer used a PIT maneuver to end the pursuit. Several vehicles can be seen taking evasive action to avoid collision.

Terminators have the potential to discourage a suspect from fleeing in a vehicle by deflating their tires, but the devices can only be used if officers can safely deploy them, and they don't entirely disable the vehicle. OIG reviewed only terminator deployments that resulted in pursuits, but observed that drivers who fled on deflated tires at high speeds created significant danger for other drivers and bystanders. This point is made clearly by Stop Stick Ltd. (the company that makes both stop sticks and terminators) guidelines, which warn that "the driver may lose control of the vehicle while attempting to operate it with one or more deflated tires, potentially endangering you, pedestrians, and other motorists."

Third-Party Tracking Software: Useful When Available

Some vehicle owners purchase a service that may provide law enforcement with a stolen vehicle's real-time location. If these services (OnStar, LoJack, etc.) are available and used, law enforcement can avoid pursuit by tracking the stolen vehicle remotely and making an arrest under more favorable conditions. OIG observed three instances where officers used internal tracking software to track a vehicle's location and create a plan for arrest. While tracking technology can be an effective alternative, they are only available for vehicles that have the capability, which is likely a fraction of potential pursuits.

SPD is Evaluating Additional Technologies as Pursuit Alternatives

In June 2025, Seattle City Council approved the use of a new vehicle tracking technology called StarChase.[24] StarChase uses a vehicle-mounted or hand-held launcher to place a GPS tracker on fleeing vehicles. Law enforcement can then track the location of the vehicle in real time. Using the tracker's location, officers can follow the vehicle from a distance and wait until the vehicle stops before making an arrest.

Drones are another emerging technology that can be used to disengage from or avoid a vehicle

24 Seattle Municipal Code 14.18 (commonly referred to as the Surveillance Ordinance) requires that City Council approve the acquisition of any technology considered to be 'surveillance'.

pursuit. San Francisco Police Department's (SFPD) use of drones demonstrates some ways the technology can be used to avoid potential pursuits.[25] Similar to Seattle, San Francisco has a dense urban environment, and prior to their acquisition of drones SFPD also did not have a dedicated air support unit. Beginning in 2024, SFPD began deploying six drones citywide. In an early report on implementation of the drone program, SFPD officials estimated that the drones helped prevent five pursuits in the first 4 months of operation. The Department shared that current models are limited in speed and range, which may limit SPD's ability to use them in active vehicle pursuits. However, like other tracking technology, drones can be used to locate suspects and follow them until conditions are favorable for an arrest, avoiding the need to pursue.

KCSO, which uses drones and helicopters for aerial support reported similar speed and range limitations for using drones to actively pursue a subject. However, these limitations are less applicable in urban environments and may change as consumer drone technology improves.

SPD is currently evaluating whether the Department should seek to acquire drones. Both Star Chase and drones may be used to avoid pursuit by allowing officers to track the location of a suspect remotely. OIG encourages SPD to continue evaluating and weighing the efficacy and related privacy concerns related to these technologies as they seek a reliable pursuit alternative for officers.

Recommendation 2 — Expand Access to Pursuit Alternatives

SPD should acquire or expand available technologies that provide alternatives to pursuit. Such alternatives should be readily available to officers engaging in a pursuit.

SPD Response

■ Concur □ Do Not Concur

25 https://www.sanfranciscopolice.org/your-sfpd/explore-department/drones

Section Four: Pursuit Reporting and Supervision

SPD has a System of Pursuit Reporting that is Generally Complete, Accurate, and Timely

All officers that participate as drivers in a pursuit are required to complete a detailed pursuit report in IA Pro.[26] These reports are then reviewed by a supervisor who views video of the pursuit, identifies errors in reporting, and provides their own synopsis and analysis of the pursuit before sending the report to a watch lieutenant and precinct captain for additional review and analysis. OIG found this review process facilitated timely conversations among the chain of command to identify and address training, compliance, or factual reporting issues.[27]

Reported Pursuits Were Fully Documented

All pursuits recorded in IA Pro included a completed pursuit driver report, pursuit supervisor report, a record of review by the chain of command, and supporting documents.[28] While a small number of reporting fields were left blank, every report included a narrative description of the pursuit, and OIG observed instances where supervisors directed report writers to add additional detail during review.

Some Pursuits Were Potentially Not Properly Identified

OIG sampled the Department's records management system for possible unidentified pursuits and found three incidents that appeared to meet the criteria of a pursuit but were not recorded in IA Pro.[29] Much like use of force incidents, pursuits rely on officers and supervisors to identify that a pursuit has occurred to prompt the proper review. In two incidents, officers followed a vehicle after its tires were deflated by terminators. In a third incident, the officer decided not to pursue after 50 seconds where the fleeing driver and officer reached speeds over 55 mph and ran three red lights. Similar incidents during the audit period were reported as pursuits.

While OIG observed that these incidents should have been recognized as pursuits, there is room for professional judgement and these incidents were within the realm of understandable disagreement. OIG also observed the opposite scenario, where incident reviewers identified unreported pursuits and directed the officer to complete a pursuit report. As such, OIG finds that while some minor pursuits may go unreported, SPD has generally been successful in identifying and capturing the population of pursuits.

More than 90% of Pursuit Reports Were Submitted Within One Week

OIG reviewed the timeliness of submitting and reviewing reports after each pursuit incident. Most pursuits (78%) were reported within 24 hours of the pursuit, with 92% reported within one week. The two longest delays in submitting a pursuit report (74 and 101 days) occurred because the incident was not initially identified as a pursuit, but the chain of command later determined a pursuit report was warranted.

26 IA Pro is the Department's professional standards software. It includes a 'Blue Team' module the Department uses to route various matters for review, including vehicular pursuits.

27 In most cases, OIG based this analysis on the report of the lead officer in each pursuit.

28 Supporting documents include the dispatch log and incident report, as well as linked information on involved officers, community members, and related incidents.

29 OIG reviewed incident reports for 129 out of 612 cases that involved the offense type 'eluding'. A fourth unrecord pursuit was identified separately when OPA determined in 2024OPA-0044 that the officer had engaged in an unauthorized pursuit.

The timeliness of supervisor review varied more; 34% of reports were reviewed by a supervisor within one week of the pursuit and 79% were reviewed within one month of the incident. Eight pursuits took more than ten weeks for an initial supervisor review. OIG was able to identify the cause of delay in four of these cases, which included pursuits that were not identified until later and personnel on extended leave. Every reported pursuit was eventually reviewed.

Reports Generally Contained Accurate Information, with Some Exceptions

Pursuing officers complete a report form that includes specific data entry fields and a narrative description of the incident. While OIG found officers' reports to be accurate in key aspects of pursuits when reviewed against other evidence such as in-car video, this audit identified three areas where incomplete data or inaccuracies were more common:

- **Descriptive information required by policy** – SPD policy requires officers to report a list of pursuit conditions in their report.[30] The report form contains many fields for specific information, but most information required by policy does not have a specific field. The only place to write this information is in the narrative section, where there is no prompt to include the information. As a result, officers at times did not add some of the required conditions.
- **Distance, duration, and max speed** – These fields require officers to either estimate a value or spend time searching for accurate information. While OIG found inaccuracies, they appeared to be estimation errors and did not significantly impact reporting.
- **Estimated damages** – Pursuit reports include a series of fields for officers to estimate the damages (in dollars) that result from an incident. Officers frequently left these fields blank when there was an accident. Officers likely do not have enough information to accurately estimate the cost of damage to vehicles.

Despite minor omissions or inaccuracies, OIG finds that the current reporting system provides the chain of command enough information to assess a given pursuit. This assessment is aided by a reviewer's ability to follow up on potential inaccuracies or omissions with review of in-car or body-worn video.

Recommendation 3 **Align Required Reporting Fields With Policy**

SPD should update the pursuit reporting form in IA Pro to prompt officers for sufficient descriptive information required by policy.

SPD Response

■ Concur □ Do Not Concur

30 These required reporting elements are; reason for the pursuit; lighting, roadway lighting, traffic, road, and weather conditions; whether their vehicle was a one- or two-officer car; whether their vehicle was marked; whether lights and sirens were activated; route of travel; what pursuit ending option was considered and why it was used or why it was not used.

SPD Collects Pursuit Data but Does Not Currently Conduct Analysis

While the current reporting system is well designed to support supervisor review and provide accountability, data about the pursuits is not stored in a way that supports visibility into pursuit statistics or trend analysis. Pursuit information is collected and stored at an officer level, not by incident number. Manual review is required to determine which pursuit reports correspond to the same incident, and statistics reported by different officers can be expected to naturally vary. Further, statistics are recorded on individual pursuit forms in Word or PDF format, and there is no process for collecting these separate entries for higher level analysis. Given the inherent risk in vehicular pursuits and the potential development of new pursuit alternatives, the Department should develop and implement a means for active monitoring of pursuit outcomes, trends, and risk factors.

Recommendation 4 **Report and Analyze Pursuit Data**

SPD should regularly analyze data on pursuits and eluding incidents to better understand outcomes, risks, and trends related to vehicular pursuits.

SPD Response

■ Concur □ Do Not Concur

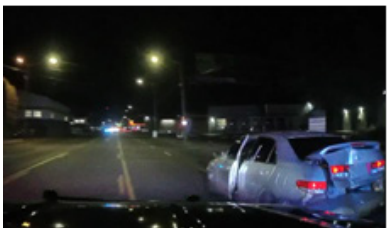
Section Five: Matters for Consideration

Matter for Consideration: PIT Maneuvers Were Not Identified and Were Mischaracterized as 'Vehicle Tactics' or 'Ramming'

SPD use of force policy defines a PIT Maneuver as "a forced rotational stop of another vehicle" and stipulates that "PIT is only authorized for sworn employees who have been trained to use a PIT maneuver."

Two of the successful PIT maneuvers identified earlier in this audit report (PIT Maneuver 2 and 4) were conducted by officers who did not have documented certification of PIT maneuver training and did not appear to be authorized within the relevant pursuits. In both cases, it appeared that neither the officers, their chain of command, nor the Force Investigation Team (FIT) or Force Review Board (FRB) meaningfully identified the forced rotational stop of the vehicle that was being pursed as a PIT Maneuver.

PIT Maneuver 2



PIT Maneuver 2 was described by the reviewing sergeant as only a 'vehicle tactic' and the FIT investigative report refers to it as a 'vehicle-related force tactic'. These are umbrella terms in SPD policy, under which blocking, tire deflation devices, pinning, roadblocks, ramming, and PIT are included. OPA investigated an allegation that the pursuing officer engaged in a prohibited pursuit-ending tactic, but uses the tactic of 'ramming' in the Directors Certification Memo.

After the OPA investigation concluded, an SPD captain reviewed the pursuit and described the maneuver as "a vehicle-to-vehicle contact that is best described as a PIT maneuver." The captain then noted that the officer had not received formal instruction in the PIT maneuver.

PIT Maneuver 4



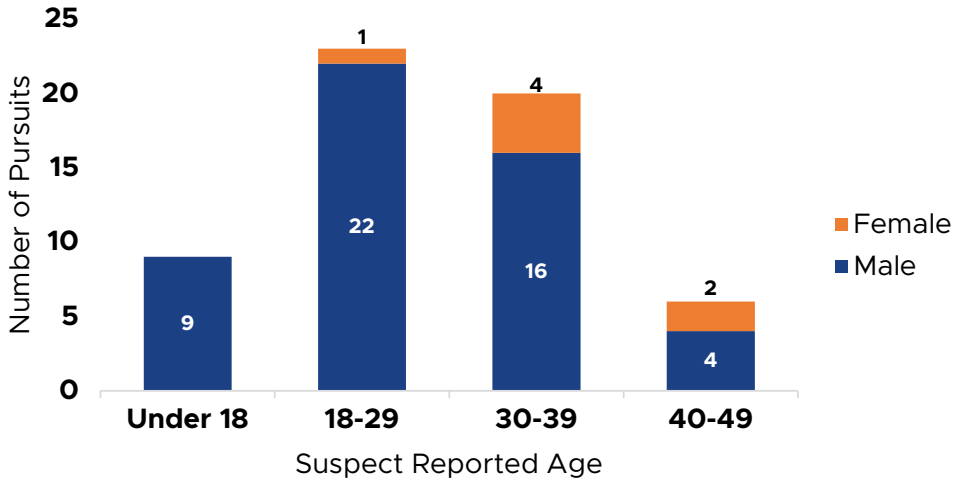

PIT Maneuver 4 was described in the officer's pursuit report as "connect[ion] with the suspect's rear bumper area with the intention to disable the vehicle." Two reviewing sergeants and a lieutenant more specifically refer to the use of force as 'ramming'. Ramming is defined in SPD policy as "the intentional use of a patrol vehicle to strike a suspect vehicle for the purpose of interrupting or incapacitating the suspect vehicle." FRB documentation does not specifically categorize the use of force, but describes that the officer "contacted the vehicle's rear fender, forcing it to spin out across the street and strike a tree, effectively disabling it." OIG finds that while the suspect vehicle was swerving, the officer made a clear turn into the rear fender of the pursued vehicle, forcing the vehicle to rotate 180 degrees.

OIG finds that both PIT maneuvers were effective and executed when there were few hazards present. However, OIG is concerned that multiple layers of force review did not identify these as PIT maneuvers and analyzed the actions under an incorrect framework of compliance with certification and authorization requirements specific to PIT maneuvers. Because force review processes including FIT and FRB are outside the scope of this audit, OIG is not making specific recommendations for improvement. However, OIG is identifying this as a potential gap for the Department to address, and will continue to monitor discussion of pursuit-ending tactics.

Matter for Consideration: Pursuits of Juveniles Involved Increased Risk

During this review, OIG compiled demographic data on the pursuit subject. A more general demographic analysis of pursued suspects is limited by incomplete or potentially inaccurate information. For the analysis below, demographic data was available in 58 pursuits (64%).

Figure 8. Perceived Age and Sex of Pursuit Suspects



OIG calls attention to a significant number of pursuit suspects who were reported as juveniles. This population made up 16% of pursuits where a suspect's perceived or actual age was reported, and in most cases, it was a group of juveniles being pursued for their suspected involvement in a violent carjacking. OIG did not identify literature that suggested pursuit risk considerations should be different when a juvenile is driving, however of the nine juvenile pursuits, seven involved collisions with bystander vehicles or serious collisions with roadside objects. All juvenile pursuits reached speeds of 60 mph or greater, with two pursuits reaching 90 mph. OIG encourages SPD to consider if factors such as driver age, driving inexperience, or risk-encouraging peer-group dynamics should be incorporated into officers' assessment of risk.

Conclusion

Risk is unavoidable when officers engage in vehicle pursuits. Fleeing suspects can act unpredictably and often make risky choices that can have serious and potentially fatal consequences for themselves, bystanders, and officers. Although state law governing pursuits has changed multiple times in recent years, SPD has maintained a posture of balancing risks of pursuits against the harm that may occur if dangerous suspects avoid custody. This audit found that officers and supervisors have generally been successful in managing risk by making quick decisions to terminate pursuits when risk outweighs the need, and when use of force to end pursuits has been limited. Although this audit found no major injuries or fatalities related to pursuit driving, there were several close calls, so SPD should remain vigilant in reviewing and assessing pursuits to ensure policy compliance and that training issues are addressed.

Even though SPD policy is focused on apprehending dangerous subjects the Department still engaged in approximately 27 pursuits per year over the period of review. To reduce risk further, the Department should have reliable and widely available alternatives to pursuit. SPD is aware of this need and is currently evaluating solutions that involve remote tracking of suspects. OIG supports the development of these alternatives provided that privacy concerns are properly assessed and weighed against the potential benefit of avoiding some pursuits.

In addition to the development of pursuit alternatives, SPD should provide greater clarity and guidance in policy in assessing time as a factor in how much of a danger a fleeing suspect poses to the community. Lastly, OIG found the Department has established a robust review process for pursuits, but more can be done to monitor the population of pursuits for emerging risks and better understand what challenges officers face.

Appendix A: Department Response

Recommendation 1 — Add Consideration of Pursuit Timing to Policy

SPD should update the pursuit policy to provide guidance about the elapsed time between a pursuit and the pursuable offense, and require pursuing officers and authorizing supervisors to include intervening time in their assessment of ongoing danger justifying the pursuit.

Management Response

■ Concur □ Do Not Concur

We agree with this recommendation. The Seattle Police Department is an evidence-based policing public service agency. Evidence-based policing (EBP) is an approach to law enforcement that emphasizes using the best available research, data, and analysis to guide policing strategies, policies, and decisions. Rather than relying solely on tradition, intuition, or anecdotal practices, EBP seeks to identify "what works" by applying rigorous research methods to evaluate interventions, measure outcomes, and continuously improve policing effectiveness. It often involves collaboration between police practitioners, academics, and community stakeholders to ensure that policing is both effective and trusted.[1]

As such, this recommendation is consistent with research published by the Police Executive Research Forum in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, on vehicular pursuits. The findings state, in part, that "the time that has elapsed between the commission of the crime and the discovery of the vehicle may affect" the decision to initiate a pursuit. In other words, a policy should require officers and supervisors to consider whether significant time has passed between the original offense and when the suspect vehicle is located; that lapse may reduce the immediacy or necessity of pursuit. Alternatively, if there is evidence that the suspect is engaged in ongoing criminal activity or poses a continuing danger (for example, access to weapons or imminent harm to public safety), pursuit may be justified even when time has elapsed since the original crime.[2]

The guide further recommends that an agency's policy explicitly list the "key factors" for assessing risk—including timing/elapsed time—and mandate that these be evaluated before initiating a pursuit and continuously as conditions change. Additionally, we submit that all officers and supervisors are empowered to intervene when their assessment indicates danger to the officers or the community.

Estimated Date of Implementation: March 1, 2026

Proposed Implementation Plan:

Submit to Policy section for adaptation, the training section for review and training, department wide training via roll calls, the training should include: a policy approach that:

- Makes elapsed time an explicit factor to assess

1 College of Policing. (n.d.). Evidence-based policing. College of Policing. Retrieved December 1, 2025, from https://www.college.police.uk/research/evidence-based-policing-EBP

2 Police Executive Research Forum & U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. (2023). Vehicular pursuits: A guide for law enforcement executives (COPS Publication No. R-1134). https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-r1134-pub.pdf

- Allows for discretion depending on context (elapsed time alone does not automatically prohibit pursuit)
- Requires continuous risk assessment — not just a one-time check
- Require documentation, which helps with transparency, accountability, and after-action review.

Full implementation and coverage confirmation by March 1, 2026.

Recommendation 2 — Expand Access to Pursuit Alternatives

SPD should acquire or expand available technologies that provide alternatives to pursuit. Such alternatives should be readily available to officers engaging in a pursuit.

Management Response

■ Concur □ Do Not Concur

We agree with this recommendation. The aforementioned guide includes an entire chapter titled "Pursuit Interventions, Pursuit Alternatives, and Technology for Managing Pursuit Risks." It recommends that agencies' pursuit policies emphasize preventing pursuits whenever possible and explicitly describe how tools such as tire deflation devices (TDDs) can be used as alternatives.[3] We submit that officers, supervisors, and dispatchers should be trained not only on how to conduct pursuits, but also on how to use all available alternatives effectively. This includes ensuring that dispatchers, pursuing officers, and supervisors know when and how to request or deploy these resources.

We strongly support this idea and request funding to invest in technology that would provide all patrol officers with access to pursuit alternatives and technologies. Examples include UAS/drone air support, spike strips, StarChase tracking systems, and TDDs.

Estimated Date of Implementation:

The estimated date of implementation is dependent on the funds to purchase devices and the availability of these devices for a department of our size.

Proposed Implementation Plan:

Submit to Policy section for adaptation, the training section for review and training, department wide training via roll calls, the training should include: a policy approach that:

- An updated SPD pursuit policy should explicitly authorize and encourage the use of alternatives (like TDDs) wherever feasible — not treat them as optional extras or afterthoughts.
- The policy should require that officers be trained regularly (initial + refresher) in the deployment and safe usage of pursuit alternatives.
- Supervisory approval should be part of any decision to deploy intervention technologies, with consideration for situational factors (public safety, road

3 Police Executive Research Forum & U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. (2023). Vehicular pursuits: A guide for law enforcement executives (COPS Publication No. R-1134). https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-r1134-pub.pdf

environment, population density, vehicle type, risk to bystanders, etc.).

- Dispatch and communications procedures should integrate availability of alternatives. For example, dispatchers / supervisors should alert officers when alternatives (UAS/Drone air support, spike-strips, tracking systems, TDDs) are available — not rely solely on ground units' discretion.
- Use of alternatives should be logged and documented in post-event reports — to allow for review, accountability, evaluation of effectiveness, and risk management.

Recommendation 3 — Align Required Reporting Fields with Policy

SPD should update the pursuit reporting form in IA Pro to prompt officers for sufficient descriptive information required by policy.

Management Response

■ Concur □ Do Not Concur

Estimated Date of Implementation: March 1, 2026

Proposed Implementation Plan:

The template includes this information. We will provide training to supervisors to ensure these fields are appropriately populated.

Recommendation 4 — Report and Analyze Pursuit Data

SPD should regularly analyze data on pursuits and eluding incidents to better understand outcomes, risks, and trends related to vehicular pursuits.

Management Response

■ Concur □ Do Not Concur

We agree with this recommendation, and we submit that the agency maintains detailed records (post-pursuit reporting) to ensure accurate and complete data about pursuits occurring under our jurisdiction. Additionally, the agency should regularly review and analyze pursuit data—including, but not limited to, when pursuits were initiated, under what circumstances, how they ended, and whether crashes or injuries occurred. This process will allow the agency to identify patterns, assess risks, and evaluate whether pursuit policies and practices are effective or require modification. For transparency and accountability, pursuit data should continue to be included in annual reports (or their equivalent) so that leadership, oversight bodies, and, potentially, the public can review how often pursuits occur, their outcomes, and whether the agency's pursuit-management strategies are succeeding in reducing harm.

Estimated Date of Implementation: March 1, 2026

Proposed Implementation Plan:

Submit to Policy section for adaptation, the training section for review and training,

department wide training via roll calls, the training should include: a policy approach that:

- Systematically collect data on every pursuit and eluding incident (initiation, duration, circumstances, termination, outcome, injuries/crashes, etc.).
- Maintain a central database or log for those data, ideally integrated into SPD's Records / Analytics systems.
- Regularly analyze that data — on perhaps quarterly or annual basis — to spot trends (rising / falling number of pursuits, correlation with certain neighborhoods or times, outcomes, etc.).
- Use that analysis to inform policy review and revision, training needs, resource allocation (e.g. equipment, alternatives, supervisory practices), and risk management.
- Report summary pursuit data to leadership, oversight bodies, and potentially the public (transparency), so that the community and policymakers can understand pursuit patterns and outcomes — especially in relation to accountability under the existing consent-decree and reform efforts.

Appendix B: Pursuit Collisions

This audit noted 32 pursuits that involved a collision with a vehicle or a roadside object. Auditors captured screenshots from in-car video systems to illustrate damages, to the extent they are visible, and the risks that vehicle pursuits represent to uninvolved bystanders.

2021-044606 / 2021-044672 - Suspect driver lost control of vehicle and crashed into a tree

2021-124008 - Suspect driver sped through red light, was hit by 2 vehicles in intersection causing significant damage to all three

2021-235747 / 2021-235826 - Suspect driver lost control on a sharp turn and collided with a parked car

2021-284056 - Suspect in bus apparently intentionally colliding with numerous vehicles and objects causing significant damage

2021-298370 - Suspect driver with trailing road sign hits multiple vehicles with the sign, which swung side to side behind the truck

2021-300690 - Suspect driver hit the rear side of a driver crossing through a red-light intersection

2021-326965 - Suspect driver sideswiped a vehicle attempting to fit through a narrow gap, causing damage to a bystander's side mirror

2022-013155 - Suspect driver lost control on a turn and crashed between two vehicles, damaging both and flipping the suspect vehicle on its side between them

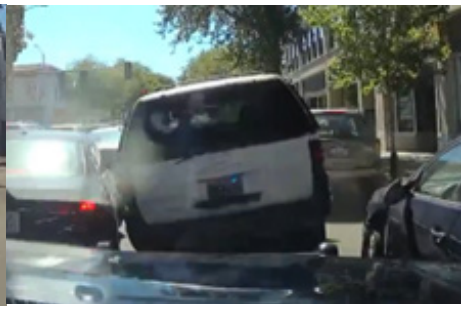
2022-051848 - Suspect driver came to a stop while fighting with vehicle owner. SPD made contact with rear bumper, and the driver accelerated into a building.

2022-131791 - Suspect driver entering highway followed bystander too close and rear-ended them

2022-139977 - Suspect driver lost control on a turn and hit the side of a parked vehicle in a driveway

2022-143755 - Suspect driver lost control on a turn and hit a stop sign and a treecausing damage to the front of the vehicle

2022-229410 - Suspect driver sideswiped two vehicles taking a turn too wide, and then damaged multiple vehicles when trying to escape through too narrow of a gap



2022-247678 - Suspect driver tries pass a vehicle on the right but overcorrects and hits the vehicle

2022-271365 - Suspect driver failed to navigate a T-intersection at high speeds, crashing into a stair railing and disabling the vehicle

2022-285457 - Suspect driver appeared to lose control on a turn and hit a power pole, damaging the front of the vehicle and downing the power pole

2022-294524 - Suspect driver did not turn with the road and hit a power box, significantly damaging the vehicle and the box

2022-318777 - Suspect driver hits at least 3 uninvolved vehicles failing to navigate turns before crashing into a tree head-on

2022-346489 - Suspect driver spun out trying to take a turn and hit a stop sign. Little damage to vehicle, but stop sign was destroyed

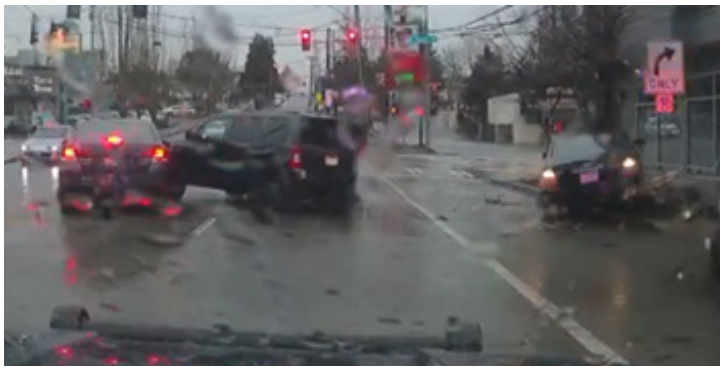
2023-013795 - Suspect driver drove the wrong way down a narrow one-way lane and tried to squeeze past a bus but became disabled

2023-025563 - Suspect went between two lanes of traffic to turn at a red light and damaged the front corner of a bystander vehicle

2023-027991 - Suspect driver hit by uninvolved vehicle after speeding through a stop sign. Suspect vehicle spun out and flipped onto roof

2023-051333 - Suspect driver began to "fishtail" on a bend in the road and went off the road, through a fence and down roughly one floor into the basement level of an apartment building

2023-068428 - Suspect driver approaching a red light tried to weave into an open lane but hit the back of a stopping vehicle in front of it. The suspect vehicle spun into a tree, while the bystander vehicle was shoved into another vehicle.



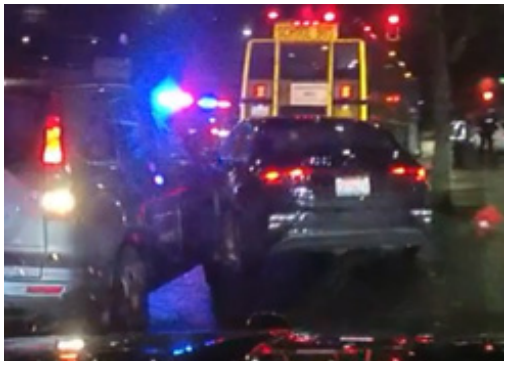
2023-198926 - Suspect driver tried to turn around on a congested street and turned into the front of an uninvolved vehicle

2023-330389 - Suspect driver attempted to turn across rail tracks and hit a tree during the turn, significantly damaging the front of the vehicle

2024-009268 - Suspect driver tried to drive between two cars in adjacent lanes stopped at a red light, scraping both

2024-041831 - Suspect driver going approximately 90 mph scraped a barrier on the side of a highway onramp, causing the vehicle to swerve hitting the barriers on both sides, disabling it

2024-005554 - Suspect driver tried cut across the front right bumper of a car stopped at a red light to force through the intersection



2024-124061 - Suspect driver ran a red light and hit the side of a vehicle crossing in front of them, damaging both vehicles and another uninvolved vehicle

2023-359106 - Suspect driver tried to pass on a highway on-ramp, made contact with the side of an uninvolved vehicle, and caused it to rotate and roll onto its side

2023-372996 - Suspect driver tried to cross a pedestrian bridge and hits the guardrail, causing the vehicle to partially fall

Appendix C: Audit Methodology

OIG strives to make objective, well-informed findings and recommendations as part of the audit process. Audit staff conducted the following investigatory steps to inform audit findings:

- Reviewed and analyzed pursuit reports submitted by officers for each pursuit. Pursuit reports include a narrative description of the incident, key descriptive information, involved officers and community members, and chain of command review history.
- Reviewed in-car (and in some cases body-worn) video for each pursuit, comparing it to pursuit reports for accuracy.
- Reviewed state law and SPD pursuit policy, including changes made during the audit scope and reporting period.
- Held interviews and email correspondence with SPD staff on pursuit tactics, fleet management, supervision, potential legal issues, and training.
- Held interviews with the Community Police Commission (CPC) and Office of Police Accountability (OPA) on their concerns related to vehicle operations, including vehicle pursuits.
- Corresponded with King County Sheriff's Office Air Support Unit.
- Reviewed best practice/risk management literature related to pursuits published by the International Association for Chief's of Police and the Police Executive Research Forum.
- Surveyed pursuit policies from 10 regional and national law enforcement agencies for comparison.
- Reviewed training materials and documentation related to pursuit technologies such as StarChase, terminators, and stop sticks.
- Reviewed cost estimates for pursuit-related damages recorded by SPD Fleet Management
- Conducted an exploratory search for possible unreported pursuits.
- Reviewed claims and lawsuits related to SPD vehicle pursuits.
- Reviewed OPA cases where there was an alleged violation of the pursuit policy and Management Action Recommendations issued by OPA2023-198926 - Suspect driver tried to turn around on a congested street and turned into the front of an uninvolved vehicle.

Seattle Office of
Inspector General

The Office of Inspector General for Public Safety (OIG) was established in 2017 via Ordinance 125315 to help ensure the fairness and integrity of the police system in its delivery of law enforcement services. OIG provides independent auditing of the management, practices, and policies of the Seattle Police Department and the Office of Police Accountability. Additionally, OIG oversees ongoing fidelity to organizational reforms implemented pursuant to the goals of the 2012 Consent Decree and Memorandum of Understanding.

Project Team
Conor McCracken, Auditor-in-Charge
Dan Pitts
Anthony Harris
Madison Barnwell
Emily Morley

Inspector General
Lisa Judge

Deputy Inspector General
Alyssa Perez-Morrison

Office of Inspector General
phone: 206.684.3663
email: **oig@seattle.gov**
web: **http://www.seattle.gov/oig/**