

Chases skyrocket after policy change

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Injuries more than quintuple

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Police chases increased tenfold in the six months after Chief Todd Chamberlain broadened the Aurora Police Department's policy to allow officers to pursue stolen vehicles and suspected drunk drivers, a move that made Aurora one of the most permissive large police agencies along the Front Range.

Aurora officers carried out more chases in the six months after the policy change than in the last five years combined, according to data provided by the police department in response to open records requests from The Denver Post.

The city's officers conducted 148 pursuits between March 6 — the day after the policy change — and Sept. 2, the data shows. That's up from just 14 police chases in that same timeframe in 2024, and well above Aurora officers' 126 chases across five years between 2020 and 2024.

The number of people injured in pursuits more than quintupled, with about one in five chases resulting in injury after the policy change, the data shows. That 20% injury rate is lower than the rate over the last five years, when the agency saw 25% of pursuits end with injury.

Chamberlain, who declined to speak with The Post for this story, has heralded the department's new approach to pursuits as an important tool for curbing crime. Aurora Mayor Mike Coffman believes the change has already had a "dramatic impact" on crime in the city.

However, the effect of the increased pursuits on overall crime trends is difficult to gauge, with crime generally declining across the state, including in Denver, which has a more restrictive policy and many fewer police pursuits.

"You throw a big net out there, occasionally you do catch a few big fish," said Justin Nix, a criminology professor at the University of Nebraska Omaha. "But you also end up with the pursuit policy causing more accidents and injuries." Impact of Aurora's pursuits

Eighty-seven people were arrested across more than 100 pursuits in Aurora between April and August, according to an Oct. 15 report by the independent monitor overseeing court-ordered reforms at the Aurora Police Department.

Of those 87 arrestees, 67 had a criminal history, 25 were wanted on active warrants, 18 were on probation and seven were on parole, the monitor found.

"What we find is that people who steal cars, it's not a joyriding thing, it's not a one-off, they tend to be career criminals who use these vehicles to commit other crimes," Coffman said. "There seems to be a pattern that when we do apprehend a car thief, they tend to have warrants out for their arrest, and we do see the pattern of stealing vehicles to commit other crimes. So we are really catching repeat offenders when we apprehend the driver and/or passengers."

The soaring number of pursuits was largely driven by stolen vehicle chases, which accounted for 103 of the 148 pursuits since the policy change, the data shows.

Auto theft in Aurora dropped 42% year-over-year between January and September, continuing a downward trend that began in 2023. In Denver, where officers do not chase stolen vehicles, auto theft has declined 36% so far in 2025 compared to 2024.

Denver police officers conducted just nine pursuits between March 6 and Sept. 2, and just 16 so far in 2025, data from the department shows. Four suspects and one officer were injured across those 16 chases.

"I think there are broader societal factors at work," Nix said of the decline in crime, which has been seen across the nation and follows a dramatic pandemic-era spike. "When something goes up, it is bound to come down pretty drastically."

Aurora officers apprehended fleeing drivers in 53% of all pursuits, and in 51% of pursuits for stolen vehicles between March and September, the police data shows.

Coffman said that shows officers and their supervisors are judiciously calling off pursuits that become too dangerous. He also noted that every pursuit is carefully reviewed by the police chain of command and called the new policy a "work in progress."

"I get that it is not without controversy," Coffman said. "There wouldn't be the collateral accidents if not for the policy. So it is a tradeoff. It is not an easy decision and it is going to always be in flux."

Thirty-three people were injured in Aurora police chases between March 6 and Sept. 2, up from six injured in that time frame last year. Those hurt included 24 suspects, five officers and four drivers in other vehicles.

One bystander and one suspect were seriously injured, according to the police data.

The independent monitor noted in its October report that it was "generally pleased" with officers' judgments during pursuits, supervisors' actions and the post-pursuit administrative review process, with "two notable exceptions" that have been "elevated for additional review and potential disciplinary action."

The monitor also flagged an increase in failed Precision Immobilization Technique, or PIT, maneuvers during pursuits, which it attributed to officer inexperience. The group recommended more training on the maneuvers, which are designed to end pursuits, and renewed its call for the department to install dash cameras in its patrol cars, which the agency has not done.

"It sounds reasonable," Coffman said of the dash camera recommendation. "They are not cheap and we need to budget for it."

'No magic number'

It's up to city leadership to determine if the benefits of police chases outweigh the predictable harms, and there is no "magic number," Nix said.

"When you chase that much, bad outcomes are going to happen," he said. "People are going to get hurt, sometimes innocent third parties that have nothing to do with the chase. You know that is going to be a collateral consequence of doing that many chases. So knowing that, you should really be able to point to the community safety benefit that doing this many chases bring."

The majority of large Front Range law enforcement agencies limit pursuits to situations in which the driver is suspected of a violent felony or poses an immediate risk of injury or death to others if not quickly apprehended.

Among 18 law enforcement agencies reviewed by The Post this spring, only Aurora and the Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office explicitly allow pursuits of suspected drunk drivers. The sheriff's office allows such pursuits only if the driver stays under the posted speed limit.

Aurora officers pursued suspected impaired drivers 13 times between March and September, the data shows, with five chases ending in injury.

Omar Montgomery, president of the Aurora NAACP, said he is a "cautious neutral" about the policy change, but would like Aurora police to meet with community members to explain the impact in more detail.

"People in the community do not want people on the streets who are causing harm to other individuals and who are committing crimes that makes our city unsafe," he said. "We want them off the streets just as bad as anyone else. We also want to make sure that innocent people who are not part of the situation are not getting harmed."

Topazz McBride, a community activist in Aurora, said she has been disappointed by what she sees as Chamberlain's unwillingness to engage with community members who disagree with him.

"Do I trust them to use the process effectively and responsibly with all fairness and equity to everyone they pursue? No. I do not trust that," she said. "And I don't understand why he wouldn't be willing to talk about it. Why not?"

Montgomery also wants police to track crashes that happen immediately after a police officer ends a pursuit, when an escaping suspect might still be speeding and driving recklessly.

"They are still going 80 or 90 mph and they end up hitting someone or running into a building," he said. "And now you have this person who that has caused harm, believing that they are still being chased."

The police department did not include the case of Rajon Belt-Stubblefield, who was shot and killed Aug. 30 by an officer after he sped away from an attempted traffic stop, among its pursuits this year. Video of the incident shows the officer followed Belt-Stubblefield's vehicle with his lights and sirens on for just under a minute over about 7/10ths of a mile before Belt-Stubblefield crashed.

Police spokesman Matthew Longshore said the incident was not a pursuit.

"The officer was stationary, running radar when the vehicle sped past, and the officer was accelerating (with both lights and siren eventually) to catch up to the vehicle," Longshore said. "The officer did not determine nor declare that he was in pursuit of the suspect's vehicle before the suspect crashed into the two other vehicles."

The officer, who has not been publicly identified, killed Belt-Stubblefield in an ensuing confrontation. Belt-Stubblefield, who was under the influence of alcohol, tossed a gun to the ground and was unarmed when he was shot.

Whether or not a pursuit preceded his death was one of several questions raised in the independent monitor's Oct. 15 report, which characterized the shooting and the department's response to the killing as a setback in otherwise improving community relations.

