

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Pursuit Policy Update

Expanded Course Outline

Date: 07/08/2026, 07/23/2026

Hours: 0800-1200 (4) & 1300-1700

Location: Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, Santa Cruz, CA 95062

Instructors throughout the month: Deputy N. Egelhardt, Deputy J. Ross, Deputy Hutson

Course Purpose

This course provides deputies with an overview of the Sheriff's Office vehicle pursuit policy, emphasizing the continuous risk-versus-necessity analysis required before initiating and while continuing a pursuit. It reviews responsibilities of involved units and supervisors, required emergency equipment, pursuit driving tactics, intervention methods, termination criteria, and the professional and ethical considerations associated with high-risk vehicle operations.

Learning Objectives

- Define a vehicle pursuit and identify the risks created by pursuit operations.
- Apply the policy balance test when deciding whether to initiate, continue, or terminate a pursuit.
- Describe the responsibilities of the primary unit, secondary unit, field supervisor, and Watch Commander.
- Identify vehicle-equipment requirements and limitations applicable to pursuit participation.
- Explain appropriate pursuit-driving tactics and the responsibilities of units not directly involved.
- Recognize the policy standards governing pursuit intervention tactics.
- Identify circumstances supporting pursuit termination and describe the proper termination procedure.
- Explain the importance of sound judgment, self-discipline, and ethical leadership at the conclusion of a pursuit.

I. Vehicle Pursuit Fundamentals

A. Definition of a Vehicle Pursuit

- A vehicle pursuit involves one or more law-enforcement officers attempting to apprehend a suspect who is attempting to avoid arrest while operating a motor vehicle.
- Evasive behavior may include high-speed driving, leaving the highway, sudden turns, or even otherwise lawful driving when the driver willfully refuses to yield to a deputy's signal to stop.

B. Impact of Pursuits

- Vehicle pursuits expose uninvolved citizens, deputies, and fleeing violators to the possibility of serious injury or death.

- Because a pursuit itself creates risk, the decision to pursue is not based solely on whether the suspect is fleeing. Deputies must continually weigh the need for immediate apprehension against the danger created by continuing the pursuit.

II. Initiating and Continuing a Pursuit

A. Initial Authorization

- A pursuit may be initiated when a suspect clearly demonstrates an intention to avoid arrest by using a vehicle to flee.
- When a suspect knowingly ignores a peace officer's signal to stop, the presentation states that officers may initiate a pursuit when they have reason to believe the suspect presents a clear and immediate threat to the safety of others, the suspect has committed or attempted to commit a violation of law, and the necessity for immediate apprehension outweighs the danger created by the pursuit.

B. The Balance Test

- The central decision-making principle is a continuing balance between the need to apprehend the suspect and the danger created by the pursuit.
- If the threat to public safety created by the pursuit becomes greater than the need for immediate apprehension, the pursuit should not be initiated or should be terminated.
- This assessment is not a one-time decision. Conditions can change rapidly and the balance test must be reconsidered throughout the pursuit.

C. Factors to Consider

- Agency policy and the seriousness/necessity underlying immediate apprehension.
- Condition and capabilities of the pursuit vehicle.
- Condition, experience, and capabilities of the driver.
- Roadway configuration and surface conditions.
- Traffic volume and conditions.
- Weather and visibility conditions.
- Any other changing circumstances that increase or reduce the risk to the public, deputies, or occupants of the fleeing vehicle.

D. Civil Liability

- The presentation warns that actions during a pursuit that violate Sheriff's Office policy or California requirements to drive with due regard for public safety may affect available civil-liability protections.
- Policy compliance and continuous reasonable decision-making are therefore both operational and liability concerns.

III. Responsibilities of Pursuit Units

A. Primary Unit

- The initiating unit is designated as the primary pursuit unit and remains responsible for the pursuit unless it cannot remain reasonably close to the fleeing vehicle.
- The primary deputy's responsibility is apprehension of the suspect without creating unreasonable danger to the deputy or other persons.

- The primary unit must notify NETCOM that a pursuit has begun and, as soon as practicable, broadcast the reason for the pursuit, location and direction of travel, fleeing-vehicle speed, vehicle description and license number if known, number and identity/description of occupants, and information concerning firearms, force threats, injuries, hostages, or other hazards.
- Unless relieved, the primary unit broadcasts pursuit progress. When practical, this task should be transferred to the secondary unit or aircraft so the primary deputy can concentrate on driving.

B. Secondary Unit

- The secondary deputy should immediately advise dispatch when entering the pursuit.
- The secondary unit should remain a safe distance behind the primary unit unless directed to become primary or the primary unit cannot continue.
- The secondary deputy should generally assume responsibility for broadcasting pursuit progress so the primary deputy can focus on vehicle operation.

C. Number of Pursuit Units

- Pursuit participation should generally be limited to three vehicles: two units and a supervisor.
- Additional units may be requested when the number of deputies involved would be insufficient to safely arrest the suspects.
- Other deputies should remain out of the pursuit while staying aware of its location and progress.
- A deputy who drops out may proceed to the termination point when necessary at legal speeds and in compliance with normal rules of the road.

IV. Supervisory Responsibilities

A. Field Supervisor

- Upon learning of a pursuit, the responsible field supervisor should immediately obtain reasonably available information and continuously assess the pursuit and its risk factors.
- The supervisor may join the pursuit when appropriate to provide on-scene supervision but retains management and control responsibilities even when not physically involved.
- The supervisor is responsible for limiting the number of participating units, terminating an unjustified pursuit, requesting aircraft when available, ensuring use of the proper radio channel, and coordinating with outside jurisdictions.
- The supervisor also controls SCSO units when a pursuit enters another jurisdiction and prepares a post-pursuit critique and analysis for training purposes.

B. Watch Commander

- The Watch Commander should monitor and continually assess an active pursuit and ensure compliance with policy.
- The presentation assigns the Watch Commander final responsibility for overall coordination, control, and termination of the pursuit.
- The Watch Commander reviews pertinent reports for content and forwards them to the Bureau Commander.

V. Vehicle and Emergency Equipment Requirements

A. Red Light and Siren

- The presentation cites Vehicle Code sections 21055 and 21056 and states that a pursuit is to be conducted with red light and siren as required for applicable exemptions from ordinary rules of the road.
- Even when statutory exemptions apply, deputies remain responsible for driving with due regard and caution for the safety of all persons using the highway.

B. Vehicles Without Emergency Equipment

- Vehicles lacking red light and siren are generally prohibited from initiating or joining a pursuit.
- Deputies operating such vehicles may become involved in emergency activity involving serious crimes or life-threatening situations, but should terminate pursuit involvement when sufficient properly equipped emergency vehicles or an aircraft arrive.
- The Vehicle Code exemptions identified in the presentation do not apply to deputies operating vehicles without the required emergency equipment.

VI. Pursuit Driving Tactics

A. Spacing and Vehicle Control

- Deputies should consider their own driving skill and the performance capabilities of the vehicle.
- Maintain sufficient spacing from other involved vehicles to see hazards and react safely to unexpected maneuvers by the fleeing vehicle.

B. Intersections

- Intersections create increased risk during pursuits.
- Units not directly involved may safely position at controlled intersections ahead of the pursuit to warn cross traffic when appropriate.
- Pursuing units should exercise due caution when proceeding through controlled intersections.

C. Wrong-Way Freeway Pursuits

- As a general rule, deputies should not follow a fleeing vehicle left of center or the wrong way on a freeway.
- Alternatives identified in the presentation include requesting an air unit, paralleling the fleeing vehicle from the correct side of the roadway, assigning units to observe available exits, and notifying CHP or other affected jurisdictions.

D. Passing Other Pursuit Units

- Deputies involved in the pursuit should not pass other participating units unless circumstances require it or the primary unit requests it.

VII. Units Not Directly Involved in the Pursuit

A. Avoid Paralleling

- Units not involved should not parallel the pursuit route.

- Deputies may use emergency equipment at intersections along the pursuit path when authorized and necessary to clear vehicular and pedestrian traffic for public protection.
- Deputies should generally remain in their assigned areas and should not join the pursuit unless directed by a supervisor.

B. Response to the Termination Point

- Non-pursuing personnel needed at the termination point should respond non-emergency and obey the rules of the road.
- The primary and secondary units should generally be the only units operating under emergency conditions unless additional units are specifically assigned.

C. Pursuit Trailing

- When SCSO relinquishes control of a pursuit to another unit or jurisdiction, the initiating unit may, with supervisor permission, trail the pursuit to provide information and assistance at the termination point.
- Trailing means following the pursuit route at a safe speed, obeying all traffic laws, and without emergency equipment.
- If the pursuit is moving slowly, the trailing unit should maintain enough separation to make clear that it is not participating in the pursuit.

VIII. Pursuit Intervention

A. General Definition and Authorization

- Pursuit intervention is an effort to end a suspect's ability to continue fleeing through tactics such as technology, spike strips, blocking, boxing, PIT, ramming, or roadblocks.
- Intervention tactics should be used only after supervisor approval as described in the presentation.
- The deputy and supervisor should balance the risks of allowing the pursuit to continue against the hazards created by the proposed intervention tactic.
- Any intervention decision must be reasonable under the circumstances and consistent with legality, sound judgment, and accepted practices.

B. Firearms

- Using firearms to disable a pursued vehicle is generally ineffective and carries the inherent dangers of firearm discharge.
- Deputies should not use firearms during an ongoing pursuit unless the circumstances reasonably indicate that firearm use is necessary to protect life.
- The policy does not prohibit firearm use when reasonably necessary to stop a suspect who is using a vehicle as a deadly weapon.

C. Deadly-Force Considerations

- Depending on how and under what circumstances an intervention tactic is used, it may constitute deadly force.
- Deputies must consider the risks to the public, deputies, and occupants of the fleeing vehicle as well as any deadly-force requirements before selecting an intervention tactic.

IX. Specific Intervention Tactics

A. Blocking / Vehicle Intercept

- Blocking or vehicle intercept should be considered only in the circumstances described by policy, including felony suspects or impaired drivers posing a public-safety threat when a conventional stop is reasonably expected to result in flight.
- The technique should be used only by deputies trained in the tactic.
- The need to immediately stop or contain the suspect vehicle must substantially outweigh the risk of injury or death.
- Other reasonable intervention methods should have failed or reasonably appear ineffective, and the maneuver must not unreasonably increase officer-safety risk.
- The target vehicle should be stopped or traveling at low speed. Civilian vehicles are not to be used for this tactic.

B. Pursuit Intervention Technique (PIT)

- Only deputies trained in PIT are authorized to perform the procedure.
- PIT requires supervisor approval and consideration of the circumstances, including the potential risk of injury to deputies, the public, and occupants of the fleeing vehicle.

C. Ramming

- Ramming should be considered only after other reasonable tactical means have been exhausted and when there does not appear to be another reasonable alternative.
- Policy factors include whether the suspect is an actual or suspected felon who reasonably appears to pose a serious threat to the public and whether the suspect is driving with willful or wanton disregard in a reckless, life-endangering manner.
- If there is no present or immediately foreseeable serious threat to the public, the presentation states that ramming is not authorized.

D. Spike Strips

- Spike-strip deployment should receive advance supervisor approval and should occur only when it is reasonably certain that the pursued vehicle will be the vehicle affected.
- Deputies should account for device limitations and risks to themselves, the public, and occupants of the fleeing vehicle.
- The presentation calls for additional consideration when the fleeing vehicle is a motorcycle, hazardous-materials vehicle, or school bus carrying children.

E. Roadblocks

- Roadblocks placed directly in the path of a pursued vehicle present a risk of serious injury or death and are generally discouraged.
- They should not be used without prior supervisor approval and should be reserved for extraordinary circumstances in which other reasonable intervention techniques have failed or appear ineffective and the need to immediately stop the vehicle substantially outweighs the associated risks.

X. Capture of Suspects and Pursuit Conclusion

A. Apprehension

- Sound professional judgment and self-discipline remain important when the pursuit ends.

- Deputies should use only the amount of force that reasonably appears necessary under the circumstances.
- Unless relieved by a supervisor, the primary deputy should coordinate apprehension efforts after the pursuit.
- Containment and arrest planning should consider the safety of the public and all involved deputies.

XI. Pursuit Termination

A. General Termination Standard

- A pursuit should be discontinued whenever the totality of objective circumstances known, or reasonably available, indicates that the present risks of continuing the pursuit outweigh the risks associated with allowing the suspect to escape.
- This standard requires continuous reassessment rather than waiting for a single mandatory termination event.

B. Circumstances Supporting Termination

- The distance between the pursuing units and fleeing vehicle becomes so great that continued pursuit is futile or would require an unreasonable duration or distance.
- The fleeing vehicle's location is no longer definitely known.
- The pursuit vehicle is damaged in a manner that makes continued operation unsafe.
- Extended pursuits for misdemeanor violations that do not independently involve violence or risk of serious harm are discouraged.
- The pursuit creates hazards to uninvolved motorists or bystanders.
- The offender's identity is known and the need for immediate capture does not reasonably outweigh the risks of continued pursuit.
- A supervisor orders termination.

C. Speed as a Continuing Factor

- Pursuit speed must be continually evaluated in relation to public safety, officer safety, and the safety of occupants of the fleeing vehicle.
- Deputies and supervisors should consider termination when speeds become unreasonably unsafe for existing conditions, exceed the deputy's driving ability, or exceed the safe capabilities of the pursuit vehicle.

D. Procedure for Terminating

- Advise over the radio that the pursuit is being discontinued.
- Reduce speed to the posted limit.
- Turn off emergency lights and siren.
- Stop following the suspect.
- When necessary, pull safely to the side of the road and regain composure.

XII. Ethical and Human-Factor Considerations

A. Stress and Decision-Making

- Psychological and physiological stress can affect decision-making during and immediately after a pursuit.

- A suspect may not immediately comply with commands, while involved deputies may be highly stressed from the pursuit.

B. Ethical Leadership

- Deputies should consciously work to remain calm and recognize when another deputy may be too stressed to effectively perform a task.
- When appropriate, another peace officer can take over for an overstressed officer.
- If officers begin using unreasonable force or unauthorized tactics, other deputies have a responsibility to exercise ethical leadership and intervene.

XIII. Practical Review

A. Key Questions During Every Pursuit

- What is the reason for the pursuit and how serious is the need for immediate apprehension?
- What danger does the suspect presently pose independent of the pursuit?
- What risks is the pursuit itself creating right now?
- Have traffic, weather, roadway, speed, visibility, vehicle condition, or driver condition changed?
- Is the number of involved units appropriate?
- Is an intervention tactic reasonable and authorized under the circumstances?
- Can the suspect reasonably be apprehended later?
- Does the balance test still support continuing the pursuit?

B. Core Training Principle

- The decision to pursue is not permanent once made. Initiation, continuation, intervention, and termination all require ongoing judgment.
- The overriding theme of the presentation is disciplined risk assessment: immediate apprehension must continually justify the danger being created by the pursuit.

Source / Instructor Note

This expanded outline was developed from the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office "Pursuit Policy Update" presentation. It preserves the presentation's policy framework, pursuit responsibilities, intervention standards, termination criteria, and cited Vehicle Code concepts. Because pursuit policy and California law can change, instructors should verify all policy language, statutory references, and intervention authorization standards against the current Sheriff's Office policy manual and current law before using this outline as an authoritative policy reference.