

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. State Police are chasing far more motorists these days, and nobody really knows why**

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Sept. 7, 2020

State Police in New Jersey are chasing more drivers these days, and officials aren't sure why that's happening.

The head of the State Police last week said the Garden State is on track to log a record number of trooper pursuits.

At a coronavirus briefing in Trenton, Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent, rattled off the numbers: 153 State Police pursuits through August, compared to 102 the same period last year; crashes up 34%; more people dying on the road.

And it all comes as the attorney general's office considers changing the rules of the road for police.

It's difficult to know if the increase is due to more troopers deciding to chase or drivers choosing to run, said Dennis Kenney, a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York who co-wrote a book on police pursuits.

Recent protests against police brutality and systemic racism could affect drivers' decisions to flee, he said.

"The climate may have altered people's respect for officers, or increased their fear of being caught," Kenney said.

Drivers could also delay pulling over because of "mental illness" or fearing for their safety if it's at night on an empty road, said Stephen Carrellas, public affairs director of the National Motorists Association New Jersey Chapter. But without more data, he said, it's difficult to know if more drivers are purposely running because of say, illegal drugs or a guilty conscience.

"With lighter traffic and the same number of police on patrol it is easier to target a motorist compared with heavier traffic," he added.

Gov. Phil Murphy and Callahan agreed lighter traffic could be a cause, and they also blamed the rise on "folks being pent up" and stress because of the coronavirus pandemic. Murphy also speculated that, "if we looked at this nationally, we're not going to be an outlier."

National data is hard to come by — the last survey of pursuits from the U.S. Department of Justice is from 2012.

New York State Police have logged an increase in pursuits, according to a spokesman. Troopers chased drivers 463 times the first eight months of the year, a nearly 47% increase from the same period last year.

However, Maryland Troopers had chased only 103 vehicles as of last Monday, 10 fewer than the same period last year, and Connecticut logged only 19 chases, down from more than 100 two years ago.

Sometimes “it is safer to terminate the pursuit and delay the arrest in order to prevent or reduce the potential for immediate harm to a member of our public,” Connecticut Trooper Josue Dorelus wrote in an email.

He noted they generally would not chase somebody for “motor vehicle infractions, property crimes” or other non-violent offenses, and he said dozens of pursuits have been called off in recent years by both troopers and supervisors.

Callahan, the leader of New Jersey’s troopers, stressed that it’s a very bad idea to take off when patrol cars flash their lights.

“Whether it’s a taillight summons or warning or a speeding summons, to put your own life, law enforcement’s life, other motoring public lives at risk over what could ultimately end up in being, quite frankly, a written warning — not all the time — but it just doesn’t make any sense to put those lives at risk over a motor vehicle summons,” Callahan said Wednesday.

New Jersey police may only initiate chases under specific circumstances, according to rules from the state attorney general’s office, including if the driver “poses an immediate threat to the safety of the public.”

When asked Friday how drivers who initially may have only faced a written warning were “immediate threats,” Callahan said speeding more than 100 miles an hour was one example.

“If they had stopped, they may have received a summons or a warning,” he said.

Troopers followed a “very strict” pursuit policy, he said, and they took traffic conditions and the likelihood of catching up with the suspect later into account. Many chases were also called off, he added.

Police pursuits can come with a high cost.

In May, a chase beginning in Trenton ended with a man smashing into a police car and almost hitting an officer. Another man fleeing police while allegedly driving a stolen car plowed into a 62-year-old driver in July, and debris hit two teenage girls in a nearby

intersection. Another Trenton chase that same month ended in two crashes, three injured teenagers and six hurt cops after the teens shot at officers, police said.

Sometimes officers decide it's not worth the risk.

The same day State Police announced its pursuit numbers, South Brunswick cops received a call for help from a Best Western.

When officers responded Monday to a domestic dispute, a 25-year-old man fled on a motorcycle down Route 1, according to Deputy Chief James Ryan. The motorcycle likely broke 80 miles per hour, Ryan said, on a road that generally caps speed at 55, and dash cam footage shows the man weaving through traffic as he flees the flashing lights.

But the road was nearing a construction zone, Ryan said, and cops decided a chase wasn't worth the risk, especially since they knew the man's name.

"We'll put out a complaint, and one day he'll have to answer to a court," the deputy chief told NJ Advance Media.

The rules governing pursuits were last revised more than a decade ago.

In June, officials announced they would revise New Jersey's use-of-force policies, including guidelines for "high-speed car pursuits."

A spokesman said new guidelines will likely be finished by the end of the year.

*NJ Advance Media staff writer Brent Johnson contributed to this report.*