Why Are You Putting Us in Danger?

By: Tyra Harper

Every time someone gets in a motor vehicle and hits the road, they are taking a risk. Imagine minding your own business and obeying the rules of the road, then Boom! Someone slams into the side of your vehicle. This was the reality for an Atlanta woman and her two grandchildren on their way to church on Sunday, January 31. According to Channel 2 Action News, the accident happened as a result of a high speed chase after a suspect stole a woman’s car from a hotel in College Park. Once the suspect stole the car, he started a chase with police, where they followed him to a residential area where he then crashed into another vehicle.

In an interview with Channel 2, witness David Baird said, “I saw that red car coming down the street minding their business and all of the sudden I saw the black car run the stop sign right here and hit them, T-bone them.” This accident comes just a few days after another high speed chase killed an elderly couple leaving a birthday party. Why do police officers choose to pursue suspects in high speed chases?

In **High-speed Police Chases Have Killed Thousands of Innocent Bystanders**, Frank Thomas states based on a USA TODAY analysis, “More than 5,000 bystanders and passengers have been killed in police car chases since 1979, and tens of thousands more were injured as officers repeatedly pursued drivers at high speeds and in hazardous conditions, often for minor infractions.” Further, USA TODAY found “the bystanders and the passengers in chased cars account for nearly half of all people killed in police pursuits from 1979 through 2013. Most bystanders were killed in their own cars by a fleeing driver.”

According to the Atlanta Police Department Policy Manual, “The decision to pursue a vehicle that refuses to stop voluntarily for "a motor vehicle that is used on official business by any person authorized to make arrests" must comply with five state laws. The following two conditions must be met before a police officer can engage in a vehicle pursuit. First, the vehicles of the primary and secondary pursuit units must comply with the three applicable state codes of Georgia regarding the equipment of law enforcement vehicles. The codes are 40-8-90 (Use of flashing or revolving blue lights), 40-8-91 (Marking of official vehicles), and 40-8-94 (Sirens, whistles, and bells). In addition, the driver of the authorized emergency vehicle must drive with due regard for the safety of all persons as described in Georgia code 40-6-6 (Authorized emergency vehicles). (CALEA 41.2.2d). Second, the driver of the fleeing vehicle or a passenger in the fleeing vehicle must meet one of the three following standards set forth in O.C.G.A. Ik-4-20 (Arrest without a Warrant). 1. "The suspect possesses a deadly weapon or any object, device, or instrument which, when used offensively against a person, is likely to or actually does result in serious bodily injury." 2. "When the officer reasonably believes that the suspect poses an immediate threat of physical violence to the officer or others." 3. "When there is probable cause to believe that the suspect has committed a crime involving the infliction or threatened infliction of serious physical harm." (CALEA 1.3.2) Once the two required conditions exist, other factors that need to be considered in order to initiate a vehicle pursuit or allow a vehicle pursuit to
continue are: 1. The risk of the subject's conduct to innocent third parties. 2. The driving abilities of the police officer. 3. The performance capabilities of the police vehicle. 4. Weather conditions. 5. Roadway surface conditions. 6. The type of roadway and its contour~ (CALEA 41.2.28).”

Are these chases really necessary? How many lives have to continually be lost before something is done? One of the emphasized subjects in this policy is ensuring the safety of all people. If this is so important, then why are innocent people constantly being put in danger? Often as I see high speed chases being reported on the news, I see innocent bystanders losing their lives, and the police are unable to catch the suspect. After reading the manual and looking at all of the conditions that need to be met before pursuit, I question if police follow all of these procedures. With a very lengthy set of rules, how can police really be involved with so many high speed chases? I think that the situations that govern a high speed chase need to be reevaluated because many of the people who get harmed were not even involved. What will it take for police to stop conducting chases? Maybe when police lose as many lives’ of police officers as innocent bystanders lose, the issue will be reconsidered.