

Technology may help police halt hot pursuits

By Larry Copeland, USA TODAY



Emerging technology could soon slam the brakes on high-speed police chases, which kill hundreds and injure thousands every year.

OnStar, the General Motors unit that manufactures GPS systems for vehicles, offers Stolen Vehicle Slowdown technology: An OnStar operator can send a signal to a stolen vehicle, restricting its fuel flow and slowing it to 3-5 mph. The technology is available on about 1 million 2009 GM vehicles, OnStar spokesman Jim Kobus says.

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Another company, Virginia Beach-based StarChase, is field-testing its Pursuit Management System. It's a laser-guided launcher on the front grill of a police car that fires projectiles that stick on fleeing vehicles, enabling police to track the car by GPS.

The system, which has been tested by the manufacturer in Columbus, Ohio, and Suffolk County, N.Y., is in final testing by the Los Angeles Police Department, StarChase spokeswoman Mandy McCall says.

"That kind of technology is exactly what we need," says Geoff Alpert, a criminology professor at the University of South Carolina. "One of the most powerful tools the police have is to turn off their lights and siren because the pursued suspect will slow down."

David Hiller, national vice president of the Fraternal Order of Police and chief of the 44-officer police department in Grosse Pointe Park, Mich., calls the OnStar technology "very effective."

"We have to engage in police chases," he says. "Any technology that assists us in preventing further police pursuit crashes is welcome."

Barry Steinhardt of the American Civil Liberties Union says the OnStar technology is fine as long as the vehicle's owner is the person reporting it stolen.

Last year, 424 people were killed in police chases, according to federal statistics. Alpert says the actual number is 800-900. More than 40,000 people die each year in crashes.

The technology raises hopes but is no magic solution, says Candy Priano, whose 15-year-old daughter, Kristie, was killed in a police chase in 2002. "The human element plays a far more integral part in chases than any technology," she says. "I hear the police saying, 'Our policy is restraint,' but I don't see them actually implementing it."

Priano, 56, says many chased suspects are accused of shoplifting and minor traffic violations. "None of these were murder, rape or pedophile suspects," says Priano of Chico, Calif. Her daughter was killed by a teen who had taken her mother's car and was fleeing police, Priano says. "They (police) knew her name," she says. "They knew her address. It was the mother who had called in."

READERS: Have you ever seen a high-speed police chase and felt that your safety might be threatened? Tell us about it below.

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