

MICHIGAN

Police pursuits kill more than a dozen Michiganians a year. What can change?

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Daziah Crawford was 19 years old when she died as the result of a police chase she wasn't involved in.

It was the first Sunday of August 2018, the hottest and most humid day of the month. Crawford and her younger brother, Dalyn, were a few blocks from their house on their way home from church. In a few weeks, she was supposed to go back to school at Eastern Michigan University, where she was pursuing her two biggest passions: journalism and performing arts.

That never happened. Instead, a woman fleeing Warren Police hit Crawford's car after the chase crossed into Detroit, winding into a residential neighborhood. It's not clear how fast the woman was going — witness reports estimate it was anywhere from 45 to 80 miles an hour — but the woman hit Crawford's door and sent her car spinning through the intersection, where it ripped a signpost out of the ground before finally coming to a rest.

Crawford was taken to the hospital, where she later died. Recounting the story five and a half years later, her mother, Natavia Frazier, said it feels like yesterday.

"Even to this day, I cannot understand why the police would pursue someone in a residential neighborhood like that," she said.

Crawford is one of nearly 100 people in Michigan killed by police chases between 2017 and 2022, according to new data gathered by the San Francisco Chronicle and made public. That number is likely low — as the Chronicle found, reporting leaves a lot of wiggle room when it

comes to deaths in police chases. The Detroit News, in a further analysis, found at least 20 additional fatalities across the state in 2023 and 2024, although that too may be low.

In more than half of these police chase deaths in Michigan from 2017 to 2022 — 56 of the 94 found by the Chronicle — the original chase stemmed from a suspected nonviolent crime or a traffic stop, although experts said it is sometimes discovered later that people may have more serious warrants. More than a quarter of the people killed were bystanders otherwise uninvolved in the chase, like Crawford, the Chronicle found.

In 2023 and 2024, similar patterns hold: Six of the 20 deaths found by The News, or 30%, were bystanders.

It can be difficult to say exactly how many police pursuits end someone's life in Michigan. There is debate about what even would be considered a fatality during a chase, experts said. There are also different and complex systems of counting crashes that could lead to different numbers from different government agencies.

In Crawford's case, Warren police pursued the woman who would hit Crawford's car into a residential neighborhood with narrow streets. Each department has its own standards for when officers should pursue suspects, but in reports released in recent years, experts said pursuits in local streets where pedestrians are likely are at a much higher risk for danger.

"If it hadn't been Daziah, it could have been kids outside playing. There's a park on the corner. It eludes me to this day," Frazier said.

Police pursuit policies in Michigan

There is no singular state law dictating how police pursuits should be handled. Instead, there is a patchwork series of policies that can vary widely from department to department.

Michigan State Police earlier this month changed its policy on pursuits. Under the new approach, troopers will only pursue "if there is a probable cause to believe the driver or occupant of the pursued vehicle has committed a life-threatening or violent felony," according to a release announcing the change.

In the release, Col. James F. Grady II, director of MSP, called high-speed chases "one of the most dangerous circumstances police officers face."

"A key consideration in any pursuit must be the seriousness of the underlying crime and whether the risks of a pursuit outweigh the public safety benefits of immediately apprehending the suspect," Grady said. "In all decisions, protecting lives — that of innocent bystanders, police officers and fleeing suspects — is of paramount importance."

MSP First Lieutenant Mike Shaw told The News that the state police policy had already been to not pursue suspects for misdemeanors. The policy change further limits the crimes State Police troopers might pursue, narrowing the focus to only violent crimes.

"A stolen vehicle is a felony, for example, but it doesn't rise to that level," Shaw said. "If someone killed someone and is now on the run, that would be a different circumstance."

The change is designed to help decrease the danger involved in police chases. MSP was involved in more than 230 chases annually in 2022 and 2023, the agency said in a news release. The state agency did not respond to a request for numbers from further back before press time.

But, as Shaw noted, the state police do not "police the police" or set policies for other local agencies. Each builds its own, which is generally in line with its accrediting body but can vary wildly.

Crash death numbers vary

The result is that police pursuit fatalities can vary. The National Highway Safety Administration shows 50 fatalities as the result of police pursuits in Michigan between 2017 and 2021, the latest data available. Michigan Traffic Crash Facts, a collaborative effort between the state's Office of Highway Safety Planning and the University of Michigan among other entities, reported 69 fatalities under the same parameters. The Chronicle team found 81 in that same period.

NHSTA, in a statement to The News, said its data collection includes fatalities that are accidental (for instance, the driver fleeing police loses control and crashes) but not those that result from legal intervention (if a fleeing driver crashes into a roadblock put up by police). It has analysts looking at data from all states, making the dataset more dynamic than what may be found at the single-state level.

Michigan Traffic Facts uses closed data sets, said Patrick Bowman, the statistician lead with the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute, which means what they use may later be edited with additional information. The Chronicle data combines NHTSA data with reports found independently and with assistance from researchers at a variety of organizations that track police deaths. Further Detroit News analysis reviewed similar reports, including media reports on crashes.

"It all comes down to what you want to consider the 'real number' to be," Bowman said. "We're all looking at similar things, but it is slightly different."

What the Chronicle data shows is this: Crashes are more likely to happen in Michigan's largest cities. The Detroit Police Department, with 13 pursuits ending in fatalities between 2017 and 2021, leads the state. MSP had eight in the same time period, something Shaw attributed to the fact that the state police covers the entire state.

In a statement, the Detroit Police Department said it couldn't confirm that number "at this time."

"However, factors that likely have bearing on this issue include the suspect-driver's reckless driving coupled with the city's traffic density and geography," the statement said.

Fatal police chases are more likely in areas with a higher number of people, which tracks with what can be seen across the country. There are two potential reasons, experts agreed: More people means a higher likelihood for a police chase and an increased likelihood that a resulting fatality would receive media coverage and be included in the data set.

Changes in pursuit policy

Increasingly, policing experts are encouraging departments to consider alternatives to chases as part of "restrictive" pursuit policies. In the 2023 report cited by Michigan State Police as part of its policy change, the Police Executive Research Forum, in conjunction with NHTSA and the U.S. Department of Justice's office of Community Oriented Police Services, urged departments to have an assessment of risk be a considerable factor in the decision to pursue suspects. Such assessments ask: Will the threat to the community be greater if this suspect is not immediately apprehended?

That includes a variety of factors: What might the speeds look like, particularly if the chase cuts through a residential area? What are the weather and road conditions? If a suspect's identity is known, might he or she be apprehended later?

The report's recommendation is that "pursuits be authorized only for a suspect wanted for a violent crime," which it said should be clearly defined. By most considerations, that might include someone who is believed to be on an active crime spree and would likely continue to victimize people. Some policies, the report noted, allows police to pursue people for "reckless driving," but it warned against that: "A driver who is already operating recklessly may take even more risks to escape police, so deciding not to pursue the suspect may reduce risk to the community."

It's what helped form the basis of MSP's recent change, Shaw said. But other departments said their circumstances require a different policy.

In Detroit, the department said it has placed "a greater emphasis on officer and citizen safety and heavier reliance on alternatives to police pursuits." The department requires officers to consider the "seriousness of the offense" and risks involved and to alert zone dispatchers.

"As a general matter, members may only initiate or participate in a vehicle pursuit where there is probable cause to believe the suspect committed a violent felony," the department said in a statement, adding that in the past, Detroit officers were authorized to chase for "most felonies" but the policy has since changed to only violent felonies.

In Warren, Michigan's third-most populous city, Acting Police Commissioner Charles Rushton said his department considers each chase on an individual basis, informed by what is being reported by officers but also live access to the cameras on their cars and bodies.

Warren, which has had four pursuits end in casualties since 2017, does not have a policy to only pursue those believed to have committed a violent felony. Lt. John Gajewski, who works in internal affairs for Warren Police, said he wasn't sure comparing Warren's policies with those of state police is "necessarily fair," since the MSP often operates with freeway traffic and in more rural areas, whereas Warren police officers are working on surface streets and more directly in neighborhoods.

"Our policy — that obviously I agree with, because I haven't changed it — is that every single pursuit needs to be judged on a case-by-case basis," Rushton said. "We do find that in the

vast majority of our pursuits that when we arrest someone, they're either already wanted for more serious felonies or have committed more serious felonies."

Rushton, who was a supervisor on shift at the time of the crash that killed Crawford, said he isn't sure that anything could have been done differently in that 2018 chase. It was short, he pointed out, adding that he believes it was the act of fleeing from police that caused the accident rather than the chase itself.

He said he doesn't necessarily disagree with MSP's change, but he feared that a blanket policy in Warren for only pursuing people suspected of violent crimes would lead to more people simply hitting the gas to try to evade police and get away with the crime. Shaw emphasized that state police troopers are still seeking to apprehend people suspected of crimes, just without a chase. Studies in Virginia have shown no evidence that restrictive pursuit policies would increase crime.

"Their policy wouldn't have prevented this tragedy," Rushton said about the Crawford death.

After Daziah's death

Frazier, Crawford's mom, said she doesn't know if justice has been served, even though Alyssa Verbeke, the woman who hit Daziah and Dalyn, is in prison. Now, she said she hopes to see more changes to pursuit laws in ways that prioritize safety for everyone.

"I keep hearing about innocent bystanders like Daziah, seeing it on the news," Frazier said. "It feels like it never ends well. I hope we can adopt a law at the city level that would change the statistics (on pursuits ending in fatalities) very quickly."

A lawyer for Verbeke did not return a request for comment. Verbeke, who is held at the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility, will not be eligible for parole before 2033. If she serves out her maximum sentence, she will be in prison until August 2048 — one day before the 30-year anniversary of the crash.

But Crawford's family doesn't like to dwell on that. They've tried to move on, celebrating her life and her passions even if she's not around the celebrate with them. It's not hard: Everyone who met Crawford loved her deeply, Frazier said. She had the kind of personality people wanted to be around. She loved making friends.

To continue to honor her, they launched the Daziah T. Crawford Foundation, which gives scholarships to students with the same passions Crawford had. The scholarship is worth \$750 right now, Frazier said, but the organization is slowly working its way up to one day raising enough money to cover a student's full need.

Arts programs are often the first cut when schools face budgetary concerns, and it can be difficult to find scholarships in the same way. To help support the students interested in the things Crawford loved brings Frazier closer to them and to her daughter's memory. Hearing from parents who are excited their own children are following their passions is "perfect," she said.

"I get to see a little piece of Daziah in each one of those students as they pursue their dreams," Frazier said. "They become family. It's beautiful in that way."

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