

## **Police pursuit deaths, Victoria 2000-2011**

### **1. Background**

The Coroners Prevention Unit (CPU) prepared a revised and updated research summary regarding Victorian police pursuit deaths, 2000-2011, at the direction of Coroner Peter White.<sup>26</sup>

### **2. Method**

Comment 1 above refers:

For the purposes of this study, Coroner White directed that the CPU use the Office of Police Integrity (OPI) definition of a 'police pursuit death': "Any death related to an active or abandoned police pursuit, and any other death related to a police vehicle following another vehicle".<sup>27</sup>

The CPU limited the scope of the OPI definition by adding the requirement that the cause of death must be related to the pursuit, such as a motor vehicle crash. A death where (for example) a person is pursued by police then climbs out of the motor vehicle and jumps off a bridge, is not included because it involves issues potentially unrelated to the conduct of the police pursuit itself.

The CPU searched coronial databases and Victoria Police Use of Force material to identify all deaths that met the definition for a police pursuit death and were reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2011. For each relevant death, the CPU recorded a number of variables regarding the deceased and the fatal police pursuit into a spreadsheet.

### **3. Deaths and incidents**

The CPU identified 47 police pursuit deaths reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2011. Among these, 39 deaths were identified on the basis of a completed coroner's investigation that established the police pursuit context. The other eight deaths were still under investigation as at 30 January 2012, and were identified as probable police pursuit deaths on the basis of available case file material. The CPU emphasises that these eight deaths still under

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26 The original research summary was attached as Attachment B to Coroner White's finding in the death of Shane Bennett, which was delivered on 23 March 2012. Following this, Victoria Police contacted the CPU to discuss identification of police pursuit deaths. Through this process, the Coroners Prevention Unit identified four police pursuit deaths occurring in two incidents in 2003 and 2004, which it had not reported in its original research summary. These deaths and incidents are incorporated into the present research summary.

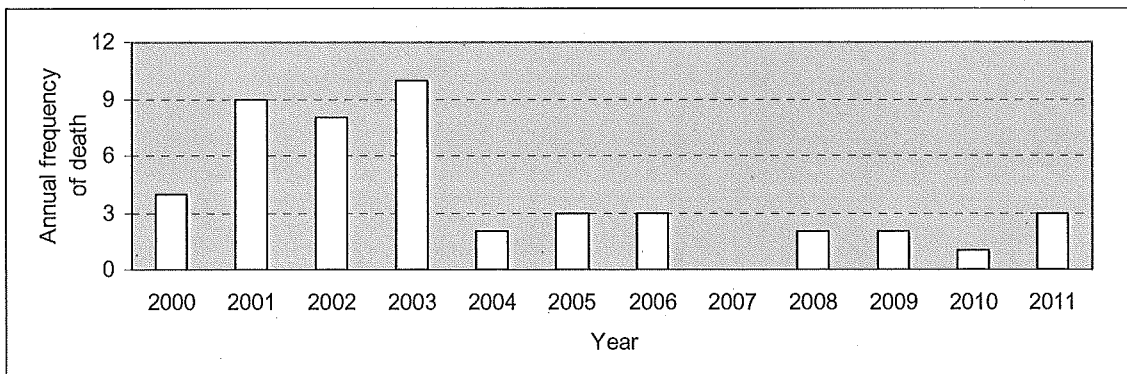
27 Office of Police Integrity, "Review of the investigation of deaths associated with police contact: Issues paper", October 2010, p.21.

investigation are included provisionally, pending a final coronial determination on the circumstances of death.

The 47 police pursuit deaths occurred across 37 fatal police pursuit incidents: 29 incidents in which one person died, six incidents in which two people died, and two incidents in which three people died.

#### 4. Analysis of deaths

Figure 1 shows the annual frequency of Victoria police pursuit deaths for each year from 2000 to 2011. There was a downward trend in annual frequency, with a peak of 10 deaths in 2003 and between none and three in each year 2004-2011.



**Figure 1:** Annual frequency of police pursuit deaths, Victoria 2000-2011.

In Table 1, the 47 Victorian police pursuit deaths are classified by the role that the deceased played in the police pursuit.

**Table 1:** Police pursuit deaths by role of deceased in police pursuit, Victoria 2000-2011.

Role that deceased played	n	%
Driver in motor car being pursued	17	36.2%
Passenger in motor car being pursued	15	31.9%
Passenger in third party motor car	4	8.5%
Rider on motorcycle being pursued	4	8.5%
Driver in third party motor car	3	6.4%
Rider on third party motorcycle	2	4.3%
Pillion passenger on motorcycle being pursued	1	2.1%
Pedestrian third party	1	2.1%
<i>Total police pursuit deaths</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

Table 1 shows that for 21 deaths (44.7%), the deceased was the driver of a motor vehicle (car or motorcycle) that was being pursued by police. For 16 deaths (34.0%) the deceased was a passenger in a motor vehicle (car or motorcycle) that was being pursued by police. For 10 deaths (21.3%), the deceased was a third party not involved in the police pursuit itself. It is noted that no police officer died in any fatal police pursuit.

The CPU divided the deceased into three broad groups based on the nature of their role in the police pursuit:

- The 'pursuit driver' group, being the 21 deceased who were driving a motor vehicle that was pursued by police.
- The 'pursuit passenger' group, being the 16 deceased who were passengers in motor vehicles that were pursued by police.
- The 'third party' group, being the 10 deceased who were not involved in a police pursuit.

Table 2 shows the sex profile for the deceased in each of these three broad groups. Males comprised the majority of deceased in both the 'pursuit driver' and 'pursuit passenger' groups, but the approximately equal numbers of males and females were found among the 'third party' group.

**Table 2:** Sex of police pursuit deceased, by deceased role in the police pursuit, Victoria 2000-2011.

<b>Role in police pursuit</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>All</b>
'Pursuit driver' group	20	1	21
'Pursuit passenger' group	13	3	16
'Third party' group	6	4	10
<i>All deceased</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>47</i>

Table 3 shows the age profile for deceased in each of these three broad groups. In both the 'pursuit driver' and 'pursuit passenger' groups, the deceased were far younger than in the 'third party' group. These findings demonstrate that motor vehicle drivers who die while being pursued by police, or shortly after the police pursuit is called off, are overwhelmingly young males. Similarly, passengers in the motor vehicles who died during or shortly after police pursuit, are most likely to be young males.

**Table 3:** Age profile of police pursuit deceased, by deceased role in the police pursuit, Victoria 2000-2011.

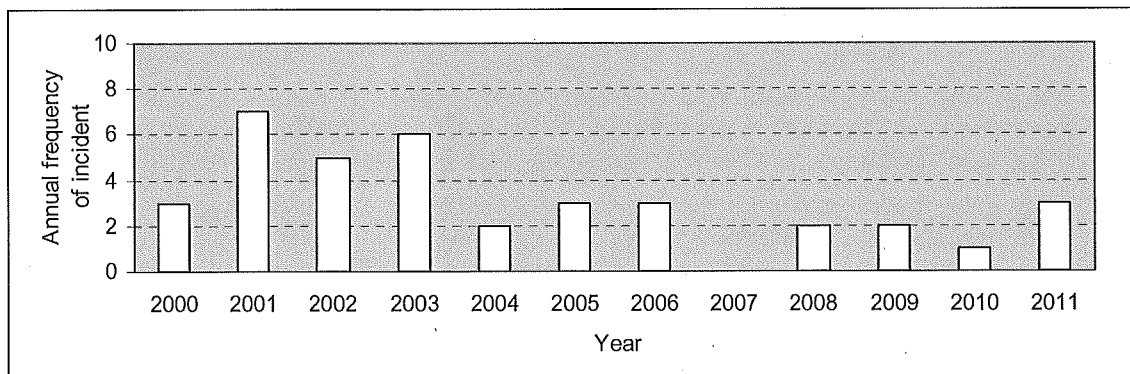
<b>Role in police pursuit</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Average age</b>	<b>Median age</b>
'Pursuit Driver' group	14-39 years	22.9 years	22 years
'Pursuit Passenger' group	12-26 years	18.6 years	18 years
'Third party' group	19-72 years	43.9 years	42 years
<i>All deceased</i>	<i>12-72 years</i>	<i>25.9 years</i>	<i>21 years</i>

## 5. Analysis of incidents

As already noted, the 47 police pursuit deaths occurred in the context of 37 fatal police pursuit incidents. Figure 2 shows the annual frequency of fatal police pursuit incidents for each year from 2000 to 2011.

The CPU notes that for each year between 2000 and 2003 there was at least one incident involving multiple police pursuit deaths; for example in 2002 one incident

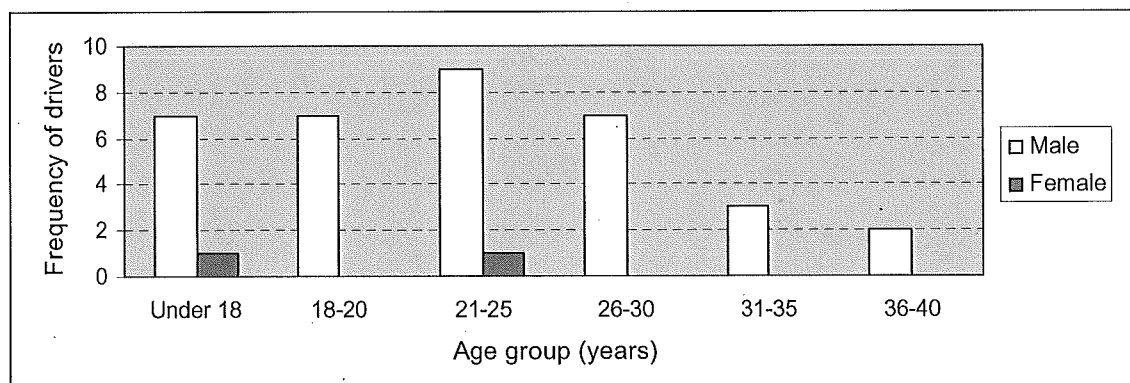
accounted for three police pursuit deaths and another incident accounted for two police pursuit deaths. By contrast, in the years from 2004 to 2011 there were no incidents in which multiple police pursuit deaths occurred.



**Figure 2:** Annual frequency of fatal police pursuit death incidents, Victoria 2000-2011.

Given that 21 deceased were drivers pursued by police, it follows that in 16 fatal police pursuit incidents the driver being pursued did not die. The CPU reviewed the court material and, where necessary, searched other information sources such as online news archives, to identify the sex and age of the 16 drivers who were pursued by police but did not die in the fatal police pursuit incident.

Figure 3 shows the age group by sex for the 37 drivers who were pursued in fatal police pursuit incidents.



**Figure 3:** Frequency of pursued drivers involved in fatal police pursuit incidents by sex and age group, Victoria 2000-2011.

Male drivers (n = 35, 94.6%) were involved in far more fatal police pursuit incidents than females (n = 2, 5.4%). Eight of the 37 drivers (21.6%) were under 18 years, and seven were aged between 18 and 20 years (18.9%), suggesting that they were unlicensed or probationary drivers. The majority of drivers (n = 25, 67.7%) were aged 25 years or under, suggesting that they did not have extensive driving experience.

Table 4 shows the general circumstances in which the 37 fatal police pursuit incidents commenced.

**Table 4:** Circumstances in which fatal police pursuit incidents commenced, Victoria 2000-2011.

<b>Circumstances</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Police observed road rule violation	12	32.4%
Police observed suspicious driver behaviour or vehicle	7	18.9%
Police were alerted about vehicle or driver prior to making contact	7	18.9%
Unknown	7	18.9%
Vehicle appeared to flee from police	4	10.8%
<i>All police pursuits</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>100%</i>

The Table 4 data suggests that most fatal police pursuits (n = 23, 62.1%) were unplanned in that they were initiated in response to police observations of driver behaviour. There were seven fatal pursuits (18.9%) where police were alerted in advance to look out for a particular driver or vehicle and then subsequently encountered that driver or vehicle and commenced to follow or pursue.

Table 5 shows the circumstances in which the fatal incidents occurred. The majority of fatal incidents (n = 22, 59.4%) resulted from the pursued vehicle leaving the road and colliding with a fixed or stationary object - usually a light pole or fence - or rolling. However a substantial proportion of the fatal incidents (n = 15, 40.6%) involved a collision with a third party vehicle or pedestrian.

**Table 5:** Circumstances in which fatal police pursuit incidents occurred, Victoria 2000-2011.

<b>Circumstances of fatal incident</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Pursued vehicle left road, collided with fixed or stationary object	21	56.8%
Pursued vehicle collided with third party (unrelated) vehicle	14	37.8%
Pursued vehicle left road and overturned	1	2.7%
Pursued vehicle collided with third party (unrelated) pedestrian	1	2.7%
<i>All police pursuits</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>100%</i>

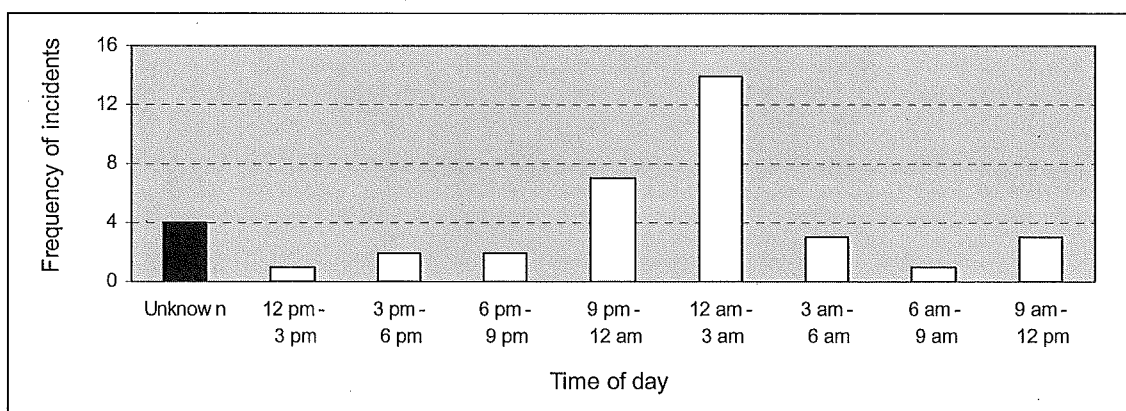
The CPU further examined the circumstances to establish whether police were following the motor vehicle at the time the fatal incident occurred. The CPU found that in 32 of the 37 fatal incidents (86.5%) police were following the vehicle, regardless of whether a police pursuit was technically underway. The other five fatal incidents occurred when police were not following the vehicle.

Table 6 shows the location of the 37 fatal police pursuit incidents, classified according to the road type and region (Metropolitan Melbourne or rural) where they occurred. Fatal police pursuit incidents were relatively evenly distributed between Metropolitan Melbourne and rural regions. In Metropolitan Melbourne, most incidents occurred on roads or streets, whereas in rural regions a slight majority of deaths occurred on highways and freeways.

**Table 6:** Locations of fatal police pursuit incidents, Victoria 2000-2011.

Region	Highway/Freeway	Road/Street	Other	Total
Metro Melbourne	1	13	1	15
Rural	12	10	0	22
<i>All locations</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>37</i>

Figure 4 shows the frequency of Victorian fatal police pursuit incidents, 2000-2011, by the time of day the fatality occurred. The peak time was 12 am to 3 am (n = 14, 37.8%), followed by 9 pm to 12 am (n = 7, 18.9%).



**Figure 4:** Frequency of fatal police pursuit incidents by time of day, Victoria 2000-2011.

## 6. Conclusions

The CPU identified 47 Victorian police pursuit deaths that occurred in the period 2000-2011. The annual frequency of Victorian police pursuit deaths declined notably across the period, from a peak of 10 deaths in 2003 through to an average of two deaths per year in 2008-2011.

Among the 47 Victorian police pursuit deaths that occurred between 2000 and 2011, the CPU found that 21 deceased (44.7%) were the drivers of motor vehicles being pursued by police, 16 deceased (34.0%) were passengers in or on motor vehicles being pursued by police, and 10 deceased (21.3%) were bystanders. Put another way, the majority of people who died in police pursuit deaths (n = 26, 55.3%) were not the drivers of cars being pursued. This finding demonstrates that a police pursuit puts at risk the lives of people who do not necessarily have any control over the driver's actions.

The CPU found that the deceased drivers of motor vehicles being pursued by police were mainly male (20 males versus one female) and young (median age 22 years), as were the deceased passengers in motor vehicles being pursued by police (13 males versus three females, median age 18 years). This is congruent with broader research findings that young people - particularly males - have a diminished capacity to think through the consequences of high-risk behaviours.

Among the 37 fatal police pursuit incidents that occurred between 2000 and 2011, the overwhelming majority of the drivers being pursued were male (n = 35, 94.6%) and young (median age 20 years). This is consistent with the previous reported finding, and suggests that youth, impulsivity and risk-taking may be factors in a driver decision to flee police. It also suggests that the drivers might not be particularly experienced, which may contribute to the fatal outcomes.

The CPU found that the majority of fatal police pursuit incidents (n = 23, 62.1%) were unplanned, in that they were initiated in response to police observations of driver behaviour such as speeding, running red lights, or suspicious driving. Seven fatal pursuits (18.9%) occurred after police were alerted in advance to look out for a particular driver or vehicle and then encountered that driver or vehicle and commenced to follow or pursue.

The majority of fatal incidents (n = 22, 59.4%) resulted from the pursued vehicle leaving the road and colliding with a fixed or stationary object - usually a light pole or fence - or rolling. However a substantial minority of the fatal incidents (n = 15, 40.6%) involved a collision with a third party vehicle or pedestrian, further emphasising the danger that police pursuits present to bystanders who become involved through no fault of their own. At the time of the fatal incident, police were in pursuit of the vehicle in 32 (86.5%) incidents, and were not following or pursuing the vehicle in the other five (13.5%) incidents.

Fatal police pursuit incidents occurred all over Victoria, in Metropolitan Melbourne as well as in rural regions, on streets and roads as well as on highways and freeways. No particular areas stood out as 'hot spots' for fatal incidents which could be targeted for specific interventions.

## **7. Postscript**

In the first four weeks of 2012, four deaths occurred in three incidents that on the available evidence appear to be possible police pursuits. In due course Coroners will complete their investigations, and establish the circumstances of these deaths.