



For cops, no limit

Speeds reaching 90-130 mph are common among police

Even when there's no emergency, even when they're off duty

Punishment is rare, despite crashes and deaths

BY SALLY KESTIN AND JOHN MAINES | Staff writers

We've all seen it, and now there's proof: Police officers sworn to uphold our traffic laws are among the worst speeders on South Florida roads.

A three-month Sun Sentinel investigation found almost 800 cops from a dozen agencies driving 90 to 130 mph on our highways.

Many weren't even on duty — they were commuting to and from work in their take-home patrol cars.

The extent of the problem uncovered by the newspaper shocked South Florida's police brass. All the agencies started internal investigations.

"Excessive speed," Margate Police Chief Jerry Blough warned his officers, is a "blatant violation of public trust."

The evidence came from police SunPass toll records. The Sun Sentinel obtained a year's worth, hit the highways with a GPS device and figured out how fast the cops were driving based on the distance and time it took to go from one toll plaza to the next.

Speeding cops can kill. Since 2004, Florida officers exceeding the speed limit have caused at least 320 crashes and 19 deaths. Only one officer went to jail — for 60 days.

A cop with a history of on-the-job wrecks smashed into South Florida college student

Erskin Bell Jr. as he waited at a red light in Central Florida three years ago, hitting him at 104 mph. Bell is now severely brain-damaged.

"Every day, you pray for a miracle," said his father, Erskin Bell Sr. "Had this officer's behavior been dealt with, maybe he would not have run into our son."

Law enforcement officers have been notoriously reluctant to stop their own for speeding, and the criminal justice system has proven no tougher at punishing lead-foot cops, records show.

That sense of impunity infuriates many Floridians. Those concerns erupted in October, when a state trooper clocked Miami Police Officer Fausto Lopez driving 120 mph through Broward County on his way to a moonlighting job.

"They think that they have carte blanche. Who's going to catch them? Who's going to do anything about it?" said state Sen. Steve Oelrich, a Gainesville Republican and former sheriff.

"Something needs to be done."

It's hard to drive more than a few days on Florida's Turnpike or Interstate 95 without witnessing a squad car from a different city rocket by in the fast lane. But just how many cops were flooring it, and how often, remained a mystery —

“Speeding is a big problem. It’s a big problem not only for us but for every other police department.”

Maj. Nancy Perez, Miami-Dade Police spokeswoman

until now.

The Sun Sentinel uncovered the answers by digging into the officers’ toll records. The findings:

- 793 transponders assigned to police agencies from Miami-Dade to Palm Beach counties showed evidence of speeding — and habitual speeding by some officers.

- One out of five police cars hit speeds above 90 mph.

- Total high-speed incidents: 5,100 in a 13-month period.

- Most of the high speeds — 96 percent — were between 90 and 110 mph.

- Many of the officers did not appear to be rushing to save lives or fight crime. More than half of the high-speed incidents involved city cops outside their jurisdictions, many of them driving regular routes most likely to or from work.

In Broward County, cops from a half-dozen departments — Davie, Fort Lauderdale, Margate, Pembroke Pines, Plantation and Sunrise — were clocked going above 90 mph at least once outside the cities where they work.

“If we have officers who are not responding to an emergency and they’re driving to or from work at 100 mph, I have a problem with that, and so does the chief,” said Plantation Police Detective Robert Rettig. “If an officer is found in violation, they’ll be disciplined.”

Sheriff’s deputies also drove at excessive speeds but their countywide jurisdiction makes it harder to tell whether they were working.

Almost 30 percent of the transponders assigned to the Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office showed speeds above 90 mph, mostly within the county. The Sheriff’s Office is investigating and will discipline deputies found speeding without justification, a spokeswoman said

At the Broward Sheriff’s Office, 18 percent of the transponders registered speeds above 90 and



Erskin and Phillipa Bell, of Ocoee, care for their son Erskin Jr., who was hit by a Central Florida officer going 104 mph in November 2008.

Tom Benitez/Orlando Sentinel

as high as 122 mph, the SunPass analysis found. Sheriff Al Lamberti ordered his commanders to determine what the deputies were doing and whether the speeds were justified, said spokesman Jim Leljedal. The deputies included a supervisor and K-9 officers, who are frequently called to emergencies, he said.

Driver Vince Martinelli of Lake Worth sees it all the time: Cops speeding past him on the turnpike.

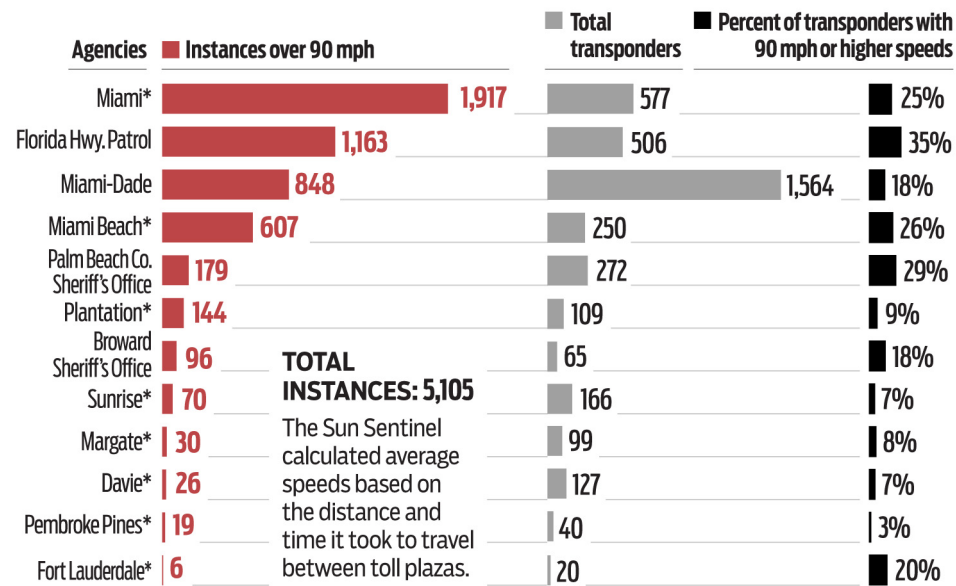
“I’m going 70, and they go flying by me,” he said. “These are policemen who live in Palm Beach County and work in Broward County.”

Cops drove the fastest from late at night to 6 a.m., when shifts change and traffic is lightest.

Miami officers were among the most chronic speeders, with 143 of them driving over 90 mph — all outside city limits, the SunPass analysis found. More than 50 Miami cops broke 100 mph — one more than 100 times.

Speeding rampant in some agencies

Not all South Florida police cars have SunPass transponders. Of those that do, as many as 35 percent reached speeds more than 90 mph at least once in a 13-month period.



SOURCES: SunPass, Sun Sentinel research

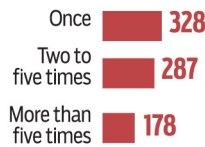
*All excessive speeds were outside jurisdictions. Data from October 2010 through November 2011.

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CINDY JONES-HULFACHOR/STAFF ARTIST

Speeding frequency

Some South Florida cops drove at excessive speeds much more often than others from October 2010 through November 2011.

Number of times that a transponder went above 90 mph*

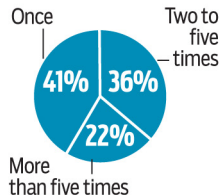


*Average speed between toll plazas

Percentages are rounded.

SOURCES: SunPass, Sun Sentinel research

Percent of time that a transponder went above 90 mph

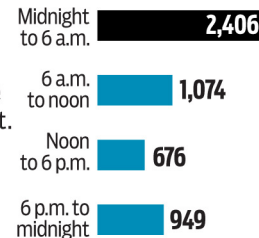


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Time to speed

Cops drove the fastest last year in the late night and early morning, when traffic on the highways is lightest. Speeds above 90 mph mostly occurred before 6 a.m.

Instances above 90 mph



Based on Sun Sentinel analysis of SunPass toll records for police agencies from Davie, Fort Lauderdale, Margate, Miami, Miami-Dade, Miami Beach, Pembroke Pines, Plantation, Sunrise, Broward Sheriff's Office, Florida Highway Patrol and Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, October 2010 through November 2011.

SOURCES: SunPass, Sun Sentinel research

JOHN MAINES and SALLY KESTIN/RESEARCH
CINDY JONES-HULFACHOR/STAFF ARTIST

"How disturbing," said Miami Police Maj. Jorge Colina. "Clearly it's a problem we need to deal with."

The Miami cop who drove the fastest on the turnpike hit 125 mph one morning about 4 a.m. The speed leader on the Gratigny Expressway reached 117 mph and drove over 100 mph on 36 days.

At the Miami Beach Police Department, 54 officers drove over 90 mph as far away as Palm Beach County, the analysis found. Many hit speeds over 100 mph.

Some of the speeding could be justified if the cops were off-duty and called into work for an emergency, said Raymond Martinez, Miami Beach's assistant police chief. But he said some



Fellow officers attend the funeral of rookie Miami-Dade Police Officer Giovanni Gonzalez, who was killed when he drove his patrol car into a dump truck while going nearly 100 mph for no apparent reason.

El Nuevo Herald/File photo

may speed simply because they know they can.

"I really don't have an explanation for what goes through an individual's mind to think they can go 100 mph without consequences," Martinez said. "Is it because they're in a marked car and another agency isn't going to stop them? Maybe."

SPEEDING ON THE JOB

Some on-duty cops clearly drove much faster than allowed even for the most serious emergencies, the Sun Sentinel found.

Florida law allows officers to exceed the speed limit for an emergency, as long as they can do it safely. Most South Florida police agencies, including the sheriff's offices in Broward and Palm Beach counties, do not set a cap on how fast cops can drive to a call.

At the Miami-Dade Police Department, a countywide agency, officers are required to stay within 20 mph of the speed limit even in the most serious emergencies, such as responding to shootings, according to department policy. That means a top speed of 75 to 90 mph, depending on the highway speed limit.

That policy is not always followed, the Sun Sentinel found: More than 270 Miami-Dade cops drove over 90 mph and as fast as 115 mph.

"That is very disturbing," said Maj. Nancy Perez, the department's spokeswoman. "Speeding is a big problem. It's a big problem not only for us but for every other police department."

A former road patrol officer, Perez said she understands "the urgency to get to either a citizen that is calling the police or assisting another officer."

"But still, it has to be done with a conscious mind of what could happen not only to you, but you could also cause an accident and hurt someone else," she said.

Florida Highway Patrol troopers drove the fastest among the cops examined, at speeds as high as 130 mph, according to the SunPass records. FHP began an internal review of the Sun Sentinel's analysis to determine whether the troopers were off-duty or working, and if so, what they were doing at the time.

Troopers will be held accountable if their actions did not contribute to a "safe driving environment," said FHP Capt. Mark Brown, an agency spokesman.

FHP policy requires troopers to obey the speed limit unless they're chasing a law breaker. Then they're expected to stay within 15 mph of the limit but can go faster if they can drive safely and "the gravity of the situation so warrants."

"If somebody goes by at 120," Brown said, "we can't go 85 to catch him."

POLICING THEIR OWN

The internal police investigations prompted by the Sun Sentinel will take several weeks to complete. Spokesmen said unnecessary speeding, on or off duty, will be punished.

"We write speeding tickets. ... It's not very prudent to be out violating the very laws that we enforce," said Miami Police Maj. Delrish Moss. "We'll investigate ... and we'll take the appropriate action."

Police have only recently begun to seriously address a problem that they acknowledge has

persisted for years.

Last fall, Miami police began undercover radar stings of their officers, nabbing a dozen on one stakeout, Colina said. The department is now considering going so far as to equip police cars with “governors” that prevent the engines from exceeding a certain speed. They may consider GPS devices that track a vehicle’s location and speed by satellite.

Fort Lauderdale police are one of the few South Florida departments currently using GPS in patrol cars to monitor and discipline officers for speeding, though most of the punishments have been written reprimands. “We take it seriously because it’s been an issue,” said Police Chief Frank Adderley.

GPS is also coming soon to patrol cars in Miami Beach. “My first and foremost thing is stopping the behavior,” Martinez said.

The Miami-Dade Police Department holds driver training courses and posts signs in its parking lots urging officers to drive safely. One reason: It’s not just civilians who are victims of speeding cops. In 2009, Miami-Dade police buried one of their own — Giovanni Gonzalez, a 23-year-old rookie who rear-ended a dump truck while driving nearly 100 mph for no apparent reason.

“It’s very heart-wrenching when you have to go to a memorial or a remembrance and look at these families destroyed with questions: ‘Why is this happening?’” Perez said. “We don’t have an answer for them.”

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THREE-PART SERIES

The Sun Sentinel investigated a year’s worth of SunPass data for Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties and found police speeding is rampant and rarely punished.

Today: 90-plus mph is common, even when cops are off duty.

Monday: High-speed cop crashes leave lives in ruin.

Tuesday: Police culture condones speeding.