



Speeding cops get punished

44 detectives hit 90 mph or more at least 400 times

BY SALLY KESTIN | Staff writer

Forty-four Miami-Dade Police detectives who drove 90 mph or faster more than 400 times while on and off duty are being disciplined in the widest-ranging result to date of the Sun Sentinel's investigation of police speeding.

The Miami-Dade cops, at the wheels of unmarked vehicles, drove faster on duty than policy permits even in the most serious emergency, said Maj. Nancy Perez, a department spokeswoman. About half of the time, they were speeding off duty.

The officers will receive a "counseling" acknowledging the violation, and 39 are losing their take-home cars for a month. Most will also have to attend an eight-hour driver safety training course.

"All law enforcement officers must be fully aware of the ethical responsibilities of their position and must strive constantly to live up to the highest possible standards of professional policing," James Loftus, director of the countywide department, said in a statement.

The crackdown follows a Sun Sentinel investigative series published in February that found South Florida police officers blatantly violating the laws they're sworn to uphold, driving at excessive speeds often while commuting to and from work.

Using SunPass toll records, the investigation

revealed almost 800 cops from a dozen agencies drove 90 to 130 mph at least once over a 13-month period. Many were habitual speeders.

Police conducted their own investigations to verify the newspaper's results. A total of 138 officers have now been punished, including 36 from the city of Miami, 31 Florida Highway Patrol troopers and 27 cops from four departments in Broward — Plantation, Sunrise, Margate and Davie.

The epidemic of police speeding has infuriated South Florida motorists, who called it a double standard for officers who write tickets yet ignore the law when they're behind the wheel. And until now, cops largely got away with it, racing to and from work in police vehicles, unlikely to be pulled over by one of their own.

The clampdown is being cheered by ordinary drivers, happy to see cops finally held accountable. But public opinion is mixed over whether the punishment is enough.

The most severe discipline has come in Miami, where the police chief has said one or more officers will be fired.

Most of the speeding cops are losing take-home cars for anywhere from a few days to six months. And the consequences for some are as slight as a reprimand — the equivalent of a slap on the wrist, some South Florida motorists have complained.

Ordinary drivers caught going 90 or 100 mph would likely be fined and face an insurance rate hike and points on their driver's license. Police officers "should be at least subject to the same consequences as every other driver on the road who breaks the law," said Mel Pollock, a Boca Raton retiree.

Police brass say the punishment is appropriate.

"Anyone in this country can speed, and you don't lose your job," Miami police Chief Manuel Orosa said in an interview this month. "But in police work, if you speed you're open to losing your job."

Even a reprimand stays on an officer's record and is taken into account for future violations and promotions, said the chief's head of internal affairs, Maj. Jorge Colina.

"It's not as easy as going to court and paying a fine and that's that," said Colina, who led his department's speeding investigation. "On the surface, it may not seem like it's a lot, but in fact it is."

Charles Miller of Davie, a retired Miami-Dade Police captain, called the discipline a necessary first step. Responsible driving needs to be drilled in to officers starting with recruits in the police academies, and supervisors must keep constant watch to stop unnecessary speeding, he said.

"The bottom line is that those same officers

who would stop you and I for speeding have no business violating the same traffic laws that they enforce on a daily basis, yet they do it far too frequently," Miller said. "For far too long, this has been a significant problem and the results in terms of injuries, deaths, lawsuits and ruined careers are staggering."

Doug Spence, manager of a Pompano Beach electrical contractor, said he believes the message is finally sinking in: "Hey guys, you're not above the law."

Spence said he has frequently witnessed police speeding on his weekly travels between Central and South Florida.

"I see it all the time — an out of area police officer just flying down the road," he said. "You know he's not going to a call."

But Spence and some other drivers believe there's been a perceptible change in behavior since the crackdown on speeding, and not just among police.

"I have noticed a great improvement on the roads," said Jean Feuillet, a Fort Lauderdale real estate agent. "Now that cops are driving at or around the speed limit, drivers are slowing down a bit."

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