



Cops hitting the brakes

New data show excessive speeding dropped
84% since investigation

BY SALLY KESTIN AND JOHN MAINES | Staff writers

The trend is dramatic and definite: South Florida cops have slowed down big time.

The Sun Sentinel examined new SunPass data and found police speeding has dropped significantly since the newspaper published its “Above the Law” investigative series in February.

The investigation found nearly 800 officers from a dozen agencies averaging 90 to 130 mph between highway tollbooths. Many of those lead-foot cops were speeding to and from work.

SunPass toll records for the same agencies from mid-February through October show an 84 percent drop in high-speed incidents over the same period last year, the Sun Sentinel has calculated.

“It seems like the message has been received by South Florida law enforcement to slow down,” Margate Police Chief Dana Watson said.

The records show excessive speeding by cops to and from work in their take-home cars virtually ended in late spring as police departments began disciplining officers based on the newspaper’s investigation.

In Broward County, cops became much more mindful of the speed limit. Officers from Davie, Plantation and Sunrise hit speeds over 90 mph a total of only 10 times, compared to 160 times last year.

A SunPass transponder assigned to a Pembroke Pines officer who had been commuting through Miami-Dade County as fast as 105 mph never registered a speed above 79 mph.

In Fort Lauderdale and Margate, no cop with a transponder drove above 90 mph after the Sun Sentinel investigation, according to the records.

High-speed incidents overall fell to 495, down from 3,179 during the same period in 2011.

Some South Florida commuters have noticed.

“I see them speeding a little bit, but not to the extent they were before,” said Scott Spizman of Plantation, who drives 100 miles a day to and from his job in West Palm Beach. “It seems a lot safer out there.”

The new trend captured by the data shows:

- Cops at 11 of the 12 law enforcement agencies examined in the Sun Sentinel series slowed down in 2012. (For the 12th, the Miami-Dade Police Department, SunPass records are no longer available).

- Only one in 13 police cars registered speeds above 90 mph, compared to one in four last year.

- Habitual speeding stopped. Cops are no longer pushing the speedometer past 95 or 100 mph day in and day out.

Leaders in South Florida law enforcement welcomed the change. They say off-duty speeding and speeding in non-emergencies is not only dangerous and deadly — but also erodes citizens’ confidence in police fairness.

“It’s something that I continue to remind them of,” said Watson, Margate’s chief. “We’re here to uphold the law, and we’re expected to abide by it.”

ONE COP, RAMPANT SPEEDING

It was one Miami cop's blatant disregard for speed limits a year ago that brought scrutiny of the driving habits of all South Florida law enforcement officers.

Running late for his moonlighting job one morning in October 2011, Miami Police Officer Fausto Lopez, of Coconut Creek, blew past a state trooper on Florida's Turnpike, reaching speeds of 120 mph as he weaved in and out of pre-rush hour traffic.

The subsequent Sun Sentinel investigation, using SunPass records to calculate cops' average speeds from one tollbooth to the next, confirmed what South Florida drivers had witnessed for years: Lopez was hardly the only police officer taking advantage of the badge and patrol car to ignore the very traffic laws they are supposed to enforce.

The Sun Sentinel found cops routinely drove at speeds unthinkable to most drivers, averaging in the mid 90s to more than 100 mph on long stretches of the turnpike and other expressways with tollbooths. The problem was no doubt far more widespread since SunPass doesn't record the movements of cops driving on Interstate 95 or other toll-free roads.

Local law enforcement agencies responded by launching their own investigations, confirming that many officers found racing along the highways weren't fighting crime — they were just going to and from work.

Those internal investigations so far have led to disciplinary actions against 163 officers and state troopers, most receiving a reprimand and losing their take-home cars from a few days to six months.

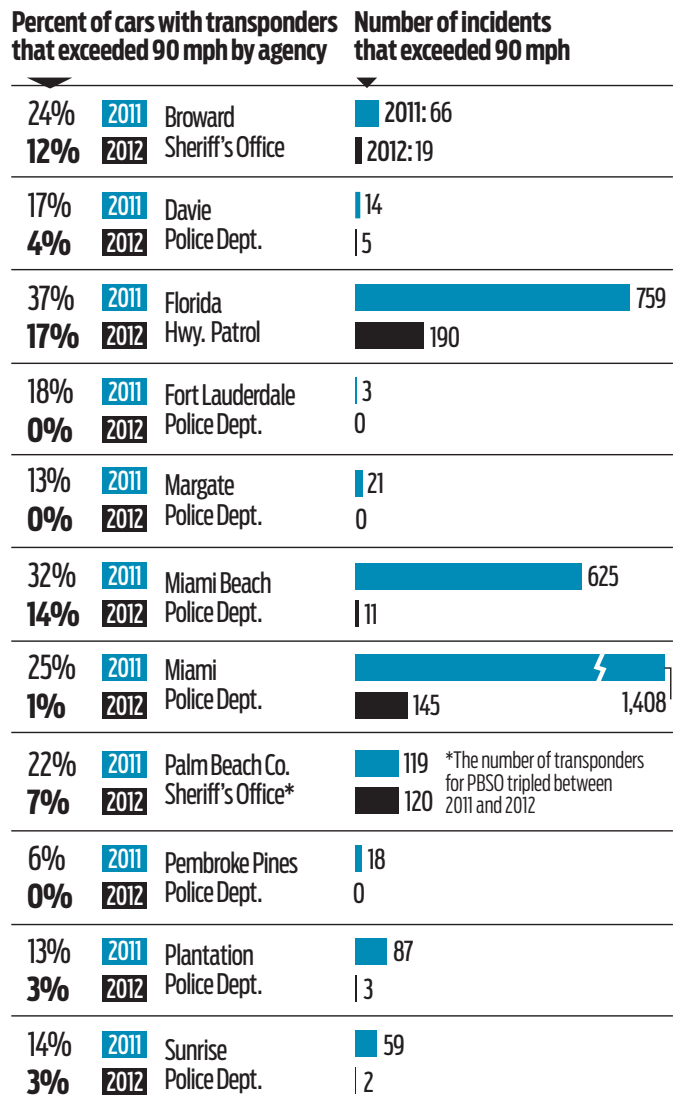
Miami Police suspended 10 officers and fired Lopez after the Sun Sentinel documented that his high-speed commute on the day he was stopped by a Florida Highway patrol trooper was no exception. He had been averaging at least 90 mph between Miami and his Broward County home nearly every workday in the year before, toll records showed.

One of the most noticeable turnarounds this year has come in Lopez's own department.

Before publication of "Above the Law," 115

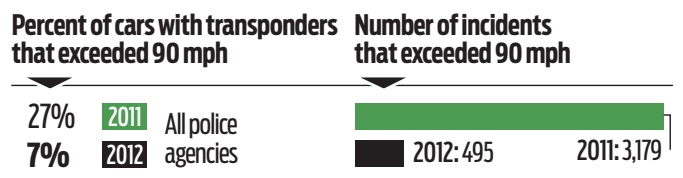
Police speeding, then and now

Far fewer South Florida police cars equipped with SunPass transponders exceeded 90 mph in 2012 compared to the same period in 2011, the Sun Sentinel found. If all agencies are taken together, the share of such cars found to be exceeding 90 mph plummeted, from 27 percent to 7 percent.



*The number of transponders for PBSO tripled between 2011 and 2012

All police agencies combined



A comparison of time periods, Feb. 12 through Oct. 31, for 2011 and 2012. Miami-Dade Police Dept. 2012 data were not available for comparison.

SOURCES: Sun Sentinel analysis of SunPass transponder data from the Florida Highway Patrol, Broward Sheriff's Office, Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office and police departments in Davie, Plantation, Pembroke Pines, Fort Lauderdale, Margate, Sunrise, Miami and Miami Beach.

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Miami Police transponders registered speeds of 90 mph or higher a total of 1,408 times — all outside the city limits.

Since the series, incidents of high-speed driving by Miami cops clocked outside their jurisdiction dropped by 90 percent, and virtually ceased by the end of April. Since then, just three transponders hit 90-plus speeds a total of four times, all while heading south through Broward in the early morning hours.

“I am very pleased that it has decreased so much,” said Miami Police Maj. Jorge Colina, who led the internal affairs investigation into speeders on his force. “We’re hoping it’s an institutional change that’s lasting.”

Speeding by Miami Beach cops, who had been accustomed to driving more than 25 mph above the limit to and from work, dwindled to almost nothing. In the months following the Sun Sentinel series, Miami Beach cars logged above 90-mph speeds just 11 times, compared to 625 over the same period in the previous year.

Sheriff’s deputies in Broward and Palm Beach counties, along with the Florida Highway Patrol, cover larger areas so it’s more difficult to tell from their toll records whether they’re commuting or responding to an emergency. But speeding is down even at those agencies, with South Florida troopers showing a 75 percent decline in speeds above 90 mph, SunPass data show.

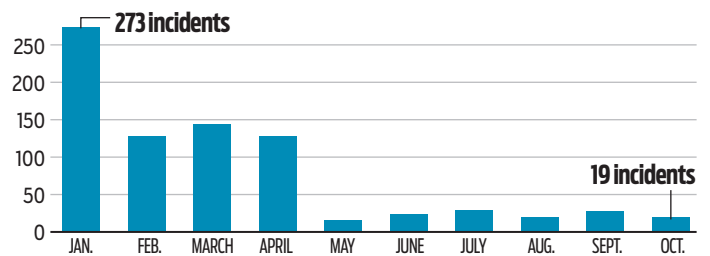
Police speeding had not been taken seriously by many South Florida agencies for years, going unchallenged unless someone complained, and punishment was as slight as a reminder to obey the speed limits. It took videotape gone viral of Lopez being pulled over and the newspaper’s analysis of SunPass records to force an official reassessment and acknowledgment of the problem.

“Thank God for the power of the press, because I don’t think it would have happened without the public being aware,” said Lance Block, a Tallahassee lawyer who represented the family of a Sunrise teen permanently impaired by a Broward sheriff’s deputy speeding to work in 1998.

For cops, a major slowdown

South Florida police departments have slowed down significantly since spring 2012, after the Sun Sentinel published “Above the Law” and agencies launched internal probes.

Times police cars exceeded 90 mph between toll plazas



SOURCES: Sun Sentinel analysis of SunPass transponder data from the Florida Highway Patrol, Broward Sheriff’s Office, Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office and police departments in Davie, Plantation, Pembroke Pines, Fort Lauderdale, Margate, Sunrise, Miami and Miami Beach.

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CULTURE MAY BE CHANGING

Speeding kills, and crashes above 90 mph can be catastrophic. In “Above the Law,” the Sun Sentinel found that 21 Floridians, including a high school freshman from Oakland Park, had been killed or maimed by speeding cops from 2004 through 2010. Since the series, the death toll has climbed by at least two.

A 51-year-old North Florida woman died in February after her car was struck by an FHP trooper who lost control of his Crown Victoria on the curve of a road with a speed limit of 55 mph. Data from the trooper’s cruiser showed he was going 102 mph in the seconds before the crash — responding to a call of someone throwing rocks from an overpass, an FHP spokesman said.

A 45-year-old man attempting to cross the street in his wheelchair died in February after being hit by a St. Petersburg police officer. Though on duty, the officer was not on a call and had no reason to be driving his cruiser 21 mph over the speed limit, police brass concluded.

The officer and the trooper were both fired.

For too long, current and former officers told the Sun Sentinel, many cops dismissed the dangers of excessive speeding and considered it a right conferred by the badge.

“A lot of these people are going home, or they’re going to meet somebody for a hamburger,” said Steve Oelrich, a former sheriff and state senator.

“They’re doing it because they can.”

Oelrich said the public needs to remain vigilant and report police speeding, part of what he calls an “ingrained culture” within law enforcement. The backlash against the state trooper who pulled over the Miami cop last year, from name-calling on blogs to cops looking up her personal information in police databases, demonstrated the depths of the brotherhood and the attitude that speeding is an entitlement that comes with the job.

But the latest SunPass data is evidence the culture may finally be changing.

“I think the message was sent and received,” said Miami’s Colina. “It now falls on us to make sure the message isn’t forgotten.”

Erskin Bell of Central Florida hopes the slow-down will spare another family the pain he’s known since his son, a college student living in Fort Lauderdale, was nearly killed in 2008 by a police officer driving 104 mph for no reason. Erskin Bell Jr. is severely brain-damaged and requires round-the-clock care.

“I think it’s great news that they have started to slow down,” Bell said. “Great for everyone’s sake.”

Said Block, the lawyer: “If it saves one life, it’s worth it.”

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DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS

After the Sun Sentinel reported on the widespread practice of police speeding in South Florida, local law enforcement agencies conducted their own investigations to verify the speeds. To date, these disciplinary actions have resulted:

- 48** Florida Highway Patrol troopers have been reprimanded and ordered to attend an ethics course.
- 44** Miami-Dade Police detectives have received “counseling,” with most losing their take-home cars for a month and being sent to a driver safety training course.
- 38** Miami Police officers have been disciplined: 1 has been fired, 10 have been suspended without pay for up to two weeks, and the rest have temporarily lost take-home vehicles.
- 9** Plantation officers have lost take-home cars for up to three months.
- 7** Sunrise officers have been reprimanded, with three losing their take-home cars for up to six months.
- 7** Margate officers’ cars have been taken away for up to 37 days.
- 5** Palm Beach County Sheriff’s deputies have received verbal counseling or a reprimand.
- 4** Davie officers, including a major and a captain, have been reprimanded or lost take-home cars.
- 1** Pembroke Pines officer has lost his take-home vehicle for 70 days.

No action has been taken by the Broward Sheriff’s Office, but deputies have been reminded to obey traffic laws unless they’re responding to an emergency.

Source: Police records, internal affairs investigations