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Denver Police to Test GPS Dart System to Track Fleeing Cars

To reduce the danger posed by high-speed chases, the department will be testing adhesive GPS trackers that can be fired onto a fleeing vehicle from a compressed air cannon mounted on patrol cars.

April 25, 2019 • Elise Schmelzer, The Denver Post



(TNS) — With the push of a button, Denver police officers can now blast an adhesive, soup-can-size GPS tracker at fleeing vehicles and remotely follow the cars from a phone app.

It may seem like a tool Batman would use, but Denver police hope the technology will allow them to avoid dangerous pursuits of suspect vehicles. The department is testing a small number of the devices, said patrol chief Cmdr. Ron Thomas.

“We recognize the inherent danger of chases,” Thomas said.





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The adhesive GPS unit is propelled by compressed air from a double-barrel launcher attached to the front bumper of a patrol car. The tracker sticks to the suspect vehicle as the officer backs off. A supervisor can then track the car with a phone app and plan a stop at a safer location.

The tracking range of the device is “quite large,” and police will be able to track a car even if it moves dozens of miles away or into the next city, Thomas said.

The pilot program started Monday and officers have used the device twice to track and recover stolen vehicles, Thomas said.





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While the GPS tag is not meant to injure, the department recognized that a projectile about the size of a soup can would hurt if it missed its intended target. Leaders developed policies to minimize that risk, including forbidding officers to use the tool to track motorcycles or convertibles.

The Denver police operations manual states that the technology can be used for cases that involve a stolen vehicle or one believed to be driven by a person wanted on a felony warrant, as well as at a supervisor's discretion.

Police in Arvada and Aurora as well as many jurisdictions across the country already use similar systems, Thomas said.

Nationally, about 355 people are killed every year in pursuit-related crashes, [according to a 2017 study by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics](#).

The department already follows strict pursuit policies, Thomas said. Denver police are not allowed to chase cars that drive away from a traffic stop, a suspected drunk driver or car thieves. Officers can only pursue if the driver is acting so dangerously that they are likely to hurt or kill someone immediately.

Despite that policy, Denver police chases have led to deaths in recent years, including a man officers shot and killed because **they mistakenly believed he was an escaped inmate.**

The department paid Virginia company StarChase about \$100,000 to equip patrol cars with the device for the pilot program, though department leaders would not say how many cars now have the device, department spokesman Sonny Jackson said. He said he didn't know how much it would cost if the department decides to expand the pilot program.

"It is an expensive piece of equipment but I think it will pay dividends," Thomas said.

The device will only be used to apprehend suspects and not for long-term investigations, Thomas said.

The American Civil Liberties Union **approved of the device** as long as it is used correctly and not for long-term monitoring.

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