

**Police peril: Pursuits and rammings:
High on drugs, out of control, taking advantage of being on the streets, auto thieves are taunting police with dangerous driving**

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Huffing and puffing, Mountie Luke Halvorson called out for help as he chased Christian John Engh down a dark and isolated Langley road.

"I've got a runner," the 24-year-old officer called over his radio. "Request assistance."

Moments earlier, Halvorson had pulled up behind a stolen black Mustang that had run out of gas in rural Langley.

Engh, 39, bolted as soon as Halvorson approached and the chase began.

By the time reinforcements arrived, Halvorson had Engh in handcuffs and was walking him back down the road to the stolen vehicle.

"He was faster than me but he fell into a ditch and I pretty much fell on him," said Halvorson. "It was lucky." The Mustang, stolen three days earlier in Surrey, had no licence plates and was full of the tools of Engh's trade.

A pack in the back seat contained a hacksaw blade for cutting steering wheel locks and a screwdriver for breaking door locks and breaching ignitions.

A car stereo lay on the floor, a half-full beer on the dash and a black notebook marked "Crack 101 for Dummies" sat on the passenger seat.

Engh likely fled because he was awaiting trial on an assault charge and had a probation order not to be in a motor vehicle without the vehicle's owner.

Court records show Engh's criminal past dates back to the mid-1980s and includes convictions for drunk driving, hit and run, assault, possession of narcotics and obstructing a peace officer.

While Halvorson's solo bid to bring down Engh was a success -- two weeks ago, Engh plead guilty to possession of stolen property under \$5,000 and was sentenced to 60 days in jail -- it highlights the dangers police face each time they come across a stolen vehicle.

Officers across B.C. are reporting stolen vehicles being driven more dangerously, with more police vehicles being rammed and thieves eager to lure police into chases.

In July, Todd Sweet, a New Westminster police officer and B.C. Federation of Police Officers spokesman, revealed publicly what officers had been discussing among themselves for months before.

A frightening trend had emerged, with out-of-control drug addicts now responsible for almost all police pursuits.

"Just about every one we pick off is high on methamphetamine or high on crack cocaine," Sweet told The Province. "They are telling us they are stealing cars specifically to go out and do other crimes or get other cars to pay for their drug habits."

Sweet said police were becoming "increasingly frustrated with a system that releases on bail persons with multiple outstanding charges for auto theft and causing police pursuits."

On Aug. 23, Sweet shot and killed a 16-year-old Surrey boy in a stolen SUV that was allegedly ramming Sweet's cruiser. Sweet wasn't in the vehicle, but his partner was trapped in the passenger seat.

Fearing for his rookie partner's life, Sweet fired into the SUV. Kyle Tait, a repeat auto thief, died at the scene, while the driver was slightly injured.

Sweet, a veteran officer, is on leave and would not comment, pending an investigation by the RCMP's Integrated Homicide Investigation Team.

However, New Westminster police Staff Sgt. Casey Dehaas has spoken out: "This was a 5,000-pound weapon that was being used to ram and injure a police officer, and that officer felt that in order to stop his partner from being possibly killed, he fired the rounds to stop that vehicle."

Cpl. Tim Shields, of the Integrated Municipal Provincial Auto Crime Taskforce, estimates there are now 10 police pursuits started in the Lower Mainland every day.

"The thieves are becoming more and more brash. They know about our pursuit policy and realize if they drive like a maniac we are going to stop the pursuit," he says.

Shields adds pursuit statistics kept by the RCMP are not accurate: "The numbers are very low because they are often not reported."

In 2001, the RCMP adopted a national pursuit policy after a report by the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP in 1999 called the old policy vague and confusing.

The new policy specifies that a pursuit must be terminated "when the risk to life becomes too great, the pursuit becomes futile or other means of apprehension are possible."

Shields says there are no statistics available for rammings because there is no police code for that.

Last November, auxiliary Vernon RCMP officer Glen Evely was killed when his cruiser was rammed by a speeding stolen vehicle.

His partner, Const. Francois Grenier, was seriously injured and is still recovering.

Vancouver police spokesman Howard Chow said his officers have been involved in 20 pursuits so far this year.

They have also been rammed so many times recently that Vancouver cops are now taking courses that show them how to box in a vehicle.

Victoria police were disturbed on July 14 when an auto thief they arrested after a high-speed chase called out "wait till next time" to the officers that arrested the man.