



Street Racing and “Sideshows” Endanger the Public

By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott

Street racing has been around for decades, but a dangerous new variation is tearing up our city streets and putting lives in danger. Called “sideshows” or “takeovers,” they are gatherings where people show off their cars while performing perilous stunts that threaten the safety of our communities.

My Office has established a special task force to prosecute these drivers with the goal of protecting public property and keeping our community members safe from harm.

Typically, these gatherings involve dozens of vehicles and sometimes hundreds of spectators. Meet-ups usually occur at night, in parking lots, cul-de-sacs, roads, and even freeways throughout the county. The spinning, speeding cars often careen close to spectators. Bystanders have been struck and even killed in San Diego County.

This newest trend originated in Oakland in the 2010s, and has since spread across the country, fueled by pandemic boredom and videos posted on social media. The drivers are usually men between the ages of 18 and 25, and the cars are typically modified for street racing so that they are faster, noisier, and spew more exhaust.

The San Diego Police Department’s ABLE (Airborne Law Enforcement) helicopter plays a crucial role in spotting these events from the air and tracking vehicles until they can be safely pulled over by patrol officers.

Our Office prosecutes street racers for reckless driving, exhibition of speed, and other misdemeanors stemming from street racing to high-risk stunt driving.

Other crimes often go hand-in-hand with these activities. Law enforcement has noted a correlation between street racing and possession of illegal drugs and “ghost guns” – firearms without serial numbers that cannot be traced – across the country.

Our task force is handling more than 30 street racing cases where the defendants have allegedly:

- Taken turns doing “donuts” (speeding rapidly in circles), sometimes with passengers hanging out the windows, in the center of a crowd of bystanders.
- Performed “burnouts” (keeping their cars at a standstill while the tires spin, burning rubber) and other dangerous stunts on crowded streets and in residential neighborhoods.

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- Slid out of control, endangering spectators and causing them to scramble to safety.
- Slowed down on the freeway, side by side, then took off at speeds of up to 120 miles per hour.
- Tried to evade police, either by speeding away or by abandoning their cars and running off on foot.
- Modified their cars to make the engines louder and the exhaust fumes smokier.
- Outfitted their cars with high-traction racing tires, or driven with tires worn down to the metal threads as a result of skidding across the pavement.
- Lost control and run into a parked car or a freeway divider.
- Driven without a valid driver license, insurance, or auto registration.
- Driven with open containers of alcohol in the car, despite being underage.
- Driven with a loaded concealed gun in the car.

Our Office has received dozens of complaints about this concerning conduct. We will continue to take this safety hazard seriously by working closely with our law enforcement partners to send a strong message that this conduct will not be tolerated in the City of San Diego.

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