

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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Dodge
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Brawler

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JP MOLNAR

PREDATOR: Dodge's HEMI Charger Pursuit model is one bad mamba jamba in the police vehicle world

In law enforcement, there is what is known as the Use of Force Continuum.

Simply put, this is the scale of force options available to an officer to achieve both compliance and control of a situation, as well as protect themselves and others. Unlike many other scales, the importance of the very "lowest" level can be just as critical as the highest level, as compliance or deterrence in a more basic sense can prevent the necessity of a higher level of force.

That said, the Continuum begins with mere command presence. In the driving world, it is pretty basic: you see a cop car, you slow down. You see a cop car with someone stopped on the side of the road, you slow down for a while. Part of this equation, then, is having a patrol vehicle that, by its mere presence, lays down an unspoken law: you can try, but you aren't gonna win. In that

respect, the Dodge Charger Pursuit model delivers that message in spades. Here's why.

Background

Law enforcement vehicles, while small in number compared to the general consumer marketplace, are a critical category for automobile manufacturers, for several reasons.

First, it is the perfect environment to test their product under the harshest of conditions, 365 and 24/7. Second, the garnering of lucrative government contracts can mean years of steady purchasing. While you may buy a new car every few years, larger departments buy them by the hundreds or thousands. Finally, and arguably most importantly, manufacturers derive a tremendous sense of pride from supplying hard working officers with a vehicle that lets them do their job efficiently and safely while

actually enjoying what they drive. Plus, since everyone notices a cop car, better to have your logo on the grille and trunk than someone else's.

Dodge has certainly been a part of this mix for decades, but the Charger has been their most successful iteration so far. Introduced in 2005, the "new" Charger hit the road at full steam with a brawny 5.7-liter V8 that absolutely decimated the patrol vehicle market in terms of straightline performance and top speed. I had one of the first Chargers as a patrol vehicle, and it was a thrill to drive, and overall a much better car than the Crown Victoria or the Impala. It has some warts in the space, braking and visibility areas, but the car functioned extremely well and delivered driving dynamics that really stood out.

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Hauler

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOE SAGE

Prey: This store-bought civilian Charger has the cojones to take on the police Pursuit model, but they know that, and we don't recommend you try it

The Charger Pursuit model shown at left will win any contest. It comes with a competitive advantage that goes beyond any spec sheet. But, as always, the Charger SRT8—the maximum performance model from Chrysler Group's Street & Racing Technology group—outspecs the rest, including the Pursuit model, on paper.

There is not a weak-kneed Charger in the lineup, of course. The basic car ranges from a 292-hp 3.6-liter Pentastar V6 to a 370-hp 5.7-liter HEMI V8. The Pursuit model offers the same two engines. An SRT8 ups the game with a highly tuned 6.4-liter HEMI pumping out 470 hp—a 27 percent horsepower gain off just a 12 percent displacement bump.

We drove the Pursuit model first and fell in love with its 5-speed immediately. The shifts are powerful and smooth, and it feels good to feel them. It's a throwback during a time

when 7-, 8- and even 9-speeds are joining the fray—and we liked the five.

The basic Charger 5-speed automatic is an AutoStick overdrive model whose final drive ratios vary by trim and engine option in the civilian model, with the Pursuit version (just about) matching the base SE, or optionally matching the R/T. That is the only Pursuit transmission, but the civilian Charger also offers an 8-speed automatic on SXT models. The SRT8's 5-speed has the same ratios and a final drive ratio matching the base model's R/T Blacktop model (3.06), delivered through a Getrag limited-slip differential. Adaptive electronic control (automatic, AutoStick or paddles) adds a more aggressive shift pattern through available Track mode.

Some things never change: Chrysler Group

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CHARGER PURSUIT VS SRT8

	Pursuit V6	Pursuit V8	SRT8
ENGINE	3.6L	5.7L HEMI	6.4L HEMI
TRANS	5-spd auto	5-spd auto	5-spd auto
<i>(Pursuit with overdrive and AutoStick; track mode on SRT8)</i>			
POWERTRAIN	RWD	RWD	RWD
<i>(or avail late 2014)</i>			
	--	AWD	--
POWER/TORQUE	292/260	370/395	470/470
TRAILER WT MAX	1000 lb	1000 lb	--
FUEL MPG c/h (RWD)	18/27	16/25	14/23
	(AWD)	--	15/23
CHARGER SRT8 BASE (as tested 2013)\$44,995			
DRIVER CONFIDENCE GROUP\$745		
ADAPTIVE CRUISE CONTROL GROUP\$795		
HARMAN KARDON AUDIO GROUP\$1995		
POWER SUNROOF\$995		
245/45ZR20 BSW PERFORMANCE TIRES\$150		
GAS GUZZLER TAX\$1000		
DESTINATION\$995		
TOTAL AS TESTED\$51,670		

2011 meant a redesign

While there is a new, reskinned Charger due in 2014, for 2011 Chrysler had listened to department gripes by fixing the brake issue, and making some substantial changes body-wise. While looking similar to the previous model, in actuality the sheet metal was all new. The biggest change came in visibility, as the windshield header was moved up 3 inches, larger side glass openings were added, and quarter glass was added at the rear doors for better over-the-shoulder view. There were also wider door opening angles, a redesigned front grille and fascia, and a redesigned rear decklid and fascia. Personally speaking, I can say that the changes were immediate and night-and-day. After having a patrol Charger based on the previous model, these changes have helped to keep the Charger in the hunt with newly-released products like Ford's Interceptor and SUV, and with the recently released Caprice (the platform for the upcoming Chevrolet SS). That the Charger has essentially remained unchanged since 2005, yet is still highly effective in the patrol environment, speaks to its solid design. Let's review why the car still has a lot of dog left in its fight, and why it's not too far from the SRT8 in spirit and performance.

Drivetrain

Cop cars need power to minimize the time it takes for apprehension of offenders, which can make traffic enforcement safer. Now, before you start griping, the same power allows them to come help you when you are in a world of hurt. The pursuit Charger is available in two flavors.

The first is a 3.6-liter Pentastar V6 that churns out a respectable 292 hp (6500 rpm), with 260 lb-ft of torque (4800 rpm) bringing up the bottom end. It's mated to a 5-speed automatic transmission that transfers power to the 200 mm rear axle through a standard 2.65 final drive with 3.07 optional. I have had several occasions to drive this powertrain choice, and it's not a bad combination, especially if the bulk of patrol work is block-to-block, short distance driving. It won't set the world on fire, but it can get out of its own way, and if you have driven a rental Charger V6 as of late, it's the same motor.

Then there is the 5.7-liter HEMI option, the same roaring, snorting beast of a powerplant you find in the civilian model. It rules the patrol vehicle roost with 370 hp (5250 rpm) and a tree-stump-pulling 395 lb-ft of torque (4200 rpm) delivered through a 5-speed automatic, 215 mm rear axle and 2.65 final drive

(3.07 optional). Equipped with this torque beast of an engine, the Charger smacks 60 mph in the nose at just a tick over 5 seconds, and keeps on pulling from there. Comparatively speaking, the V6 delivers more of a body blow with a mid-6-second time, which isn't slow, but not amazing either. Both versions have a 19.1-gallon fuel tank, and fuel economy numbers are 18/27 for the V6 and 15/24 for the V8, not much of a difference actually, and consistent with what I have seen with both models in real world driving.

Transmission-wise, the 5-speed automatic on both models allows for "manual" control of the transmission via a rocker switch located on the column shifter. The transmission also features an electronically controlled torque converter. More on this later.

Suspension

In short, the Charger is like most beasts: large and in charge, with muscles rippling from every angle. Park it next to typical mid-to full-size four-door sedans, and its slabshape with high door skins and squared-off corners makes them look like kiddie cars, outside your favorite supermarket. This

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does engineering very well—hence the special attention paid to details of each model.

While the Pursuit model's suspension adds front and rear stabilizer bars (28/20mm in RWD with either engine; 32/16mm in an AWD V8), the SRT8 adds 30mm and 18mm bars (front and rear), Bilstein shocks, lateral and diagonal lower links in front, and an isolated suspension cradle in the rear. An Auto suspension mode is joined by a Sport mode and Track mode (the latter working in combination with shift programming).

For comfort, control and the general presence of a Navy destroyer slicing through the high seas, every Charger delivers. The SRT8 delivers to the absolute max. Suspension is a key part of the timeless American muscle car formula, and Dodge gets it right.

Overall, our logbook noted that we like the Charger SRT8's simple and effective interfaces, its fit and finish, and its style—wheels, badging, spoiler and other SRT details (though we appreciate the Pursuit model's stealth approach, lighter on the scoops and scallops and spoilers). We liked the SRT's power, solid feel and ergonomics.

If you miss the best of the great American sedans and muscle cars, here is a great modern example. This is not the only way you

The SRT8's race-inspired flat-bottomed steering wheel is cool in style but hot in summer. Alerts from a forward collision warning system could be welcome but seem a little out of character in this libertarian muscle car. SRT8 wheels are stylin'.

can get it, but... you can sure get it this way.

Our car had a \$1995 Harman Kardon system, and audio quality was very good. (It also seemed to have a sixth sense, like the radio in Stephen King's *Christine*—in our case bringing all-American Springsteen, Seger, Thorogood, Boston and Skynyrd around on the iPod's shuffle, as though it just knew.)

We found the Charger Pursuit and SRT8 to both be smooth, powerful and utterly a kick to drive. The SRT8 might win on the track (if its driver is as well trained as a law enforcement officer), but a real world faceoff between the two would be folly for the SRT8 owner. We drove through one speed trap in the Charger Pursuit (and lived to tell the tale). Whereas those officers were probably puzzled by our lights and livery, they basically didn't bat an eye. A good thing, since if they had been more curious, we would have had some 'splainin' to do. What the SRT8 has in common with the Pursuit version is that confident feeling—yeah, c'mon, just try to take me on. The SRT8 adds a rebel touch. ■



The full-size spare needed in the police version of the Charger takes space away from an already fairly tight trunk. • The current Charger has added some dimension to the rear doors and noticeable improvement to rear glass visibility.

comes at a cost, and that's in a curb weight of between 4000-4275 lbs, so controlling it all requires a competent suspension. Thankfully, Dodge has done an excellent job with this by equipping the Charger up front with independent suspension with high upper "A" arms, coil spring over gas-charged mono-tube shock absorbers and a very hefty 28 mm stabilizer bar. Lateral and diagonal lower links with dual ball joint knuckle help control the suspension deflection shenanigans. Bringing up the rear is a five-link independent rear suspension with coil springs, gas-charged load-leveling NIVOMAT rear shocks, a 20 mm stabilizer bar and isolated suspension cradle, charged with both delivering suspension compliance while planting the rear wheels squarely to terra firma for the 395 lb-ft constantly coming their way.

Since the HEMI provides a lot of "go," the "whoa" is equally important. As mentioned, Dodge has addressed previous brake gremlins with updated, sizable 13.6-inch vented, dual-piston caliper front brakes and 13.8 inch single-piston, vented rotors in back. As with all new vehicles, the Charger has ABS, stability control and traction control, plus two additional braking proactive technologies called Ready Alert Braking and Rain Brake Support. Since we don't get much of the latter here in Arizona, I didn't get a chance to play with it, but I assume it is similar to other braking systems that "pre-charge" the brake system and modulate braking based on CAN-BUS inputs from other systems like stability control, throttle and steering wheel angle, speed of brake pedal application and so on.

Rounding out the suspension is power assisted rack-and-pinion (my favorite) steering and 18x7.5 inch steel wheels wrapped with either Goodyear or Firestone Pursuited tires. My demo had the Firestones.

Interior

If there is anywhere where the Charger has taken some hits, it's the size and accessibility of interior areas. This isn't different from the civilian model. When I had my 2005, getting a taller or bigger subject into the back seat took some creative maneuvering at times. Once in, they fit fine, but larger doors were needed. Chrysler responded with the 2011 model revision by restyling the doors to square them off a bit more. This has helped. Another area of gripe was rear window visi-

bility. The revision has helped, for sure, and makes backing the Charger much easier, cage and all.

If there is any Achilles heel to the Charger, it's the trunk. What's deceptive is that, despite having large rear haunches, the trunk is actually pretty small. This is hampered further by the fact that the full-size full spare doesn't fit in the cutout at the bottom of the trunk. While the compact spare may be fine in the civilian world, officers who work rural areas or highways need a full-size spare. Making this happen means it has to be mounted in the main area of the trunk, under the slide-out metal electronics tray located under the rear deck area (also not in the civilian model). The end result is pretty poor, to be honest. The lack of a spare in the spare tire hole means you have a bit of chasm to deal with, and not much flat surface area. In other words, if you have items you carry in your car you hardly use, the spare tire well is the perfect place for it. It's the only real weakness on an otherwise fine car, and may or may not matter, depending upon what you carry around. This isn't an issue in the civilian model, but hopefully the 2014 model will cure an ailment that has plagued this car since the beginning.

Thankfully, up front, things are much better. The front seats are shaped and cut to accommodate duty belts, and seating position is fairly high up in the car, making for good visibility out the squared-off windshield and side windows. Dash height is manageable, and the car feels airy inside, despite a high door line, something I can't say about the Interceptor.

The floors, front and rear, are predictably rubber for easy clean-up, and the traditional center stack between the front seats has



been replaced with a law enforcement-specific equipment tray for radios, siren controls and so on. The shifter has also been moved to the steering column to make room for police gear. Ergonomically, the control switches are good quality, fall easily to hand, and the leather-wrapped steering wheel feels nice to the touch.

As can be expected, many wiring configurations can be ordered, depending on your needs. Chrysler's infotainment/HVAC command center is called Uconnect, and it's available in some models. Mine had the standard HVAC and radio head unit, with steering wheel-mounted controls and a 12-volt outlet, USB port and AUX-input cluster located central in the dash. Dual-zone climate control is

standard, and a 6-speaker audio system is standard. A dual-mode white/red dome light is standard, as are 160 mph speedometer and power windows and mirrors.

In the rear, a cloth seat is standard, with a fixed plastic (yes, please) rear seat, which mine was equipped with. Plastic seats with padded handcuff cutouts don't bode well for taking Grandma comfortably to the Golden Corral on Sundays, but then again, I don't know your grandmother. Overall, the interior is a comfortable place to be, with lots of space and easy-to-use features.

Driving impressions

In short, this is one awesome patrol car. I didn't expect to be as smitten with the Charger as I was, especially since it is in the twilight of its production life. As a law enforcement and high-performance driving instructor, I drive every current patrol car out there, and while many are powerful cars, a big engine in itself does not often a great car make. Driving dynamics is important, of course, but capturing the blend between comfort and handling can be a tall order.

Furthermore, as someone who has spent a lot of non-exciting time in a patrol car (yes, it's not like COPS all the time), ergonomics and comfort are equally important. In other words, when I evaluate any new patrol vehicle, it really comes down to whether I could see myself wanting to drive the thing every day. In this case, yes.

My time with the HEMI Charger involved two weeks of daily driving on city streets, highway, back roads, and even seeing how it easy it was to park at the gym. Along the way, the Charger grew on me. As an example, the 5.7-liter HEMI is powerful, but it's the smoothness of its delivery that impressed. Power is everywhere in the rpm range, and the engine never seemed at all concerned with delivering what I asked of it. It's also quiet despite its size, only snarling appropriately under full throttle.

Another component to that experience is the 5-speed transmission. One clear way to see if a drivetrain engineer is paying attention is the amount of drivetrain lash between shifts. A surge, or rough shift, is not only an unpleasant feeling, but it can also upset the dynamic balance of the car due to erratic weight shift. In this area, the Charger impresses. The electronically controlled torque convertor does its job, with barely perceptible upshifts even under full throttle. Impressive.

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Dynamically speaking, the suspension and tires do their job well, with essentially zero body roll or pitch under most conditions. The suspension settings are stiff, almost to the point of being a little overaggressive. Suspension compliance is limited, as this is one stiffly sprung and shocked car. On billiard smooth roads like here in Arizona, that can be advantageous, but add in some minor imperfections and you can feel where shock compression settings could stand to be a little softer, as the end result is that the car tends to want to dance around a bit as the suspension valiantly attempts to remain compliant with the road surface. It's not anything major, and while I tend to prefer a stiffer suspension over a soft one, I can see where areas of the country with atrocious roads could make for a rough ride for officers.

Braking is confident, with excellent feel and modulation. Overall, the rack-and-pinion steering is very precise, the feel is good, and the car feels like a 4000-lb go-kart that goes where you want it to go, and does so without ever feeling really challenged.

Stylistically speaking, nobody else comes even close to the Charger. It's one bad mamba-jamba, and the styling says "Uh

uh...not in my house." The car looks like what a police car should look like, and the public apparently agrees. I had numerous people tell me what a "bad ass" car it was, not something I ever heard with any of my other patrol vehicles. So, congrats, Chrysler, for being unique and nailing it right on the head.

Down the road

The Use of Force Continuum begins with "Command Presence." In many cases, this begins with what you see in your rear view mirror, or on the side of the road. Beyond that, the vehicle has to be many things: powerful, safe, versatile, comfortable, efficient, flexible and enjoyable to drive.

If I were to sum up the Charger, I would call it "highly capable" on all fronts, despite the thorny trunk. Like Rocky, it still has a few more solid punches to throw before it's time to throw in the towel. It's solid in every aspect of its performance, and it sits on the road with authority that few cars can match. Hopefully, the 2014 Charger will preserve the excellent chassis, Rottweiler attitude, roomy interior and unmatched command presence, while adding in a decent trunk and some more goodies. Can't wait to drive it. ■