



SAFEY DURING POLICE TRAFFIC STOPS

We are in the midst of a crisis of what is being perceived as police violence towards minorities. That is a tough situation. I'd like to set that aside for the purpose of this essay and instead focus on the idea of the safety of everyone involved during routine police stops. Let's assume that no one wants to get hurt or have a bad day during a routine traffic stop by a police officer. How to do we make sure that no one gets hurts and leaves the situation safely? To level the discussion, let's assume that the police officer and the person driving the car are all sincere and have no hidden agendas or otherwise nothing to hide. Assume the cop is just doing his job and the person getting pulled over is simply driving his car. What happens next is all about perceptions and behavior, and that is mostly up to you as the person being pulled over.

PUT YOURSELF IN THE POLICE OFFICER'S SHOES: Consider the range of possibilities that a police officer encounters during a routine traffic stop. The police officer might be pulling over a family going out to visit grandma or the car might be full of trigger-happy drug dealers with guns that don't want to go to jail. That is the range of situations a police officer has to deal with during every routine traffic stop. So put yourself in the police officer's shoes. One situation ends with a warning to not drive too fast and a nice discussion about grandma's apple pie, while the other ends up with the cop getting shot in the face by a drug dealer. A police officer is fully aware of the range of possible encounters and outcomes, so you should expect the police officer to be on alert and otherwise very concerned when he approaches your car.

ASSUME YOU ARE BEING PULLED OVER FOR A REASON: The police officer will likely be pulling you over for a reason. Start there. So assume that you were speeding, or your plate is expired, or you have a light out on your car, or there is some other situation unknown to you. Perhaps your car is the same make and color of a car that was recently used to commit a crime. Yes, it is OK for a police officer to pull you over - even if you aren't the person they are actually looking for. You simply do not know the situation, so assume there is a valid reason that you are being pulled over.

ASSUME THAT YOU ARE SAFE IN THE POLICE OFFICER'S PRESENCE: Nowadays, with dash cams and body cams, it is getting less and less likely that a police officer would actually act inappropriately, simply because everything is caught on camera. The police are required to have their cameras running, otherwise they attract attention to themselves if they were to disable their cameras. So cameras are a good thing for everyone involved.

ASSUME THE POLICE OFFICER IS DOING HIS JOB: The police officer wants no trouble from the driver, but he is obligated, as a function of his oath to duty as a police officer, to pull a driver over if there is any legal reason or probable cause to do so. Remember, it could be as simple as your car looks like the car they are looking for! So give the officer the benefit of the doubt that he is doing his job out of duty. In doing so, a



police officer is protecting the public at large, which includes you. So give him credit for doing his job when you are being pulled over.

CONSIDER YOUR PHYSICAL APPEARANCE: Perception is reality. It does not matter how you really are as a person, because no one can get to know you from a one minute encounter on the side of the road. Instead, in a short encounter, all that matters is how you are perceived during those first few moments. The way you are perceived going into a situation is what is going to drive how you are going to be treated. This may not seem fair to you, but guess what, there are a lot of things in life that are not fair. You have a role in how your life goes, so consider how you present yourself to the world, and to the police officer in the moment that you are being pulled over. Let's examine this a bit closer. Consider the following examples of person's physical profile:

- Driver # 1: A long-haired white male, covered in tattoos, wearing a t-shirt that says "Party Animal" on it, with "K-I-L-L" tattooed on his knuckles, driving an old Chevy with a bumper sticker that says "Shoot First."
- Driver # 2: A black male wearing a business suit driving a new Lexus with a bumper sticker that says "Harvard Alumni Association."

Do you see the difference in perception based solely on the physical appearance of what the police officer sees as he approaches the car? Now be honest and ask yourself which one of these guys the cop is going to be more concerned about? Driver # 1 may actually be the nicest guy in the world. In fact, he might be a famous rock star and the name of his band is "Shoot First," and just likes to drive old cars. His tattoos may all be part of his image and his act to sell more records. But the perception is what is going to work against him in this situation. On the other hand, Driver # 2 may actually be a corrupt doctor with a warrant out for his arrest for defrauding the Medicare system and he may even be desperate and have a gun handy. You just never know.

MAKE SURE THAT WHAT COMES OUT OF YOUR MOUTH IS RESPECTFUL: Remember the Golden Rule? Now would be a good time to follow it. Treat the police officer with respect. A simple "yes sir" or "how are you today?" will go a long way towards diffusing a situation that always starts out with the perception of great intensity and danger for everyone involved. If Driver # 2 opens his mouth and starts yelling at the police officer about how unjustified the cop is in pulling him over, then that will set the tone for the rest of the encounter. If Driver # 1 says nicely, "officer, what's up, dude, did I do something wrong?"

Remember, physical appearance is what is first perceived and what comes out of your mouth is the second thing to be perceived. Both can work against you, both can work for you, and both can counter each other if you are not careful.

CONSIDER YOUR PHYSICAL ACTIONS: If you act nervous, you are going to make the cop nervous. If you have nothing to hide, then you have nothing to be nervous about. Be yourself, if you are a nice person, or try being a nice person for a few minutes if your



physical demeanor is not typically nice. Keep your hands up on the steering wheel, don't get out of the car, turn on your flashers, and open your window completely. Tell the officer when you are going to move your hands to get your license. Don't give the officer any reason to doubt your intentions in this situation. All these things matter in how you are going to be perceived by the police officer, and ultimately in how you are going to be treated.

OTHER WAYS TO ENHANCE YOUR SAFETY

GET A DASHCAM: To enhance your own safety, get a dash cam for your vehicle. They are cheap and will also help you defend yourself if you get into a car accident or help prosecute a perpetrator if you get attacked.

CALL A FAMILY MEMBER TO HELP MONITOR THE SITUATION: If you get pulled over, call a family member or a friend and have them on your wireless phone in the car. Even tell the officer that you have a family member on the phone that is going to monitor the situation.

MAINTAIN YOUR CAR: If you have a broken taillight, you are going to get pulled over. You should expect it because you have basically asked to be pulled over. It is illegal to drive a car with faulty lighting. Wouldn't it be easier to simply keep your car properly maintained?

DRIVE LEGALLY: If you speed or cross the dividing lines or don't stop at a stop sign, you are going to get pulled over. Expect it! These actions are all illegal when driving and they raise suspicion that you are driving impaired or distracted.

DON'T DRIVE DURING TROUBLE HOURS: Trouble hours are the early hours of the morning when the police expect all the drunk drivers to be out after a night of partying. The police also expect drug dealers to be out during the wee hours of the morning. Some of us work late shift, so that is not something that we can change, but we certainly avoid attracting attention to ourselves by following all the other rules. If you are out partying, then consider taking a taxi or using Uber to get back home.

STICK TO MAIN ROADS: You might think it interesting or cool to drive through a bad part of town. But that might backfire and get you into a bad situation, simply by association. Is this fair? Of course not, but that is the reality of perception. If you are in a bad part of town with a known high crime rate, then you are, by definition, a part of that bad part of town. You are whom you hang out with, even if you are just passing through.

In summary, don't do anything to contribute to becoming a statistic. Recognize that police officers are doing their jobs and they are ultimately protecting our society. Are there bad cops? Of course there are! Are there bad drivers? Of course there are! So do your part to make a good first impression to a police officer. Treat the cop with respect and do everything from your end to give the perception that you are a law-



abiding citizen. This advice is true regardless of the color of your skin or what kind of car you drive. Impressions matter, especially during those few minutes of getting pulled over by a police officer along the side of the road. Do your part to be safe!

Check out my safety books and other safety resources and information at <http://www.markkowaleski.com> for more insights to guide you on your journey to living a healthier, wealthier, longer, and happier life.

Remember: keep TABs on your safety: Think safe, Act Safe, Be safe!

- Mark M. Kowaleski