

Police Stops, a Discussion for the Times



The police are here to protect and serve the citizens. The overwhelming majority of the time that is what these essential public servants do. But, like any profession, there can be bad apples, and nearly all are affected by bias that can impact different communities disparately.

For example, if you ask non-African Americans if their parents have ever had a sit-down discussion with them on how to behave if ever approached by the police, the vast majority will say “no.” That answer reflects a different cultural experience and explains in part why it’s difficult for them to relate to past abuses shown to have been committed disproportionately against African-Americans.

For decades across the entire country, the African-American community has grown painfully accustomed to being treated differently than other communities, leading to the assumption, right or wrong, that police may be as much a threat to community members as an asset. It will take time and a concerted effort by the police and other public officials to turn these fears and opinions around.

In the meantime, it’s important that we educate our children (and ourselves) on how to behave when approached by police. With that in mind, and considering recent events, I will cover many safe and effective ways of approaching police-citizen encounters. This discussion, an elaborate version of what my father taught me, and so many other African Americans teach their children, is often referred to as “the talk.”

Dealing with police-citizen encounters is something everyone needs to consider. This information offers something for everyone, regardless of skin color, to consider personally and review with family members and children.

Vehicle Stops Conducted by the Police: Preventing the Stop in the First Place

- Every time you change your oil, make sure to check that your license plate tabs are up to date. Also check all exterior lights to ensure proper function, including tail lights, brake lights, headlights, turn signal lights, side lights, and license plate lights/ tabs. It is surprising to realize how many police stops result from faulty lights/tabs. Check all exterior lights, especially in the dark. This is one of the easiest ways to avoid an interaction with the police.
- If you plan on going to an event where you will or might consume alcohol, either arrange a predetermined designated driver or use an alcohol monitoring device readily available on the Internet for around \$30.00 and easily stored in the car. Use it EVERY TIME you consume alcohol before driving and NEVER drive if you are not sober. Call a friend, family member, taxi, sober cab, Uber, or Lyft. Some cab services will even have a separate driver follow you in your own car, so it is there waiting for you the next day!
- Always wear your seatbelt. In Minnesota, law enforcement may pull you over simply for not wearing a seatbelt. Most importantly, seat belts save over 10,000 lives every year in the U.S.

If you see a police car with sirens and lights on and realize that you are being pulled over: Tips for a safe encounter.

- Using your turn signal, pull over to the right side of the road quickly and safely, slowing down moderately without braking so hard that the police car has to avoid hitting you.

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- Pull over as far to the right as possible to give the officer plenty of room to approach your car on foot without fear of being hit by passing traffic.
- Understand your movements and actions are now being watched very carefully. Sometimes a police officer will shine a bright light on you as they approach the car to see if you are attempting to hide something below the seat or in a pocket or to throw something out of the car the window. Suspicious, yet innocent, movements may give an officer reason to search you or your vehicle, so remain calm and relatively still.



Right After You Stop: Keeping Yourself and the Police Calm

Like anyone else, the police appreciate courteous behavior. This is not the time to be angry or argumentative, and disputes or disagreements can be handled at a later date by you or your attorney if necessary. Remember at this point, courtesy is king.

- Turn off the ignition.
- Completely roll down your window.
- Remain in your car and place your hands-on top of the steering wheel at the 10 and two o'clock position, in plain sight, and do not move them until given permission by the officer.
- If you are being pulled over in the dark, it's critical to immediately turn on your dome light as a courtesy so that the officer has a clear view of and into your car. Remember, a traffic stop can feel threatening to both parties, so anything you can do to be cooperative and reduce any anxiety on the officer's part will go a long way in keeping you safe.
- When the officer approaches your car, you should say one thing and only one thing: "Hello, Officer."
- Wait for the officer to make the next comment while maintaining eye contact.
- The officer may ask a question like, "Do you know why I pulled you over?" The only answer you can and should politely provide is, "I am not sure, officer."
 - You will be asked for your driver's license, proof of insurance, and registration. Tell the officer where these items are located and ask the officer for permission to remove your hands from the steering wheel to retrieve them. Do not remove your hands until the officer gives

permission — this is a tense situation, and you don't want the officer to have any reason to believe that you are reaching for a weapon.

- At this point, the officer may take the materials back into the squad car and check your documents.
- Remain calm with your hands on the steering wheel until the officer returns. If you only receive a warning, that's great! If you are given a ticket and disagree, you'll have an opportunity to protest it at a later time, but not now.
- Whatever the officer gives you, accept it and say two things and two things only: "Thank you, Officer," and "Will you please instruct me how to re-enter the road as I depart?"

Because of its importance, I repeat my caution that, even if you do not agree with a citation or how the officer treated you, you should avoid an immediate confrontation, instead following the instructions on the back of the ticket to make your protest. You may be well advised to consult an attorney to defend your rights. In short, the primary objective is to survive the encounter without incident or injury. It may seem like a terrible double standard, but as a parent, recognizing and abiding by the double standard gives the best odds for my child remaining safe so we can fight the good fight against bad behavior another day. Like so many, I look forward to the day when all Americans are free from worrying about these issues and can stand together and appreciate how far we've come. In the meantime, the most important thing you can do is review this article yourself and cover it with adult family members, and your children and their friends. Print it out and practice by doing a live car test (maybe just in your driveway). Run through a mock traffic stop and have them follow the list entirely, including turning on the dome light as if it were a nighttime encounter, as you play the role of the police officer. This 10-minute investment in "Preventative Medicine" may pay you and your loved ones very rich rewards.

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Dr. Charles Crutchfield III, M.D.

Charles E. Crutchfield III, MD is a board-certified dermatologist and Clinical Professor at the University of Minnesota Medical School. He also has a private practice in Eagan, MN. He received his M.D. and master's degree in Molecular Biology and Genomics from the Mayo Clinic. He has been selected as one of the top 10 dermatologists in the United States by Black Enterprise Magazine. Dr. Crutchfield was recognized by Minnesota Medicine as one of the 100 Most Influential Healthcare Leaders in Minnesota. He is the team dermatologist for the Minnesota Twins, Vikings, Timberwolves, Wild and Lynx. Dr. Crutchfield is an active member of both the American and National Medical Associations, and president of the Minnesota Association of Black Physicians.

