

# ***What Should You Do If the Police Stop You?***

Recently, across the country, there have been several unfortunate incidents resulting from contact between citizens and police officers. The Sikeston Department of Public Safety is concerned and would like to avoid having these types of situations occur in Sikeston. For this reason, the Sikeston of Public Safety has developed this information to help citizens better understand what to expect from police officers if they are stopped and/or questioned. A familiarization with law enforcement concerns and practices will help avert needless confrontation or misunderstandings.



While there are no specific guidelines for citizens in handling contacts with police, the following advice is beneficial. [We are not offering legal advice.] The goals of the police department are to improve police-community relations and to have contacts and interviews resolved without unnecessary conflict or injury to either the officer or the citizen. This information will hopefully help to minimize your stress and anxiety during your contact with the police and the same time give you some insight into the concerns and procedures of the officers.

## **IF YOU ARE STOPPED BY THE POLICE WHILE IN YOUR CAR**

- **As soon as you see the police emergency lights, pull your vehicle to the right as soon as it is safe to do so.**
  - If you do not feel you can safely pull over or if you cannot clearly identify the police vehicle, signal your intention to pull over and proceed slowly to a safe or well-lit area.
  - Although you might not know the reason, you should pull over right away. You may have committed some minor traffic violation without realizing it or there may be some problems with your vehicle of which you are unaware.
- **Remain in your vehicle while the officer approaches.**
  - Do not attempt to get out of your vehicle or approach the officer. Exiting your vehicle does not assist the officer and may be perceived as a threat.
  - Turn on your interior light if stopped at night. A lit vehicle cabin will reduce the officer's concern regarding weapons or other possible threats in your reach.
- **Give your license, registration and proof of insurance to the officer when asked to do so.**
  - Missouri law requires a driver to turn over this information upon request by a law enforcement officer.
  - Most officers will not provide a specific reason for the stop until they have received your license, registration and proof of insurance. This is to avoid debating the reason for the stop prior to acquiring this necessary information.
  - If you wish to inquire as to why you were stopped or offer an explanation, do so before the officer returns to his or her vehicle.
  - Answer all questions honestly. Information pertaining to prior arrests or traffic violations is easily verified via the police dispatcher.



- **Touching or threatening a police officer or acting in a disorderly manner could result in your arrest.**
  - If the officer asks you to step out of your vehicle, do so without any sudden or threatening movements.
  - Give the officer approximately 2 – 3 feet of “personal” space as a safety zone to do his or her job.
- **Do not become argumentative, disorderly or abusive.**
  - If an officer has already written a ticket, it cannot be voided at that time.
  - If you believe that you have been unfairly treated, DO NOT make this argument on the side of the road.
  - Your best alternative is to carry your protest to traffic court.

## DON'T BE OFFENDED

Most citizens already realize that law enforcement is a difficult and dangerous profession. Hundreds of police officers are killed each year, and thousands more are injured and assaulted. For these reasons, police officers tend to be extremely cautious. They place a great deal of emphasis on officer safety and survival. Certain safety practices are instilled in our officers from the first day of their careers. Although the procedures maximize safety for the officer, they may seem impolite, or offensive to citizens who may not consider such precautions necessary.



Even though you have no intention of doing the officer harm, he or she will probably maintain a defensive posture until the officer feels that there is no risk of confrontation or injury. As far as police officers are concerned, there is no such thing as a “routine” traffic stop. Every stop has the potential for danger.

## IF THE POLICE APPROACH YOU ON THE STREET

Innocent individuals are often offended or angered, or both, because an officer has detained them for questioning. Although the delay might be inconvenient for you, the officer believes there is a reason (reasonable suspicion) to stop you and ask questions. Most of these stops are not officer initiated. The most common reasons that cause an officer to stop someone are as follows:

- **You might be one of only a few people walking around in the vicinity of a crime that has recently occurred.**
- **Your clothing might be similar or identical to that worn by the perpetrator of a crime.**
- **Someone may have called the police complaining about your presence or that you looked “suspicious.”**
- **Someone may have pointed you out to the officer.**
- **You might be acting in a manner that the officer considers “suspicious” and you may act even more “suspicious” after realizing the officer is observing you.**

The police officer does not wish to detain you any longer than necessary. Once the officer is able to determine that you are not the individual that he or she is looking for, the officer will often apologize for the inconvenience and then quickly leave to resume the search.

## **IN ALL POLICE ENCOUNTERS**

- **Avoid making sudden movements (for your wallet, into your coat, toward your waistband, etc.)**
- **Do not carry weapons (real or otherwise) or even joke about having a weapon on your person.**
- **Do not touch the police officer or violate his or her “personal” safety zone (2 – 3 feet).**
- **Remain calm and avoid being argumentative. If you are uncooperative and refuse to answer reasonable questions, the officer is likely to become more suspicious and the encounter will probably last much longer than necessary.**
- **Comply first, then, you may seek an explanation from the officer or the officer’s supervisor later.**

**T**here are times when citizens who have contact with the police come away with feelings of frustration or dissatisfaction. The Sikeston Department of Public Safety does not condone police misconduct of any type. In our experience, we have learned that those negative feelings are often a result of not knowing the reason(s) an officer has made certain requests or acted in a certain manner. Unfortunately, demands on a patrol officer do not always permit time for explanations at the time you are stopped.

Hopefully, the information presented here will give you an understanding of police procedures and let you know what to expect from a police officer if you are stopped.