

# POLICE/CIVILIAN ENCOUNTERS:

OFFICERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TRAFFIC STOPS AND THE  
CLIMATE FOR POLICING

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Periodically, the nation's attention is captured by press coverage of a needless death of a Black person at the hands of police. And, in each case, the police department of jurisdiction launches an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the incident.

These investigations focus on the actual (or alleged), real-time, behaviors of both the officer and the decedent in an attempt to elucidate the incident and determine culpability. Several questions must be answered. What were the circumstances? How did the incident escalate? What did the deceased do? How did the officer respond? And was the response justified? What these investigations don't do is shed light on any antecedent factors that may have conditioned the behaviors of either party.

Indeed, missing from these investigations, and from research into police-involved deaths more generally, is an understanding of attitudes and perceptions held by the officers and victims prior to their interaction. The pre-dispositions of each, toward each other, may be contributing factors in how these incidents unfold. This study explores only one side of these dynamics – the attitudes and perceptions of police officers with respect to their encounters with civilians during traffic stops.

The study gathers information about the officers themselves and their feelings about their jobs. It queries their experiences with, and reactions to their traffic stop civilian encounters – seeking answers to how such stops become contentious and sometimes deadly. It asks whether race plays a role in these encounters. And finally, given the attention paid to these incidents, the study explores the officers' reactions to declines in public opinion of police and policing.

This report presents the results of these explorations in the voices of the officers themselves.

# INTRODUCTION

Recent estimates by *The Washington Post* suggest that, on average, police in the United States shoot and kill more than 1,000 people each year (Fatal Force, 2020). In fact, that number reached a historic high of 1,176 deaths in 2022 (Washburn, 2023). While each of these deaths speaks of tragedy and has its own story, for the past decade, the attention of the nation has been particularly drawn to police killings of African Americans – more specifically, Black men.

Between 2014 and 2022, there were at least 14 high-profile police brutality cases that resulted in the deaths of Black Americans. Overall, 26% of those killed in 2022 were Black, roughly twice the proportion of black in the U.S population (Mapping Police Violence, 2023). An even more recent and particularly horrific example was the fatal beating of Tyre Nichols by five Black Memphis police officers on January 7, 2023 (Rojas, 2023).

Seeing a need to better understand how and why these deaths occurred, I constructed an algorithm – the [Police/Civilian Encounters \(P/CE\) Framework](#) – to map the sequence of events that can occur during the most frequent occasion for police contact with civilians, traffic stops (Hyman, 2022). I found that traffic stops account for fully 40% of all civilian encounters with police. Traffic stops are ubiquitous in that they can happen to anyone regardless of race, religion, gender identification or any other demographic. They are also one of the most dangerous interactions that people of all races have with police, and repeated studies and investigations have found that Black people get pulled over much more frequently than other groups (Lartey, 2023).

The P/CE Framework elucidates these encounters by positing that they occur in seven stages involving 14 separate events displayed in a tree diagram. It highlights pathways that can lead to excessive use of force and civilian deaths, and it identifies patterns of police behavior that may deserve intense scrutiny (Hyman, 2022). I acknowledged, however, that an important shortcoming of this approach is the framework's inability to consider the perceptions of either the police officer or the civilian, or the respective contributions of those perceptions, to the encounter's evolution and eventual outcome.

In short, though the framework does present a logical, comprehensive sequence of events that can occur, it cannot factor in the perceptions and motivations of the parties involved. This study attempts to fill in at least one side of that perceptions/motivations story – the officers' view.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is a great deal of literature and opinion polling on and about civilian perceptions of police and policing, there is less information available about police opinions of civilians or their encounters with them. One of the largest, most definitive, and comprehensive studies of officers' opinions was conducted by the National Police Research Platform and published by the Pew Research Center in 2017.

The study's survey involved nearly 8,000 police officers from departments of 100 officers or more. It explored the culture of policing, noting how officers view themselves and their roles in the communities they serve. It queried officers' views of their departments as places to work and solicited their views on departmental leadership on the quality of their training, on use-of-force guidelines, on the fairness of assignments and on the department's disciplinary procedures. It also explored police opinions about their relationships with their communities – the quality of those relationships, the degree to which they feel respected, and issues related to police-minority relations.

The study examines officers' views on fatal police/civilian encounters and the protests that often ensue. It chronicles a split in police opinion as to whether such incidents are isolated events or symptoms of system problems, and whether the ensuing protests are truly calls for justice or the result of anti-police bias. It delves into

police support for training and reforms such as the support officers express for the use body cameras. And finally, the report explores opinions that are shared by the police and the public as well as areas where their opinions diverge.

In another study of police attitudes, Garner (2005) explored whether experience in the field caused police attitudes to change compared to those held during their training as cadets. Results showed marked differences in attitudes on the two issues being queried: 1) their views about their abilities to impact crime in their communities, and 2) their beliefs about acceptable police conduct. The findings determined that a year after training, the officers were less sanguine about their abilities to impact crime and more tolerant of bending the rules.

Barthelemy, et al. (2016) observed that police perceptions of the communities they serve directly influence their level of interaction with the individuals within those communities. But the authors also lament the relative dearth of research on police perceptions of civilians.

In an older but related study, Groves and Rossi (1970) assert that self-fulfilling prophecies play a large role in influencing social interactions and that police may fall victim to this phenomenon in their work in low-income Black communities. Their qualitative study, of how 522 policemen that worked in Black ghettos perceived those communities, asserted that white policemen's perceptions of Black hostility were a projection of their own fears and prejudices rather than a legitimate reaction to actual hostility.

Though each of these studies explores important aspects of police perceptions and attitudes, none of them examines what officers may be thinking and feeling during actual law enforcement encounters with people in their communities. And as such, they shed little light on the dynamics that influence the decisions and behaviors of officers during those events.

The present study is designed to delve into such questions in the context of traffic stops. It begins by gathering data about the studied officers including why they chose the profession, how they feel about conducting traffic stops, how and what they perceive as threatening during the conduct of a traffic stop, what they see as the causes for escalation, and their experiences with and uses of force during these encounters. Finally, given the public's concern with civilian fatalities, the study queries officers about their perceptions of public opinion and whether public opinion has any influence on how they see their jobs.





# RESEARCH DESIGN

**Research Method:** These questions are being pursued using qualitative research methods employing a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, as a research method, “seeks to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience: how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, make sense of it, and/or talk about it with others” (Marshall et al, 2016). In the context of the present study, I am examining the lived experience of police officers as they engage in contacts with civilians during traffic stops.

**Sample Selection:** This study draws from a convenience sample comprised of 24 police officers serving in Prince Georges County, M.D. According to Lafferty et al. (2021), Prince George’s County envelopes 27 municipalities and houses one of the largest populations in the State of Maryland at more than 900,000 residents. The county’s racial and ethnic diversity is reflected in the breakdown of the county’s four most populous racial and ethnic groups: Black (61%), Hispanic (20%), White (12%), and Asian (4%). The Prince George’s Police Department (PGPD) employs 1,530 sworn officers and 326 civilian personnel.

The sample was populated through the active cooperation of the PG County Fraternal Order of Police, Lodge 89. Under the leadership of its President, Lt. Angelo Consoli, the police union sent a study invitation to its membership. That invitation netted 63 officers who expressed interest in the study and who were subsequently sent a link to a pre-interview survey. The survey gathered information on the officers and their traffic stop histories. To each officer selected for a study interview, the invitation letter promised a gift certificate of \$100 for each completed interview.

After reviewing the survey results, 24 officers were selected for interviews based on the recency and volume of their traffic stop experiences. Of them, 12 are African American, 9 are Caucasian, only 1 is Hispanic and the remaining 2 are other races. There are only 3 women – 2 Black and 1 white. Educational attainment varied widely with 4 officers having completed high school and 4 having some college, however, most officers (15) either completed or went beyond a bachelor's degree. Five of the officers had prior military experience. More than half (14) of the officer sample is married compared to 6 who are single and 4 divorced. 14 are under 45 years of age. The remaining 10 range from 45 to retirement age.

Relatedly, the sample is relatively experienced with officers having an average of 14.4 years in policing and 13.7 years in PG County. Caucasian officers are more experienced than African American officers by an average of over 3 years. The sample contains officers of all ranks. The ranks appear to be equitably distributed with half (12) having obtained

the rank of Corporal (six of them African American) and with 15 (7 African Americans) being at a rank of Corporal or lower. 7 are Sergeants (4 African American, 3 Caucasian) and 2 are of higher rank – one Black and one white.

**Data Gathering:** Data for this report was derived through a mixed-method approach involving a survey and interviews. The first tranche of data came from a pre-interview survey that was distributed, in July of 2022, to the 63 officers who expressed interest in participating. Information was collected on the officers' demographics and policing experience. Officers who had minimal or no experience with traffic stops and those whose experience was not recent (32 in total) were eliminated from consideration. This left an initial pool of 31 officers who were enrolled in the sample. Subsequent to their enrollment, a combination of scheduling difficulties and nonresponse whittled the sample to a final 24 officers.

The second and primary segment of data was gathered through individual 90-minute interviews that were conducted during the first three weeks of August 2022. Each of these interviews was recorded and later transcribed using computerized transcription software. Transcribed responses were then coded and arrayed in an Excel Spreadsheet for analysis.



## FINDINGS

Study participants provided a wealth of reflections about themselves, their jobs, their interactions during traffic stops, their views on race in the department, and their reactions to media reports and public opinion. In reporting on these reflections, this report will use the voices of these officers to vivify the results. Some editing has been done for the sake of clarity.

### ABOUT THE OFFICERS

Beyond the demographic and experience data collected in the survey, the study endeavored to learn more about the officers themselves as a means of contextualizing their reactions to civilians while in the field. I wanted to know why they chose policing as a profession and how they felt about their jobs. I also wanted to learn something about their social and out-of-work lives.

### Why Choose Policing?

A question of immediate interest was, why policing? "What made you choose policing as a career?" The overwhelming response, given by 75% of respondents and expressed in several ways, centered on the theme of community service (e.g., helping people, giving back, duty to serve, etc.). One respondent expressed it this way:

Honestly, I really like dealing with people on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes it's not always the best circumstances or the best situation. But I've always felt like there's a kind of a social obligation to look out for people who are in a bad situation. So, if somebody's being victimized, you're supposed to stand up for 'em. If somebody's being harassed or whatever, you're supposed to look out for 'em, and if somebody's out there not following the rules, then it's kind of everyone's responsibility to make sure that're held accountable. That's just kind of been like the way I was raised, I guess. (Interview #124)



This finding is consistent with the findings of a 2022 national survey of 2,376 officers on “What Cops Want” where Harrison (2022) reports that the most prominent reason expressed for choosing policing as a career, by 72% of respondents, was “to help people”(pg. 1.).

Some of the respondents (5) viewed policing as an extension of their military experience while several others viewed policing as the fulfillment of a childhood aspiration.

## What Do You Like/Dislike About Your Job?

As a follow up to the above, the study sought to gain insight into how officers felt about being in the career they had aspired to. So, they were asked what they liked and disliked about the job. On the upside, the primary response of 83% of officers, was the “superhero” opportunities (e.g., helping people out, helping them solve problems, and keeping people safe, etc.). This result also aligns with the “What Cops Want” survey in which 64% of respondents cited “serving the community” and 42% cited “crime fighting” as the most satisfying aspects of the job. Here is how one respondent put it:

The best part to me is when you can clearly see that you’ve made a difference to someone’s life or even saved a life. There’s no greater feeling, man. You know? and it’s like, Hey, if I, if it wasn’t for me, if I wasn’t there at that time, if I didn’t hurry up and get there, that person wouldn’t be alive today... that, that’s pretty amazing. And having a couple of calls like that throughout my career you know, it doesn’t happen very often, but when it does, it’s, it’s just amazing. (Interview #141)

On the downside, there is great concern about the negativity respondents feel from the press, the media, and the public. This concern stems from the perception that they are “lumped in” with bad apples whose misdeeds are the public’s primary focus. 90% of respondents hold this view.

What I don’t like is the perception that we get because of isolated incidents and bad apples. I don’t like that. We all get grouped together. And I often find myself arguing with people like it’s bad people in every profession, but you don’t hear people going around saying f\*\*k the priests, or f\*\*k the school teachers, or f\*\*k the doctors, or things like that. Well, we get f\*\*k the police. I don’t like that. Even if you are trying to do the right thing, you still get all bad heat from everything else. (Interview #108)

Many of these same officers say that, in addition to the bad press and the inherent dangers of the job, the department, in response to the few bad actors, may be overdoing it with increased accountability measures that they feel hamstringing them and make their jobs harder.

We have potential threats from all around us literally and mentally. So, on one hand, I can actually get murdered today or I can risk my life. That’s the most obvious threat, you know, and then you have threats from the justice department where if I make a mistake or do something wrong, even if I don’t do anything wrong, things just go south, like if someone just naturally dies or something in my custody. Then I can go to jail. That that’s a lot of stress cause I don’t want to go to jail. You know, and then you have the, the stress of being, being fired. (Interview #141)

## Good Day/Bad Day

For further insight into their views of the job, respondents were asked to share their views on what constitutes a good vs. a bad day at work. The most prevalent response, expressed by half of the officers, in describing a good day was “not getting hurt” and “when everybody gets to go home safe.” For several officers, a good day was also characterized by congenial relations with the public. The following expresses both sentiments.

A good day? A good day is I wake up, I go to work, and I come home in the same condition that I went to work. That to me is a good day. But oftentimes that doesn't happen. Whether I'm mentally exhausted, physically injured, physically tired, things like that. So, you know, a good day for me again, is going to work, having good interactions with people, not getting screamed at, not getting told, “I'm gonna have your job” – for what? “Because you're writing me a ticket. I pay your salary.” If I don't hear that kind of stuff in a day, then yeah, it's probably a good day. (Interview #120)

Another frequent response given by one-third of the officers was “receiving at least one call where the person got the help they needed. A bad day is portrayed as just the opposite, where either an officer or a citizen loses their life.

A bad day would be when one of my fellow officers was either injured or killed while I've been working. Or, you know, an officer having to take a citizen's life. That's a bad day to me because I don't go to work with the mindset of having to take someone's life. And I don't think most of us go to work with that mindset. (Interview #103)

## Officers' Social Circles and Off-Duty Activities

To round out an understanding of the officers, the interviews enquired about the makeup of their social circles and the kinds of activities and pastimes they engage in while not at work. At various points during their interviews, many officers expressed the view that stress is more of a “feature” than a “bug” in policing, and most saw their off hours as the antidote.

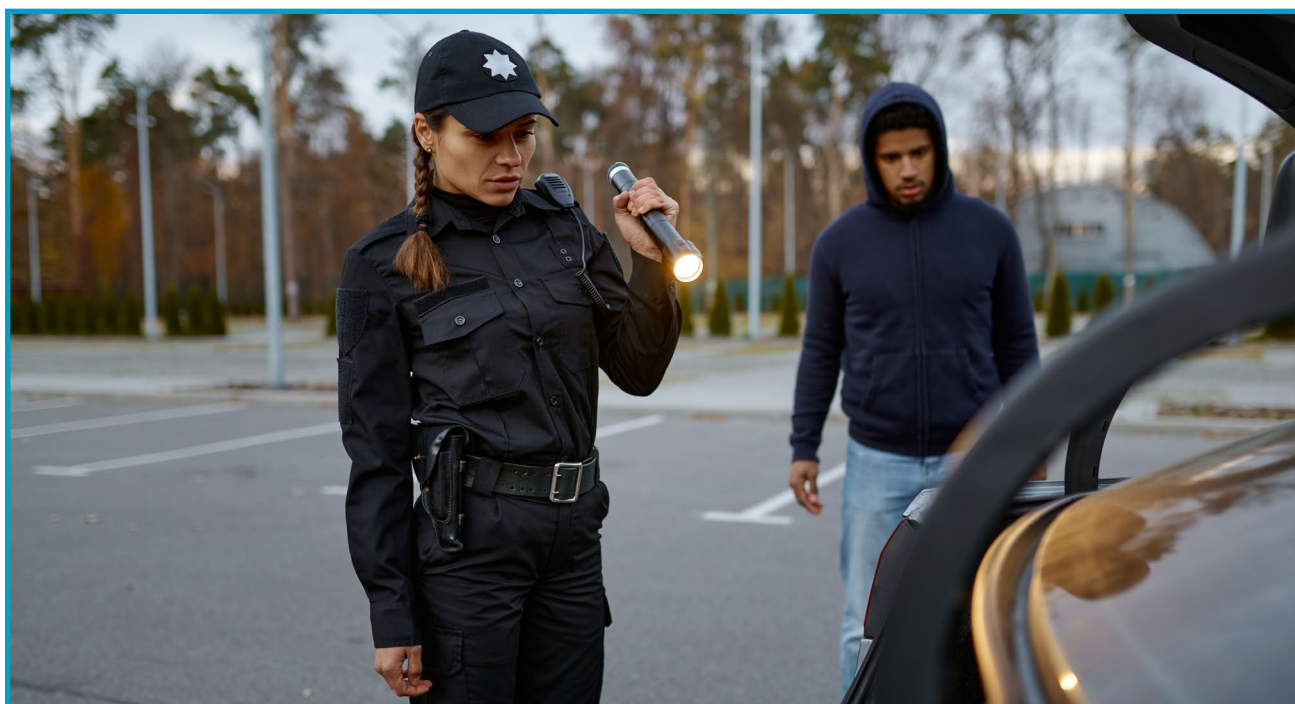
Every time I'm off, I step away from policing because I feel the stresses of this job... you can't carry that every day, all day. I feel like if you don't find an outlet, or you don't find a way to walk away from what you're doing every single day, that could cause personal problems for you, it could cause mental health issues. It could cause you to start having panic attacks or stress related attacks. You have to let this job go... and it took me a while to realize that, because I used to carry this job with me all the time, everywhere I went. (Interview #103)

Interestingly, despite the prevalence of stress on the job, most of the respondents (75%) reported that many, if not most, of their friends and close associates are fellow police officers. They reported feeling a comfort and comradery in these relationships. By contrast, 25% of the officers said they had no officers in their friendship circles feeling that when not at work, they wanted to be completely off the job. The activities officers pursued when not working were varied. The most frequent answers to this question, in rank order, were sports and exercise (60%) and hobbies (30%), and TV and video games at 30%.

## ABOUT TRAFFIC STOPS

According to the Stanford Open Policing Project (2020), police pull over more than 50,000 drivers on a typical day, more than 20 million motorists every year. And, as earlier stated, the fact that these stops are most common occasion for police interactions with civilians, makes them an appropriate context for the focus of this study.

But before probing those traffic stop interactions, it was important, on background, to better understand the officers' perceptions of traffic stops generally, as a component of police work. So, a number of stage-setting questions were posed. "How do traffic stops compare to the rest of your job or to other assignments you have had as a police officer?" "Are there particular thoughts, concerns or emotions you experience when initiating a stop?" "What kinds of civilian behaviors can contribute to a good vs. a bad traffic stop?" And "how might a civilian's behavior influence the way you resolve the incident?" The answers to these questions, above all else, highlighted the levels of stress most respondents experienced.



## Traffic Stops Vs. Other Police Work

When asked to compare traffic stops with other aspects of policing, the officers gave one of the strongest responses in the study. They were unanimous in stating that they are stressful. Sixty-six percent (66%) characterized them as absolutely more dangerous than calls for service. A third said they are high risk and half expressed the view that there are just too many unknowns.

I don't feel that heightened sense of danger going to a call for service, whether it's a domestic, a theft of auto, an alarm call, whatever the case may be. But a traffic stop, to me, my senses are, are much more heightened. For one, I can't see anything that's in that car as I'm walking up to it. Through my training, I know how fast a person can turn a weapon on you and you don't even know it's coming. Action is always gonna be faster than reaction. So, if they already know that, when this person gets up to the car door, I'm gonna shoot them, they're prepared for it. I'm not prepared for that. I don't think, in every traffic stop, somebody wants to kill me. Don't get me wrong, but I look at it as this person can hurt me. (Interview #103)

Traffic stops are a unique animal. No two are ever the same and, going into a stop, you don't know what you're dealing with. If you're stopping somebody for speeding, yeah, they're speeding, but what else are they doing? Why are they speeding? Could they be trying to get away from something? Or could they just be going somewhere? So that's difficult. When I was on patrol and you would get a call for say a shoplifter, you knew what you were dealing with. Or if you would get a call for a domestic,

you would know that it's a husband or wife having some kind of an issue. So, you would have a lot more information. The dispatchers would also try and get more information while you were heading to those calls. With traffic stops, they're self-initiated, so the amount of information you have is very little. Like we may know that the tags are expired because we looked at it or we may know that there's a headlight out, but again, we don't know what else may be going on with that stop. And we don't know who we're stopping. That could be a carload of people that just robbed a bank. That could be a drug courier taken his drugs somewhere. I mean it could just be almost anything. (Interview #120)

One officer made a comment about the stress of the policing profession and the difference a single positive encounter with a citizen can make.

Policing is tough, you know? I once had a bad couple of weeks where I had two fatal traffic accidents and there was also a homicide. I was on the scene with three different people that were deceased in those four weeks. Our job is, is by no means easy. We're often exposed to the worst that the community has to offer. Those are the calls we get. it's not often that we get to experience the best that the community has to offer. But, one particular day, I was driving, and this vehicle pulls up next to me honking the horn and the driver's waving at me. And, I rolled my eyes and I said to myself, oh, what now? So, I wind down my window. "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?" He said, "I just wanna say, have a great day and stay safe." And I was, I was blown. I was not expecting that, you know? I sincerely said, "thank you. I needed to hear that." That really made my day. (Interview #133)

## Situational Awareness: Approaching the Vehicle

The stress officers expressed, as emblematic of traffic stops, suggests that learning more about what they are thinking, feeling, and observing, as they approach the stopped vehicle, may be important to a later understanding of how they interact with the driver. Two responses stood out as prominent among the insights they shared. The biggest issue in the officers' awareness – expressed by 60% of them – was being attentive to movement in the car. “Furtive” movement by the operator can be a major contributor to negative outcomes during these incidents.

I'm also looking at the movement in the car as I'm talking to the dispatcher. Most people, you know, are just rummaging around looking for their license and registration prior to us making that approach. But if I see you tuck to the left or under the seat or not even under the seat, but if I see you tucking to the left more, it's gonna raise questions because there's nothing to the left, in my opinion, that you will be reaching for on a traffic stop. If anything, it will be the middle console to the right, or in the glove box. (Interview #108)

The second issue on which there was some consensus, among 50% of respondents, was being attentive to the number of occupants in the car. Tinted windows were cited here as a major obstacle to what could be life-saving observations.

When I first started police work, you didn't see a lot of tint on windows, but everything is tinted now. Now everybody's tinted. These tint shops out here, they'll sell you whatever you want. They don't care. So, most of the cars that we're walking up on have limo tint, 5% limo tint. You cannot see inside the car. And that

is extremely dangerous. I mean literally, even with a flashlight or the spotlights on our cars, you cannot see into these cars. So, I'm walking up to the back of a car. If it's a four-door car, I have to walk past that tinted out window and I don't know if somebody's sitting in a backseat with a shotgun. (Interview #137)

## Good Stop Vs. Bad Stop

Participants in the study, on many occasions, remarked that no two traffic stops are the same. As such, it was important to learn how they differ, in particular, what distinguishes a “good” traffic stop from a bad one. Interview results suggested that the operant factors are almost polar opposites. Good traffic stops are described as those that proceed “smoothly” where everything remains calm, the driver is compliant, and the parties depart without incident. Some variation of these themes was shared by every respondent.

Bad traffic stops, by contrast, have a different profile – characterized by 50% of officers as primarily involving contentious and argumentative drivers.

Often, you pull somebody over and they give you a really hard time on a traffic stop. They're arguing with you, they're cussing at you, you know, they pull out the camera, they're recording, which is okay, you know, we're recording too. But some people can give you a really hard time on a traffic stop. (Interview #119)

Forty percent (40%) of respondents also said that a bad stop is when drivers fail to comply with instructions such as producing requested documents. And 25% reported that a bad stop is having to take someone to jail.

## Civilian Behavior and Incident Resolution

According to the officers, the difference between good and bad stops depends on the behavior of the civilians. So, the interviews probed how that behavior might influence the officers' handling of the incident. Police have a great deal of discretion in how they resolve traffic matters. They can issue warnings, repair orders, or tickets. They can take no enforcement action, or they can conduct searches and arrests. As a follow up to the good vs. bad stop responses, the survey inquired as to whether the driver's behavior can influence the officer's choice of actions to take in resolving the stop.

All of the respondents indicated that their initial inclination is to let the driver off with a verbal or written warning. Only 4 (17%) responded that a driver's behavior would have no bearing on their resolution of the stop. The overwhelming majority (83%), however, indicated that there were behaviors that would cause them to take more punitive steps. Principal among those behaviors was a driver's belligerence and bad attitude. Research by Nix et al. (2017) supports the idea that demeanor, particularly involving non-compliance and/or disrespect, can have negative impacts on these interactions. Here is what one officer said.

A majority of the people that we deal with, even if they're argumentative, we let go with a verbal warning or just a written warning. But sometimes we'll issue citations. If you're a real a\*\*hole, I might write you four or five tickets because I tried to explain to you, "Hey, look, this is what I stopped you for." And if you say, "Well, I don't care. So what? There's other people out here committing crimes." If you

come at me with that attitude. Well, this is part of my job. This is what I do. I enforce traffic law. If you don't like it, don't get behind the wheel and drive if you're driving a piece of junk that you don't wanna get stopped in, you know? If you don't wanna get stopped, don't drive on dead tags. I mean, that's just, that's part of our job. (Interview #137)

Half of the officers in the survey said that they felt it was important for the vehicle's operator to acknowledge the infraction and take responsibility for it and that failure to do so would likely earn them a citation. A third of the officers reported issuing citations to drivers with repeat offenses. The following is a representative response.

I don't know what I'm gonna do for you until I have an interaction with you and go back and check your record. If I'm stopping you for speeding and I go back, run you through the computer, and I see that you've gotten 15 warnings for speeding, that tells me you're not learning anything. And, if I write you the 16th, you're still gonna just keep speeding. Or if I go back to my car and you've never been stopped before, I'm not gonna write a citation and you'll be on your way. (Interview #120)



## ABOUT TRAFFIC STOPS AND THREATS

Officers' views on traffic stops reveal a good deal of information about their likely predispositions toward their contacts with civilians. The heightened stress of the job, compared to other policing functions, combined with comparatively less advance information and the on-scene unknowns, are reported as contributing to officers' perceptions that traffic stops offer higher levels of threat to their well-being.

The pre-interview survey queried the officers' experiences with threatening situations. Table 1 below shows that the sampled officers reported a total of 2,652 traffic stops over the previous 12 months during which two-thirds of the officers experienced a total of 209 threatening behaviors. Among the male African American officers, 60% had experienced a civilian threat while over 70% (7 of 9) of the white male officers had had similar encounters. Two of the three female officers reported the same. Overall, then, two-thirds of the respondents perceived a threat during a traffic stop, but those threats occurred less than 8% of the time.



**TABLE 1. THREATENING BEHAVIOR AT TRAFFIC STOP**

Race by Sex	Sample	Total Traffic Stops	Total Civilian Threats to Officers	Ever Experienced Threat		% Officers With Threat Experience	% Threats At Stops
				No	Yes		
Female							
African American	2	200	8	1	1	50%	4.0%
Caucasian	1	25	2		1	100%	8.0%
Female Total	3	225	10	1	2	67%	4.4%
Male							
African American	10	1,287	162	4	6	60%	12.6%
Another Race	1	20	0		1	100%	0.0%
Caucasian	9	1,120	37	2	7	78%	3.3%
Latino	1			1		0%	0.0%
Male Total	21	2,427	199	7	14	67%	8.2%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>2,652</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>7.9%</b>

To better understand how these threats are perceived, the interviews probed deeper into the following set of questions. How do traffic stops typically proceed? What kinds of driver behavior may cause tensions to arise? What behaviors do officers view as actually threatening? How do officers view civilian compliance vs. non-compliance, and what kinds of civilian behaviors can put officers at ease.



## The Stop Process

To shed light on how these events unfold, the interview queried the process of making a traffic stop asking officers for a step-by-step walk through. Here is how one officer recounts the process.

Well, first of course, you activate your emergency equipment to pull the car over. You call out on the radio to advise the dispatcher with a description of the vehicle – how many people are in the car, of course the tag number and color. I exit my vehicle. We're trained to put a thumbprint on the trunk of the car, just in case something goes wrong. They can locate the car and know that that is the car that you were in contact with by obtaining your fingerprint off of it. As I'm approaching a car, I'm walking so that I can see, or at least attempt to see, what's in the back of the car. As I approach the door, I'm talking to the driver at the same time, watching the movement of his hands. I'm also watching to see whether or not they're reaching or moving from side to side or trying to discard anything. And then I start my pleasantries, "Hi, I am Officer XXX with Prince George County Police. The reason I stopped you is X, Y, and Z. Can I have your driver's license, registration? And on a good stop, they just comply and give me everything. I go back and check 'em for wants and warrants and make and sure their registration and everything is good. And I send 'em on their merry way with a warning. (Interview #106)

While this description comports with the others given, several officers offered additional information about things they are observing in these early moments including how the driver reacted to being "lit up;" what's in, or going on, in the car; and whether there is an odor of alcohol or marijuana.

## Levels and Causes of Tension

As earlier stated, the respondents, at various points in the interview, reported that traffic stops are tense situations for them. Much of the tension is fueled by lack of information, and uncertainty in the combination of the initial anonymity of the driver and the unpredictability of what may come next.

Like I said, many times, more likely than not, when we pull people over, we don't know who's inside the car. So yeah, there's always that. That unknown creates anxiety. It creates nervousness, right? Until you initially look in the car, at that person, and you have that first few seconds of exchange, you don't know, where that traffic stop's gonna' go. (Interview #119)

## Behaviors Perceived as Threatening

Recognizing the tension evoked by this uncertainty, the interview probed more deeply to discern specific examples of behavior that the officers found threatening. Without exception, respondents reported furtive movement as the number one potential threat during a traffic stop. This includes drivers ducking so they can't be seen; obscuring their hands; reaching for something; and trying to hide or discard something.

If you have a person that is doing a lot of movement and very nervous, I think most police officers would find that to be threatening – not that it actually is threatening, but it should raise your sense of awareness. It should make your senses more heightened because you don't know why they're moving. (Interview #103)

So, we're looking for hand movement, breathing, pulse rate, evasive answers, you know, those type of things. All that kind of stuff gets your "spidey" senses going. They start being real evasive. You know, you ask them questions like "what's your name?" and they go "uh uh uh" and you know that's not a normal response. If I ask your name, you're gonna blurt that out real quick. (Interview #137)

Several other officers also cited evasive behavior as suspicious and potentially threatening. As an example:

I find evasive, non-communication behaviors threatening. If I'm having a conversation with you and you're not having a conversation back, or you're not engaging, it seems as if you're trying to find a way out of this and that raises issues for me. And so that's why in that situation, I might say, "okay, just step out the car." 'Cause now I don't know what your plan is or what you have in that car. I wanna separate you from your car because that will bring me back down. Once I pat you down and make sure you don't have any weapons, now we can have a conversation. But while you're in the car, even if your hands are on the steering wheel, if you're evasive, I am not comfortable. (Interview #108)

Still other potential threatening behaviors cited included: drivers exiting their cars, unfastening their seatbelts, and illuminated brake lights indicating that the car is not in park.

## Driver Non-Compliance

As part of the probe into traffic stops and threats, the pre-interview survey collected data on civilian non-compliant behaviors as reported in Table 2. The results were strikingly similar to those in Table 1. Here too, as with threats, two-thirds (16) of the officers reported having had encounters with non-compliant civilians. And again, 60% of male African American officers reported experiencing civilian non-compliance while over 70% (7 of 9) of the white male officers reported the same. And here too, two of the three female officers reported encounters with non-compliant drivers. As with the threatening behaviors reported in Table 1, civilian non-compliance was reported to occur less than 8% of the time. The similarities between Tables 1 and 2 cannot be definitively explained. It is possible that the concepts of non-compliant and threatening behaviors were conflated in the survey. Still, the orders of magnitude appear to be commensurate with the interview results.

**TABLE 2. NONCOMPLIANT CIVILIANS (NC) AT TRAFFIC STOPS**

Race By Sex	Sample	Total Traffic Stops	Total Civilian Threats to Officers	Ever Experienced Threat		% Officers With Threat	% Threats At Stops
				No	Yes		
Female							
African American	2	200	10	1	1	50%	5.0%
Caucasian	1	25	4		1	100%	16.0%
<b>Female Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>6.2%</b>
Male							
African American	10	1,287	144	4	6	60%	11.2%
Another Race	1	20	5		1	100%	25.0%
Caucasian	9	1,120	37	2	7	78%	3.3%
Latino	1			1		0%	0.0%
<b>Male Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>2,427</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>7.6%</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>2,652</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>7.5%</b>

It should be noted here that there were 162 distinctly different characterizations of non-compliant behaviors reported by survey respondents. For the purposes of the analysis, they have been coded into the 5 categories, shown in Table 3, and ranked in terms of the frequency in which they occurred among the 16 officers who reported them as follows:

**Table 3: Types and Frequencies of Non-Compliant Behaviors**

Drivers' Non-Compliant Behaviors	Frequency of Occurrence
Refusing commands/instructions	92%
Unarmed Aggressiveness	54%
Belligerent/Hostile Attitude	25%
Violent Behavior	13%
Armed Aggressiveness	13%

## Putting Officers at Ease

As described in Interview #119 above, the first few seconds of police/civilian contact can be an important stage-setter for how a traffic stop is likely to proceed. The interviews suggest that the apprehension associated with the stop can be mitigated by the attitude and demeanor of the driver. For instance, in earlier responses, officers indicated that, in many instances, a driver's behavior is what makes the difference between a warning and a ticket. Indeed, when asked what civilians might do to put them at ease, most responses focused on the civility of the driver – being polite, sitting still and being calm, being respectful, and engaging in relaxed conversation. Other suggestions included lighting up the interior and rolling down the windows, especially tinted windows. But, beyond all else, the officers urged compliance.

Just pull over and comply whether you agree with the stop or not. I understand people don't have time for that, but you can make time to get things right without taking it to a level where you can end up in jail or have force used against you for something that's against the law but may not be a big deal. (Interview #117)

## Drivers' Dos and Don'ts

The focus on threatening behaviors led us to inquire what the officers would advise as the best ways for drivers to comport themselves during a traffic stop. Below is an array of their top 5 suggestions about drivers should and should not do. The percentages shown do not necessarily reflect the relative importance of each suggestion. Rather, they reflect top-of-mind recall of the suggestions most immediately mentioned. Indeed, it is likely that most, if not all, of the respondents would agree with each of the suggestions listed.

## Exhibit 1: Top 5 Officers' Suggestions for Safe Traffic Stop Encounters

What Drivers Should Do		What Drivers Should Not Do	
Suggestion	Mentions*	Suggestion	Mentions*
Comply with all instructions	100%	Don't reach without permission	83%
Be still, calm, courteous, respectful	100%	Don't argue the citation	67%
Keep hands visible	67%	Don't get out of the car	33%
Pull over as soon as possible	50%	Don't leave car in gear	25%
Control your passengers	25%	Don't unfasten the seatbelt	18%

\*Percent for whom this response was top of mind.

### ABOUT ESCALATIONS

Exhibit 1 above provides a blueprint for the behaviors that officers believe will contribute to safe, orderly traffic stop encounters between civilians and police. But, the officers did not suggest that failure to adhere to these suggestions will necessarily lead to an escalation. So, the interviews went further to learn more about behaviors most likely to escalate to confrontation. An escalation usually refers to an officer's need to become more assertive in the conduct of the stop. Two questions were posed here. The first attempted to establish what kinds of non-compliant or distasteful behaviors the officers would tolerate before seeing a need to become more assertive. Here is one answer.

If I'm dealing with a driver who is very nasty, I'm not getting equally as nasty with them because I know that will cause it to escalate. If they are yelling and screaming and I start yelling and screaming, no good can come from that. If they're yelling and screaming and I'm trying to remain calm, I'm trying to deescalate that situation. However, if they continue at that level and I'm still not getting the cooperation that I need, I may ask them to step out of the car for my safety. I can honestly say that typically people don't act like that. Those kinds of traffic stops are very few and far between. (Interview #103)

Other officers expressed restraint in different ways including a willingness to tolerate a driver's use of bad/foul language, questioning the stop, being disrespectful, and name calling.

On the flipside, a second question was asked about the kinds of behaviors most likely to cause an escalation, the unanimous response related to more aggressive demonstrations of poor driver comportment. A variety of behaviors was cited. The most frequent were furtive movements and failure to show hands.

I think one of the things a driver could do is have all of the occupants sit still and show their hands. Have the backseat passengers just put their hands on the front seat. If they're in the front seat, everybody just put their hands where we can see them because, at the end of the day, the hands are what's gonna hurt you. Not anything else. (Interview #103)

Other behaviors perceived as provocative included drivers exiting the vehicle, being belligerent, and refusing to cooperate.

## ABOUT THE USE OF FORCE

Perhaps more than any other behavior, the use of force by police officers has the potential to decrease public trust. While most citizens recognize the occasional need for force, the frequency of force used by police, and force that is perceived to be excessive are clearly of concern to the public (Stewart et al., 2012).

While there is no single, universally agreed-upon, definition of use of force, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (2023) has described use of force as the "amount of effort required by police to compel compliance by an unwilling subject." Use of force encompasses a range of officer behaviors from "officer presence" and using a more commanding tone and language, to the use of more assertive tactics including physical contact, and/or ultimately the use of a weapon (Purdue, 1980).

Table 4 reports on the frequency at which the officer sample experienced traffic stops that escalated to a use of force. Overall, the table suggests that, out of 2,652 traffic stops in the previous 12 months, only 16 (or 0.6 percent) were reported to have escalated to the use of force. This finding comports with data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics that suggests that police use of force is relatively rare. According to BSL, between 2002 and 2011, only 1.6 percent of the 44 million people in the U.S. who had face-to-face encounters with police experienced the threat or actual use of force (Highland et al., 2015).

The interviews suggested that roughly 1/3 of the 24 officers in the sample reported ever having to use force during a traffic stop. For them, two driver behaviors were primarily responsible for this level of escalation – resisting arrest and resisting being removed from the vehicle.

I've actually had to go hands on with someone because they were being arrested on an open warrant plus their license was suspended. The vehicle had no insurance, and the tags were wrong, so the vehicle's gonna get impounded. Once I got him out of the car, told him he was being arrested and tried to handcuff him, he started to pull away, which caused me to escalate my force in dealing with him. So yeah, I've had to use force on a traffic stop, but the force was no greater than what was needed to gain control of the person. (Interview #103)

**TABLE 4. USE OF FORCE AT TRAFFIC STOPS**

Race By Sex	Sample	Total Traffic Stops	Total Use of Force Against Civilians	Ever Used		% Officers With Threat Experience	% Threats At Stops
Female							
African American	2	200	1	1	1	50%	0.5%
Caucasian	1	25	1		1	100%	4.0%
<b>Female Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>
Male							
African American	10	1,287	6	8	2	20%	0.5%
Another Race	1	20	1	1		0%	5.0%
Caucasian	9	1,120	7	4	5	56%	0.6%
Latino	1			1		0%	0.0%
<b>Male Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>2,427</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>0.6%</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>2,652</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>0.6%</b>

The following is one officer's recitation of an incident in which force was used to remove a passenger from the vehicle.

The driver was actually extremely cooperative. He pulled over for the headlight being out. I was with another officer, and I went through the regular spiel about the driver's license, registration. I asked, "Do you have anything illegal in the car?" He said, "No you can search." So now, I'm gonna search the car. So, he steps out of the car, but the passenger doesn't wanna get out. I explained to the passenger that, in order for me to search the car, you need to get out. He wouldn't look at me, but he said, "I don't wanna get out."

I said, well, it's his car. And he's allowing us to search so you need to step out. When he did step out, I put my hands on his shoulder because I knew he was gonna try to run. And that's when he elbowed me, and we tussled a little. He had a gun in his waist. It fell on the ground. My partner was still engaged with the driver, but when he finally saw what was going on, he came over and retrieved the gun and wound up getting the guy in handcuffs. But prior to getting him in handcuffs, the guy was reaching in his pocket. It turns out he had a knife in his pocket, and another magazine. (Interview #106)

But, the interviews also revealed that for some officers, particularly white officers in predominantly Black Prince George's County (PG) in Maryland County, the use of force is fraught with stress because of fears of possible personal consequences.

Right now, the use of force thing, is a big stress on everybody. People are scared to police. Officers are scared to engage because they think that if they get into a use of force, they're gonna get fired, they're gonna go to jail. So that is a big stress. The police officers are really, really stressed about that. I don't think about it too much because I've always done things the way I'm supposed to. It's in the back of my mind, but it doesn't really affect me as it does other officers that are scared. The ones I'm talking about are the ones that believe that mainly because they're white – that if they do something it's gonna be presumed as being on purpose. There gonna be perceived as doing something automatically wrong, even if they do it by the book. (Interview #117)

## ABOUT THE CLIMATE FOR POLICING

As above, much of what is reported here chronicles various manners in which stress can manifest in policing and in police encounters with civilians. But the interviews suggested that there are also stressors posed by the larger environment in the ways officers perceive and react to public opinion. The decline in public opinion has been cited by Gallup:

One of the notable findings this year is that for the first time, the percentage of Americans who say they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the police has dipped below 50%. It's now at 48%, and over the 20 years we've been tracking this, it's never been below 50%. In 2017 it was up to 57%, so there's been some decline since then (Public Perceptions, 2020)

### Officers' Views on Public Opinion

Every respondent in the study commented on public opinion on more than one occasion during the interviews and, in each case, the officers recounted at least one incident where drivers expressed or demonstrated a poor opinion or lack of respect. Indeed, when asked how they believed the public views police today, 75% said the public has a very low opinion of them. And their primary concern is that the high-profile instances of police misconduct, covered in the media, have created the impression that all police are bad.



Well, let's talk about the media. I mean, we've been demonized. That one bad apple has affected everybody. And there's has been a few bad apples over the years. But, to me, that's like dipping your hand in a bucket of water and pulling your finger out and watching that one drop go down in that bucket compared to the amount of water that's in the bucket. But the media has focused on it so much that public perception of law enforcement now is that we're all bad. We're all bad. We're all dirty. You know? We're crooked, we plant evidence, we beat people. I mean, I've heard all of it. I still love my job regardless of what the public opinion is. It just makes it extremely hard to do our job and it's making it unsafe. I mean, who pushes this stuff the most? – the news, the media and social media push it. The kids believe everything they read on social media. They think every single police officer they encounter is gonna be a piece of crap. They're gonna get treated with no respect. So, they come off treating us disrespectfully right outta the gate. (Interview #137)



## The Impact of George Floyd

Several of the officers viewed the 2020 killing of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, MN, and its graphic coverage, as a pivotal inflection point in public opinion.

I think people just think that we wake up and grab a gun and we're out looking for people to shoot. That's honestly what I think, and especially minorities think that. I have a number of people, especially after George Floyd, the first thing they would do is, say, "oh, don't shoot me." I'm like, "really? That's how you feel? I show up and you'd say, don't shoot me? I haven't even said a word. Why do you think I'm just gonna shoot you? Right. Oh, cause that's what I do." (Interview #137)

Two things that I believe are big: one is where the media just bombards people with information; and two, people themselves don't bother to do any more research. So, the perfect example is, if we talk about George Floyd, all you see in the video, constantly, is Eric Chauvin with his knee on his shoulder or his knee on his neck. Right? And that's all you're constantly consuming, you know, and instead of people saying, "okay, well, that guy might be a bad cop," they think everybody that wears a badge, and a gun is a bad guy.

I think it was wrong. I don't think that eight minutes, whether it was the back or the shoulder or the neck, there was no reason to have him there for that long handcuffed. That's just, it's not. Right. ...We know that a guy laying on his stomach handcuffed, it's a no, no, for no minutes. As soon as you've got him handcuffed, turn him over, he's on his back, sit him up, everybody grab him, put him in the cruiser, take him to the hospital, take him to jail, do what you need to do but get him up. Wrong is wrong, but not all of us are like that. (Interview #117)

## A Symbiotic Relationship with Community

While officers lamented what they saw as media-propelled public disapproval, they were unanimous in the view that public opinion is important to policing and that the police, and the communities they serve, need to be mutually supportive and work together.

I think that, even though some people may not want to, they need the police. They need us and we need them. We need them to help us out. We need them to let us know when things are going wrong because we can attempt to correct it. They can help us out. They can give us information that we can use. If people understood us more, then I think that would help a lot. But I just think that because they're unaware of our policies and how we think, I think that is really killing us. Like we need to find a way to bridge the gap between us and the community because if you don't understand why I'm doing what I'm doing, then you can take it as a threat, or this guy is just being a jerk today. It's like, no, I'm not being a jerk. Like this is policy. (Interview #141)

Several officers shared the view that public support varies by certain segments of their communities.

I feel like there's a whole generational shift that's going on. Like we can go to community events, and we can relate well to the really younger kids and the older citizens who have been around and they're established, but trying to get through to that middle generation, the teens and the early- and mid-twenties, and even some of the thirties – I don't know how we can do it because it's a different mentality now. (Interview #124)

## Impacts on the Officers

The majority's view, that the public holds them in disregard, has deleterious effects on many of the officers. Some confided feeling unappreciated as expressed below.

People have this very warped perception of the police because, it can be 2:00 a.m., on Christmas day, and you call 911, and a police officer will show up at your house. You know, it's a blizzard and there's two feet of snow on the ground and that officer's gonna show up at your house. You know, they have this idea that we are not human beings – like we're either superhuman or we're robots or whatever the case may be, but they lose sight of the fact that we are people just like everybody else. There are mornings that I get up and I don't wanna go to work. I'm having a bad day. I had a fight with my wife before I left for work, you know, and now, you call because you got \$5 less change at the gas station than you're supposed to have. And I have to smile and be polite and respectful, but I'm having a terrible day. (Interview #133)

I understand it's a thankless job, but it gets to the point where it's like, all right, we literally will die for any one of the civilians that we work with. And, and half the time, these are not even the communities that we live in. So, putting ourselves, literally our lives, and everything we work for on the line for their survival, and then turn around, and get cursed out and spit on. And I understand that people are not gonna appreciate it – some people will but, to be like disrespected... In the most recent years, our profession has really been disrespected. I think it is quite unfair. It's based on whatever experience people have with social media and not on any experience of their own, to be honest. (Interview #141)

Still another officer expressed his views in even more personal terms.

I used to be really proud of what I did. Now, I worry. Like, I date, right? And I feel that because of the narrative of a police officer, or the stereotypical police officer, I feel for some women, it's just viewed negatively. Where it used to be such a distinguished profession, now it's like, "oh, you're a cop? What kind of cop are you? Are you a racist a\*\*hole or what?" Unfortunately, that's how policing as a profession is being perceived and painted these days. (Interview # 119)

Perhaps one of the more concerning aspects of officers' perceptions may be the impact public opinion is reportedly having on officer morale.

I'm 25 years into my career – a whole 17 years here and eight with another agency and, with the political atmosphere in the last 24 months, I can honestly tell you that, if I was not gonna lose \$60,000 a year in my retirement, I'd be gone tomorrow. But I'm so close to retirement now, I'd be stupid not to just grind through it and get my retirement that I've busted my butt for all these years. And that's why our recruitment is down so much. We can't hold onto People. These guys are fleeing left and right out of the agency. (Interview #137)

I think public opinion is very important because officers, who do not feel like the public supports them, get disgruntled and they don't wanna do the work to help the community. I also feel that it's hindering hiring people. Cuz right now a lot of our squads are really, really short. Some of them are on midnight shifts. They're running one supervisor and three officers when the minimum staffing should be one supervisor and five officers. And that's also impacting service time. And I really think that a lot of the reason why people aren't applying to be police officers is the public perception. (Interview #132)

## The Issue of Race in Policing

Public opinion about the role race plays in policing and in the administration of justice in the US, is highly charged and divided along both political and racial lines. Nearly nine out of ten Democrats support major changes in policing, while only 14% of Republicans do, and two-thirds of Americans say they believe police treat black people less fairly than white people, a view held by 91% of black adults (Pew Research Center, 2017). Crabtree (Public Perceptions, 2020) suggests that politically, the divergence in opinion has dramatically increased since the separate killings of Black men in Ferguson, MO, and New York in 2013. In that year there was only a 9-point partisan difference. Today, ten years later, it has grown to a 54% difference. The issue of race has played an important role in shaping public views about police and policing.

This study views race as both an important issue affecting public opinion, as well as a potentially important contributor to police perceptions of their civilian encounters. To focus on the latter issue, the pre-survey interview posed two questions: 1) whether officers suspected that some

of their colleagues harbored implicit racial biases; and (2) whether they personally knew officers who were racially biased. Interestingly, the two questions produced identical responses, as shown in the table below.

**Table 5: Suspecting vs. Knowing Racially Biased Officers**

RACE BY SEX	SAMPLE	SUSPECT OTHER OFFICERS ARE RACIALLY BIASED				PERSONALLY KNOW OFFICERS WHO ARE RACIALLY BIASED			
		NO	YES	NO ANSWER	GRAND TOTAL	NO	YES	NO ANSWER	GRAND TOTAL
Female									
African American	2	1		1	2	1		1	2
Caucasian	1		1		1	1			1
<b>Female Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
Male									
African American	10	1	4	5	10	5		5	10
Another Race	1		1		1		1		1
Caucasian	9	1	6	2	9	3	4	2	9
Latino	1			1	1			1	1
<b>Male Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>24</b>

Table 5 shows a surprising result – that over one-third (9) of the respondents chose not to answer either question and that two-thirds of those nonrespondents (6) were Black (5 males and 1 female). But among those who did answer, there is a strong consensus (among 12 out of the remaining 15 officers) that there probably are racially biased officers within their ranks. At the same time, only 6 of the 15 could confirm that they personally know officers who are biased. Also of note, when asked, during interviews, whether racial bias plays a role in policing in PG County, there was a very different response indicating that the officers didn't think so.

I don't know if you can say it plays a role because you have one or two instances. I think, in order for something to play a role, you would have to look at it as a systemic problem that is known throughout, and that is condoned by the leadership. And I don't think either of those apply in Prince George's county. I think the leadership has made it well known that that is not something they're gonna tolerate. The County Executive's made that well known the State's Attorney's made that well known. So, I really don't think that that is a problem here. Do we have officers that are that way? Yeah, I will say that, but again, you have that in almost every profession. (White Male Interview #120)

I think that there may be some, but I don't think the stops are generally biased because, when you're riding behind a person, you can't tell what color that person is or what kind of hair they have because the seat blocks it. So, now, if you're riding beside them and then you get behind them, then that's one thing. But if you're just riding behind a person, you can't tell what race the person is. (Black Male Interview #106)

So, while the survey indicated that the officers believe racial bias does occur among their colleagues, the interviews suggested it may play only a small role, if any, in PG County. But the issue of race and policing is very large and highly nuanced. Consequently, a fuller accounting of the issue lies far beyond the purview of this study.

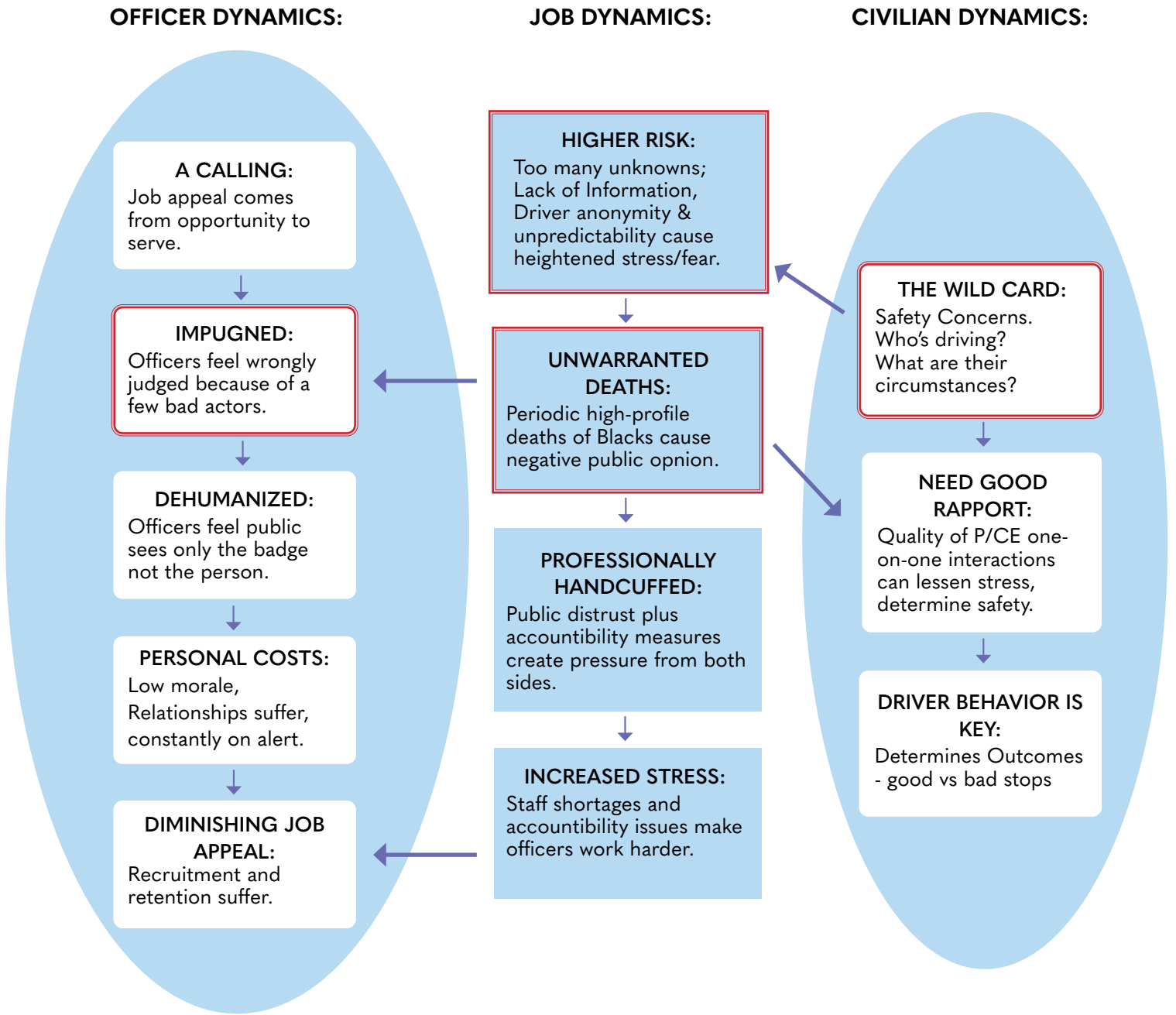


## DISCUSSION

The present study was conceived and conducted to shed light on how police officers perceive their traffic stop encounters with civilians as a means of understanding the kinds of dynamics that can cause those encounters to turn contentious, and, in the extreme, deadly. Through 63 survey responses and 24 in-depth interviews, this study gathered a great deal of information, as reported above, about the officers, their feelings about traffic stop duty, and their interactions with the drivers they encounter. And, given the spotlight that is often shown in their profession, the study inquired about their views on the public's opinion of police and policing. From this information, I have constructed the schematic, shown in Exhibit 2, to array the central themes that summarize the findings. The pivotal "drivers" of the schematic are outlined in red.



## Exhibit 2:



## OVERVIEW

As the Exhibit 2 schematic shows, the testimonies of the officers point to three major themes for understanding police perceptions. As a central theme, there are the dynamics of the job itself, in particular, the officers' views of traffic stops as being more dangerous than calls for service. This view has a major influence on the officers' perceptions of, and behaviors toward, civilians during their traffic stop encounters. They express apprehension because of "too many unknowns" – as examples: the identity, disposition, and circumstances of the driver; the lack of dispatcher involvement and prior information, and the resultant unpredictability of the situation.

The schematic identifies the civilian dynamic as a second and concomitant major theme. Because of the unknowables cited above, civilians are cast as a "wild card" in the exhibit. They are portrayed as the sources of the higher risk the officers perceive. Officers don't know whom they are pulling over, how they will be received, or what, if any, circumstances (e.g., weapons, contraband, substance abuse, mental/emotional instability, or outstanding warrants, etc.) may be at play. And the innumerable, possible combinations of these factors are what create the heightened stress and apprehension that they associate with traffic stop duty.

These two sets of dynamics set the stage for the third major theme – the officers' responses, namely how they navigate the job, and how they react to, and are affected by, their interactions with civilians.

## Navigating the Job

Without question, study respondents view their traffic stop duties as taxing as reported above. And they believe that periodic traffic stop fatalities at the hands of police have made the job even more taxing. A recent *New York Times* investigation found, for instance, that over the past five years, police officers have killed more than 400 drivers or passengers who were not wielding a gun or a knife, or under pursuit for a violent crime – a rate of more than one a week (Kirkpatrick, 2021). Among the respondents, the 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN is viewed as a particular inflection point.

Such incidents present a two-fold challenge to police. Officers believe the press coverage they receive has a negative impact on public opinion – painting them all in a bad light. At the same time, the consequent calls for increased accountability are viewed as ushering in an overbearing set of restraints. As a result, the officers are reporting feeling squeezed at both ends – being held suspect by the public while at the same time being handcuffed by their superiors. Moreover, they report that the press coverage creates more tension during traffic stops as drivers may feel a heightened sense of insecurity when being stopped.

The confluence of these dynamics is making the officer's jobs harder. The officers report shortages of PG County police to the point where squads usually staffed by 5 officers are going out with only three. This translates into more and longer shifts. Indeed, for the FY 2023 budget year, staffing in the PG County Police Department was authorized



at 1,786 full-time sworn police officers. But, as of March 2023, only 1,413 of those positions were filled (Police Department, 2023). Recruitment is also down from 3,257 applicants in FY 2016 to 718 through March 6, 2023 (Ibid). The consequence, as presented in the exhibit, is increased stress. At least one officer suggested that collecting his pension was the only motivation he had for staying on the job.

## Engaging with the Civilians

Exploring officers' perceptions when encountering civilians is the predicate for the present study. And the testimonies of the officers suggest that a concern for their personal safety is the primary dynamic guiding their traffic stop behaviors, especially in the early stages of the encounter as they are approaching the stopped vehicle. They report that the need to remain on high alert – examining the vehicle, watching for movement, and keeping situational awareness – can only be abated by the initial exchange with the driver. They also report that the driver's attitude and comportment, in this early stage, are critical to the progression and resolution of the stop. For instance, in each of the interviews, respondents stated that it was their inclination to resolve the traffic stop by issuing a verbal or written warning. There are only two exceptions cited to this rule. One is in the case of repeated traffic violations and the other relates to poor and/or offensive driver behavior.

For the officers then, establishing a rapport with the driver is the first step in easing the tension that surrounds these encounters, and it can be instrumental in gaining compliance with their instructions. Inklings of what constitutes

compliance vs. non-compliance are shown in the list of Dos and Don'ts in Exhibit 1. Indeed, the interview responses clearly point to the driver's behavior as the difference between a good vs. a bad stop. It is noteworthy, here, that the level of stress expressed by the officers bears no relationship to the nature of the stop. In their view, a speeding stop is no more stressful than a stop for a broken taillight.

## The Officers vs. the Job

The final theme in the study relates to the officers themselves and how they are affected by their jobs. As a starting point, it should be noted from the pre-interview survey, that officers come to policing with high-minded aspirations to serve and protect and that these motives are aligned with national studies of police attitudes (Parker et al., 2017). But many of the respondents report frustration and disillusionment with police-involved, high-profile, wrongful deaths, particularly deaths of Black victims. While none would defend those deaths, some question the coverage of such incidents as inherently biased against police and they blame that coverage for the deterioration in public opinion. Results from the pre-interview survey showed that the officers are keenly aware of media coverage of such events and the impact those events have on their jobs. In fact, in a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, 86% of officers said that high-profile incidents involving Blacks and police have made their jobs harder (Pew Research Center, 2017).

They also recognize that public support is critical to their effectiveness while, at the same time, acknowledging being at odds with public perception. As an example, in the debate

depicting these deaths as isolated incidents vs. indicators of systemic bias in policing, the respondents strongly attest to the former and protest the latter. Research suggests that their view runs strongly contrary to public opinion on this question. The Pew Research Center study also showed that 67% of the sampled officers believed that Black fatalities at the hands of police are isolated incidents compared to only 39% of the public who shared that view.

The officers resent such sentiments and, in fact, feel impugned by them. They complain that the public does not see them as people, but see only the uniform or the badge. Consequently, many report that morale is low and that they take comfort in having other officers in their social circles. A few officers even suggested that they hide or disguise their profession when not on the job, especially when making new acquaintances. This, combined with the pressures they express from changing policing policies and from the staff shortages, is negatively affecting how they feel about their jobs. Several officers blame declining public opinion and the fear of police prosecutions as contributing to the difficulties they are witnessing with retention and recruitment.



# CONCLUSION

The present study is a sequel to a paper on *Police/Civilian Encounters* (Hyman, 2022). Its purpose is to shed light on a central question left unanswered in that report – how do police perceptions of civilians and civilians' behaviors contribute to the evolution, disposition, and resolution of traffic stop encounters particularly in ways that can become deadly? A more complete answer to the question of deadly traffic stops would involve explorations into the attitudes and behaviors of both parties to the stop – the officer and the civilian. This study has explored only one side of the encounter – the officers' view. A fuller understanding of this question requires explorations into the perceptions and behaviors of the drivers as well.

Figure 2, above, offers a schematic that arrays the themes discerned from the pre-interview survey and the in-depth interviews. It posits the higher risk of traffic stops, resulting from the unknowns surrounding the driver, as major variables contributing to officers' traffic stop perceptions and behaviors. And it also posits high-profile, police-involved deaths of Blacks as a major determinant of public opinion that officers believe is defaming and demoralizing police.

But the information gathered also suggests that, without provocation, the officers involved in traffic stops are more likely to be anxious than aggressive, and that assuring their personal safety is their primary objective from reporting in for work to returning home. The interviews appear to affirm the Pew Research Center findings show that officers, by a large margin, see traffic stops, police-involved, fatalities as isolated and rare events rather than the results of systemic problems in policing. Indeed, the officers believe that non-compliant behavior, rather than systemic bias, is the catalyst for most such events. And their advice to stopped drivers is “just comply.”

In conclusion, our findings suggest that the police officers in this study prove not to be the stereotypical monsters feared by many but rather they are people themselves – people who have their own stresses, fears and concerns that they bring to the very same encounters that drivers experience during these stops.

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