

You and the Police

In 2008, an estimated 16.9% of U.S. residents age 16 or older had face-to-face contact with police.

— Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Contact Between Police and the Public, 2008” (2011)

Some time you may have a difficult contact with the police. They may want to question you. You may be subject to arrest. It might be because of your conduct or just because you happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.



It is important to remember that the police work for you as a citizen of your community, whatever your age, race, or job. The police are required to respect your rights. You, in turn, should cooperate in a respectful manner and understand the difficulties of their job. Mutual respect can go a long way toward easing tension in a difficult situation.

The following is general advice on what to do if the police stop you. In any particular situation, you should always rely on your best judgment and, when possible, the advice of a lawyer.

If You Are Stopped by a Police Officer

1. Be courteous and cooperative. Avoid hostility, profanity, or aggressive movements. Do nothing to cause an officer to believe you are a threat. For example, do not keep your hands in your pockets or out of officers' line of sight.
2. Give your name and address, or show an I.D. if requested.
3. Do not talk on your phone during a police encounter.
4. The police can search you for concealed weapons by patting your clothing. Do not physically resist, but you have the right to tell the officer that you do not agree to any search of yourself, your car, or your surroundings. By making it clear that you do not consent to any search, you can protect your right against unlawful searches. The police may search you or your surroundings anyway. Do not try to stop them physically. You can question the legality of the search in court. If the police say that they have a warrant, ask to see it.
5. If you believe the police have violated your rights, you have the right to file a complaint.