

Know Your Rights: A Pocket Guide for Police Encounters

Calm, accurate, general information to help you stay safe and understand your rights during a police encounter.

What's inside:

- Plain-English rights checklist by encounter type
- Calm-compliance safety steps for any encounter
- What to document immediately afterward
- What to do if you believe your rights were violated

The Practical Guide: Staying Calm & Safe

During a traffic stop

Pull over safely, turn off the engine, keep your hands visible, and turn on your interior light at night. Provide license, registration, and insurance when asked. Beyond that, you can calmly decline to answer other questions.

If you're being questioned

Outside of required identification, you're generally not required to answer questions about your activities or associations. A calm, single statement is enough: "I want to remain silent."

If they want to search

You can say clearly, "I do not consent to a search." If a search happens anyway, do not resist physically — object verbally and address it afterward with documentation and an attorney.

If you're detained or arrested

You can calmly ask, "Am I being detained, or am I free to leave?" If arrested, state once that you wish to remain silent and want an attorney, then stop discussing details until you have one.

Recording the encounter

In most circumstances you can record police performing public duties from a safe distance, without physically interfering. Comply with lawful orders to step back.

Actionable Checklist: Before, During, After

- ☐ Keep your hands visible and movements slow and announced.
- ☐ Provide required ID/documents; decline other questions calmly if you choose.
- ☐ State clearly, once: "I want to remain silent" / "I do not consent to a search."
- ☐ Do not physically resist, even if you believe something is unlawful.
- ☐ Ask calmly: "Am I being detained, or am I free to leave?"
- ☐ If arrested, ask for an attorney and stop discussing details.
- ☐ As soon as it's safe, write down time, location, badge/patrol numbers, and witnesses.
- ☐ Save any video or photos securely.
- ☐ Consider contacting a licensed attorney about your specific situation.

Questions to ask an attorney afterward:

- Was the stop, search, or arrest lawful given the circumstances?
- What options do I have if my rights were violated?
- What should I do with the documentation I collected?

If You Believe Your Rights Were Violated

If something about an encounter felt wrong, the safest and most effective path is almost always the same: stay calm during the encounter itself, then act carefully afterward. Complaints and legal claims are generally strengthened by detailed, contemporaneous documentation — written down the same day, while details are fresh.

Common next steps

- File a complaint with the department's internal affairs or a civilian review board.
- Contact an established civil-rights organization, such as the ACLU, for guidance.
- Consult a licensed attorney about whether you have a potential legal claim.

Want a free legal-aid referral?

Call the number below, or visit police.id to request a callback and reach the AI Rights Advisor for general guidance.

{{PPC_NUMBER}} · police.id

General information for United States consumers, not legal advice. Police.id is not a law firm and this guide does not create an attorney-client relationship. Rights and procedures vary by state and by the specific facts of a situation. If you are in a real encounter, prioritize your personal safety and consult a licensed attorney afterward about any rights violations.