



Traffic Stops

Chapter 11: A comprehensive guide to conducting safe and professional traffic stops, covering both unknown-risk and high-risk scenarios.





Chapter Overview

Traffic Stop Procedures

Unit 1: Unknown-Risk Traffic Stops

Lesson 1: Communication With Drivers

Lesson 2: Initiating the Stop

Lesson 3: Conducting the Stop

Unit 2: High-Risk Traffic Stops

Lesson 1: Initiating the Stop

Lesson 2: Conducting the Stop

Unit 1: Unknown-Risk Traffic Stops

Lesson 1: Communication With Drivers

Lesson Goal

Know how to professionally interact with people during a traffic stop.

Think About This

You stop a vehicle, and when you begin to communicate with the driver at the window, you realize they do not speak English. How do you handle this situation?





The Goal of Every Traffic Stop

Promote driver education and safer roadways. During traffic stops, you may issue a uniform traffic citation or warning, you may make an arrest, or you may find that someone needs help.

Decreasing Tension and Increasing Cooperation

Exercise procedural justice and remain professional at all times. Traffic stops can be tense, and how you interact with those in the vehicle could shape the way they view law enforcement.

When stopped, a driver may react with embarrassment, anger, fear, or excuses, and tensions may rise. You can minimize negative and potentially unsafe results by conducting yourself professionally and following your training.





Guidelines for Professional Interaction

Initial Contact

- Greet the driver and passengers politely
- Introduce yourself and your agency
- Tell them why you stopped them
- Give the driver the chance to speak

During Interaction

- Request driver's license, registration, and proof of insurance
- Explain the violation in terms of what the vehicle did
- Allow the driver to talk or vent
- Remain polite and focused

Maintaining Professionalism

- Keep a pleasant expression and calm tone
- Use non-confrontational interview stance
- Establish command presence with professional words
- Maintain officer safety throughout



Best Practices for De-escalation

- **Respond Politely to Arguments**

Simply explain your observations and the violation, if any. Whether or not you issue a warning or citation, listening respectfully will help many people calm down and accept the situation.

- **Keep Detention Time Short**

Minimize the time the driver is detained to reduce stress and inconvenience.

- **Emphasize Importance Without Lecturing**

Explain the seriousness of the violation, such as the risk of a crash or other circumstance. Do not lecture the person on what they did wrong.

- **End Professionally**

Conclude by saying "thank you for your cooperation" or "drive safely." Courteously provide your rank, name, and badge or ID number upon request.

Handling Difficult Situations

When dealing with a difficult or disrespectful driver, you may be tempted to respond with anger. If the encounter gets heated, it is important to respond with professionalism and a level head.

Use a reasonable tone of voice and give the driver the option either to comply with your request or be detained further for their non-compliance. A rational and reasonable approach will often defuse a situation that could otherwise escalate with an angry response from you.

The person you stop could be stressed, tired, sick, or afraid. **Use empathy** to place yourself in their position. **Do not take anything that a driver says to you personally.**



Bridging Communication and Language Barriers

Language barriers can hinder communication. For example, some drivers may speak a language other than English. Determine the driver's ability to understand you throughout the traffic stop. They may be fearful based on previous encounters with law enforcement, confused as to why they were stopped, or concerned about what they should do during the stop.



Request an Interpreter

Request an interpreter through dispatch. If not available, try to communicate using gestures.



Use Translation Tools

Follow agency policies on using translation mobile phone applications or passengers as interpreters (e.g. Google Translate).



Alternative Methods

For drivers with hearing impairments, writing notes back and forth may be effective. Some can read lips.



Procedural Justice Strategies

Treat People With Respect

Show dignity and courtesy to all individuals regardless of the circumstances.

Listen to What They Have to Say

Give drivers and passengers the opportunity to explain their perspective.

Make Fair Decisions

Base your actions on facts, policy, and law rather than personal bias.

Explain Your Actions

Clearly communicate why you made the stop and what actions you're taking.

When communicating with people during a traffic stop, your professional behavior should be a positive reflection of your agency and is a vital part of fostering positive relationships with members of your community.

Unit 1: Unknown-Risk Traffic Stops

Lesson 2: Initiating the Stop

Lesson Goal

At the end of this lesson, you will know when and how to initiate a safe and professional unknown-risk traffic stop.

Think About This

While patrolling at night, you notice a car with a broken taillight and initiate a traffic stop. The road you are on is a secluded state highway. The driver continues for miles before finally stopping in a gas station parking lot. What are some possible reasons why the driver didn't immediately pull over?



Understanding Traffic Stops

A **traffic stop** is the lawful and temporary detention of a pedestrian or driver of a vehicle for the purpose of traffic enforcement.

Traffic stops are among the most frequent activities that officers perform. Although officers conduct traffic stops regularly, you should not become complacent when conducting one. There is a potential risk of harm each time you make a stop. Many officers are injured or killed during traffic stops. Traffic stops require that you apply officer safety skills and situational awareness at all times.



Deciding to Make a Traffic Stop

You may decide to make a traffic stop while driving, or when your vehicle is stopped or parked. Choose a safe parking place where you can monitor vehicle movement and watch for traffic violations.

For example, when watching drivers at a traffic light intersection, park your patrol vehicle where it does not obstruct traffic flow but can enter the road quickly and safely to make a stop. Safe places include areas with a wide shoulder, available parking areas, and areas with an unobstructed view of oncoming traffic when entering the road.





Unknown-Risk Traffic Stops

A traffic stop begins the moment you observe a violation that merits a stop. Some of the reasons to stop a vehicle include BOLOs, reasonable suspicion, or probable cause.

- ☐ All traffic stops are **unknown-risk traffic stops** because the potential risk of the situation is unknown to you at the time of the stop.

You may stop a vehicle if the driver commits a traffic infraction or to assist a motorist whose vehicle is having mechanical trouble. You may have reasonable suspicion that a driver has committed, or is about to commit, a crime. Other justifications include investigating suspicious behavior or investigating a vehicle or occupant matching a BOLO description.

During the stop, keep in mind that all vehicle occupants are innocent until proven guilty.



When NOT to Make a Stop

Unsafe Conditions

If immediately stopping the driver may endanger you or other motorists, do not make the stop. Unsafe conditions include heavy traffic, construction, or roadway conditions that do not allow room to pull over. For example, a bridge is not a safe place for a traffic stop.

Conflicting Priorities

If you are driving to an emergency call or an in-progress crime, or are transporting a prisoner, stopping a driver for a traffic violation is generally not practical. However, a reckless driver who is immediately endangering the lives of others may justify a stop, even if stopping means abandoning an earlier call.

Agency Policy

Your agency's policies will dictate what takes priority in these situations. Always follow established protocols.



10 Steps for Unknown-Risk Traffic Stops

Initiating the Stop

- Step 1: Follow the vehicle
- Step 2: Notify dispatch
- Step 3: Select a safe location
- Step 4: Activate emergency equipment

Conducting the Stop

- Step 5: Park the patrol vehicle
- Step 6: Conduct visual assessment
- Step 7: Exit vehicle
- Step 8: Determine approach
- Step 9: Interact with driver
- Step 10: Choose a course of action

Some steps may happen at the same time. The following sections will detail each step.



Step 1: Follow the Vehicle Through Traffic

Use defensive driving techniques to catch up with the vehicle, follow at a safe distance, and signal all lane changes. A well-executed traffic stop should have a minimal effect on traffic flow.

Consider calling for backup, based on your agency's policies and procedures. You may have to follow the driver's vehicle for an extended period before you can initiate a safe stop or before requested backup arrives.

Continuously observe the vehicle from the time of the violation until you complete the stop. Note the vehicle's description, including its type, make, model, year, color, plate number and state of issue, and any vehicle descriptors, such as condition, bumper stickers or decals, dents, or a truck toolbox.

Observe the driver and any passengers for unique identifiers such as glasses, hat, hair, or beard.



Step 2: Notify Dispatch of the Traffic Stop

Your safety depends on how much information you can gather before making a traffic stop. Relay the following general information to dispatch:



Officer and Location Information

- Your radio identification number
- Your location (street, cross street, house number, or mile marker)
- Your general direction of travel (north, south, east, or west)



Vehicle and Occupant Information

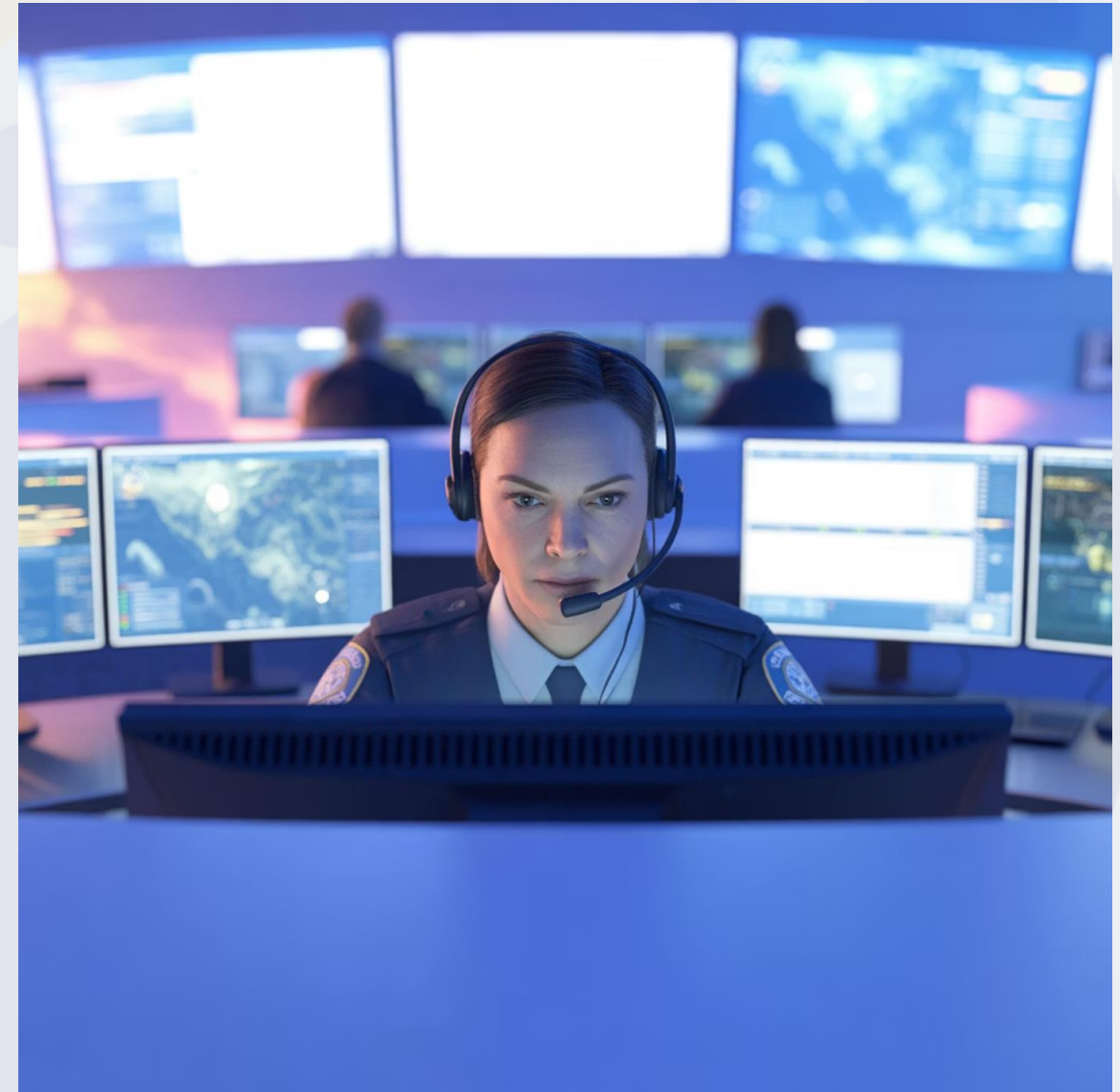
- Description of the driver's vehicle (color, make, approximate year)
- License plate number and state of issue
- Number of occupants and descriptions if possible
- Need for backup or other assistance as required

Importance of Location Information

Location information is crucial on interstates and divided highways. If the situation escalates and you become injured or cannot use the radio, dispatch can pinpoint your location.

If the final stop location changes, update dispatch immediately.

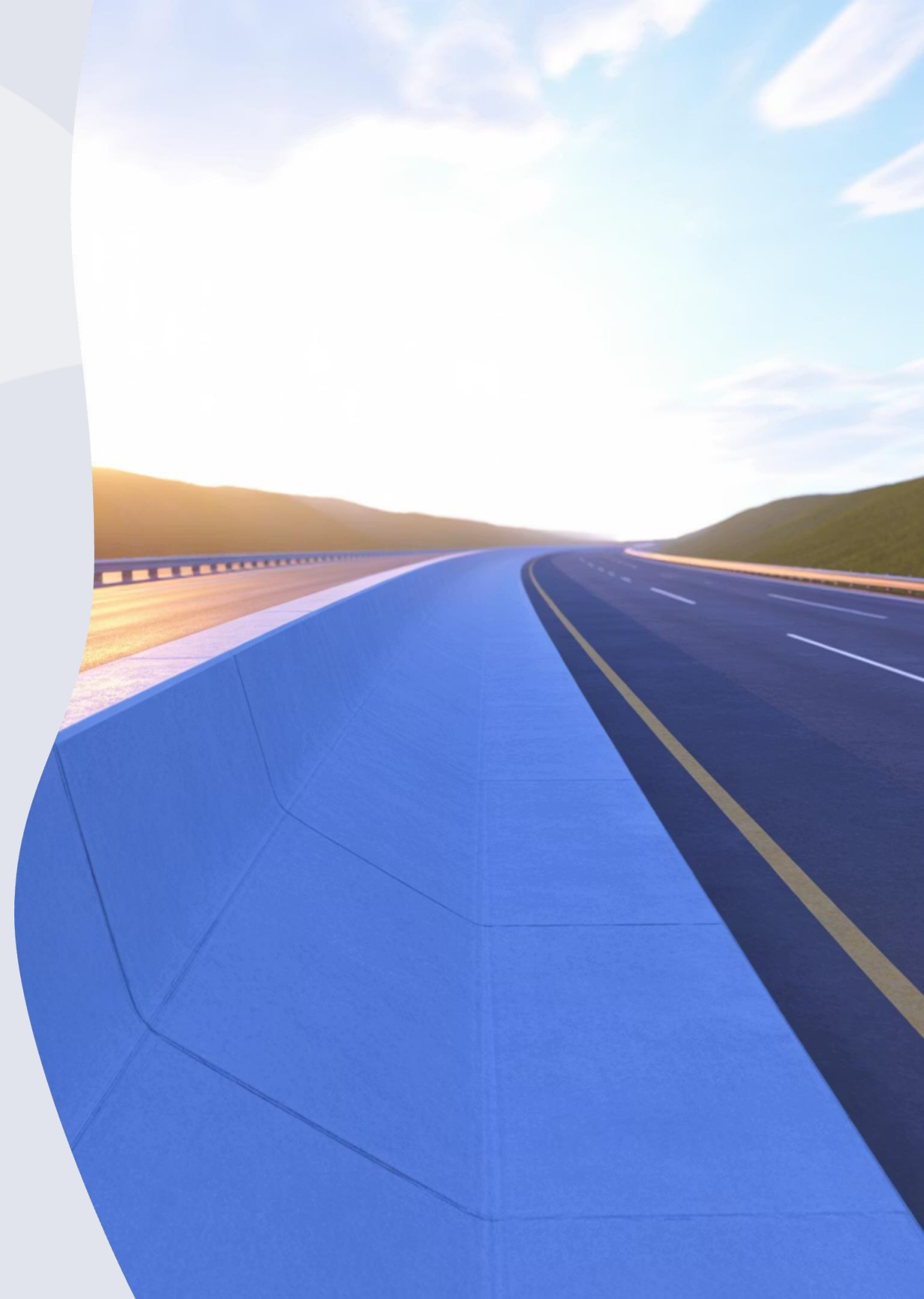
Provide enough information so that dispatch can perform a database check before you approach the vehicle or before the stop, as it might reveal important information about the operator or vehicle.



Step 3: Select a Safe Location to Stop

Select a safe location to initiate the stop. Plan to conduct the stop in an area that gives the driver a place to stop safely, preferably in a well-lit location with a low traffic volume.

Be ready to adjust and react quickly to any developments once the driver stops their vehicle. Any suspicious activity by the driver or passengers can increase the level of risk. Request backup based on your evaluation of the situation and agency policies and procedures.





Understanding Traffic Flow

Traffic flow is the general speed and direction of vehicle or pedestrian movement.

Weather conditions, school zones, construction zones, and neighborhood activities all affect traffic flow and can slow drivers and cause congestion. In addition to traffic flow, certain road and traffic conditions increase the potential for danger for both the officer and the driver. These include merge areas, intersections, and acceleration lanes.

If you have an assigned patrol zone, become familiar with normal traffic flow, speed limits and the locations where the limits change, and changes to traffic flow and conditions at different times of day.



Choosing the Right Stop Location

Out of Traffic Flow

Except in emergencies, choose a location where the driver can maneuver out of the flow of traffic. The location should be a place where both you and the driver can avoid the danger of passing vehicles.

Adequate Space

Check the width of the road and the shoulder to make sure that both you and the driver are far enough off the road so that other vehicles can pass. This reduces the potential for crashes.

Level Ground

Try to pull off onto a level spot or a slight downgrade. Stopping on an upgrade may cause a large vehicle to roll into the patrol vehicle.



Locations to Avoid

Blind Curves

Do not make a stop on a blind curve where oncoming traffic cannot see you.

Ramps and Hills

Avoid stopping on or close to a ramp or close to a crest of a hill.

Hazardous Conditions

Avoid areas where road conditions could cause other vehicles to hit the patrol vehicle.

Areas With Children

Take special precaution when conducting stops in areas where children are present, such as school zones or parking lots.

Step 4: Activate Emergency Equipment

Signal the driver to pull over using your lights and siren. Once you signal the driver, you have limited control over where the driver will stop.

Your interaction with the driver may begin before you signal the driver to stop. The driver may indicate that they know you are asking them to stop. They may look into the rearview mirror and make eye contact with you, signal a lane change to pull over, or suddenly reduce speed.



Communicating the Stop

Once the driver acknowledges that you have directed them to stop:

- Follow the vehicle as the driver changes lanes
- Follow the vehicle at a safe distance
- Direct the driver to a safer location if you are uncomfortable with the initial location

Begin communicating the stop by pulling your patrol vehicle directly behind the driver's vehicle. You are required to turn on your emergency notification equipment once you are in a safe location to make the stop.

Emergency notification equipment includes emergency lights, siren, headlights, the PA system, and a horn. It may not be necessary to use all the emergency notification equipment to communicate during the stop. Follow your agency's policies.



Using Emergency Lighting Effectively



Emergency Lights

Use flashing emergency lights when conducting traffic stops. Emergency lighting systems differ among agencies, and each driver reacts differently to them. Some might panic and stop in the left lane, skid to a stop, or swerve. Others ignore the lights.

If this happens, tap the siren for one or two seconds.

Additional Lighting

The patrol vehicle's high beams, spotlight, and takedown lights (white lights facing forward on the light bar) will help to conceal you from the driver's view. Leave the emergency lights on at all times to warn oncoming traffic during the stop.

If the stop occurs at night, spotlights can provide additional lighting.





Night Stop Lighting Considerations

Consider turning on the patrol vehicle's high beams, unless they interfere with oncoming traffic or restrict your vision by reflecting off the driver's rear bumper or other object.

To illuminate the interior of the driver's vehicle, activate the takedown lights if your patrol vehicle is equipped with them. This also prevents the driver from seeing into the patrol vehicle.

Stay far enough behind the vehicle so that you can react to any situation. Use safety precautions, such as avoiding traffic lanes, watching for pedestrians, and protecting the driver.





Directing the Driver to a Safer Location

If you need to move to a safer location, give clear, firm verbal directions using the PA system. You might say:

"Driver, proceed into the parking lot ahead to the right"

or

"Driver, pull your vehicle farther to the right"

If the driver flees instead of stopping as instructed, you should follow your agency's protocol regarding vehicle pursuit.

Unit 1: Unknown-Risk Traffic Stops

Lesson 3: Conducting the Stop

Lesson Goal

At the end of this lesson, you will know how to conduct a safe and professional unknown-risk traffic stop.

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Legal Carry of a Weapon





Steps for Conducting the Stop

The last six steps involve conducting the stop. Some of the steps may happen at the same time.

Step 5: Park the Patrol Vehicle

Step 6: Conduct a Visual Assessment

Step 7: Exit the Patrol Vehicle

Step 8: Determine Approach Technique

Step 9: Interact With Driver and Passengers

Step 10: Choose a Course of Action



Step 5: Park the Patrol Vehicle

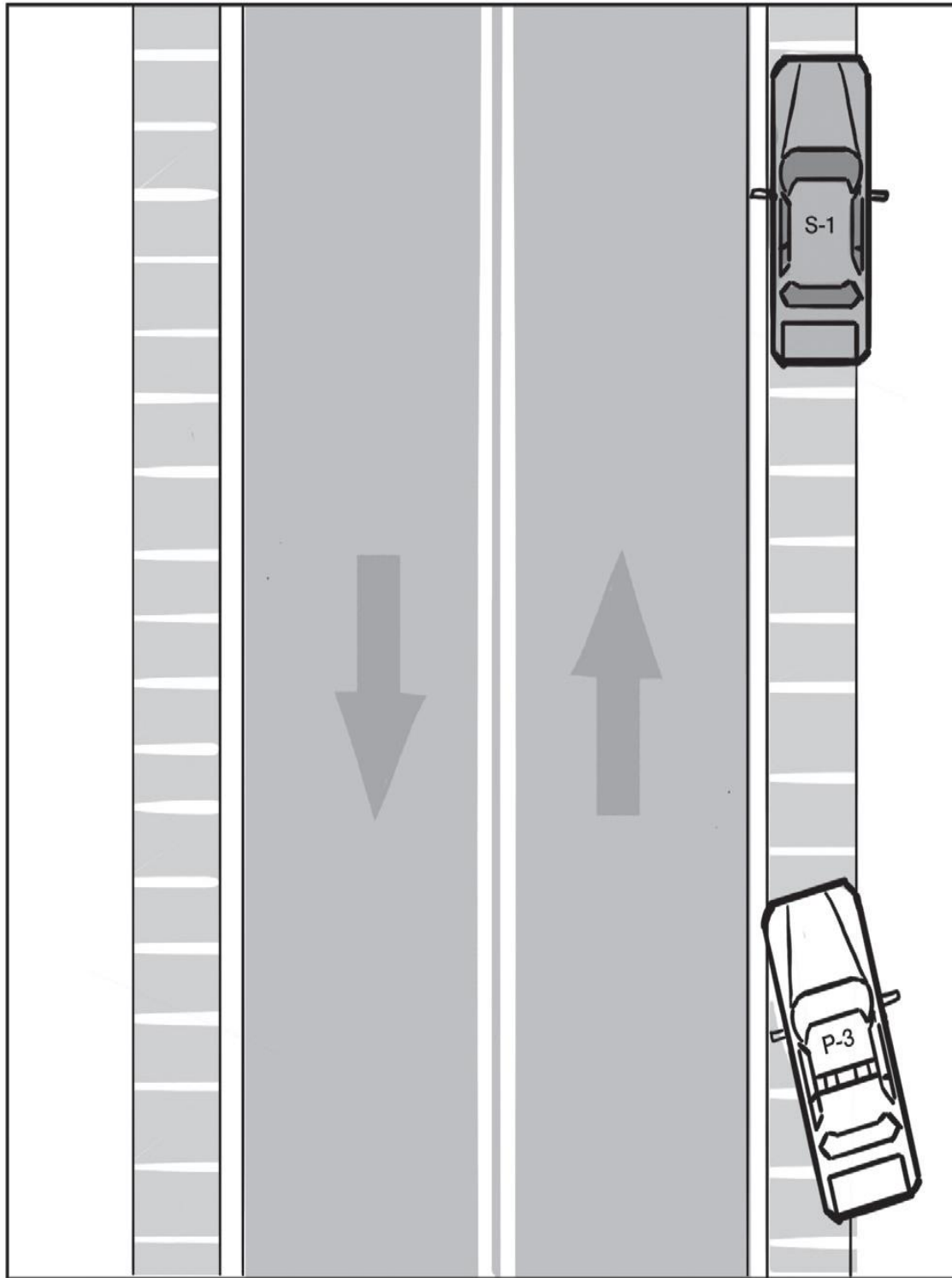
Because of roadway conditions, traffic, and other environmental factors, each traffic stop is unique. After stopping the driver in a safe location, park your patrol vehicle a safe distance behind the driver's vehicle, about 1½–2-car lengths behind the vehicle.

If the driver stops on the right side of the road, position your patrol vehicle in the **offset-angle position**. Align the center of your vehicle's hood with the taillight of the driver's vehicle and point your vehicle's nose outward into the flow of traffic.

This vehicle position creates a safety corridor for you to walk when approaching the stopped vehicle. Turn your wheels away from traffic. Angling the vehicle may also provide cover if the driver shoots a weapon.

Offset-Angle Positioning: Right Shoulder

Figure 11-1: Offset-angle positioning on the right shoulder of the road. This creates a safety corridor and provides cover for the approaching officer.





Alternative Positioning Scenarios

Left Side Stops

Due to environmental conditions or roadway obstacles, you may have to conduct a traffic stop on the left side of the road.

If needed, use the PA system to direct the driver to move their vehicle further to the right to improve safety and reduce the obstruction of traffic.

On-Roadway Stops

In emergencies or less than optimal conditions, you may have to conduct a traffic stop on the roadway. Move your vehicle to the far outside of the driving lane and place it in an offset-angle position.

Offset-Angle Positioning: Left Shoulder

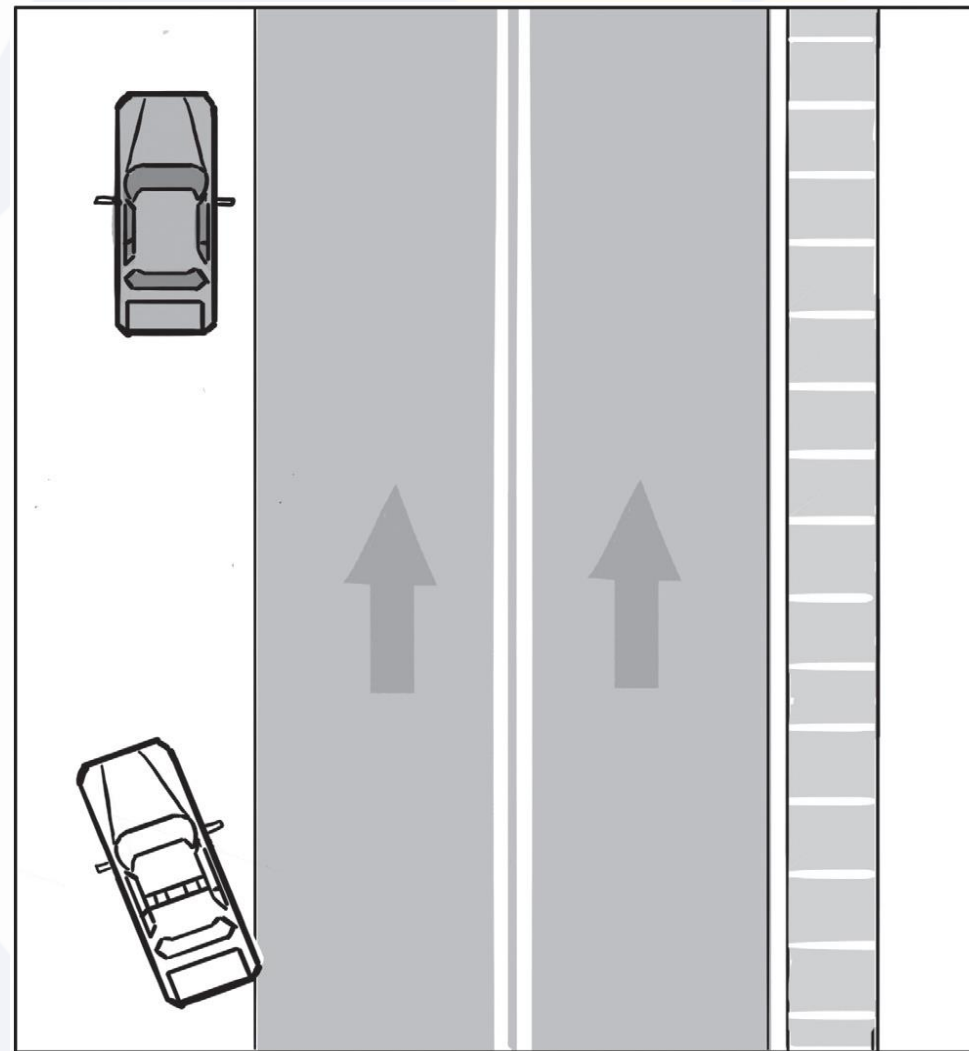


Figure 11-2: Offset-angle positioning on the left shoulder of the road for situations where stopping on the right is not possible

Offset-Angle Positioning: Driving Lane

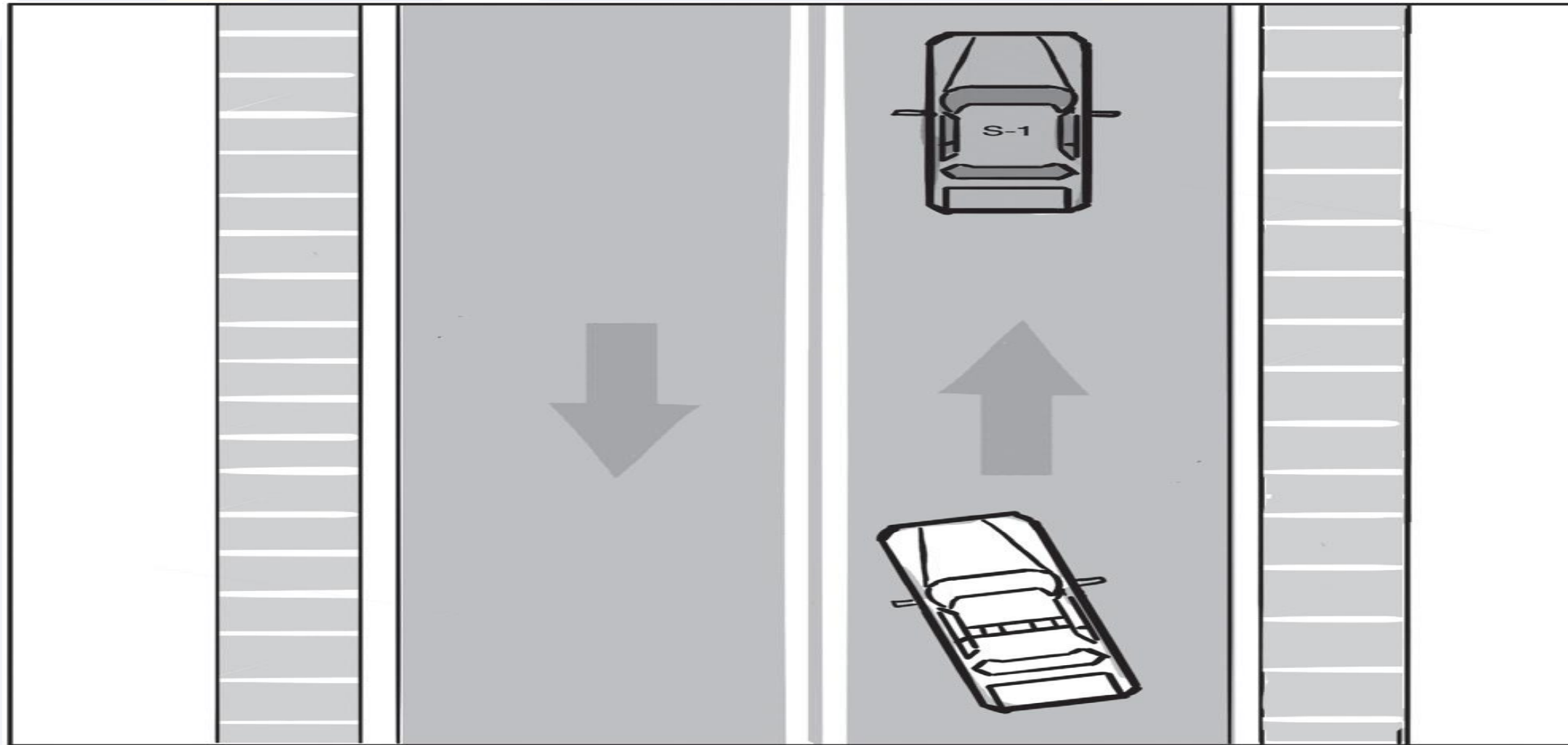


Figure 11-3: Offset-angle positioning in driving lane of the road when emergency conditions require stopping in the roadway.



Position the Backup Patrol Vehicle

The backup officer should park their patrol vehicle at a safe distance behind the primary officer's vehicle. Depending on the conditions of the traffic stop, the backup officer may offset their vehicle to the left or the right of the primary officer's vehicle.

The backup officer should not use the front emergency lighting, to avoid blinding or silhouetting the primary officer, and should use only rear emergency lights.

The backup officer should approach the driver's vehicle along the passenger's side of the primary officer's vehicle.

Backup Vehicle Positioning Diagrams

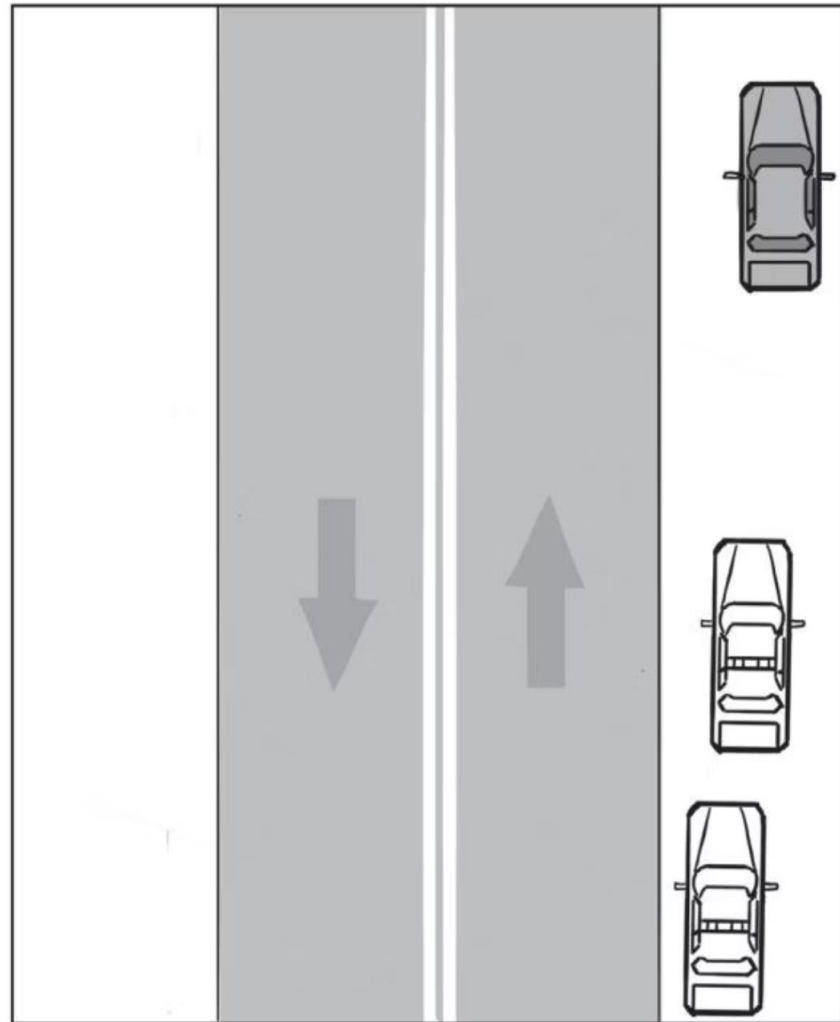


Figure 11-4: Positioning (offset of primary) of backup patrol vehicle

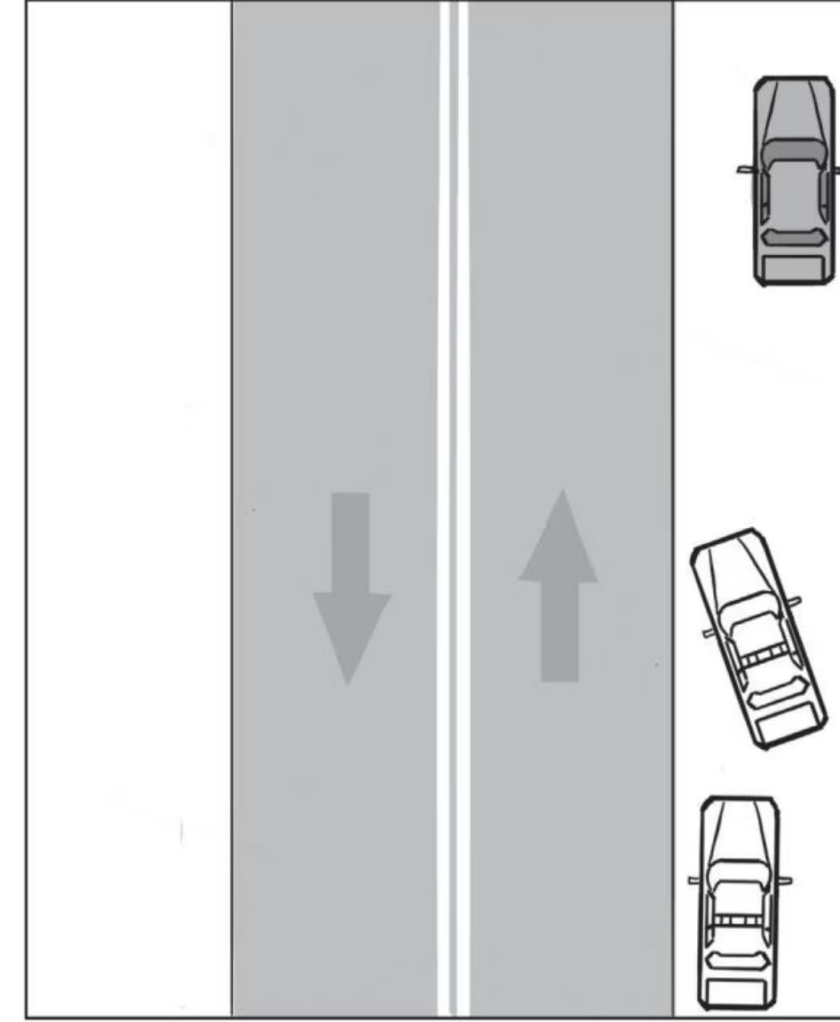


Figure 11-5: Positioning (offset-angle of primary) of backup patrol vehicle

Step 6: Conduct a Visual Assessment

Assess the vehicle for signs of danger before you exit your patrol vehicle. Visually assess the vehicle from the safety of your vehicle. If the occupants try to exit their vehicle, your discretion and agency's policies will determine whether you order them back into the vehicle.

Look for signs of criminal activity. If the vehicle's rear end appears to be significantly lower than the front, the vehicle could be carrying stolen merchandise, drugs, tools, a person, or a corpse.





Step 7: Exit the Patrol Vehicle

After checking for oncoming traffic in the rearview and side-view mirrors, exit your vehicle quickly. A silent exit from the patrol vehicle may give you time to approach the driver's vehicle and assess the situation before the driver reacts.

Quietly secure your vehicle door so it will not blow open and strike a passing vehicle. Adjust your portable radio volume to low. Continuously observe the driver's vehicle and all its occupants.

Be prepared to transition to a high-risk vehicle stop based on your threat assessment. If a situation seems dangerous, request backup and wait for its arrival before taking any further action.



Step 8: Determine Appropriate Approach Techniques

When you exit the patrol vehicle, use available cover. To prevent injury, avoid walking between your patrol vehicle and the subject's vehicle. The driver could reverse their vehicle or another vehicle could accidentally strike your vehicle, pinning you between the two vehicles. Stay out of the flow of traffic.

Be aware of brake lights or reverse lights. At night, avoid crossing in front of the headlights, which would reveal your position. If you need to approach the passenger's side of the driver's vehicle, walk behind your vehicle.

Consider keeping your flashlight off while on approach until you make contact with the driver and passengers.



License Plate Inspection

Look at the license plate for clues that the plate may not belong to the driver's vehicle:

- **Attachment Method**

The way the plate is attached, suggesting the license plate is from another vehicle

- **Hardware Age**

The age of the license plate attachment relative to the age of the plate (for example, shiny, new bolts on a dirty plate)

- **Registration Issues**

An expired registration sticker or tampered-with decal, suggesting it was removed from another plate

- **Obscured Plate**

Paint or dark film on the license plate

- **Insect Evidence**

The presence of dead insects on the plate, suggesting it was the front plate of another vehicle



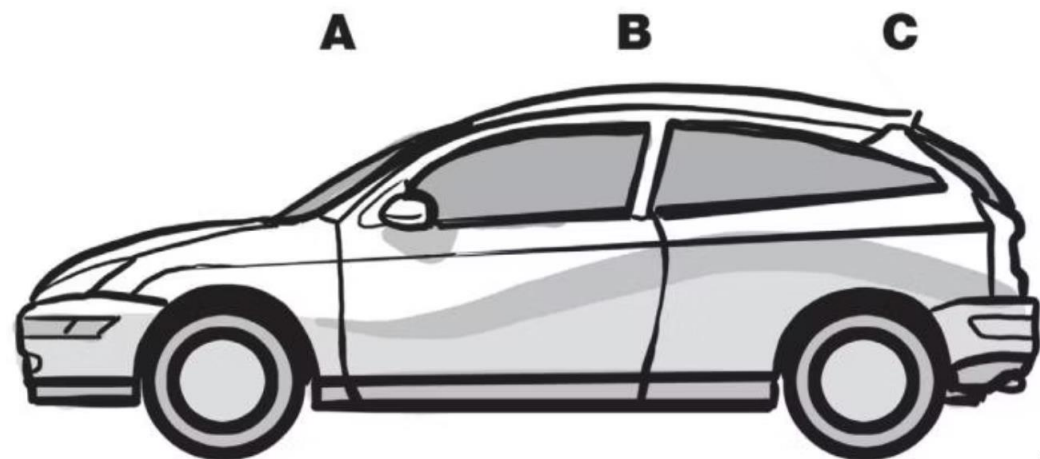
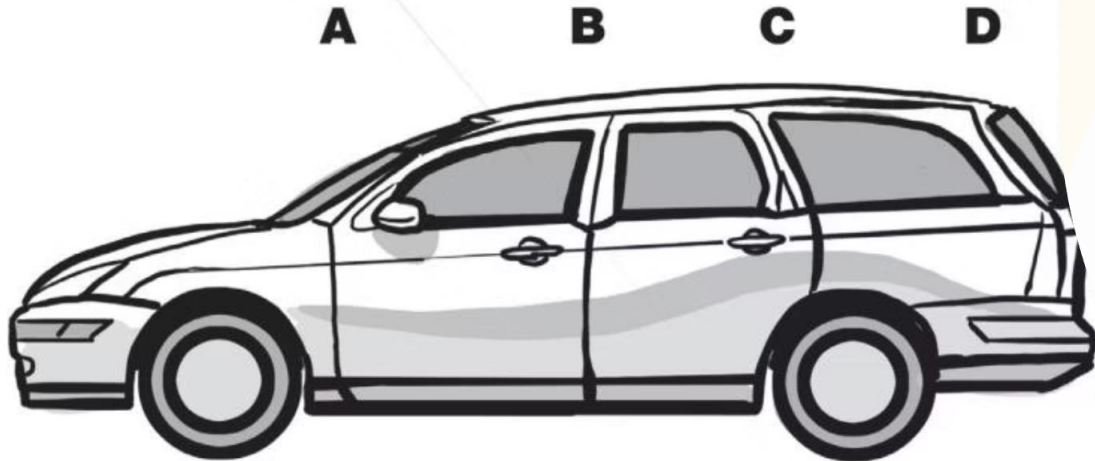
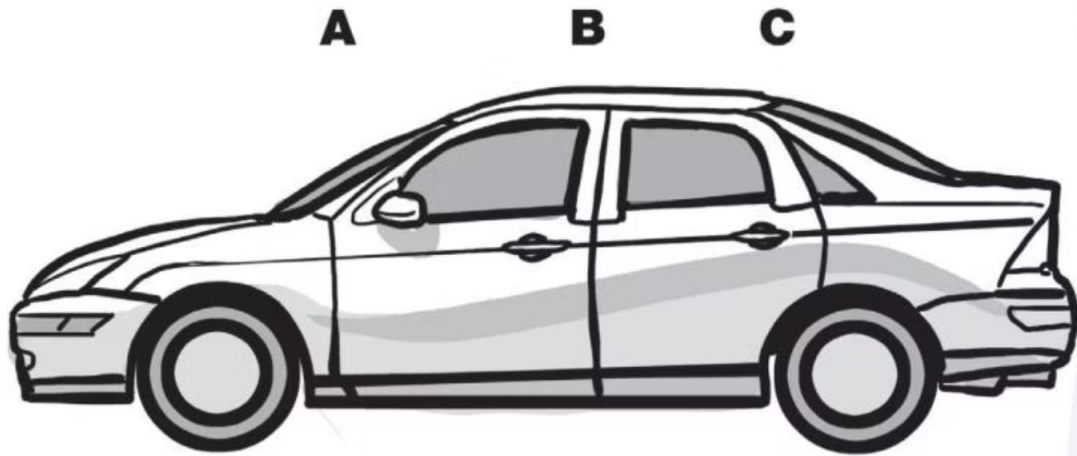
Trunk Inspection Procedures

Check the trunk for signs of damage, such as pry marks or a hole in the trunk where the lock should be. These are common signs of a stolen vehicle.

Push down on the trunk as you approach the vehicle. Doing so will lock in anyone hiding inside the trunk. However, be aware that modern technology allows someone to open the trunk from the inside of the vehicle or the inside of the trunk.

Touch the trunk lid during every traffic stop, even if the trunk lid appears closed. This transfers your fingerprints to the vehicle, which will serve as evidence of your contact with the vehicle if the traffic stop deteriorates into a crime scene, the driver flees, or you go missing.





Vehicle Pillars Reference

Figure 11-6: Vehicle pillars - Understanding the A, B, C, and D pillars is essential for proper positioning during approach.



Approach on Driver's Side Option

Approach the driver's vehicle cautiously, constantly assessing the situation. Do not fix your full attention on any one part of the scene, but rather scan the entire vehicle and its occupants for suspicious movements.

Examine the interior of the vehicle while looking through the rear window into the rear seat. Try to determine the number of passengers, the position of the rear seat, and the presence of any potential weapons or contraband.

Stay close to the driver's vehicle. Depending on conditions and location, a flashlight may be needed during daytime. If a flashlight is used, keep it in your support hand.



Positioning Based on Passengers

With Backseat Passengers

When approaching the vehicle, if you see a passenger in the backseat, stop at the back edge of the rear window, also known as the C-pillar. Remain behind the C-pillar for cover.

Instruct the driver to roll down all the windows on the driver's side of the vehicle so that you can easily observe the passengers in the backseat.

Without Backseat Passengers

If there are no passengers in the backseat, stop at the back edge of the driver's window, also known as the B-pillar. Remain behind the driver's B-pillar for cover.

This gives you a position of tactical advantage while maintaining a safe distance when talking with the driver.



Approach on Passenger's Side Option

The occupants of the vehicle will expect you to approach on the driver's side. Approaching on the passenger's side of the vehicle may give you extra time to listen and observe if the driver is concealing something on their right side, for example, a weapon, an alcoholic beverage, drugs, or drug paraphernalia.

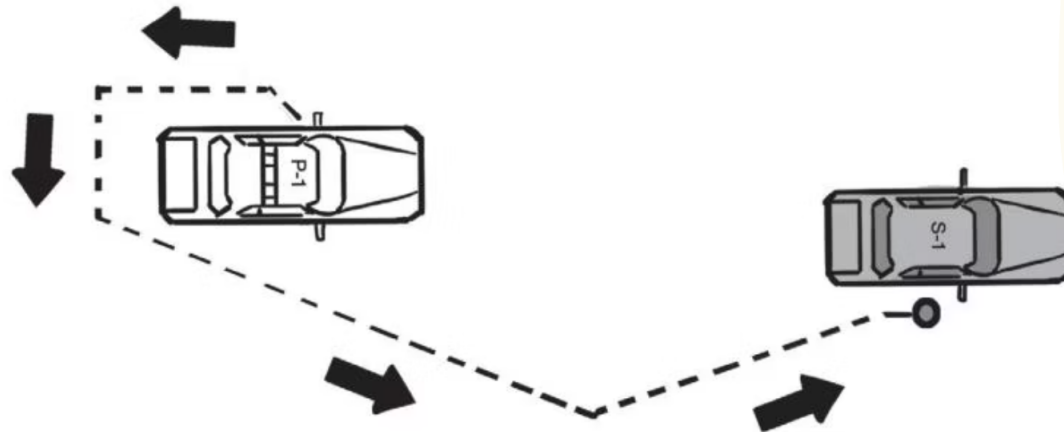
Observe if there is a **popped or damaged ignition**, which may indicate a stolen vehicle. Evidence of a popped or damaged ignition includes popped open plastic housing around the steering column's base and exposed ignition wires pulled forward to start the car without a key.

At this point during the traffic stop, call for backup if the situation suggests a potential threat.

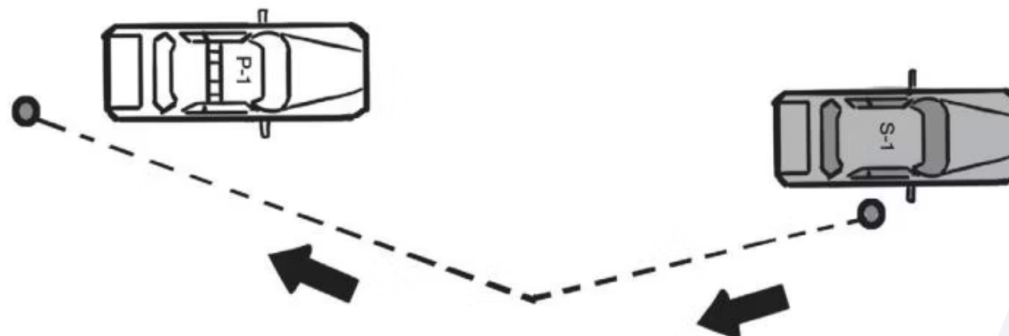
Stage 1
Officer shines spotlight, observes stopped vehicle and surrounding area for a few seconds



Stage 2
Officer approaches vehicle



Stage 3
Officer returns to his/her patrol vehicle, keeping stopped vehicle under observation



Traffic Stop Guidelines Diagram

Figure 11-7: Traffic stop guidelines illustrating proper approach paths and officer positioning for maximum safety.



No-Approach Tactic Option

If you do not feel safe approaching the vehicle, you may use the **no-approach tactic**, which calls the driver to the patrol vehicle. Consider using the no-approach tactic if the driver's windows are tinted dark, if there are multiple occupants, or if you cannot see what is going on inside the driver's vehicle.

If you decide to call the driver back to the patrol vehicle, assume a tactical position behind one of your patrol vehicle pillars, the driver's or passenger's side door, or the rear of the patrol vehicle. **Do not remain seated in your car.**

If the driver is looking at you directly or through a side or rearview mirror, you can motion the driver to come back to the patrol vehicle, or use the PA system to direct the driver to walk toward the patrol vehicle. As the driver approaches, be observant, especially of the driver's hands, for any signs of aggression or the presence of a weapon.



Step 9: Interact With the Driver

Three Main Objectives During Initial Interaction

Identify Yourself

When interacting with the driver, begin by identifying yourself as a law enforcement officer, especially if you are not in uniform. Display a courteous but commanding presence. Make sure your expression, tone of voice, body position, gestures, and words are professional, respectful, and polite even while you are being assertive.

Explain the Reason

Explain the reason for the stop. Describe what you observed the vehicle, not the driver, doing, and request the required documentation. For example, an explanation for the stop might include the observation that the vehicle's taillights are not working. Allow the driver to offer an explanation, such as vehicle malfunction.

Request Documentation

Ask the driver to provide their driver's license, registration, and insurance information. You may ask the driver where they keep the documents. This will help you predict where the driver's hands will move.

Observing Driver and Passenger Behavior

Observe the driver's and passenger's behavior for signs of a threat, such as:



Excessive Movement

Moving excessively and nervously



Intense Watching

Watching you intently, beyond normal curiosity



Suspicious Reaching

Moving toward the floorboard or backseat



Excessive Motion

Making excessive motion, beyond natural curiosity



Rigid Posture

Sitting in a rigid, wooden posture



Safety During Document Retrieval

If the driver reaches to open the glove compartment or other inside compartment, request that they do it slowly. Pay close attention to both of the driver's hands. The driver could use the reaching hand as a distraction while going for a weapon or object with the other hand.

Expect the driver to retrieve this information from a wallet, glove compartment, or center console. **Never accept a wallet from the driver.** Instead, ask the driver to remove the license from the wallet. This prevents the driver from later making accusations of theft.

Be aware that the driver or passengers may have lethal opioid drugs, such as fentanyl, in the vehicle. Follow your agency's policies and procedures regarding administering an emergency opioid antagonist if you encounter these types of opioids, as they may pose a life-threatening situation.

Verifying Driver and Vehicle Information

Driver's License



Verify that the information on the driver's license is current. If the driver does not have identification, ask for their Social Security number.

Insurance Information



Confirm that the insurance information is current and applicable to the driver's vehicle. A driver can provide proof of insurance in either a uniform paper or electronic format, as approved by DHSMV.

Vehicle Registration



Compare information on the vehicle registration to the VIN, make, model, and year of the vehicle.

Gender Designation



While the Florida driver's license has the designation for sex as either F for female or M for male, several states have a third sex or gender option, usually designated by the letter X. If you encounter a driver with an X on their license, or an individual whose appearance does not match the sex on their license, follow your agency's policies and procedures.



Legal Carry of a Weapon

LE1113.9 How to respond if you suspect that there is a firearm in the vehicle

The driver or a passenger may state that they have a weapon on their person or in the vehicle despite not being required to do so. Regardless, if you have reasonable suspicion that there is a firearm in the vehicle, ask for its location.

If you determine that a firearm is readily accessible to anyone in the vehicle, follow your agency's policies and procedures on how to proceed with the traffic stop.

For more information regarding the lawful ownership and possession of weapons and firearms, refer to Chapter 3.



Obtaining Passenger Information

The driver is the only occupant in the vehicle required to provide documentation. However, should you suspect other occupants of a violation or crime, request their documents that provide accurate personal information such as:



Primary Identification

- Driver's license or state-issued identification card (with picture)
- Military ID
- Permanent resident card (green card)



Alternative Identification

- School picture identification

After obtaining the driver's and passengers' documentation, complete the criminal justice database checks or request dispatch to complete them. Remember to keep an eye on the vehicle and its occupants while you run the database checks.

Database Checks and Information

The information from D.A.V.I.D. and FCIC/NCIC can be useful during traffic stops. Recall from Chapter 5 that these databases provide information on people with outstanding arrest warrants nationally, driver's licenses, and vehicle registrations.

If your query returns a hit, and you confirm the identifying information with the entering agency, take the appropriate action, which may include making an arrest or impounding the vehicle.





Step 10: Choose a Course of Action

You may decide to take no action, issue a verbal warning, issue a written warning, issue a citation, or make an arrest. The law, your agency's policies and procedures, and the circumstances of the violation affect your enforcement options. Some agencies do not permit officers to issue written or verbal warnings. Handle civil traffic infractions for a juvenile in the same way as for adults.

Weigh the seriousness of the offense and the road, weather, and traffic conditions when deciding a course of action. You may request that the driver and any passengers stay in the driver's vehicle or ask them to move to a designated area away from the vehicle but within your sight. This can make attacking you from behind more difficult as you choose or implement your course of action.



Completing the Traffic Stop

Complete the traffic stop by returning the driver's documents with a copy of the warning or citation and any relevant public information pamphlets that your agency may provide. Professional behavior can make this interaction easier if you clearly explain options for handling the citation. **Do not argue about the merits of the citation with the driver.**

Traffic stops are documented in many ways, such as through dispatch, computer, written warning, UTC, in-car video system, or body camera.

If the driver expresses a desire to make a complaint against you, politely explain the process for doing so and notify your supervisor according to your agency's policies and procedures. Allow an upset driver time to calm down before the driver leaves. When the driver is ready, make sure they are able to re-enter traffic safely. Return to your vehicle and clear the traffic stop with dispatch.

Arrests During Traffic Stops

During a traffic stop, you may develop probable cause to justify an arrest of a driver or a passenger for an offense that came to your attention during your investigation. Whether you make a physical arrest or take some other action will depend on the nature of the offense, the severity of the circumstances, and your agency's policies and procedures.

Before making an arrest, you should call for backup. When the backup officer arrives, work together on the best strategy to conduct the arrest. Keep in mind that during an arrest, there is always potential for resistance or violence. Remember to maintain a professional standard of conduct at all times.





Disposition of Vehicle and Passengers

If you arrest a driver during the course of a traffic stop, you will have to decide what to do with the vehicle and any passengers.

Treat the passengers with dignity and respect. Witnessing a friend or family member being placed under arrest will cause some individuals to react or become emotional.



Search or Impound

Depending on the offense, you may search the vehicle, impound it, or retain it for evidence.



Inventory Contents

If you impound it, follow agency policies and procedures to inventory the contents of the vehicle and remove and secure any driver or passenger possessions.



Arrange Removal

You may arrange for a third party to remove the driver's vehicle or leave it at the scene with the owner's consent. If the vehicle must be impounded, contact a wrecker to take the vehicle to the impound lot.

If the vehicle is stolen, follow agency policies and procedures.



Key Takeaways: Traffic Stop Safety and Professionalism



Officer Safety First

Maintain situational awareness throughout every traffic stop. Use proper positioning, cover, and tactical approaches to protect yourself and others.



Professional Communication

Exercise procedural justice by treating all individuals with respect, listening to their concerns, making fair decisions, and explaining your actions clearly.



Follow Procedures

Adhere to the 10-step process for unknown-risk traffic stops, from initiating the stop through choosing a course of action, while following agency policies.



Community Relations

Your professional behavior during traffic stops reflects on your agency and is vital for fostering positive relationships with community members.

High-Risk Traffic Stops

Unit 2: Initiating and Conducting the Stop





Unit 2, Lesson 1: Initiating the Stop

Lesson Goal

Know when and how to initiate a safe and professional high-risk traffic stop



What Defines a High-Risk Traffic Stop?

A **high-risk traffic stop** occurs when you reasonably believe that the vehicle was stolen or used in the commission of a felony, or that the occupant(s) of the vehicle:

- Has committed, or is committing a forcible felony or a crime of violence
- May be armed and dangerous
- May have an active violent felony warrant
- Poses a higher risk to yourself or the public

Unknown-risk traffic stops become high risk when any of the above criteria are present.



Critical Skills for High-Risk Stops



Listening

Pay close attention to dispatch communications and backup officers throughout the stop



Communicating

Maintain constant communication with dispatch and coordinating officers



Observing

Maintain constant visual contact with the suspect vehicle and monitor occupant behavior



Coordinating

Work effectively with other officers to ensure everyone's safety



10 Steps for High-Risk Traffic Stops

The first four steps occur when the primary officer initiates the stop. Some steps may happen simultaneously.

1

Identify a vehicle or suspect

2

Identify the location of the stop

3

Coordinate with other officers

4

Initiate the stop

Step 1: Identify a Vehicle or Suspect

You might receive information about a BOLO during roll call or over your vehicle computer while on patrol. If you identify a vehicle or suspect matching the BOLO details, notify dispatch immediately.

Request a secure channel and provide dispatch your location and travel direction, along with detailed suspect vehicle information.





Vehicle Information to Provide Dispatch

Vehicle Description

- Make, model, and year
- Color
- Plate number and state
- Visible damage
- Special markings (stickers, decals, window writing)

Safety Considerations

- Aftermarket modifications (truck boxes, spinning rims, tow hitches)
- Officer safety issues (tinted windows, gun rack, grill guard, raised chassis)
- Number and description of occupants



Following the Suspect Vehicle

If dispatch confirms the driver and vehicle information you provided, you have reasonable suspicion to initiate the stop. Follow the suspect's vehicle and maintain constant visual contact.

- ❏ **Important:** Know your agency's policies and procedures for safe vehicle speeds when following a suspect. Do not turn on emergency equipment until backup arrives.

If backup is unavailable from your agency, ask dispatch to request assistance from another agency.



Never Stop Alone

Do not conduct a high-risk traffic stop alone unless the driver's behavior forces action





Waiting for Backup

It is recommended that you request and, if possible, wait for backup before acting in a high-risk traffic stop situation. Maintain contact with dispatch and responding units at all times.

As circumstances change, update dispatch and backup on:

- Movement and route of the suspect's vehicle
- Activity of the occupants in the vehicle
- Any observations of weapons or contraband

Periodically ask dispatch to provide the location and estimated time of arrival (ETA) for backup units. An accurate ETA may help you plan for the safest stopping location.

Step 2: Identify the Location of the Stop

Determine a safe location to stop when backup officers arrive. Attempt to locate a place that is well lit, has light or no traffic, few or no pedestrians, and provides plenty of room for all vehicles.





Ideal Stopping Location Characteristics

Visibility

Unobstructed view between suspect's vehicle and patrol units, visible to approaching traffic and all officers

Traffic Control

Location where vehicular and pedestrian traffic can be stopped or redirected to a safe location

Space

Large enough to accommodate two or more backup units on a wide and straight roadway

Environment

Away from heavy pedestrian and vehicle traffic, preferably in an open or rural area rather than a business area



Step 3: Coordinate With Other Officers

Usually, the initiating officer serves as the primary officer. There are exceptions to this rule—for example, a canine unit may relinquish the role of primary officer to a patrol officer.

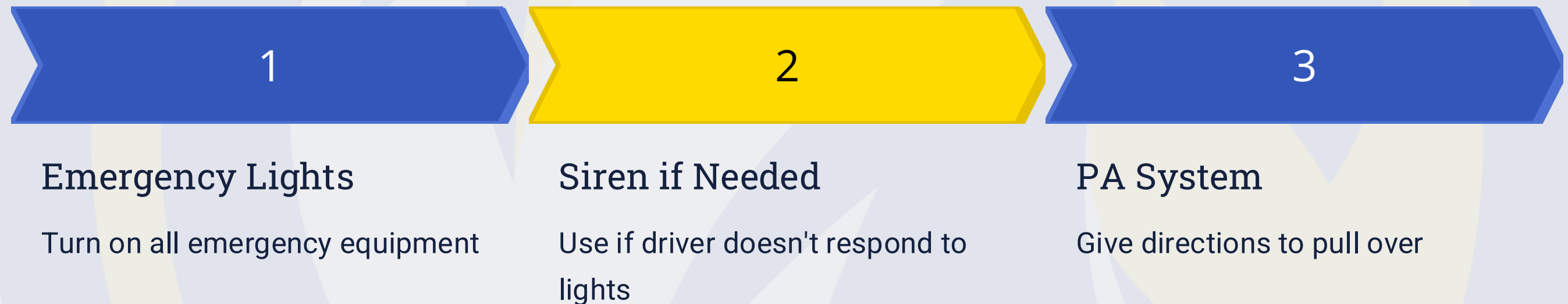
If possible, attempt to stop all vehicular and pedestrian traffic. When backup officers arrive, the primary officer chooses a safe stopping location and uses the radio to direct responding patrol units to positions of backup or control of the driver and passengers.

When there is enough backup to initiate the high-risk stop, the primary officer provides dispatch the location of the stop and information regarding the driver's and passengers' actions and behavior.



Step 4: Initiate the Stop

All officers must turn on their patrol vehicle's emergency lights to direct the driver to stop, and keep them on throughout the entire stop. This includes takedown lights, high beams, and spotlights.



The lights may help protect officers from potential attack by the suspect. Using blinding light for safety can be effective during day or night.

If the Driver Flees

If the driver flees and does not stop as directed, you should **FOLLOW YOUR AGENCY's POLICE** regarding vehicle pursuit.





Unit 2, Lesson 2: Conducting the Stop

Lesson Goal

Know how to conduct a safe and professional high-risk traffic stop using verbal commands

The last six procedural steps for the primary officer to take when involved in a high-risk traffic stop are as follows. Some of these may happen at the same time.



Conducting the Stop

Position the patrol vehicles

Decide officer assignments

Issue commands

Secure the suspects

Clear and search the vehicle

Conclude the stop



Position the Patrol Vehicles

Positioning the Primary Patrol Vehicle

Once the vehicle stops, the primary officer positions their patrol vehicle so that the driver's door of the suspect's vehicle is immediately visible. Officers should stop at a safe distance behind the suspect's vehicle, 15–20 feet, as more distance provides more protection.

Keep patrol vehicle engines running in case you need to react to changes in the situation. If your siren is activated, turn it off.



Primary Vehicle Positioning Details

Agency policies and the physical situation (terrain, type of intersection, whether it is a highway or street, officer safety) help officers determine how far to offset the primary patrol vehicle. Generally, the primary patrol vehicle should offset toward the driver's side of the suspect's vehicle.

Make sure you leave room for a takedown area. A **takedown area** is a tactical area of advantage for the officer to handcuff and search the driver or passengers. The takedown area is always in front of a fan, wedge, or other patrol vehicle formation.

Takedown Area and Safe Zone

The back of the patrol vehicle formation is preserved as the "safe zone." The safe zone is always behind the patrol vehicle formation and the place where secured suspects are thoroughly searched before being placed in a patrol vehicle.

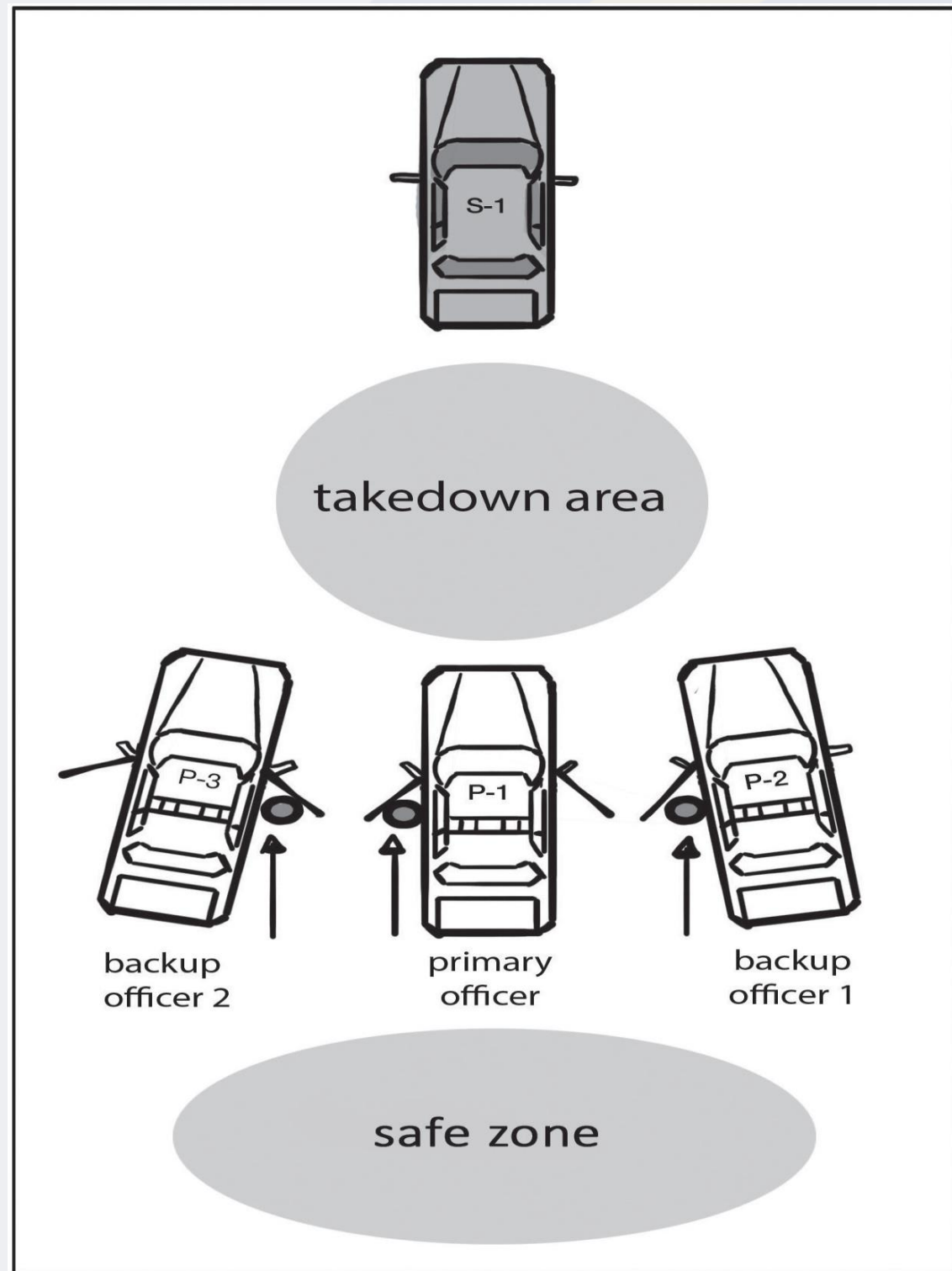


Figure 11-8: Takedown area and safe zone with fan of vehicles



Positioning Backup Patrol Vehicles

The positioning of the backup vehicles will be dictated by the location and terrain of the stop. A high-risk traffic stop usually involves many backup units.

- Position the first backup patrol vehicle to the right of the primary patrol vehicle and facing the suspect's vehicle
- Position all backup vehicles at least two door widths apart so that all vehicle doors can open completely
- Focus the backup vehicle's takedown lights, high beams, and spotlight on the suspect's vehicle
- Position a third vehicle (or fourth) to one side or the other of the fan formation

The Wedge Backup Position



If you choose to position a patrol vehicle at the rear of the primary patrol vehicle, turn off the forward-facing emergency lights.

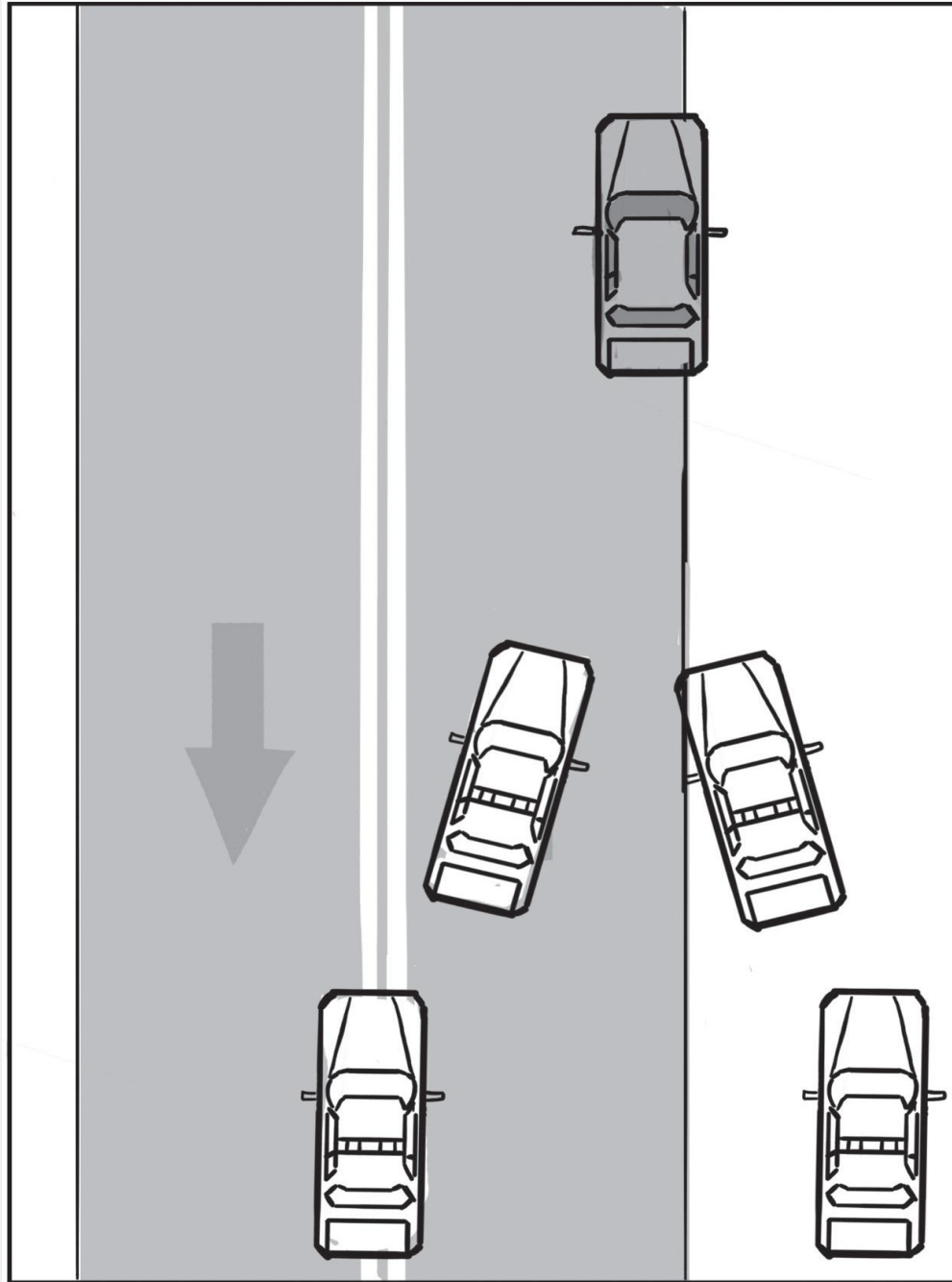


Figure 11-9: The wedge backup position

Taking Cover Using the Patrol Vehicle

Exit your vehicle and use available cover for safety after the suspect's vehicle has stopped and all patrol vehicles are positioned.

Your patrol vehicle is usually the most effective and readily available cover; this includes the door frame and the rear of the vehicle. However, there may be instances where other environmental cover will offer better protection.





Firearm Ready Position

Once all officers are in position, they should draw their firearm, and based on the environment, orient the muzzle in the appropriate ready position that does not obstruct the officer's vision with their finger off the trigger and indexed on the frame.

Visually locate all other responding officers, and be mindful of other officers in your crossfire. The situation will dictate your position.



Pursuit Considerations

If the driver pulls away after you initiate the stop, make a second attempt to pull over the vehicle. If the driver does not stop, the primary officer must decide whether the situation is legal, feasible, necessary, and meets their agency's criteria for pursuit.

- ❏ **Critical:** If a supervisor advises against pursuing or advises canceling the pursuit at any time, all officers must comply.



If Suspects Flee the Vehicle

1

Initiate BOLO

Broadcast suspect descriptions

2

Set Up Perimeter

Contain the area

3

Continue Stop

Proceed with high-risk procedures

Relay the details of the fleeing suspects to other responding officers. If the suspect vehicle begins to flee from the stop and then crashes, initiate a BOLO, set up a perimeter, and follow the high-risk traffic stop procedures.



Step 6: Decide Officer Assignments

Taking Command of the High-Risk Traffic Stop

Hold a brief discussion to determine the roles of the responding officers. While the primary officer assumes command of the high-risk traffic stop, the situation dictates who verbally controls the movements and actions of the driver and passengers.

Only one officer should give instructions



Officer Roles and Responsibilities

Primary Officer

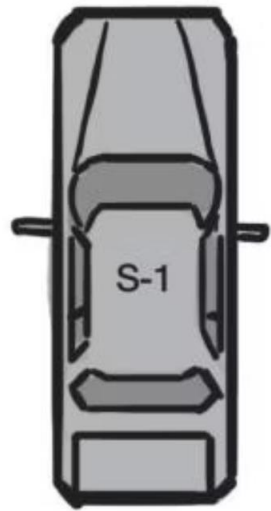
Assumes command and usually verbally controls all occupants from the driver's side one at a time using loud, concise, clear commands

Contact Officer

Approaches the suspect after they are in a position of tactical disadvantage. Responsible for handcuffing and searching the suspect

Cover Officer

Provides defensive protection for the contact officer during the arrest

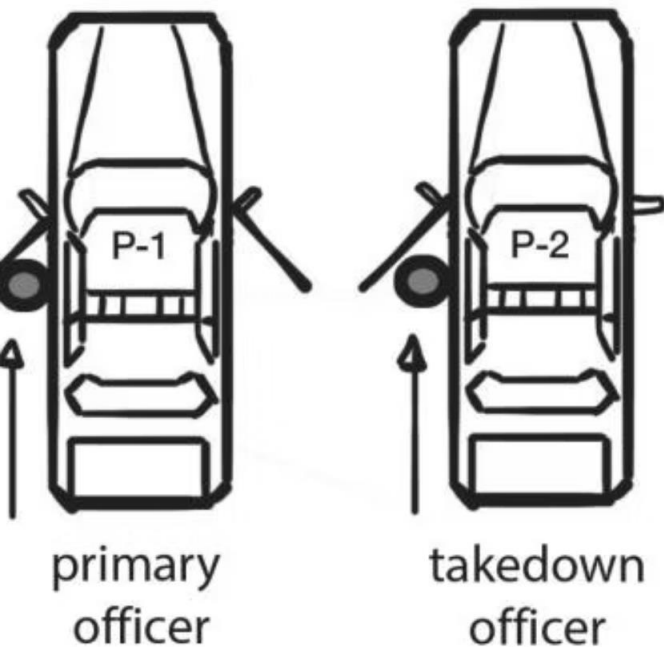


15 - 20 feet

✓ Crouch behind doors for cover

✓ Primary unit d commands to vehicle.

✓ Takedown officer opens passenger of primary vehicle allow for cover.



Felony Traffic Stop: Two Police Units

Figure 11-10: Felony traffic stop with two police units

Felony Traffic Stop: Three Police Units

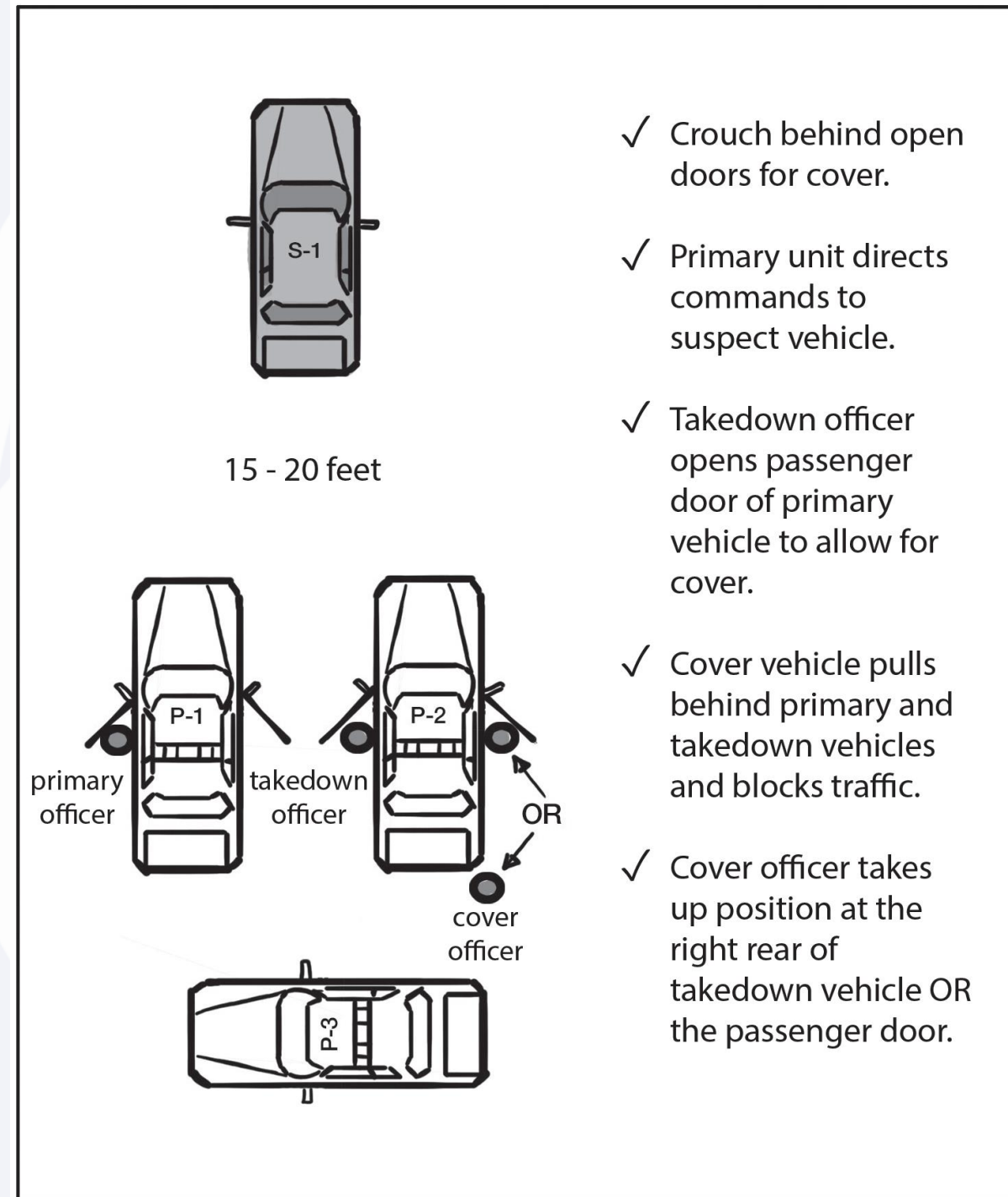


Figure 11-11: Felony traffic stop with three police units



Maintain Situational Awareness

All officers must maintain situational awareness throughout the incident. There can be many officers moving within the traffic stop location. There will be noise, lights, and a heightened sense of anxiety.



Practice Deep Breathing

Control your stress response



Take Your Time

Don't rush critical decisions



Remain Focused

Stay alert to your surroundings



Recall Your Training

Trust your preparation



Step 7: Issue Commands

Verbal Commands

You may use the PA system to identify yourself as a law enforcement officer. Maintain cover when giving voice commands. Instruct all occupants to put up their hands to where they are clearly visible.

If the driver does not immediately respond to your command, repeat the command. If they are still unresponsive, reassess and follow your agency's policies for the situation at hand.



Initial Verbal Commands (1-4)

- 1 "Roll down all the windows."
- 2 "Raise your hands again where I can see them."
If windows are heavily tinted, instruct occupants to put their hands outside the windows
- 3 "Turn off your engine."
Note that newer car technology may not have a key in the ignition
- 4 "Remove and place your keys or key fob outside on the roof of your vehicle."



Initial Verbal Commands (5-8)

1

"Open your door from the outside with that same hand."

2

"Put your hand back above your head."

3

"Exit the vehicle on the driver's side. Do not close the driver's door. Keep it open."

4

"Keep your hands visible and put them above your head while facing away from me."



Commands After Driver Exits (1-4)

Once the driver has exited the vehicle, the primary officer can continue issuing the following commands:

1

"Step away from the vehicle."

2

"Extend your arms above your head."

3

"Lift the back of your shirt by the collar."

4

"Slowly turn in a complete circle."

Look for any weapons or obvious bulges from possible weapons as the driver turns

If You Observe a Weapon

- ❏ **Critical Warning:** If you observe a weapon, advise the driver that if they move toward their weapon, you will use appropriate force. Refer to the techniques you learned in Defensive Tactics.



Commands After Driver Exits (5-8)

1

"Stop, turn, and face away from me."

2

"Place your hands back in the air."

3

"Slowly step backward toward the sound of my voice."

4

For four-door vehicles: "Stop at the back door. Open the back door. Continue backing up until I tell you to stop."



Transitioning to Contact Officer

The contact officer will take over and issue commands to the driver directing them to the takedown area to be secured and searched.

Where you handcuff the driver and passengers may vary. Some agencies handcuff all suspects near the front tires of the backup vehicle, leaving the back of the primary vehicle as a "safe zone." Other agencies take all suspects to the back of the backup vehicle to search and secure.



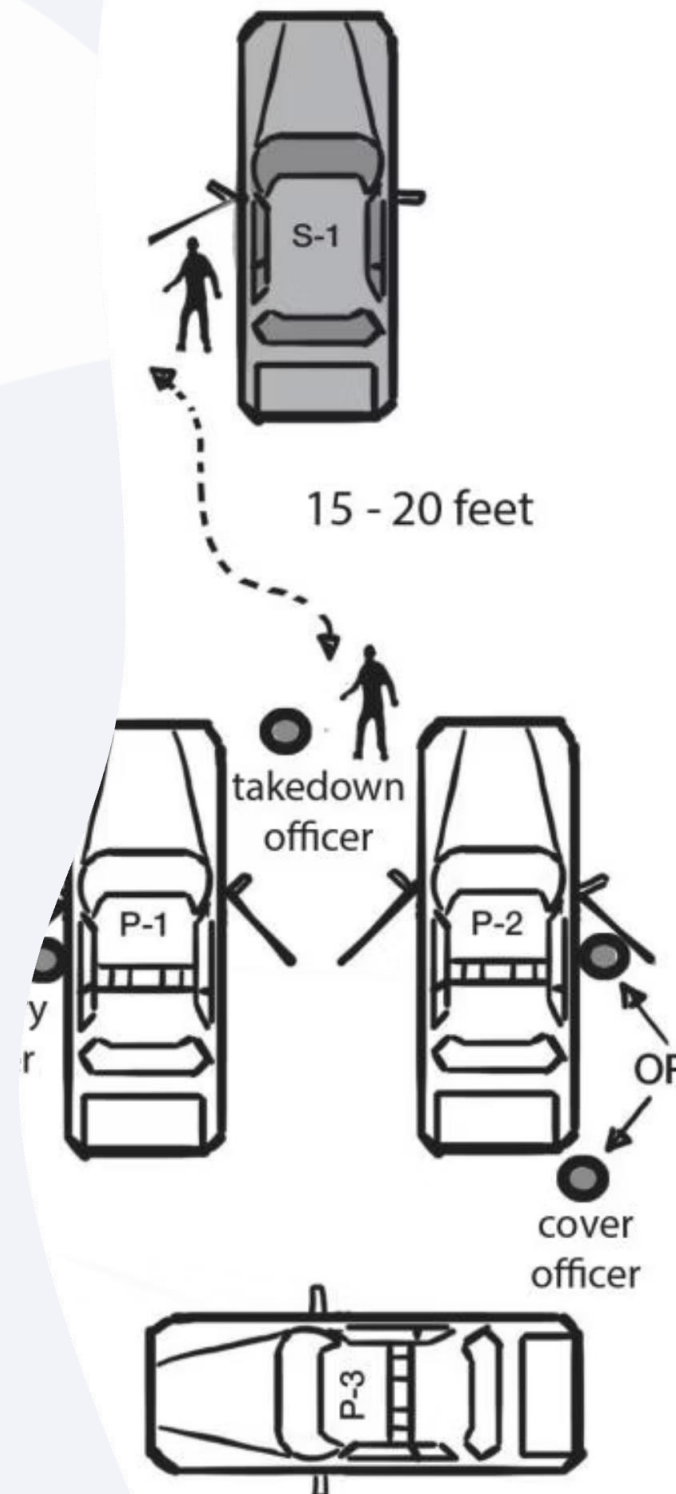
Step 8: Secure the Suspects

Detaining the Driver

Once the driver is in the takedown area, the contact officer tells the driver to kneel, lie prone, or assume another position of disadvantage. Holster your firearm, approach the driver, and handcuff them. Conduct a cursory pat down and secure any weapons.

Handcuff and Cursory Search Position

Figure 11-12: Handcuff and cursory search position



- ✓ Once the primary officer releases cover of the suspect, the takedown officer directs the suspect to a position about 15 - 20 feet with the leading of the police vehicle.
- ✓ Takedown officer instructs suspect to a position of tactical disadvantage before approaching and placing handcuffs on the suspect.



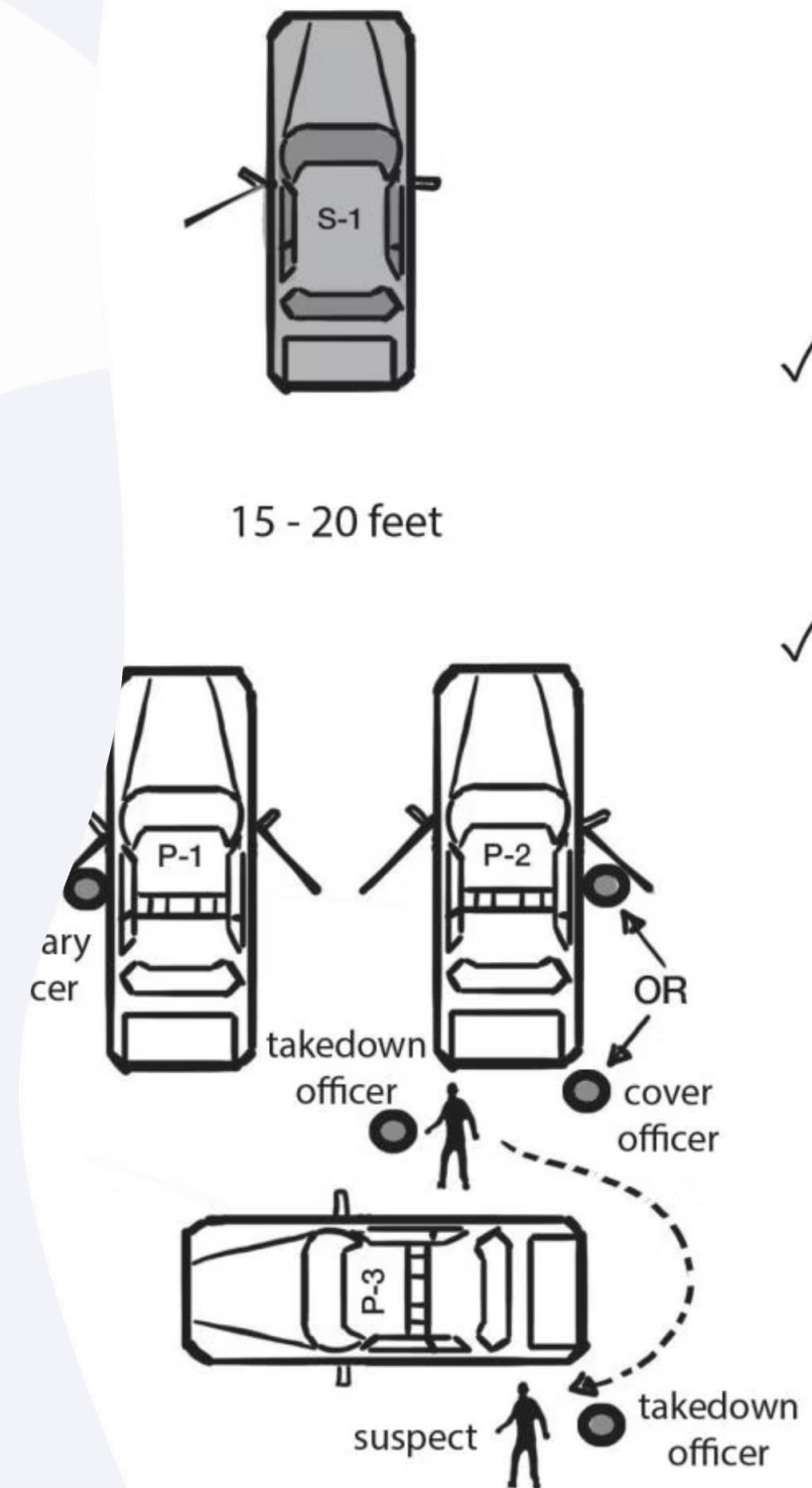
Thoroughly Search and Secure

Walk the handcuffed driver behind the cover of the backup vehicle. Thoroughly search the driver. Follow up with a conversation about any remaining passengers and weapons. Place the handcuffed driver into a patrol vehicle.

Once you secure the driver in the vehicle, move to a position of cover and draw your firearm, orient the muzzle in a safe position, based on the environment, that does not obstruct your vision with your finger off the trigger and indexed on the frame.

Thoroughly Search and Secure the Suspect

Figure 11-13: Thoroughly search and secure the suspect



- ✓ Takedown officer escorts suspect to far side of the cover vehicle.
- ✓ Takedown officer conducts a thorough search, brief interview, and secures the suspect in the cover vehicle.



Removing Passengers From the Suspect's Vehicle

Do not remove any passengers from the vehicle until you secure the driver in the patrol vehicle. However, if the driver is uncooperative and refuses to exit their vehicle, remove the passengers from the vehicle.

- ❏ **Important:** Only one suspect should be taken out of the vehicle at a time. Never take another suspect out of the vehicle until the previous suspect is secured in the back of a patrol vehicle and all officers are in or returned to position.



Passenger Removal Procedures

1

Same Procedures

Follow same procedures as used for the driver

2

Individual Removal

Remove, secure, and search each passenger individually

3

Leave Door Open

Last passenger leaves door open

4

Separate Suspects

When possible, separate all suspects



The Plus One Rule

The **plus one rule** assumes that if you find one of something there is another. When you believe that you have removed all passengers from the suspect's vehicle, command any hidden passengers to make themselves known.



Step 9: Clear and Search the Vehicle

If there is no response to the command, more than one officer should cautiously approach the suspect's vehicle with their weapons pointed at it. The officer with the best vantage point should give commands to any discovered passenger.

Only one officer should issue commands to prevent confusion. If a discovered passenger refuses to come out, consider retreating back to the patrol vehicle.



Systematic Visual Search

The officers who perform the systematic visual search of the vehicle will check the vehicle's interior for hidden passengers. After the interior is clear, retrieve the keys or remote to open the trunk.



Move Cautiously

Approach trunk area carefully



Assume Safe Position

Point firearms at trunk, avoid crossfire



Unlock Trunk

One officer unlocks while another holds it down



Lift and Clear

Officer lifts trunk lid and clears it

Vehicle as Crime Scene

The vehicle may be a crime scene. Follow your agency's policies for searching the vehicle.





Step 10: Conclude the Stop

After the scene is secure and all is safe, the primary officer notifies dispatch to discontinue emergency radio traffic. Follow proper arrest procedures if you are arresting the driver or any passengers.

If the occupants of the vehicle are not the suspects, explain the reason for the stop (for example, their vehicle matched the description of a vehicle used in a robbery), and release them.



Vehicle Disposition

Circumstances and your agency's policies and procedures will dictate the disposition and documentation of the high-risk traffic stop, such as seizing, impounding, or releasing the vehicle.

Seizing

Take custody of vehicle as evidence

Impounding

Tow vehicle to secure location

Releasing

Return vehicle to owner if appropriate

Documentation Requirements

Document the incident thoroughly, including:

- All information gathered from the time of roll call to locating the suspect
- Confirmation of the warrant
- Contact with and possible arrest of the suspect
- Any seized evidence

