

## Archive: Police Officer Focus Groups

Charles Epp, Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald Haider-Markel *Reconstructing Law on the Street: The Influence of Citizen Characteristics on Traffic Law Enforcement*. National Science Foundation, 2002-2005. NSF29720 and NSF29725 (supplement).

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### Primary Document (PD): 1

Police Officer Focus Group 1/31/2003  
KU Edwards Campus

Facilitators:  
Steven Maynard-Moody (S)  
Charles Epp (C)  
Don Haider-Markel (DHM)

Notes:  
Bonnie Johnson

Participants:  
D  
K  
J  
DL

S – Introduction, survey of drivers on traffic stops. Do you make regular traffic stops?

J – Yes, regularly.

K – Yes, on occasion.

DL & D – Not regularly.

(All started in traffic divisions.)

S – Describe a routine traffic stop.

J – See a violation - stoplight, speeding. Call in the license plate or by computer while making the stop.

D – May follow after violation for awhile until there's a safe place to pull over because people usually just stop when you hit the siren.

S – What information do you know?

DL – You run info and find out any warrants associated with the tag so you know what you're dealing with.

K – You can know information on if they have assaulted police. Information on the tag may track more than one driver. The information is different depending on what service you're tied into Alert, (acronyms? - Kansas, Missouri, and Federal – only stolen vehicles and warrants).

S – Okay, after you turn on the sirens, then what?

DL – Approach car, see what's inside, touch trunk to make sure it is closed.

J – And to leave your fingerprint if things go badly.

K – Make sure the person can't lean out.

DL – Our protocol is to introduce ourselves by name.

K – Then give the reason why I stopped you then ask for driver's license and insurance.

J – I used to ask "Do you know why?" but I stopped. Sometimes they'd admit to going faster than what I clocked them at.

D – You say why so you don't leave it open to debate.

S – At this point could it go either way on whether you write ticket or not?

K – No. You make up your mind before leaving the car.

J – I like stopping cars but I hate writing tickets so my goal is to get people to slow down. If it is a school zone with a lot of complaints then you write a ticket. If you stop the car and smell pot – Great! That's what I like.

K – Up to 12 miles per hour over the speed limit, then no ticket. I'm more likely to stop someone for a child car seat violation because that's my training.

J – Some officers just love getting drunks.

K – Depends on the time of day. Midnights, you're looking for DWI and drugs. The types of infractions differ.

DL – Rush hour, you'll let minor infractions go.

K – In rush hour, if you make a stop it could cause problems. There's nothing that's really a must stop.

D – Different cops have different things they go after.

K – There is no routine stop because humans are unpredictable. Nothing is routine.

D – Some people react differently to different things.

S – So a stop is inherently dangerous.

J – The most danger is from passing cars.

S – Could you tell us about the times when something unexpected happened?

J – Yeah, the other day I stopped “Jesus”. It was for a license plate violation but he didn’t stop. He was driving a two-tone Bronco. It was a 30 mph pursuit into another jurisdiction where they stop cars and pull out their shotguns.

C – What percentage stop?

DL – Very high.

DL – When I was training someone, we got information about someone in the motel district. They had a warrant out on them. He immediately bailed and tried to climb a fence. As he did so, we grabbed him and then drugs, a knife and a gun fell out of his pockets. Other cars were in route, it was just a misdemeanor warrant.

K – I’ve had where a drunk would let me get to his window before he’d pull out again. He kept doing that.

D – If you stop people who are speeding because of a medical reason, they won’t want to wait but you want them to wait for the ambulance.

DHM – When you stop someone for speeding, you see something in the car or they do something, what are you looking for?

J – You look for a shoulder dropping like they’re hiding a gun or dope.

K – It’s a problem when they keep reaching over into the glove box.

D – You look for furtive movements.

J – If there is a problem, you call for back-up, stop the car, block it with your car, get the engine block between you and them and then ask them to get out, and walk to the car.

D – The difference is between a traffic stop and an occupied vehicle stop. If it is an occupied vehicle stop, something might have turned up on the computer, strange movements, lots of people in the car handing stuff back and forth . . .

DHM – Sometimes other officers just stop without being called.

J – Often, more often at night.

D – We don’t have enough officers for that.

DHM – Do people do anything different when more officers are there?

J – Yeah, innocent people get concerned.

K – You might be training someone so it helps to explain why so many people are there.

C – How many react in a proper manner?

D – People always do stuff, reach into the glove box or their purse, cell phone, so if they do nothing you get suspicious. Everybody thinks you're going to ask for their registration.

S – Do you get a sense for the neighborhoods you regularly patrol?

J – Yeah, for example in Lakewood, you notice the car with broken windows and smoking. It just doesn't fit in.

S – Who do you stop?

J – The dopers.

S – What makes you relax?

D – When they comply.

K – When you recognize the person or they flash a badge.

S – What about pretext stops?

DL – I did that more when I'd work midnights. Look for license plate light out, just left hotel district after three minutes, expired tag. It's being proactive in a good way. You have to pull cars over to do something.

C – I've heard that people will always give you some reason to pull them over if you wait long enough.

K – Yeah, improper turn, littering, license plate light out, turn signal. . . The drunk will stop at a yellow light or forget to turn on his headlights.

DHM – Are there any guidelines you use to decide on giving a citation? What percentage do you give a citation to for speeding?

J – Citations- 75% to 80%.

D – Most don't have time to do much writing. I do more of an education thing.

K – The young guys write more.

DL – If there are multiple violations, then write ticket.

K – You sometimes give them a choice, speeding ticket or seat belt ticket – amazingly some choose the speeding ticket.

S – What about the behavior of the driver?

J – Comments like, “What the hell are you doing?”, “Don’t you have something better to do?”, “Do you have a doughnut shop to be at?”, “Why are you picking on me?”, “Don’t you have criminals to catch?”

D – If you see from their record that they are not learning, then you write a ticket.

C – Do people argue?

J – Less than 10%. If you are in a bad mood, they’ll come back at you.

DL – Some officers are always rigid so they always have to go to court.

S – Are the contentious officers the ones most likely to have to go to court?

DL – No, it’s the number of tickets.

D – You educate or write a ticket (don’t do both).

S – What about racial profiling?

K – In Missouri, you have to fill out forms.

S – Are there differences between the states?

K – Different cultures.

J – Different crime rates.

C – What are the differences?

D – For example, in Leawood, they’ll stop you for going 5 miles over the speed limit.

J – Small towns use tickets as revenue generators.

K – 2 to 3 miles over the speed limit.

S – Is there a racial component to the stops?

DL – Depends on who you stop.

D – With traffic stops, you don’t know the race until you walk up to the window.

K – At night you don’t know.

C – Are African Americans more tense?

K – Depends on where they are from like South Kansas City.

D – Whites don't mention race. Race is just an extra tool like playing the race card to argue a stop.

J – I stopped a Black man with expired tags but he had the sticker in his hand so I shook his hand and it was a good experience.

C – Are African Americans more likely to argue?

K – It may be just the media making people aware of an issue.

D – When we started the program to track racial profiling, awareness went up, so more complaints. It is more of the person's experience with police.

DHM – If you know an area and know the vehicles, what are you looking for? Unrepaired damage? Certain characteristics of the vehicle?

DL – Number of occupants, time of day, apartment complexes, hotels, car driving around parking lots . . .

K – If there are burglaries in the area, looking for something out of place.

J – Old damage that wouldn't pass inspection yet the car has new plates or clean car with dirty plates or dirty car and clean plates.

C – If you stop someone and they get out of the car, is that a problem?

J – Yes, gets out of the car, comes over to you.

D – If they say how they live in a certain, rich part of town – don't like that.

K – If they stay on the phone while getting stopped – the indifference is annoying.

DHM – If it took a while for someone to pull over, would you tell them you'd been following them?

All – Yes!

K – If the roads are icy and they're going fast, that's annoying.

D – Unsafe driving gets you concerned.

J – Different jurisdictions give written versus verbal warnings. We give written warnings to help us gather intelligence.

DHM – How much over the speed limit before someone gets stopped?

K – Over 12 mph.

J – Over 11 mph.

D – City police – over 10-15 mph. The big fishes won't argue.

S – When do you conduct a search?

J – Anytime you make an arrest.

K – Midnight, you search allot of cars.

J – It's interesting that at 3:00 p.m. the whole character of the city changes.

C – When are people more argumentative?

D – It depends on the person.

End.

**PD: 2**

Police Officer Focus Group #2 - 2/21/2003  
KU Edwards Campus

Facilitators:

Steven Maynard-Moody (S)  
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Don Haider-Markel (DHM)

Notes:

Bonnie Johnson

Participants:

J  
JP  
M  
R

S – Introduction. Do you make regular traffic stops?

R – Used to be everyday, 4 or 5 years ago.

M – Three years ago.

J – Twelve years ago. Last 18 months in traffic support units.

JP – I don't, I'm in the research unit.

S – Describe a typical traffic stop.

R – For a traffic stop like for speeding, the violation is observed, or for a probable cause violation, lights, stop, approach car, license, registration, explain stop, check for outstanding warrants, license okay, decide whether to write a ticket or not. You think, how serious? Is this an area you're having a lot of accidents? Influences on writing a ticket also can be whether the officer is having performance issues or not.

J – On performance, a month goes by and no tickets, you have to look and find out – did they stop anybody? Did they investigate a lot of accidents? If they did, they should be writing tickets.

M – There are a lot of people who don't write tickets.

J – We've seen a reduction in tickets being written because of the change to Community Policing. We went from standards to don't worry about tickets, just solve problems, plus officers don't like to write tickets.

M – In the decision to write a ticket, it depends on the demeanor of the driver. However, traffic officers, 95% of the time, they write tickets.

J – Their primary focus is reducing accidents.



M – For the district officer, if working high accident area, then they write a ticket, but otherwise not. Rudeness would get a ticket, the person's previous history, etc. A person's family history with the police influences how they act.

DHM – We've heard that a strategy to keep the level of conflict down is to tell someone why they are being stopped.

R – We do and have verbal judo training. If someone says, "You scumbag", you say "Excuse me, I'm treating you with respect and expect the same."

J – It used to be - get the driver's license first, and then you have them. Now you introduce yourself, tell why, and then get driver's license.

S – What information do you know first?

M – License plate, number of occupants, location, dispatch has information, you wait until dispatch gives you that information.

J – But sometimes it takes too long, driver gets out of the car and you have to do something.

S – As you are approaching the car, what would be worrisome for you?

R – The number of people, people moving around, hiding things. If more than one person, your attention is divided, large vehicles, etc., it's hard to see what's going on. You try to position yourself behind the driver who has to then turn around to see you but if there's a person in the back seat, it's hard to position yourself.

M – If doing an investigative stop, you get backup.

R – There may not be a traffic violation but white car seen in burglary area and so you stop based on probable cause or reasonable suspicion.

DHM – Any traffic stops that make you more cautious?

J – It may start as a traffic stop and turn into a car check. You walk up and you see someone lying down or electronic equipment in the back seat after dark.

DHM – But not speeding versus a red light?

S – If you see a traffic violation do you have no choice but to make a stop?

R – DUI is a must stop. Red lights, speeders – depends on what you're doing. If you're working a school zone then stop everyone.

S – Differences in the amount of speeding?

J – Everyone’s different. Traffic unit has a lesser tolerance. I’ll stop at 13 mph, but another traffic cop would be around 10 mph.

R – One thing with speeding is you don’t want to go to court on every ticket so if you start at 10 mph then there’s no argument.

M – District officers don’t have radar guns and maybe not all cars do.

J – We have one for every car.

R – Plus if they’re going 95 mph, you can’t catch them because you’re starting from a dead stop.

M- That and motorcycles.

DHM – Are there different kinds of radar guns now?

M – Yes, laser guns.

R – They’re more accurate.

J – It will tell them how far car is and is very accurate.

R – You put a gun on a bridge and then call down to officer who makes the stop.

S – What about pretext stops?

M – Technically shouldn’t.

R – The culture is against it. If you watch a drug house and someone is only there two minutes, something moves from hand to hand, car doesn’t signal – but you don’t need pretext because you have reasonable suspicion. We try to train away from pretext.

S – What about if a headlight is out?

R – You’d do an investigative stop.

J – Kansas City’s activity is different from Overland Park. It wouldn’t be unusual for us to do an equipment violation. You want them to be aware if a brake light is out, no red lens that’s blinding people. The differences may be staffing.

C – Sometimes people get indignant about an educational stop.

J – If you do education with a warning, its okay, it depends on if the person has been stopped before.

M – It depends. If there’s a three year old, bouncing around, unbelted, and they say, “You can’t stop me!” My intention was to just stop to educate but she pushed it so I wrote a ticket.

R - In KC, we don't issue warning tickets, we do an activity log but no warning.

DHM – Do you give warning tickets where you have to fix the problem or you'll be fined?

R – Not that I'm aware of. With insurance tickets a judge may dismiss it if you've corrected it.

C – What about combining an equipment ticket and speeding?

R – Usually you give the moving ticket unless there's something else you're emphasizing like seat belts.

M – We tell our officers not to stack tickets.

R – If someone's doing that, it's a sign of a contemptive officer. **{Not sure on word here – contemptuous, contentious?}**

DHM – What about front and back license plates?

R – That's a good pretext.

M – Indicates a license plate has been switched. You know to stop that car because you know something's wrong – unregistered, stolen, guns, etc.

J – We get to do it too on Missouri cars. Sometimes it's a stolen tag but usually it's a stolen car. We'll get more seat belt violations because we're encouraging that. You do some "selling the ticket". You tell them all the things they did but they're only getting one ticket. If you do that you'll even get a "Thanks."

C – Is it common to have more than one violation?

R – Not so common, but to de-escalate, I'd explain this was a problem area – that will help.

M – We do it to get drug people to talk – tell them all the violations we could get them on.

S – In a typical stop, any patterns that alert you that it is atypical after all?

M – Two classic reasons – for a traffic stop it is if there are any furtive movements, "okay, he has a gun" or you see the anger from the back of the car.

S – So you approach in a different manner, do you call for back-up?

R – If they get out of the car and start back, (drunks will get out) anything that throws off the routine. Reaching into the glove box and reaching between legs under the seat are two different things.

J – I'll project where people should stop, but if they take longer than the normal time to stop, that throws off the routine. You're trained to project so people know where a safe place to stop is.

DHM – If someone did that, would you mention that they didn't stop?

J – You might just know why they didn't, like they've been drinking. If you say something, it's you playing the parent role and you being contemptive **{word??}** cop so you don't do that.

S – Do you see a variation in discretion?

R – As manager you like discretion, so you've got to write a ticket on every stop – but you don't want to have to write a ticket for the guy in a snow storm.

DHM – So for a non-typical stop, you might call for back up, how often does another officer just stop without being called?

M – It depends on the area. Like a hot area, you make a stop then another officer should stop. If we hear a change in tone and you're in a target area, officers will come.

DHM – At night would other officers stop?

R – More staffing, urban area, officers and supervisors will stop but up north you wouldn't stop. North of the river, up north it is all white. Urban poor white, black would have different perception of why three cars stop.

J – A typical stop, if it is a car stop that becomes a vehicle check – that tells other officers to stop, particularly at night.

JP – Do you have two man cars?

J – No.

M – Depends on the zone – south, not but urban core, 2 officers.

R – Generally true.

S – Does a two man car, escalate or deescalate?

R – Depends on the officers.

DHM – What about driver behavior and two cops?

R – In past, typically one officer.

DHM – What about two cars?

R – The cover officer is trained to stand back behind car at the corner just watching. The person in the car will probably not know he is even there. Sometimes they get startled to realize someone is back there when they see the officer.

M – One thing about two person crews – we had a complaint from a black, female because the officers took too long to write a ticket. They were in the car joking around and her perception was that they were laughing at her, but really the officers were just joking around waiting for information to come back.

R – You forget what its like to get stopped. There are a number of things that can cause misperceptions.

C – Young versus old, men versus women?

M – Depends on the area. If it is a high crime area, you get defensiveness. In other areas, it's "Hi, officer."

J – No difference male or female. Sometimes girls are the worst. Maybe people in their 50's and 60's are mellower. It seems like in the last 17 years that people give officers more of a hard time. It's surprising that a soccer mom will get upset at being stopped because her two year old is standing up in the car.

S – What do you key into?

M – Cold attitude.

S – What about talking on a cell phone?

M – They sometimes want to document the stop. For example, their mom is on the phone.

R – If no explanation, then I write a ticket or if they're just not paying attention.

J – Of if they flat out lie. Twenty mph over and then they argue – but it's so obvious. Maybe I'd just give a warning if they say they weren't paying attention.

R – If they are argumentative or confrontational.

S – Are there differences in the metro-area?

R – There is no limitation on officers being able to work either side of the state line.

S – What about racial profiling?

J – We collect data voluntarily.

R – Missouri mandates traffic stops but we gather information on all.

J – Metro area procedures are going to be the same. The differences in department would be volume.

JP – In Missouri mandated to get certain variables, but data collected differently.

S – So when collecting data, how do officers determine race?

R – Just observation only.

J – You get complaints when officers ask.

R – May get a few that you just don't know.

DHM – Do you have any contact with people after a stop?

M – In one instance, two months ago, when traffic officer stopped an older white guy, the guy comes back and tries to run over the officer.

J – On complaints, there's a perception there, the person is pretty upset. You then go back and look at the video tape. She runs a stop sign, she's going off, she said, "see what he did?" and the officer didn't do anything. All stops are taped now. We don't get a lot of complaints and substantive complaints are rare.

M – Out of 300 complaints only 16 are substantiated.

J – 105,000 stops with racial data.

S – So only gather full range of information on traffic stops?

J – 90,000 first year, 105,000 now.

R – Reduction in tickets could be due to depolicing activity or to data collection.

C – Are African-Americans more indignant?

R – Its equal opportunity. Where there's more wealth, you get more indignant people. In the urban core, they are so used to being stopped. They put hands on steering wheel. When I was stopped not long ago, I was scared.

M – On camera issues, when accused of brutality, the video has saved officers.

S – Do people like the videos?

J – The resistance if going down.

R – When you turn on lights, it turns on. You have to turn on audio though. It runs for ten minutes.

J – It comes on automatically unless there are mechanical problems. We're working on getting the microphones to turn on automatically as well.

S – Anything else?

R – The police culture is authoritative. If a person doesn't confront that then at the age of 21 or 23, then they'll only last 3 years.

JP – I've heard that some cities are now giving out their cards.

M – From the citizen's perspective, they're driving along and all of a sudden, these lights go on. The officer sees something wrong and reacts. Instantly you have two different perspectives.

J – You know you're a great driver so you can't imagine why you were stopped.

R – You have a situation where the person describes the officer as rude but it sounds like the officer was just being businesslike.

J – That's very common.

JP – In the past two years, we collected data with scantrons but problems with filling out the bubble sheets. We're switching to palm pilots and auto uploads.

All you can do at the state level is compare to the Census. We're trying to come up with a cheaper way of coming up with data. We're working with Kim Novak, a criminal justice person at UMKC.

R – What are the benchmarks? There are so many different variables. If hit rates on searches on minorities and whites are equal then we're okay.

End.