



Protecting the Public from Law Enforcement Impersonators

By Rachel Fretz

Police impersonators not only endanger civilians—sometimes gravely—but they also erode the often hard-earned trust in law enforcement you work diligently to establish and maintain. In short, fake cops diminish real cops' ability to protect and serve.

With this crime seemingly on the rise, it's crucial to educate your community on the key police impersonation indicators, both for the purpose of self-protection and to avoid undue anxiety and resistance should there be need for contact with legitimate officers.

Below, Street Survival Seminar Instructor Betsy Branter-Smith discusses what civilians can do to protect themselves, while not obstructing your job. Sharing these tips in your community will help keep citizens safe while making your job ultimately easier.

If this is a traffic stop situation:

- Make sure it is a marked unit with a realistic looking light bar or built-in lights (not a temporary “Kojak light”). Make sure they are the appropriate color (very few jurisdictions allow blue lights for their police cars; most must be red). If it's **NOT** a marked unit, the take-down lights should be built-in and somewhat uniform front and back.
- Try to stop in a well-lit area. Don't pull into a remote parking lot or somewhere secluded.
- If possible, turn on your flashers but don't turn off your car.
- **DO NOT** get out of the vehicle to meet the approaching officer (real cops don't like that anyway).
- Lock your door.
- Look for a uniform, raid jacket, body armor, radio, flashlight (at night). Watch their demeanor; do they seem more nervous than you? Are they watching you or are they distracted (perhaps looking to see if the “real” cops are going to drive by)?
- Plainclothes officers rarely make traffic stops without numerous identifying pieces of clothing and equipment.
- Pay attention to what they ask. They should first ask for driver's license, proof of insurance, etc. **MOST** will tell you the violation or reason for the stop right away.
- If they immediately tell you to get out of the car without any preliminary questions (and you've not committed a felony), be suspicious. Explain to the

“officer” that you are unsure about the situation and you’d like a minute to verify his/her identity. **KEEP YOUR HANDS WHERE THE OFFICER CAN SEE THEM**; be polite as you question them, **MAKE NO SUDDEN OR SUSPICIOUS MOVEMENTS**. Watch their reaction to you.

- Ask them where they work and would they mind if you called their dispatch (not their boss or their office) center to confirm their identity.
- **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS**. If they don’t seem to be real cops, they probably aren’t. Keep your cell phone handy.

If they come to your home or business:

- **NEVER** let them in if you are not 100% sure of their identity.
- Ask to see not just a badge, but a photo ID card and a commission card (**NEVER** take a business card as ID). Real cops will not mind this.
- Ask them what they need to see you about.
- Ask them if you can call their dispatch center or headquarters to confirm before you let them in.
- **BE POLITE** but firm; if you suspect something is not right, call 911 immediately.
- Generally, real cops either wear a full uniform or none at all, be wary of people in “**partial**” uniform (*i.e.: a uniform shirt with jeans or a uniform shirt with a badge but no patches or nametag*). If they are in uniform, look for long hair in men, excessive facial hair, piercings, etc...this is usually not allowed.
- If they are unprofessional or overly dramatic or excitable, they may not be legitimate.
- If they threaten you (“let us in or we’re kicking down the door!”) and you have not committed a forcible felony, lock the door and call 911 immediately.