



# Citizen expectations of police traffic stop behavior

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**Abstract** *The most frequent type of citizen complaint filed against police officers involves how the officer uses interpersonal communication. The most common context of police-citizen contact is the traffic stop, and verbal judo is the most widely used police training program in interpersonal communication intended to reduce citizen complaints and improve citizen cooperation. However, does verbal judo meet citizen expectations for appropriate traffic stop behavior? In order to determine what communication behaviors citizens view as appropriate during traffic stops, a sample of 245 college students were surveyed about their preferences with regard to the officers' behavior. The responses of the sample support the use of verbal judo techniques during routine traffic stops. The responses also demonstrated support for the theory of procedural justice.*

In this modern era of community-oriented policing, it is important for law enforcement agencies to improve their relationships with the public and avoid citizen complaints. Research has demonstrated that a large portion of citizen complaints against police officers involve citizen perceptions of verbal disrespect. Reiss (1971) was one of the first to review citizen complaints against police officers, examining complaints filed in Boston, Chicago, and the District of Columbia. He found that more than 60 percent of these complaints dealt with an allegation of inappropriate verbal conduct by an officer. However, rather than focusing on the specific words officers had said, most of these complaints centered on how the officers had spoken words to citizens. The complaints often alleged that the officers had "talked down to" the citizen or otherwise acted in an ambiguously "rude" manner, referring more to non-verbal communication and voice inflection (Reiss, 1971).

Other studies in Philadelphia (Hudson, 1970), Washington State (Dugan and Breda, 1991), St Louis (Wagner and Decker, 1993), and Florida (Lersch, 1998) consistently found similar results – that the most common type of citizen complaint against police officers involves a situation where a citizen believes that a police officer spoke to him/her in a disrespectful manner or tone. This emphasis on the importance of how officers verbally communicate with citizens is theoretically supported by the procedural social justice model (Tyler *et al.*, 1997).

The theory of procedural social justice suggests that people care as much (or more) about the fairness of government processes as they do about the outcomes of those processes. As a result, citizens are as equally concerned with how they are treated by the criminal justice system as they are with the outcomes of the criminal justice process (Tyler, 2001a, b; Tyler *et al.*, 1997). In order for citizens to have trust in the official outcomes of the criminal justice process, they must believe that the whole process treated them fairly.

The theory of procedural justice suggests that public trust and confidence in the criminal justice system is linked to two issues. The first is whether or not people think



the agents of the criminal justice system make their decisions fairly. The second issue is the manner in which people perceive they were treated by the legal agents with whom they dealt. The citizen's perception of the second issue has been found to have a direct relationship with the perceptions of the first issue (Tyler *et al.*, 1997). If people do not believe that they were treated with dignity and respect by an agent of the criminal justice system, they are far less likely to perceive any part of the criminal justice system as fair or legitimate.

Tyler (2001a) surveyed citizens in a number of neighborhoods in Chicago, Oakland, and Los Angeles about their compliance with the law and their attitudes towards the police. He found that citizens rarely based their opinions of the police on the effectiveness of the police at solving crimes. Rather, citizens indicated that they were most strongly influenced by their perceptions of how the police treated people. The more a citizen believed that the police treat people with dignity and fairness the more likely the citizen was to have a positive attitude about the whole criminal justice system. Sex, race, and socioeconomic status had no significant impact on this result; the desire for procedural justice appeared to be equally shared across all subgroups of the population (Tyler, 2001a).

Another consequence of perceiving that one was treated fairly, rationally, and objectively by the police is compliance with the law. Tyler's (2001a) surveys indicated that the more a person perceived that he or she had been treated fairly by the police, the more motivated the person was to defer to the law and refrain from illegal behavior. Therefore, fostering respect for the criminal justice system through the dignified treatment of citizens is an effective means of achieving social control and compliance with the law. Although the threat of sanctions also influences compliance with the law, the magnitude of that influence is small. Perceptions that the police fail to demonstrate appropriate conduct when dealing with the public can lead to a lack of trust and confidence in the police, increased willingness to break the law, an unwillingness to assist the police, and a loss of police legitimacy in society (Tyler, 2001a, b, 2002).

Observational studies of police-citizen encounters have confirmed Tyler's work. Mastrofski *et al.* (1996, 2002), and McCluskey *et al.* (2000) found that citizen compliance with a request from a police officer occurred most successfully under circumstances where the citizen believed that the officer's request had legitimacy and was delivered with respect. Paternoster *et al.* (1997) found that when domestic batterers perceived that they had been treated with dignity by their arresting officers, the batterers were less likely to engage in another incident of domestic abuse than if they had perceived they had been treated unfairly.

In surveys and focus groups of drivers, Smith *et al.* (2003) found that both African Americans and whites primarily based their trust in the police on whether or not they, or a family member, had experienced a negative encounter with an officer. For the African-American respondents, disrespectful police treatment could even undermine trust in the entire criminal justice system or all branches of government (Smith *et al.*, 2003). Consequently, citizens who feel that they were treated fairly and respectfully by a police officer may be less likely to file a complaint, more motivated to defer to the law in the future, and develop a more trusting view of the police. Citizens who perceive that they were treated in a disrespectful and unfair manner are less likely to comply with the law and assist the police while being more likely to file a citizen complaint and distrust the police.

Therefore, with the importance of respectful demeanor by police officers now established, it is necessary to develop a definition of what the public considers “respectful” and “appropriate” interpersonal communication for police officers. An important first step in achieving the goal of better community relations is to determine exactly what the public expects from police officers during common types of police-citizen contact. The most frequently occurring police-citizen contact is a vehicle stop for a violation of the traffic law. In a survey of Texas residents, Hoover *et al.* (1998) found that 40.8 percent of the respondents had experienced being stopped for a traffic violation in the last year. Using data from a national survey, Langan *et al.* (2001) estimated that traffic stops made up 52 percent of all police-citizen contacts in the USA in 1999. In both studies traffic stops were the most frequently occurring type of police-citizen interaction.

In order to provide proper procedural justice to citizens during traffic stops, it is necessary to determine what the public perceives as appropriate behavior during these encounters. What does the motoring public perceive as fair and respectful behavior when they are pulled over for a traffic violation? Are the perceptions of all citizens generally the same or are there variations by age, race, and gender with regard to their expectations? Do these expectations fit the current police traffic stop practices in use? These are the questions the present study seeks to address.

The most consistent set of interpersonal communication techniques taught to police officers in the USA is a system called verbal judo. Developed by Dr George Thompson through his combined experiences as both a police officer and professor of English, this training system focuses on using pre-determined steps, scripted phrases, responses that deflect insults, showing of empathy, and gaining compliance through personal appeals (Thompson and Jenkins, 1993).

For interpersonal communication during routine traffic stop encounters verbal judo uses the following nine-step process:

- (1) Greeting the citizen.
- (2) Introduction of the officer and the officer’s department.
- (3) Explanation of the reason for the stop.
- (4) Allowing the citizen to offer justification for the violation.
- (5) Request of license documentation and cooperation.
- (6) Clarification of details.
- (7) Decision on enforcement action.
- (8) Decision on whether or not to conduct a search.
- (9) Explanation of citizen’s option and conclusion of the stop (Thompson and Jenkins, 1993, pp. 141-3).

During all of the verbal interactions that take place during these nine steps, officers are taught to demonstrate empathy, deflect insults or excuses in a professional manner, and allow the citizen to save face while gaining the citizen’s compliance. The officer’s demeanor is to remain friendly, yet professional at all times (Thompson and Jenkins, 1993). Although verbal judo is now taught in most police academies across the USA (Bradstreet, 1993; Thompson and Jenkins, 1993), does it really meet the expectations of citizens for procedural justice during traffic stops? In order to test the tenets of verbal

judo against citizen expectations of what is fair and respectful behavior, a survey was conducted of young adults to determine their perceptions of some of the elements of verbal judo.

### Methodology

A questionnaire was created to determine citizen preferences in police officer demeanor, actions, and specific verbal behaviors during traffic stops. Besides collecting basic demographic data on the respondent, the questionnaire asked the test subject to respond to the following 11 statements with responses recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree:"

- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would prefer that the officer introduce him or herself and his or her department before explaining why I was stopped.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would be offended if the officer did not let me explain my reason for committing the violation.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, it is important that the officer empathize with my excuse even if I still end up getting a ticket.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would be offended if the officer called me by my first name.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would be offended if the officer smiled and spoke in a friendly manner.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would be offended if the officer did not smile and spoke in an unemotional tone.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would be offended if the officer raised his or her voice and spoke in an angry tone.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would be offended if the officer remained silent while filling out my traffic ticket.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would be offended if the officer tried to make small talk with me while filling out my traffic ticket.
- When stopped for a traffic violation, I would be offended if the officer did not explain my options for handling the ticket (such as driving school or how to go to court).
- When stopped for a traffic violation, how the officer acts matters more to me than whether or not I receive a ticket.

The questionnaire was given to a sample of 245 undergraduate students at a large university in west-central Indiana. The sample was 53 percent male ( $n = 130$ ) and 47 percent female ( $n = 115$ ). The racial composition of the sample was 74 percent white ( $n = 181$ ), 18 percent African-American ( $n = 44$ ), 5 percent Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 12$ ), 2 percent Asian ( $n = 5$ ), and 1 percent ( $n = 3$ ) reporting "other." Although the sample ranged in age from 18 to 44, the majority of the respondents were relatively young. A total of 76 percent of the sample was under age 23 ( $n = 186$ ), with a mean of 21 and a mode of 19.

The demographic composition of this sample is rather similar to the demographics of drivers stopped by the police for traffic violations. According to a national survey of drivers by Langan *et al.* (2001), it is estimated that nationally 60 percent of drivers

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stopped by the police are male and approximately 40 percent are female. Langan *et al.* estimated the racial composition of those stopped by the police was 77 percent white, 12 percent African-American, 8 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 3 percent other. Langan's survey also found that drivers stopped by the police also were very young, with those under the age of 20 being four times more likely to be stopped than those over age 50 (Langan *et al.*, 2001).

Consistent with Langan's findings, a large number of the respondents had personal experience with being stopped for a traffic violation. A total of 84 percent of the sample ( $n = 206$ ) reported having been stopped by the police for a traffic violation in the past. Of these 206 respondents, 64 percent ( $n = 131$ ) reported having been issued a traffic citation. These large percentages indicate that the majority of the sample had already gained personal experience upon which to draw in determining their preferences for police behaviors during traffic stops. However, for the 39 respondents who had not yet experienced being pulled over by the police, it is assumed that they too hold their own expectations about how they would like to be treated.

The questionnaire then asked each subject to respond to 11 statements about traffic stop characteristics consistent with the steps and tenets of verbal judo. As revealed in Table I, the respondents were asked to demonstrate their preferences for these characteristics by using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The results showed a general consensus among the respondents for what they perceive to be appropriate police behavior during traffic stops.

## Results

As indicated in Table I, the majority of the respondents approved of the tenets of verbal judo. A total of 72 percent of the respondents ( $n = 176$ ) indicated that they preferred that the officer begin the stop with an introduction, indicating strong support for the second step in the verbal judo traffic stop procedure; 74 percent of the respondents ( $n = 181$ ) indicated that they would be offended if not allowed to explain their reason for committing their violation, suggesting support for the fourth step in the verbal judo procedure; 68 percent of the respondents ( $n = 167$ ) indicated that it was important that the officer empathize with their excuse even if they still ended up getting a ticket. This result shows the importance of officer empathy (a major focus in verbal judo) and lends support to the theory of procedural justice. Even if the outcome is still a ticket, it is important that they feel that the officer cared.

A total of 63 percent of the respondents ( $n = 182$ ) indicated that they would be offended if the officer addressed them by their first name. Although not as significant a response as those to the questions above, a majority still indicated a clear preference for avoiding the use of first names by police officers during formal traffic stops.

Not surprisingly, 95 percent of the respondents ( $n = 233$ ) indicated that they would not be offended if the officer smiled and spoke in a friendly manner. However, 83 percent of the respondents ( $n = 203$ ) still indicated that they would not be offended if the officer did not smile and spoke in an unemotional tone. Although not as preferable as a friendly demeanor, a professional yet unemotional demeanor meets the respondents' expectations of acceptable police behavior. In contrast, only 1 percent of the respondents ( $n = 3$ ) indicated that they would not be offended if the officer talked loudly and spoke in an angry manner. These results support the directives of the verbal judo method to remain courteous and professional at all times.

**Table I.**  
Questionnaire items and  
response percentages

Questions	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1. When stopped for a traffic violation I would prefer that the officer introduce himself/herself and department before explaining why I was stopped	54	18	14	12	2
2. When stopped for a traffic violation I would be offended if the officer did not let me explain my reason for committing the violation	58	16	11	10	5
3. When stopped for a traffic violation it is important that the officer empathize with my excuse even if I still end up getting a ticket	50	18	16	16	0
4. When stopped for a traffic violation I would be offended if the officer called me by my first name	51	12	5	22	10
5. When stopped for a traffic violation I would be offended if the officer smiled and spoke in a friendly manner	0	5	0	20	75
6. When stopped for a traffic violation I would be offended if the officer did not smile and spoke in an unemotional manner	3	11	1	22	63
7. When stopped for a traffic violation I would be offended if the officer raised his/her voice and spoke in an angry manner	65	18	16	1	0
8. If the officer remained silent while filling out my traffic ticket I would be offended	51	19	7	10	13
9. If the officer tried to make small talk with me while filling out my traffic ticket I would be offended	16	30	2	25	27
10. I would be offended if the officer did not explain my options for handling the ticket, such as attending driving school or how to go to court	67	23	7	2	1
11. When stopped for a traffic violation, how the officer acts matters more to me than whether or not I receive a ticket	49	20	11	16	4

The results appeared somewhat contradictory when determining how the officer should behave while writing out the traffic ticket. A total of 75 percent of the respondents ( $n = 184$ ) indicated that they would be offended if the officer remained silent while filling out the traffic ticket. While this suggests a preference for human interaction during an emotionally awkward situation, 47 percent of the respondents ( $n = 115$ ) indicated that they would be offended if the officer attempted to make small talk while completing the ticket. Although it appears as though the respondents want some sort of verbal interaction while the officer fills out the ticket, they seem torn as to what type of verbal interaction they expect.

A total of 90 percent of the respondents ( $n = 221$ ) indicated that they would be offended if the officer did not explain their options for how to handle their traffic ticket, such as going to driving school or how to go to court. This clearly demonstrates that the respondents care greatly about their rights and options. It also indicates significant support for the ninth step of the verbal judo traffic stop procedure.

A total of 69 percent of the respondents ( $n = 169$ ) agreed that how the officer acts during a traffic stop is more important than whether or not they receive a ticket; 11 percent ( $n = 27$ ) were unsure and only 20 percent ( $n = 49$ ) did not think that the officer's behaviors were more important than the enforcement outcome. This continues to lend support for the importance of procedural justice to motorists during traffic stops. How the officer behaves – the procedure – may be at least as important as the outcome of the stop.

These survey responses were evaluated for possible statistically significant multivariate relationships with the independent variables of age, sex, and race. A linear regression analysis was conducted for each survey question. As indicated in Table II, the only significant relationship to age involved whether or not the respondent had been stopped before. As one would expect with increased life experiences, the older the respondent the more likely the respondent was to have experienced being stopped by the police for a traffic violation. Sex also had a significant relationship with ever having been stopped and ticketed. Consistent with Langan *et al.*'s (2001) findings, males were more likely to report having been stopped (92 percent) and ticketed

	Age	Beta Sex	Race	R-square
Ever been stopped?	0.198**	0.199**	-0.062	0.108
Ever been ticketed?	0.013	0.204**	0.037	0.042
Prefer officer introduction	0.011	-0.213**	0.060	0.051
Want to be able to explain my reasons	-0.055	-0.111	-0.081	0.020
Want officer to empathize with me	-0.038	-0.335***	-0.042	0.117
Want officer to use my first name	-0.035	0.052	0.193**	0.041
Offended by smile and friendliness	0.008	-0.070	-0.125	0.019
Offended by cool and unemotional	0.061	-0.150*	-0.105	0.033
Offended by loud and angry	-0.016	-0.028	0.082	0.009
Offended by silence while writing ticket	0.005	-0.030	0.022	0.001
Offended by small talk while writing	-0.017	0.128	-0.048	0.019
Want officer to explain my options	-0.081	0.028	-0.064	0.008
Officer behavior more important than ticket	0.030	-0.041	-0.166*	0.030

Notes: Significance levels noted by: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table II.**  
Multivariate regression analysis

(65 percent) than females (74 percent stopped and 45 percent ticketed). No significant differences existed by race for who had been stopped and ticketed.

Table II reveals that men and women were significantly different in relation to preferences for an introduction, display of empathy, and a cool unemotional demeanor. Whether or not the officer made an introduction at the beginning of the traffic stop was important to both sexes, but more important to the female respondents. A total of 83 percent of the women ( $n = 96$ ) preferred to have the officer begin with an introduction while only 63 percent of the men ( $n = 82$ ) indicated that they felt this way. Women were more responsive than men with regard to the officer showing empathy; 84 percent of the women ( $n = 97$ ) also thought it was important that the officer empathize with their excuse even if they still received a ticket while only 52 percent of the men ( $n = 68$ ) agreed.

The female respondents also had stronger opinions about whether or not they would be offended if the officer presented a cool, unemotional demeanor. While only 13 percent of the males ( $n = 17$ ) reported that they would be offended if the officer presented an unemotional demeanor, 23 percent of the females ( $n = 27$ ) indicated that they would be offended. Although the women were significantly more likely to be unhappy with an unemotional demeanor, the majority of all respondents (82 percent) indicated that they would not be offended by an unemotional demeanor.

As indicated in Table II, significant race differences were also revealed in relation to use of the first name and overall importance of the officer's behavior. Because the sample contained only 63 minority respondents that were classified across four race groups (African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, other), all non-white race categories were collapsed and grouped together in a dummy variable for race (white/non-white). Non-whites appeared to be significantly more concerned than whites about being addressed by their first name. While 70 percent of the white respondents ( $n = 127$ ) indicated that they would be offended by being addressed by their first name, 92 percent of non-whites ( $n = 58$ ) indicated that they would be offended by the use of their first name. All races found the use of their first names as offensive, yet non-whites felt the strongest about this issue.

It also appears that procedural justice during traffic stops is also of greater importance to non-whites. All races found the officer's behavior extremely important, but while 57 percent of whites ( $n = 104$ ) thought the officer's behavior was more important than whether or not they received a ticket, far more non-whites (89 percent) felt that the officer's demeanor was more important than the outcome.

## Discussion

This survey sought to determine what preferences citizens have for police officer behavior during the most common of all police-citizen contacts – the traffic stop. It attempted to evaluate citizen reactions to some of the general and specific aspects of verbal judo, the interpersonal communication system taught most often to police officers in the USA (Bradstreet, 1993; Thompson and Jenkins, 1993). Finally, it sought to measure the importance of procedural justice during traffic stops. It appears to have accomplished all three of these goals.

This survey demonstrated that people, especially young adults, share fairly consistent preferences for what they expect in police officer behavior during traffic stops. They prefer that the officer introduce him or herself and state his or her

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department. They prefer that the officer allow them to explain their reason for committing the violation and that the officer empathizes with their excuse even if a ticket is still issued. They prefer that the officer smile and use a friendly tone and are not offended by a professional yet unemotional demeanor. They prefer that the officer explain their options for how best to officially handle their traffic ticket.

The responses also indicate that they do not appreciate an officer who calls them by their first name or who speaks in a harsh, angry tone. They do not appreciate a pregnant silence while the officer is writing out the ticket but there is no clear indication of what type of verbal interaction they want or expect from the officer during this phase of the stop. Most importantly, the responses demonstrated that specifics about how the officer behaves during a traffic stop are important to citizens and are sometimes times considered more important than the official enforcement outcome of the stop.

Although most of the respondents wanted the officer to start with a formal introduction and display empathy for their excuses, women were more concerned than men about these specific elements. Additionally, non-whites demonstrated a stronger aversion to being addressed by their first name and stronger perceptions that the justice of the procedure is more important than the enforcement outcome of the stop. No significant age variation in responses to officer behaviors was found.

These findings may not be easily generalized to older citizens since this sample was over represented by young adults. There also is no way of knowing if these results are geographically specific or shared by those in other parts of the nation. Further study with larger and more diverse samples would be required before these findings could be generalized to all drivers in the USA. Nevertheless, this study has revealed some interesting results that should be taken into consideration in police practice.

The findings here generally support the basic tenets of the verbal judo traffic stop procedure and suggest important variations by race and sex that could be incorporated into future police training. The overall emphasis of verbal judo involves presenting a professional demeanor and demonstrating empathy (Thompson and Jenkins, 1993). The responses in this study indicate that professionalism and empathy are important to citizens during traffic stops. In fact the majority of the respondents were even willing to put up with a cool, unemotional officer demeanor as long as the officer still remained professional.

Steps two, four, and nine of the verbal judo traffic stop procedure were also supported here. The respondents indicated that citizens prefer beginning the traffic stop with a greeting and an introduction by the officer. Citizens want an opportunity to explain their reasons for why they committed their violation and they expect the officer to demonstrate at least some empathy for their situation regardless of the outcome. After receiving a ticket, they also expect the officer to explain their options for handling the official charge rather than simply leaving them hanging. It appears that much of the verbal judo technique is generally consistent with what citizens expect and prefer from the police during traffic stops. Therefore, police agencies should be encouraged to continue training their officers in the use of verbal judo during traffic stops.

Police officers should also be cautioned to avoid addressing citizens, especially members of minority groups, by their first name. It appears clear that most of the respondents found this either disrespectful or unprofessional. Therefore officers should

be encouraged to use the citizen's last name with the appropriate "Mr" or "Ms" prefix, or perhaps use the traditional "sir" or "ma'am" instead. Officers should also be warned to avoid awkward silence or small talk while filling out the traffic citation in the citizen's presence. One possible solution to the situation may be for the officer to leave the citizen's immediate presence and return to the patrol vehicle to accomplish this task. This may alleviate the verbally awkward and uncomfortable situation.

The present study also provided continued support for the importance of procedural justice. The majority of the respondents indicated that how the officer behaved during the traffic stop was more important than the outcome. The respondents also indicated that they wanted the officer to listen to their excuse and show empathy even if they still ended up getting a ticket! They wanted to be assured that the officer made his or her enforcement decision fairly and only after hearing all of the relevant facts. This result was consistent with the previous literature on procedural justice.

Procedural justice suggests that people care as much (or more) about the fairness of government processes as they do about the outcomes of those processes. As a result, citizens are as equally concerned with how they are treated by the criminal justice system as they are with the outcomes of the criminal justice process. For citizens to have trust in the official outcomes of the criminal justice process, they must believe that the whole process treated them fairly (Tyler, 2001a, b; Tyler *et al.*, 1997). This attitude was clear in the responses of the sample surveyed here. The responses were also consistent with the earlier research on citizen complaints that found citizens care about the officer's demeanor and tone as much as they do the actual words the officer uses (Reiss, 1971).

### **Conclusion**

The process by which the law is enforced is very important to citizens. When the process is perceived as unfair, it can result in a formal citizen complaint being filed, a lack of willingness to comply with the law or, at the very least, a tarnished view of the police. With regard to the enforcement of traffic laws, part of this process of procedural fairness involves the influence of the police officer's interpersonal communication skills. Citizens view discourtesy or verbal harassment as evidence of an unjust system, and an unjust system cannot be perceived as producing just outcomes (Tyler *et al.*, 1997).

One way to avoid citizen complaints and appearances of being unjust that may result from traffic stops is to train officers how to communicate to citizens in a manner that is consistent with the citizens' expectations and preferences. The use of verbal judo techniques during traffic stop situations appears to meet the expectations and preferences of citizens. Verbal judo should be taught to all law enforcement officers, old and new, and police agencies should encourage its use on all routine traffic stops. Patrol officers should also be educated about how important procedural justice is to achieving citizen support, citizen deference to the law, and avoiding citizen complaints. By ensuring that citizens perceive the actions of police officers as fair and respectful, law enforcement agencies may be able to reduce the number of citizen complaints they receive and bolster their support from the community.

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