



POLICEUSA

“SIGHT OF A POLICE CAR” DRIVER  
PANIC: A DEADLY DISORDER



## PATROL UNIT TERRORS

The sight of a police vehicle is often enough to invoke some kind of an immediate, or startle, response on the part of a passing motorist.

This may be mild, accompanied or followed by nothing more than a quick glance to the speedometer and/or a gentle or momentary application of the brake.

At the other extreme, the sight of a police vehicle may lead to hard application of the brake and concurrent steering action. Drivers may respond in this manner because they do not want to get tickets for a moving violation.

## EMERGENCY LIGHTS

Drivers may respond with a greater sense of urgency when the sighted police vehicle also has its emergency lights activated. Several cases have been documented among the 152 cases reviewed where a driver 'panicked' at the sight of a police car, braked hard, suddenly lost control of the vehicle, and crashed into the police car.

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**Some of the tasks performed that may require a police vehicle to be either parked on the side of a road, or be stopped or moving in the road are:**

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- (i) *Enforcement of legal speed limit for that specific section of the road, during which overhead/emergency lights may not be activated;*

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  - (ii) *A stop behind a vehicle that has been pulled over for a speed and/or other traffic infraction, in which case police procedures may require that the police vehicle have the overhead emergency lights activated;*

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  - (iii) *A stop behind a vehicle that has been pulled over on a shoulder, or has stopped in the middle of a traffic lane because of malfunction or breakdown, in which case police procedures may require that emergency lights be activated;*

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  - (iv) *A stop in the middle of an active traffic lane or in an exit lane in order to redirect traffic because of lane closure or presence of a construction or road crew; police procedures require that emergency lights be activated,*

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  - (v) *A stop in the middle of an active traffic lane or exit lane to manage a post-crash situation where other vehicles, debris, tow trucks and/or other emergency vehicles may be in the road; police procedures require that emergency lights be activated.*

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  - (vi) *Moving slowly behind a road crew transport in an active traffic lane in order to provide protection to the crew.*
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In at least one case in the files reviewed, a driver even resorted to the use of the emergency brake!

It is quite apparent that, under current practice, activated emergency lights on police vehicles are used to communicate several different police activities to other vehicular traffic. In some cases the police vehicle is moving. In other cases the police vehicle is stopped.

However, the message being conveyed in each case may be the same, namely, **a warning of an atypical traffic situation requiring caution on the part of all approaching motorists.**

Unfortunately, the message may not always be received, or acted upon correctly by those for whom it is intended.

FACTORS THAT MAY  
PREDISPOSE DRIVERS TO PANIC  
AT THE SIGHT OF A POLICE CAR

1. Driver age: May be relevant to cognitive conspicuity, or driving experience.
2. Driver gender: May be relevant to cognitive conspicuity
3. Driver on drugs/medication/DUI: Has well documented relevance to driver performance.
4. Driver contributing factors: Factors that may affect driver performance, e.g. sleepy, drowsy, or distracted by a cell phone or child in the back seat, etc., distractions inside or outside the vehicle as reported by driver of the POV.
5. Driver valid license: Those not in possession of a valid driver's license may be more prone to reckless driving behavior, trying to elude a police vehicle.
6. Driver citations (last 5 yrs): Not always available, this may be indicative of drivers with poor driving habits and behavior, and habitual reckless drivers.
7. Driver restraints used?: Not always available, this data may be indicative of drivers with good and poor risk taking behavior.