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Patrol Essentials: High Risk Traffic Stops

A Pocket-Reference Guide for Patrol Officers

A POCKET-REFERENCE GUIDE FOR PATROL OFFICERS

This free preview contains the complete introduction, Foreword, and How to Use this Manual, plus the full Section 1 (Identifying a High-Risk Stop) from the 53-page manual.

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About This Free Preview

This preview gives you the complete opening of **Patrol Essentials: High Risk Traffic Stops** — the Foreword and How to Use this Manual, plus the full first section, *Identifying a High-Risk Stop*. You'll see the manual's real format: the Quick-Reference card that opens each section, the case-law callouts, officer notes, red-line warnings, and pitfalls that make the full manual a fast, field-ready reference. If this preview helps, the full 51-page manual continues with the sections listed on the closing page.

Foreword

The first manual in the Patrol Essentials series — *Stop, Search & Detention* — covered the legal framework of the patrol stop. That manual was about what you can lawfully do. This manual is about how to do it when the stakes are high and the margins for error are razor-thin.

There is a world of difference between a traffic stop for a broken taillight and a felony stop on a vehicle occupied by an armed robbery suspect. The legal foundations — *Mimms*, *Wilson*, *Terry* — remain the same. But when you are behind your patrol door with your weapon drawn, issuing commands to a vehicle with multiple occupants, one of whom may be reaching for a gun while you speak, the gap between knowing the case law and executing the stop safely is measured in seconds. And in those seconds, the decisions you make about where you parked, what you said, and who moved when will determine the outcome more than any legal doctrine.

We wrote this manual because high-risk stops are, by their nature, low-frequency but high-consequence events. A patrol officer may conduct thousands of routine traffic stops over a career but fewer than a dozen true felony-extraction stops. That ratio means the skills degrade between uses — and that degradation happens precisely where it is most dangerous.

This manual covers the tactical side of the vehicle stop: positioning, communication, extraction, coordination, and the legal framework that governs force decisions during elevated-risk encounters. It is a companion to the first manual, not a replacement. The first volume taught you the law. This one teaches you how to use the law as a tool while managing the tactical realities of a stop that could go kinetic at any moment.

Every section is written with the same principle: give you the information you need in the format you can actually use — on scene, under stress, with no time to waste.

These are the protocols. Run them in your head during roll call. Rehearse them with your beat partner. Because when the BOLO comes over the radio and you're the unit that spots the vehicle, you won't have time to look anything up.

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Stay sharp. Stay safe.

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How to Use This Manual

This manual is a companion to *Patrol Essentials: Stop, Search & Detention*. Together, the two manuals give you the complete patrol-stop toolkit: the first covers the legal architecture of stops, searches, and detentions; this one covers the tactical execution of elevated-risk vehicle encounters. You will get the most value by using them together — the legal manual for the rules, this manual for the moves.

Each section opens with a Quick-Reference card — a one-page summary you can scan in thirty seconds. The detailed breakdown follows, with case citations, tactical protocols, and officer notes woven throughout. If you only have time for the quick-reference, you'll still walk away with the core protocol.

Icons and callouts used throughout:

- ⚖️ **CASE LAW** — Key Supreme Court or circuit decision you should know by name. These are the cases courts cite and your reports should reference when you articulate your justification.
- 🛑 **RED LINE** — A bright-line prohibition. If you cross this, your case is compromised, an officer or bystander may be injured, or you may face civil liability.
- 💡 **OFFICER NOTE** — Practical field guidance, common-sense reminders, and lessons learned from real-world policing.
- ⚠️ **PITFALL** — A common mistake that gets good cases tossed, creates officer-safety hazards, or undermines the tactical integrity of the stop.

Disclaimer: This manual is a training and reference aid. It does not constitute legal advice, nor does it replace department policy, POST-mandated training, or guidance from your agency's legal advisor or firearms instructors. High-risk stop protocols vary between agencies — the procedures described here represent widely accepted best practices, not a substitute for your department's specific tactical doctrine. When in doubt, consult a supervisor or your department's training unit. Provisional. Verify before you rely — agency policy and your legal advisor govern.

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Section 1: Identifying a High-Risk Stop

Quick-Reference: High-Risk Stop Indicators

INDICATOR CATEGORY	EXAMPLES	ACTION TRIGGERED
Known Armed	BOLO reports firearm, caller states subject has gun, officer observes weapon	Felony-stop protocols immediately
Violent Felony Suspect	Armed robbery, carjacking, homicide, aggravated assault, kidnapping	Felony-stop protocols immediately
Officer-Observed Threat	Furtive movements consistent with weapon reach, subject reaching under seat on approach, visible weapon or holster	Escalate to high-risk protocols immediately
BOLO / APB Match	Vehicle and/or occupant matches broadcast for violent felony	Confirm match before initiating; felony stop on confirmation
Multiple Occupants + RS of Weapons	Gang unit, drug-trafficking indicators with weapons intelligence, shots-fired call vehicle	Consider felony-stop protocols; wait for backup if possible
Flight / Evasive Behavior	Vehicle fled from other units, suspect known to be combative, spike-strip deployment	Felony-stop protocols; coordinate with pursuing units
Heightened Officer-Safety Indicators	Remote location, limited backup, low-light conditions, suspect size/numbers advantage	May justify felony-style control even for lower-grade offenses

1.1 The Threshold Decision

The most important decision in any elevated-risk vehicle stop is the threshold decision: **do I treat this as a routine stop or a felony stop?** That decision, often made in seconds based on fragmentary information, dictates everything that follows — your positioning, your commands, your cover, the role of backup, and the level of force you are prepared to deploy.

Most officers default to routine-stop protocols unless there is clear and unambiguous information that the stop is high-risk. This is understandable — felony stops are demanding, resource-intensive, and disruptive to a shift. But the bias toward routine treatment is dangerous. Once you have committed to a routine

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approach and the situation goes kinetic, you are behind the curve. The suspect has already gained the initiative.

The better heuristic is this: **if you are asking yourself whether this should be a felony stop, it probably should be.** You can always de-escalate a felony stop into a routine encounter. You cannot escalate a routine stop into a felony stop once the shooting starts.

> 💡 **OFFICER NOTE**
>
> The "Would I Want My Partner to Make This Stop Alone?" Test: If you would not want a fellow officer to initiate the stop alone without cover, treat it as high-risk. This simple mental test cuts through hesitation and tactical ambiguity. If the stop requires backup and weapon-out protocols to be safe, it is a felony stop regardless of the underlying offense classification.

1.2 Reasonable Suspicion and Probable Cause in the High-Risk Context

High-risk stops do not have their own Fourth Amendment standard. The legal threshold — reasonable suspicion or probable cause — is the same as for any other stop. What changes is the totality of circumstances that justify an elevated level of force and control during the stop.

Reasonable Suspicion for an Investigative High-Risk Stop

You may initiate a high-risk stop on reasonable suspicion alone if the circumstances reasonably suggest the occupants are armed and dangerous. The investigative detention framework from *Terry v. Ohio* applies — but the safety measures (drawn weapons, commands, handcuffing, multi-officer coordination) are justified by the specific and articulable facts that the stop involves an armed or dangerous subject.

> ⚖️ **CASE LAW**
>
> United States v. Hensley, 469 U.S. 221 (1985): Officers may conduct a Terry stop based on a wanted flyer or BOLO issued by another department, provided the originating department had reasonable suspicion. If the flyer was based on reasonable suspicion, the stopping officers may rely on it even if they do not personally know the underlying facts.

Probable Cause for an Arrest-Based High-Risk Stop

If you have probable cause to arrest an occupant before the stop (e.g., a confirmed felony warrant, or PC developed during a prior encounter), the stop may be treated as a custodial arrest from the outset. The high-risk extraction protocols in this manual apply with full force.

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Officer Safety as an Independent Justification

Officer safety justifies elevated control measures during a lawful stop — regardless of whether the underlying offense is a felony or misdemeanor. The key is articulation: the measures taken must be proportional to the threat reasonably perceived.

> ⚖️ **CASE LAW**
>
> Arizona v. Johnson, 555 U.S. 323 (2009): During a lawful traffic stop, an officer may conduct a pat-down of any occupant if the officer has reasonable suspicion that the occupant is armed and dangerous. The Court recognized that traffic stops are "especially fraught with danger to police officers" and that officer safety is a "legitimate and weighty" interest.

> 💡 **OFFICER NOTE**
>
> Articulation for Non-Felony High-Risk Stops: If you use felony-stop protocols for a stop that does not involve a known violent felony, your report must articulate why officer safety required elevated measures. Example: "Although the stop was for a misdemeanor warrant, I initiated felony-stop protocols because (1) the warrant was for domestic violence with a weapons enhancement, (2) dispatch advised the subject had previously threatened officers, (3) the subject was known to carry a firearm, and (4) the stop occurred at 0200 hours in a remote area with backup seven minutes out."

1.3 BOLO/APB Integration

A BOLO (Be On the Lookout) or APB (All Points Bulletin) for a vehicle and/or suspect is the most common trigger for a high-risk stop. How you process the broadcast information before initiating the stop determines the legal and tactical foundation of everything that follows.

Confirm Before You Act

Before initiating a high-risk stop based on a BOLO:

1. **Confirm the vehicle description** — license plate, make, model, color, distinguishing features (damage, stickers, tint, rims). A partial match is not enough unless combined with other strong indicators.
2. **Confirm the occupant description** — number of occupants, race, sex, clothing, visible identifiers.
3. **Confirm the direction of travel and location** — where the vehicle was last seen, how recently.
4. **Confirm the basis for the stop** — what crime is alleged, by whom, and what the originating officer's reasonable suspicion or probable cause was.
5. **Confirm whether weapons are involved** — "Is the subject reported to be armed?" "What type of weapon?" "Has the weapon been brandished or used?"

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> ⚠️ **PITFALL**
>
> The Partial Match: You spot a dark sedan that loosely matches the BOLO description for an armed robbery suspect vehicle. You initiate a felony stop. The vehicle turns out to be occupied by an unarmed family whose only crime was driving a dark sedan. Beyond the personal tragedy of the encounter, you have now conducted an armed detention without adequate justification. Confirm the match to the greatest extent possible before initiating felony-stop protocols. If you cannot confirm but have strong indicators, treat it as high-risk but be prepared to de-escalate rapidly if indicators diminish.

> 💡 **OFFICER NOTE**
>
> The Rolling Confirmation: When following a potential BOLO match before initiating the stop, use that time productively. Run the plate. Request updated information from dispatch. Observe occupant behavior. Look for corroborating or contradictory indicators. The goal is to convert the BOLO from a general broadcast to a specific, confirmed match before you light up the vehicle. If the vehicle is moving toward a more favorable stop location (well-lit, more backup available), use that distance to build your confirmation.

1.4 Known Armed Subjects

When you have information — from any source — that a vehicle occupant is armed, the stop is a high-risk stop by default. The only question is the level of force and control justified.

Sources of "armed" information:

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SOURCE	RELIABILITY	TACTICAL IMPLICATION
Officer observation of weapon	High — direct knowledge	Immediate felony-stop protocols
Victim/witness states suspect armed	High if witness is credible and identified	Felony-stop protocols
BOLO reports armed subject	Moderate — depends on originating information quality	Felony-stop protocols unless contradicted
Anonymous caller reports weapon	Low to moderate — requires corroboration (Florida v. J.L.)	Heightened caution; may justify felony-style stop depending on specificity
Dispatch NCIC return shows firearms history	Low for current armed status — historical only	Weapon caution indicator, not sole justification for felony stop
Gang / drug trafficking intelligence	Moderate — depends on recency and specificity	Factor in totality; prepare for weapons

🛑 **RED LINE**

Assuming "Unarmed" Without Verification: Never assume a subject is unarmed because they have not displayed a weapon, because the call type is not inherently violent, or because the subject "looks" non-threatening. Every traffic stop involves an unknown contact with an unknown person. The default assumption should be that any vehicle occupant could be armed. This is not cynicism — it is officer safety.

💡 **OFFICER NOTE**

The "Hands" Priority: The most dangerous moment in any high-risk stop is when you cannot see the occupant's hands. Your commands should prioritize hand visibility above all else. "Driver, show me your hands — both hands out the window — NOW." If you can see the hands, you have dramatically reduced the threat. If you cannot, you must assume they are reaching for a weapon and respond accordingly.

1.5 Officer-Safety Indicators That Justify Elevated Protocols

Even in the absence of a known weapon or violent felony, certain officer-safety indicators may justify felony-stop-level control measures. These indicators are cumulative — the more that are present, the stronger your articulation for elevated protocols.

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- **Numerical disparity:** Two or more occupants vs. a solo officer. You cannot safely control multiple subjects with routine-stop methods.
- **Suspect physical advantage:** Size, apparent strength, or known combative history.
- **Time and environment:** Late night, remote area, limited lighting, no immediate backup.
- **Occupant behavior:** Failure to comply with initial commands, furtive movements, occupants switching seats, vehicle slowing but not stopping.
- **Criminal indicators:** Aromatic or visual indicators of drug trafficking (which correlates strongly with weapons possession), gang indicia, counter-surveillance driving patterns.
- **Dispatch advisories:** Officer-safety caution flags on NCIC returns, prior resist-arrest history, prior weapons offenses.

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Get the Full 53-Page Manual

The tactical and legal toolkit for elevated-risk vehicle encounters

- **Section 2: Positioning & Cover** — the felony-stop position, cover vs. concealment, and the kill zone.
- **Section 3: Communication & Commands** — the command voice and clear, unambiguous verbal protocol.
- **Section 4: Suspect Extraction & Control** — step-by-step extraction, multiple-occupant order, and prone-out techniques.
- **Section 5: Multi-Officer Coordination** — contact and cover roles, crossfire avoidance, and when to wait for backup.
- **Section 6: Special Considerations** — K-9 integration, low-light tactics, highways, and vehicle types.
- **Section 7: Legal Framework** — the Garner–Graham force framework, weapon discipline, and documentation.
- **Appendix A:** Quick-Reference Case Table. **Appendix B:** Articulation Templates for the high-risk stop.

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This manual is a training and reference aid for law enforcement professionals. Consult your agency's policies and legal advisor for jurisdiction-specific guidance.