

Traffic Stops & Teen Drivers: Staying Safe, Smart, and In- Control

Presented by:

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Who am I and why should you care?

- D. Robert Lewis – Homicide prosecutor from the State Attorney's Office
- Prosecuted thousands of serious felonies, hundreds of homicide cases
- Prosecute ALL of Hernando County's Traffic Homicide cases
- I've seen every conceivable traffic stop and seen every way they can go wrong
- ALMOST 100% OF INJURIES AND DEATHS AT TRAFFIC STOPS WERE PREVENTABLE

State v. William McNeil

Video 1



What do we see?

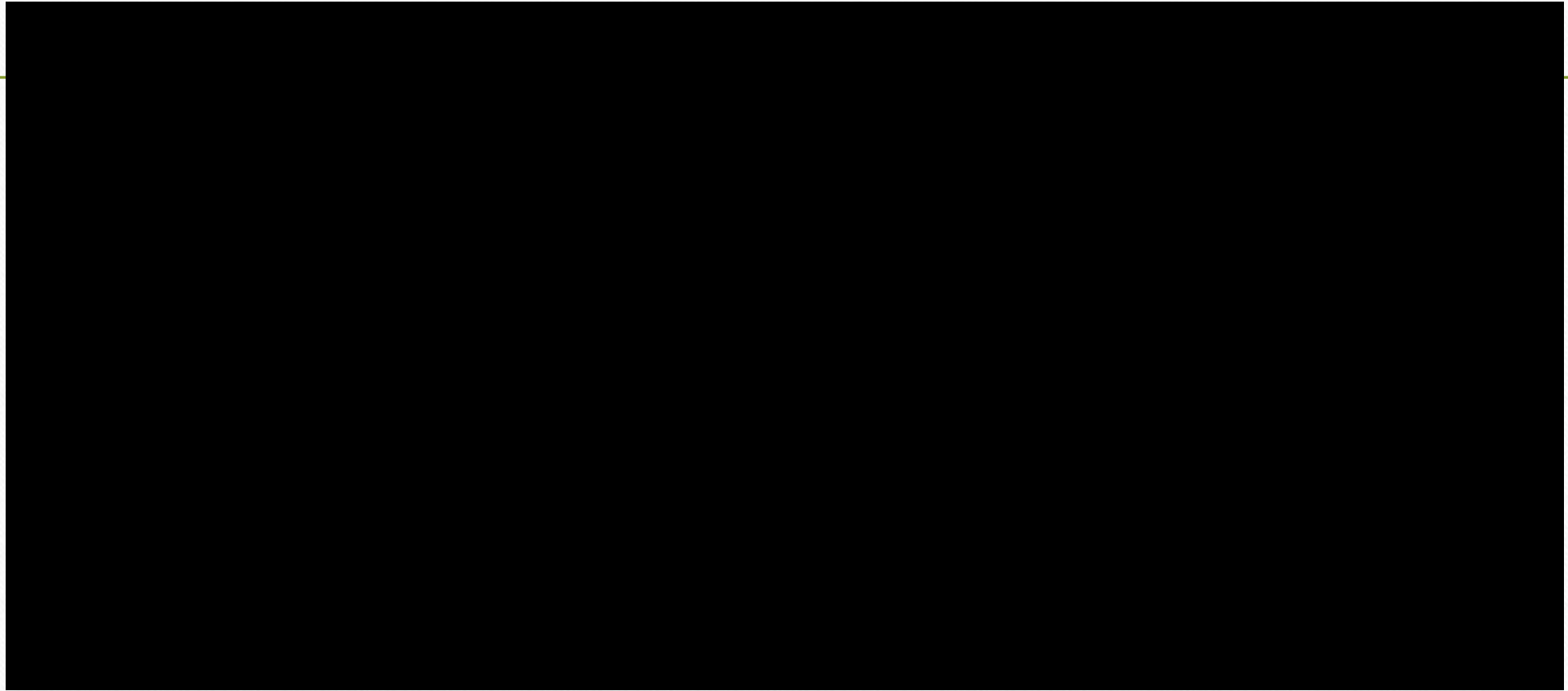
- “Why did you pull me over?”
- “Can you pull up that law?”
- “Can you get a supervisor?”
- Broken window...
- PUNCH!

Video 1

Who thinks that the cop acted improperly?

State v. William McNeil

Video 2



What do we see?

- McNeil: “Is there a reason you pulled me over?”
- Officer: “Inclement weather and you don’t have your lights on and you’re not wearing a seatbelt”
- McNeil: “It’s light out, it’s not raining
- Officer: “I’m not arguing with you. I’m telling you why I’m pulling you over. Driver’s license and registration, please”

What do we see?

- McNeil: “No! Call your supervisor (Two times)
- McNeil: “Why did you pull me over (Three times)
- Officer: “Step out of the vehicle”
- McNeil: “No!”
- Officer: “Step out of the vehicle
- McNeil: “Slams door”

What do we see?

- Officer: “Open the door and exit or we are going to break the window” (Three times)
- McNeil: “No!” (Three times)

Video 2

Who thinks that the cop acted improperly?

What could the Officer have done differently?

- NOT PUNCHING THE DRIVER!
- Anything else?

What could McNeil have done differently?

- Complied with license and registration
- Be assertive, but not argumentative
- Not shutting the door and locking the car

(McNeil was going to take the ride and he knew it.)

Why are you here today?

- Not anti-police
- Not pro-police
- **Pro-safety** – for both the driver *and* the officer
- Focused on **real-world, practical advice** to keep everyone safe
- Based on decades of experience prosecuting serious crimes, homicides, and traffic fatalities

Why Traffic Stops Matter

- Officers never know whether they are stopping:
- A distracted teen late for school
- A person with a suspended license
- Someone fleeing a crime
- Someone armed, intoxicated, or panicked
- From the officer's perspective, **every stop has unknown risks.**

What gives you the right?!!

A law-enforcement officer in Florida has the legal authority to conduct a traffic stop when they have **reasonable suspicion or probable cause** that a traffic law or other law has been violated, as authorized under **Florida Statutes (Chs. 316 & 901)**, the **Florida Constitution**, and the **Fourth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution.



The Supreme what?



- **Whren v. United States (U.S. Supreme Court, 1996)** – Officers may stop
 - a vehicle if they observe any traffic violation,
 - no matter how minor.
- **State v. Donaldson (Fla. Supreme Court, 2001)**
 - – Reinforced that a traffic stop
 - in Florida must be based on a reasonable,
 - articulable suspicion of a violation.

This can't happen to me

- Antwon Rose (2018, Pennsylvania)
- A 17-year-old, **Antwon Rose**, was a *passenger* in a car that was stopped by police in East Pittsburgh. [CBS News](#)
- According to reports, when officers detained the driver, Rose and another passenger fled on foot. [CBS News](#)
- An officer shot Rose three times; he later died. [CBS News](#)
- Although guns were subsequently recovered in the vehicle, Rose himself was unarmed at the time he fled. [CBS News+1](#)

This can't happen to me

Jordan Edwards (2017, Texas)

- Jordan Edwards was 15 years old.
- He was shot and killed by a Balch Springs, Texas, police officer while riding in a car during a traffic stop.
- Notably, he was *unarmed* and in the process of the vehicle *pulling away*.

This can't happen to me

- **17-Year-Old Shot by Texas DPS Trooper (2025, Texas)**
- More recently, in January 2025, a **17-year-old** was shot by a Texas Department of Public Safety trooper during a traffic stop. [KPRC](#)
- According to authorities, after the teen was ordered out of the car, the trooper said he saw a sudden motion toward the teen's waistband and fired. [KPRC](#)
- The teen was hospitalized but was reported to be alive and talking after the incident. [KPRC](#)

Real-Life Examples – When Routine Stops Went Wrong

- **Broken Tail Light → Driver Panic**
- A Florida teen reached quickly into his glovebox for registration.
- Officer misinterpreted the rapid movement.
- Tense, escalated moment until hands were visible again.
Lesson: fast, unexplained movements create fear on both sides.

Real-Life Examples – When Routine Stops Went Wrong

- **Speeding Stop → Hidden Weapon**
- In a “simple speeding” stop, an officer spotted a handgun on the passenger floor.
- Driver failed to mention it; officer became defensive and escalated commands.

Lesson: Unexpected surprises heighten danger.

Real-Life Examples – When Routine Stops Went Wrong

- **Failure to Pull Over Immediately**
- A teen drove a full mile trying to “find a safe parking lot,” causing the officer to think they were fleeing.

Lesson: Delay can create suspicion—acknowledge the officer with hazard lights if driving to a safer area.

Real-Life Examples – When Routine Stops Went Wrong

- **Driver Arguing Instead of Complying**
- A stop for loud music escalated when the driver argued about “knowing his rights.”
- Refusal to keep hands visible led to the driver being temporarily detained.

Lesson: Rights can be asserted politely without escalating.

What's Going Through an Officer's Mind

- Officers are trained to consider:
- Visibility of hands – most important safety factor
- Number of passengers
- Any sudden movements
- Vehicle behavior before stopping
- Odors (alcohol, marijuana, smoke)
- Driver behavior (nervousness, reaching, refusal to roll window down)
- Location and lighting

What You Should Do Immediately When Pulled Over

- Acknowledge the officer
- Turn on hazard lights if you need to move to a safer, well-lit location.
- Pull to the right and stop safely.
- Turn off the engine.
- Roll down the window.
- Turn off music.
- Keep hands visible on the steering wheel.
- At night: turn on the interior light.

Where Hands Should Be During a Traffic Stop

- **Both hands on top of the steering wheel**
where the officer can clearly see them
- Passengers: hands visible on laps
- If document retrieval is needed, say:
 - “Officer, my registration is in the glovebox—may I reach for it?”
- Wait for the officer’s approval before moving.

How to Speak to Law Enforcement— Polite but Assertive

- “Good evening, officer.”
- “May I reach for my license now?”
- “I would like to remain polite, but I’m nervous—
can you walk me through what you need?”

How to Speak to Law Enforcement— Polite but Assertive

- “I am choosing not to answer questions without a parent present.”
- “I do not consent to a search.”
(if asked—this is lawful and not disrespectful)

What NOT to Do

- **Don't reach suddenly for anything**
- Don't argue roadside
- Don't exit the vehicle unless instructed
- Don't conceal or hide items
- Don't make jokes about weapons or drugs
- Don't record aggressively (recording is legal, but be obvious and calm)

When an Officer May Search a Vehicle (Without Consent)

- **Probable Cause Exists**
- Examples:
 - Smell of marijuana or strong alcohol
 - Visible contraband (bottle, pipe, firearm)
 - Drug residue seen on seats
 - Admissions by the driver (“There’s weed in the car”)

When an Officer May Search a Vehicle (Without Consent)

Arrest of the Driver

If the driver is arrested, officers may search within reach of the driver (the “passenger compartment” in many situations).

“Inventory Search” After Impound

If the vehicle must be towed, officers may inventory its contents.

Safety Check (“Protective Sweep”)

If an officer reasonably believes there may be a weapon within reach.

Consent Searches

- If the officer asks:
- “Do you mind if I search your vehicle?”
- The driver has the absolute right to say:
- **“I do not consent to a search.”**
- This cannot be held against the driver.
It also cannot be used as probable cause.

Drug-Sniffing K9s – What the Law Allows

- **K9s May Walk Around the Car During a Lawful Traffic Stop**
- Officers can conduct a “free air sniff” around the exterior of the car.
- They cannot unreasonably prolong the stop just to wait for a K9 unit.
- **If the Dog Alerts**
- An alert from a trained K9 **does provide probable cause** to search the vehicle.

Drug-Sniffing K9s – What the Law Allows

- **The Officer Does NOT Need:**
 - A warrant
 - The driver's consent
 - A specific suspicion other than the alert

What to Do If You Disagree With the Officer

- Stay calm
- Comply with orders
- Do NOT argue law on the roadside
- Ask politely for clarification
- Save disagreements for court, not the shoulder of the highway

What to Do If You Disagree With the Officer

“Officer, I want to comply with all lawful instructions. I do not consent to a search, but I will not interfere.”

Things You Need to Remember

- Lack of experience = increased nervousness
- Peer passengers often escalate tension
- Social media posting during stops can distract or inflame
- Recognize the seriousness of body language and tone

Final Safety Tips

- Always carry license, registration, proof of insurance
- Keep documents in an easy-to-reach location
- Practice retrieval calmly
- Stay respectful even if you feel wronged
- Record the encounter if you wish, but calmly
- Call a parent if needed

Why This Matters

- Safer interactions
- Fewer misunderstandings
- Protects the driver's rights
- Helps officers do their job safely
- Reduces the risk of tragic outcomes

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