

Cop Watch 101

Copwatching goals are to discourage and attempt to stop police brutality and harassment by

- Educating people and communities to their rights and their responsibilities to each other.
- Letting police know that their actions are being observed and recorded that they may be held accountable for their actions
- Trying to get laws and regulations in place and enforced that reduce police brutality and repression.

Remember that radicals may realize that policing as a concept is one that needs to be completely rethought. But in the meantime, people have to be protected from the brutality they currently face at the hands of the police.

Form a group. Put out calls for one everywhere [yes, even in church groups and on their bulletin boards] not just in the activist/anarchist community

- Educate neighbors [the best neighborhood watch is a copwatch] and vulnerable communities to their rights and on how to accomplish a copwatch.** Hold classes everywhere in your city but especially in vulnerable communities.
- Hold regular, easily reached, meetings – DO not depend on the Internet for all or even most of your communications.** Those needing copwatch most, and who you want to come to the meetings, are those least likely to have easy or regular Internet access. Decide on your goals and how you will go about them as a group.
- Find cop “hotspots”.** Look for them at the police blotter in your local paper or ask “street lawyer” types or ask around a given neighborhood.
- Assign patrols and get report backs.** Your group will be more effective if it is well organized.
- When the cops are particularly brutal or kill someone – Protest.** Put pressure on them to change and keep the pressure high.

F. Agitate for laws and regulations about police to change. Try for the worst rouge police to get fired. Get people to give your Citizen Review Board some teeth. WWW.copwatch.com has some suggestions that can give your community a starting point as to what you need in stopping rampant police brutality and harassment. Get your group to analyze what is needed and how they are going to get it accomplished.

G. Remember that when cops are brutal and harassing it isn't just to the individual. Whole communities suffer when the cops run amuck as they almost always do. People from communities that are terrorized will almost always be afraid to stand up for themselves. [Unless it gets SO bad they riot- a separate issue] **A copwatch is often the first step towards solidarity with each other.**

To *copwatch* effectively all you need is your eyes and ears and something to record the incident. A pocket size notebook and pen/pencil are most useful and the least conspicuous. A camera of any kind is also useful in recording the incident. A cell phone can also be helpful.

Remember:

1. **Be legal!** This means making sure that you follow the letter of the law. No drugs, alcohol, or illegal weapons on your person or in your system. This also means no jaywalking. I have friends who have done a perfect cop watch then jaywalked almost immediately after leaving the scene resulting in a \$50 ticket for their efforts. If driving, make sure that you and all of your passengers have on their seat belts. No unnecessary honking of your horn or loud music as you drive away as the District of Columbia violation of noise pollution laws can be used as a viable reason to detain and arrest people. If you are not "Letter Perfect Legal" you may end up doing more harm than good and could get yourself arrested. Don't give them an excuse to bust you.
2. **Best done with 2 or 3 others.** You are less likely to be arrested in a group. Also 1 person [cool headed and aware of their rights please] can take "point" to speak to officers, get their names, ranks, badge #s, district designation, squad car # and license #, description. And to make them aware of you being there as observers. The others should hang back recording every detail of the encounter, and being even MORE careful to not interfere and to obey the law. If you have the numbers, one can even try to look and act as an individual onlooker with no connection with the rest of the group. Decide on your roles before the encounter if possible.
3. **Remember that you are there to defuse the situation not to escalate it.** Don't encourage the police to arrest people as a way of getting back at you because of your attitude. Reign in any hostility; be polite but firm. **The COPS are DANGEROUS!** Walk don't run and avoid quick or sudden movements around them. Don't become a brutality statistic yourself.
4. **Carry rights cards, flyers, and other information with you to give to people subject to arrest or harassment plus notebooks, pens, cameras etc.** The citizen complaint review boards are often virtually useless as a way of dealing with particularly roue cops but they can serve to document incidents. Tell people their rights, any numbers or Internet sites where they can contact a lawyer [www.nlg.org or in DC, Partnership for Civil Justice {in DC} etc.], how and where to file a complaint. For example, in DC, the Office of Citizen Complaint Review (OCCR)'s address is 730 11th Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001. Phone: (202) 727-3838 Additionally for a lawsuit against the city in DC you must send a letter to the mayor announcing your intention to sue the District within 6 months. Tell people: You don't have to follow through with it but should secure your right if the incident is severe enough for you to even consider a suit.
5. **Try to get as much information as you can.**
 - The day, time, and exact location of the incident
 - The officer's name, badge number, and physical description and district/psas[he] is from
 - Where anyone arrested will be taken
 - Witnesses' names, addresses, and telephone numbers
 - Vehicle or license numbers for any police vehicles involved in the incident
 - Any other evidence available including videos, tapes, photographs, and complete descriptions of police actions and any resulting injuries. (If there were injuries of any sort be sure to include what medical attention was or was NOT

offered by the police—people have been let go by officers who were “reminded” that copwatch members had observed medical attention being denied an arrestee even though the injuries had been not caused by the police.)

- **Record everything you can.** If you feel it is warranted you can call 911 [easier with a cell phone] and inform them that someone is being injured. Only tell them that it is the police doing it at the end but be factual- because all 911 calls are recorded and relatively hard to “lose”, this can become a legally useful report. You can call a friend or your own answering machine and record what is happening as it happens. This works well if the tape is long enough and can be essential if it looks like EVERYONE is getting arrested. Hell- if you get arrested, when you’re in the paddy wagon, call a talk or progressive radio station if the cops didn’t find/take your cell phone yet.
- 6. **Try to give the arrestee a way to contact you or vice versa.** That is not to say you should give your name or get their name in front of police. Give your name ONLY if you are comfortable with the police getting it.
- 7. **Aggressive copwatch.** If you are comfortable doing an “aggressive” copwatch then you can introduce yourself when approaching the scene and explain that you are doing a copwatch. Ask why they are detaining or arresting people but don’t speak to arrestees directly and don’t ask their name, as they might not wish the police to have it. {but write down their name and address if arrestees give it to the police in your hearing} If the stop is vague, ask an officer to name the law section that they are enforcing. [remember they lie and/or make mistakes- if you know better or have a copy of the code with you, respectfully speak up]**Don’t approach/speak to the arrestee directly while s[he] is being detained or you can and probably will be arrested.**
- 8. **Rights cards.** Give your flyers and rights cards to them if a detainee is let go or ticketed. If they are arrested you can ask the officer to give it to them [fat chance- but miracles happen] Or, instead, you can pretend the arrestee “dropped” your flyer or rights info card when they were searched frisked and hand it folded to the cop. You can’t speak to an arrestee directly without getting yourself in trouble [though sometimes you have to be prepared to do just that] but you can loudly talk about what rights people have with the cop or a bystander or your compatriot. [The right to remain silent, to speak to an attorney, to refuse a search of your person, personal items, or car – that doesn’t mean they won’t search just that you should not give them permission. Etc.]
- 9. **Be prepared to stay at least until the stop is concluded.** The Rodney King beating began with what seemed to be a routine traffic stop.
- 10. **Have educational conversations.** Speak to onlookers about rights, police brutality, what citizens can do and community alternatives. When answering legal questions from **non- police** do NOT be afraid to say, “I don’t know”. This is always better than giving out wrong information.
- 11. **Collect other witness statements if possible.** Many will not want to get “involved”. Try to persuade and educate them otherwise and get their statements where you can’t get their names.
- 12. **Keep the copwatch information you have gathered if there was anything “bad” about the police behavior.** Keep it somewhere organized or give it to a [hopefully your local Copwatch] group collecting the information. The least best is turning it over to OCCR but better than throwing the material away. [though **copies** turned over to them is a GOOD thing as it creates government documents on the incident] Keep the originals if you can. Do not edit any videotapes you shoot as that may render them useless as evidence against the cops.

13. **Know the laws.** If you can quote laws or refer to them knowledgeably you are probably one up on the cops and can get them to “back off” a detainee. [Aggressive copwatch] This also goes for police regulations but these are often hard to get copies of. Be forceful and not tentative during your encounter but remain polite. Carry the laws most commonly used for harassment with you if possible.
14. **Remember that in a really bad situation the cops may smash or steal [confiscate] your equipment to keep you from having evidence against them.** Have one of your group walk away with what evidence is gathered if things look hairy.
15. **Be prepared to be arrested.** [Though copwatch per se is not illegal, they will trump up charges] Have ID and a little [\$50] money on you if you want out easier/faster.
16. **Know what you will do or not do if things get very bad.** If someone is being beaten/injured/ killed by the police and witnessing does not stop them, KNOW how far you will go and what charges you are willing [or not] to risk/accept in order to stop it. Decide it ahead of time and talk about it within your group. If you copwatch in some areas, this is a situation that WILL happen. Be prepared and be aware.
17. **Be prepared to follow through.** If you couldn't get an arrestee's name and you feel that the situation was bad enough to warrant follow through or if you think the abuse/beating will continue, then go to the station they were taken to. Loudly and firmly ask how they are the details of what they were charged, explain what you saw, ask to make a complaint against the officers. This puts them on notice that people are concerned and will follow through and it may stop a back room beating.
18. **Be careful leaving the area.** The cops have been known to follow, ticket, target or beat copwatchers a few blocks from where the copwatch took place. Don't relax your guard.
19. **Report what you see.** Don't just report back to your group if you have one. If there is a Citizen Review Board however ineffective report it. Talk about it to city council members and show them your evidence. Tell them you want hearings and change of policies. Get your information to the NLG and or ACLU. Tell community or church groups. Write it up and put it on your local Indymedia.com, weekly if you can. Spread the word as to what is happening in your community.

While it is not something that should be attempted if other options are possible, there are times and situations that demand that copwatching be done by a lone individual. You should not ignore those in exceptional danger just because you are alone. But be aware that single person copwatching entails taking extra risk. If situations like these arise you should probably take the following precautions:

A. If you have been convicted of felony crimes or have a lengthy arrest records in your past or are a non-citizen, you should probably not cop watch **alone** unless the circumstances are exceptional. If you fall under these categories you have a greater risk of arrest and, therefore, have more to lose. Be aware of your risks.

B. Be legal wherever possible. {See above}

C. If possible, remain 20 feet from the incident that you are watching and try and contact someone via phone and let her or him know what you are doing so that they can act as your "backup". Call 911- see above.

D. Be less enthusiastic in engaging the police or the individual that you are watching be detained or arrested. Be aware that engaging the police without a person to back you up could put you in serious danger of arrest or assault.

E. As always, take full notes and, if possible, photos or videotape of the incident. If you take photos make sure that they are taken at the last possible moment to ensure the safety of you and your camera.

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