



Face Coverings and Police-Community Engagement

Educate Yourself. Stay Informed. Be Safe.

The increased use of face coverings presents a unique challenge to law enforcement officers. Wearing a face covering is a personal and/or public health defense against spreading communicable diseases. However, personal comfort with wearing a face covering varies from person to person. This can present challenges for law enforcement officers called upon to enforce public health orders.

Individuals may experience forms of bias related to their choice to wear or not wear a face covering. Similarly, community members may misinterpret the intentions of an officer wearing or not wearing a face covering during an interaction; the effects of implicit bias can work in both directions.

An officer's role in enforcing or not enforcing orders to wear a face covering can be difficult to navigate and can vary from one jurisdiction to another. In these circumstances, officers should remember that there are a variety of reasons individuals may choose to wear a face covering or not to wear a face covering (including certain medical conditions), and it is important to refrain from making premature assumptions.

Further, because face coverings block facial expressions that help humans interpret language, communication between community members and law enforcement can be even more challenging when either or both parties are wearing face coverings. This creates enhanced susceptibility (from both officers and community members) to relying on stereotypes and other forms of implicit bias.

Tips for officers interacting with the public regarding face coverings:

- It is important to treat all individuals with dignity, respect, and empathy regardless of the officer's personal views of wearing a face covering. These values should guide all interactions with community members.
- Unless otherwise directed by authorities in your jurisdiction, educate and assist those not wearing a face covering before relying on enforcement.

- Be cognizant of your own potential implicit biases toward wearing of a face covering.

While masks can potentially be used to conceal a person's identity, face coverings like those used for health, religious, and/or cultural concerns are less likely to be used for such purposes, especially during a public health crisis.

If you suspect someone may be involved in criminal activity, make sure to have justifiable reason for this suspicion. Consider the totality of the circumstances, and ensure intuitive judgments are supported by objective observations.

There are legitimate reasons for not wearing a face covering in public (such as certain health conditions, for example). Just as with individuals wearing a face covering, be careful not to make assumptions about an individual not wearing a face covering.

- Clear communication is imperative.

Members of the general public may be intimidated or fearful of officers wearing a face covering, which may heighten their defensive reactions.

Face coverings block facial expressions, which makes verbal communication more prone to misinterpretation.

When interacting with a member of the public in an outdoor setting, consider stepping at least six feet away to remove your own face covering and introduce yourself, then replace your face covering and continue interaction from a closer distance.¹

¹ Consult agency policy and/or laws of the local jurisdiction. This approach may not be appropriate indoors or in densely congregated outdoor areas.



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Supervisors should also closely monitor department operations to detect and address biased enforcement activities.

Some resources are included here for reference. This guidance will help law enforcement agencies recognize how implicit bias can influence enforcement decisions and provide support for equitable policing policies and trainings for all officers. However, it is important to always consult and follow the most current and relevant guidance available.

Resources:

- International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2006. "Addressing Racial Profiling: Creating a Comprehensive Commitment to Bias-Free Policing." *Protecting Civil Rights: A Leadership Guide for State, Local, and Tribal Law Enforcement, Chapter 6*. Available at https://link.edgepilot.com/s/06be0713/_9a6fx1BQU-C4Ap1zHrnJcQ?u=https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/all/p-r/PCR_LdrshpGde_Part3.pdf.
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2012. *A Resource Guide to Improve Your Community's Awareness and Reporting of Suspicious Activity for Law Enforcement and Community Partners*. Available at <https://link.edgepilot.com/s/b083799b/WERAFVs4BkShRFUrpy-sA8A?u=https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/all/s/SARResourceGuide.pdf>.
- International Association of Chiefs of Police and U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. 2018. *IACP and COPS Office Resources: Community-Police Relations*. Available at <https://link.edgepilot.com/s/8f06bc44/6N1YBIS-dQkCivUV23bjNqQ?u=https://www.theiacp.org/resources/iacp-and-cops-office-resources-community-police-relations>.
- International Association of Chiefs of Police. 2020. *Bias-Free Policing, Model Policy and Concepts & Issues* paper. Available at https://link.edgepilot.com/s/c271308f/ARIAPWAXc0qKWeme6a_pGg?u=https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/bias-free-policing.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2020. *About Cloth Face Coverings*. Available at <https://link.edgepilot.com/s/90f5076f/-39S-fqh-g0qganwfJN31dA?u=https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html>.