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One of the most obvious signs of potential trouble is a subject paying repeated visual attention to an officer's gun

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When it comes to securing and maintaining your tactical advantage, the ability to recognize and interpret non-verbal communication when dealing with potentially troublesome subjects is one of the most powerful officer safety tools you have.

10 non-verbal, pre-attack indicators

In their recently released book, “[Street Survival II](#)” from Calibre Press, authors Jim Glennon, Dan Marcou and Chuck Remsberg list 10 non-verbal, pre-attack indicators all officers should be aware of, understand and watch for.

It’s important to remember that these are not necessarily guarantees of an attack or singularly cause for immediate, intense defensive actions, but in combination with or in the context of a risky encounter, they should not be overlooked.

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1. Behavior in vehicles

Stay alert for out-of-the-ordinary activity in and around a **vehicle you’ve stopped**.

Watch for things like a driver, or worse yet a driver and one or more passengers, immediately exiting the vehicle and rapidly heading back to your squad; lots of “scrambling” inside the vehicle as you’re stopping it; a driver who quickly exits the vehicle, heads in your direction, then abruptly changes his mind and quickly heads back to the vehicle; and lots of turning heads and attention to you coming from passengers in the vehicle.

If things seem abnormally tense and “fidgety” don’t overlook the possible message that activity sends.

2. Micro-expressions

While overt expressions like smiling or frowning may seem to reflect the true emotion of the person you're dealing with, "micro-expressions" – quick, fleeting reflections of emotions that may or may not sync with the more overt demonstration of emotion you see – can tip you off to the real intent, thoughts, motivation and mood of the individual you're dealing with.

Stay intently alert for signs of clenched teeth, furrowed brow, pursed lips, bared teeth and wide, non-blinking eyes. If you see these, even for a fleeting moment, don't disregard them.

3. Grooming

Watch for things like wiping off imaginary lint, hair straightening and clothing adjustments that come at inappropriate times. These could be unconscious signs of an attempt to distract you or an outlet for nervous energy.

4. Stretching

The timing of a stretch can be revealing and a tactically valuable message. While it may not be a big deal if a person you pulled over starts stretching after getting out of the car, take note if they stretch after you start asking some key questions such as, "Do you mind if I search your vehicle?"

5. The target glance

This is a term used to describe a subject's obvious preoccupation with a particular area of an officer's body or with a particular weapon the officer is carrying. This can be represented by staring directly at or repeatedly glancing at the intended target.

One of the most obvious signs of potential trouble is paying repeated visual attention to an officer's gun, which **could flag a gun grab**, but other targets of focus, like the chin, nose, throat or eyes, can be early warning signs of an attack.

What are other non-verbal attack signs officers need to recognize?

Share your knowledge and experiences of non-verbal attack signs in this form.

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6. Clenching

Pre-fight tension can cause jaw muscles to bulge, fists to close and facial muscles to contract. If you pay close attention, you may also see the trapezius muscles that cover the back of the neck and shoulders rise as large muscles of the body constrict in prep for an assault.

7. The “fighting stance”

This bladed, quite obviously combative stance almost always signals that a fight is likely brewing. When you see this – clenched fists, tightened face, flaring nostrils and dropping one side (usually the strong side) behind the other – take serious note. Also note lots of body position shifting that can be indicative of nervous energy and fight positioning.

8. Rapid eye blinking

Under significant stress, eye blink rates can noticeably alter in one of two ways. The rate can either increase dramatically (e.g., an increase from the “typical” rate 6-20 blinks per minute to 40-60 blinks p/m) or decrease (e.g., 2-4 blinks p/m), which is often referred to as the “thousand-yard stare.”



9. Flanking

This strategic positioning to the side or sliding behind an officer generally occurs when there are multiple suspects. Stay alert for this surrounding-type positioning and be prepared to tactically reposition quickly and definitively if you spot such behavior.

10. The miscellaneous others

There are myriad additional non-verbal signs that can **indicate a pending attack** – dilated pupils, hidden hands, dipping to the strong side as though grabbing something, mouth breathing/panting, hands defiantly on hips, contemptuous spitting, pacing, etc. Learn them, remember them and watch for them!

Police1 readers share their top tips on recognizing non-verbal signs

- Removal of a hat, removal of jewelry, a change in breathing (deeper, sighing, or rapid breathing), a change in language to the native tongue, and a change in voice (speed, tone, pitch, or volume). They may stop talking or start talking, agree when they did not before, or disagree when they did not before. They may send others, especially women and children, away, or close the distance, becoming a close talker when they were not before. Patting where weapons are concealed under clothing, often subconsciously, is another sign. Females might remove shoes, and a thousand-yard stare may occur. There can be a pre-engagement look of intensity, displeasure, or anticipation. Hand gestures or replacing words with nonverbals are also common. Sometimes, they just flat out tell you.