AD EDUXIAN JOURNAL
*A Quarterly Multidisciplinary Blind Peer Reviewed & Refereed Online International Journal*
*Google Scholar Indexing* *Impact Factor: 5.0*
*Vol (3), Issue (4), October-December 2026* *ISSN: 3048-7951*

# Aversive Vigilance: Why Individuals Feel Fear When Police Are Close

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**DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24538087**

**Review: 01/10/2026** **Acceptance: 08/10/2026** **Publication:25/11/2026**

**Abstract**

The role of law enforcement presence has conventionally been understood as one of public reassurance and deterrence. For many people, even those with no criminal record or intentions, however, the proximity of police officers provokes a pronounced stress response. In this paper, I define this phenomenon as aversive vigilance: a state of vigilance characterized by physical stress, hyper-awareness, and self-regulatory behaviours in response to exposure to state authority. Grounded in the analysis of qualitative thematic synthesis of phenomenological narratives, literature from criminology on procedural justice, and sociology of state surveillance, this paper seeks to understand the mechanisms of such fear. The research identifies three main factors that trigger such a reaction: (1) the unpredictability of discretionary power of police; (2) vicarious and historic trauma transferred via the narrative of the community; and (3) the cognitive burden of "performing innocence." Implications for community policing are discussed at the end of the paper.

**Keywords:** Aversive vigilance, police presence, procedural justice, hypervigilance, state authority, qualitative synthesis

## 1. Introduction

For decades, orthodox policing models—ranging from Sir Robert Peel's foundational principles to modern hot-spot policing—have operated on a straightforward premise: the visible presence of uniformed officers reduces anxiety among law-abiding citizens while deterring potential offenders. Under this paradigm, fear of the police is assumed to be a rational byproduct of criminal culpability. Yet, everyday lived experiences frequently contradict this assumption. Across diverse demographic groups, individuals routinely report experiencing an immediate spike in heart rate, sudden self-consciousness, and a compulsion to alter their posture, speed, or facial expression upon noticing a patrol vehicle or a uniformed officer nearby. Even in the absence of wrongdoing, proximity to law enforcement often feels less like protection and more like exposure to hazard.

To capture the nuance of this lived experience, this paper introduces and examines the concept of aversive vigilance. Unlike clinical hypervigilance—which typically stems from isolated, severe post-traumatic stress—aversive vigilance is a situational, socially conditioned state of defensive readiness. It occurs when an individual perceives an authority figure not as a guarantor of safety, but as an unpredictable variable capable of disrupting their autonomy, safety, or freedom.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

To understand why proximity to law enforcement induces fear among non-offending individuals, this study integrates three theoretical lenses:

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**Procedural Justice Theory (Tyler, 1990):** This framework posits that public trust in legal authorities depends less on the outcomes of police interventions and more on the perceived fairness, neutrality, and respect demonstrated during encounters. When interactions are perceived as arbitrary or dismissive, legitimacy erodes, transforming routine visibility into a source of apprehension.

**Goffman's Dramaturgical Sociology (1959):** Erving Goffman argued that social life functions like a theatre in which individuals actively manage the impressions they project to others. In the presence of police, the stakes of this "impression management" escalate dramatically; a misread gesture or nervous tic can transition an individual from an ordinary citizen to a "person of interest."

**Allostatic Load and Threat Appraisal (McEwen, 1998):** From a psychophysiological standpoint, when the brain detects an asymmetrical power dynamic where an external actor holds the legal authority to detain or use force, the sympathetic nervous system activates. Repeated exposure to this low-grade threat creates chronic physiological wear and tear.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach paired with secondary qualitative synthesis. Rather than quantifying the prevalence of fear through survey metrics, this methodology focuses on the texture and meaning of the subjective experience—how individuals interpret their bodily and emotional reactions in real time when encountering law enforcement.

### 3.2 Data Corpus and Analytic Strategy

The thematic analysis draws upon three qualitative data streams:

**Phenomenological Vignettes:** First-person narrative accounts describing routine, non-enforcement encounters (e.g., driving alongside a cruiser, walking past officers on a sidewalk, or standing near security checkpoints).

**Ethnographic Literature:** Existing qualitative studies examining pedestrian stops, traffic enforcement, and neighbourhood surveillance across urban and suburban contexts.

**Reflective Memos:** Interpretive coding of recurring somatic, cognitive, and behavioural patterns reported during passive police proximity.

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, moving iteratively from descriptive coding (e.g., "gripping the steering wheel," "checking speedometer twice") to latent conceptual themes.

## 4. Findings: Anatomy of Aversive Vigilance

The qualitative synthesis yielded three interrelated themes that explain why individuals experience fear when police are near, independent of legal guilt.

### 4.1 The Asymmetry of Discretionary Power

Participants consistently framed police officers not merely as individuals, but as walking embodiments of state monopoly on force. The core trigger of fear is the profound power asymmetry inherent in the encounter.

- **The Ambiguity of Infractions:** Because modern legal and traffic codes are vast and intricate, individuals recognize that virtually anyone can be found in technical violation of a minor ordinance at any given moment (e.g., a broken taillight, a slight drift over a lane marker, or loitering).
- **Unpredictable Escalation:** Fear stems from the realization that once an interaction begins, the citizen loses control over its trajectory. As one synthesized account captures: "It isn't that I've done something wrong; it's that if they decide I look suspicious, my entire afternoon—or my life—stops being mine."

### 4.2 The Cognitive Labor of "Performing Innocence"

When an officer enters an individual's immediate visual field, natural, unselfconscious behaviour abruptly ceases. Individuals shift into a state of intense self-surveillance, consciously choreographing their body language to project compliance and harmlessness.

| Behavioral Domain | Unobserved Baseline | Under Aversive Vigilance |
|---|---|---|
| **Gaze & Eye Contact** | Natural scanning of environment | Calculated avoidance of staring, paired with fear that looking away looks "evasive" |
| **Posture & Movement** | Relaxed gait, hands in pockets | Rigid posture, hands kept strictly visible, deliberate slowing of pace |
| **Driving Mechanics** | Fluid lane adjustments, casual posture | Rigid "10-and-2" grip, obsessive speedometer checks, unnatural stillness |

This creates a double bind: trying too hard to appear normal often produces stiffness and nervousness, which officers are trained to interpret as behavioral indicators of deception or concealment. The fear of being misread fuels the very anxiety that makes the individual look anxious.

### 4.3 Vicarious Trauma and Collective Memory

Aversive vigilance rarely operates in a historical vacuum. Even individuals who have never experienced a negative personal interaction with law enforcement carry an internalized archive of second-hand knowledge.

- **Media and Viral Footage:** High-profile incidents of routine stop escalating into violence serve as potent cognitive anchors. When a patrol car pulls behind a driver, the brain does not calculate statistical probabilities; it retrieves vivid, worst-case scenarios.
- **Intergenerational Coaching:** Particularly within marginalized communities, fear is socialized early through explicit survival instructions (often referred to as "The Talk"). When individuals are taught from adolescence that an unscripted movement near an officer can be fatal, proximity to police naturally triggers a conditioned survival response rather than a sense of security.

## 5. Discussion

The concept of aversive vigilance challenges the foundational assumption that visible policing is an unqualified public good. When the mere presence of law enforcement induces somatic stress and defensive posturing among compliant citizens, policing inadvertently generates a hidden psychological tax on the public.

Furthermore, aversive vigilance creates a feedback loop of mutual distrust. Officers, observing rigid posture, averted eyes, or nervous fumbling, may perceive hostility or criminal concealment. Consequently, the officer adopts a more guarded, authoritative demeanor, which in turn validates the citizen's initial fear. What begins as an unremarkable shared space deteriorates into a tense, adversarial standoff without a single word being spoken.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Because this paper relies on qualitative synthesis and phenomenological framing, it does not measure physiological biomarkers (such as cortisol spikes or heart rate variability) in real-world settings. Future empirical research should combine mobile biometric tracking with post-encounter qualitative interviews to map the precise threshold at which routine police visibility crosses into aversive vigilance across different demographic and geographic contexts.

**6. Conclusion**

Individuals feel fear when police are close not because they harbour criminal intent, but because they recognize the fragility of their autonomy in the presence of absolute discretionary authority. Aversive vigilance is a rational adaptation to an environment where the burden of proving innocence rests heavily on the citizen's ability to perform compliance flawlessly. Bridging the gap between police presence and genuine public safety requires moving beyond mere visibility toward institutional transparency, predictability, and relational trust—ensuring that the arrival of an officer signals relief rather than risk.

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