

The background of the entire image is a repeating pattern of three black silhouettes: a horse, a police shield, and a pair of handcuffs. These elements are scattered across the white background, creating a thematic context for the central text.

# THAT HORSE IS A WEAPON

*Analysis of Mounted Cops in the Street*

BEWARE OF HORSES  
I MEAN A HORSE IS A  
HORSE OF COURSE,  
BUT WHO RIDES IS  
IMPORTANT  
SITTING HIGH WITH A  
UNIFORM, BARKING  
ORDERS,  
DEMANDING ORDER  
*-Run the Jewels*

**C**ops have used horses as a tool of oppression since the day the first slave patrol organized. They allowed slave patrols to cover large distance of varied terrain quickly. To intimidate those they were pursuing. To physically overpower people on the ground. To directly inflict harm. This was not a new development in human/horse relationship – the Greek cavalry officer Xenophon began writing about the use of horses in warfare in 360 BC.

While the oppressive nature of the police force has remained unchanged, many of the weapons and tactics employed by cops have evolved over the years. The gadgets, the guns, the clothes, the aesthetics, and the communications equipment have all evolved. Cops are in a constant cycle of inhumane creation and refinement of tactics, and we are in a constant cycle of learning how to best keep each other safe. Even though mounted police tactics have evolved alongside other tools of oppression and tactics, the basics of threatening people from the top of a horse is pretty much the same as it ever was.

In comparison, the relationship working class people hold with horses has changed drastically. Horses were once a part of day to day life for many. Today, access to horses is generally tied to the access of at least some wealth or land.

*Essentially- cops have a weapon that we have a limited understanding of and access to. And they are very, very practiced at using it.*

The goal of this text is to demystify the police horse through an introduction to horse body language. We hope that this will help keep our friends safer in the streets.

### How are horses used by cops?

In America, the practices for maintaining a mounted unit can vary greatly.

Large urban departments often have their own stables, typically within city limits to allow for quick deployment. Cops are often assigned mounts and may only interact with

them when working or training. Departments often employ individuals expressly for stable duties that include feeding and caring for the animals. Horses used by mounted departments are often euthanized after they are no longer deemed to be useful to the cops.

In rural areas, cops are much more likely to have their own horses, housed and cared for at their own home. This relationship allows for a stronger bond between the cop and their horse. Some departments even allow citizen horse owners that have a thing for playing sheriff to volunteer in their mounted units.

Both urban and rural mounted police work hard to integrate themselves into nearby civilian horse communities, ensuring that they will never be refused access to the goods and services necessary for maintaining horses. (It's notable that a cop's pride can be useful in this case. Many mounted units bring their horses to county fairs to show them off. It's a great opportunity to ask cops how many horses their mounted units have, how they train, what types of events they're deployed for, etc. without arousing suspicions.)



Mounted cops use horses for:

- Generating warm fuzzy feels from the media and broader community
- Gaining a wider range of vision through a height advantage
- Intimidation
- Maneuvering quickly through uneven terrain or crowded areas
- Covering large amounts of terrain
- Manipulating the movement of crowds and individuals
- Holding police lines or pushing back protester lines
- Creating stationary & moving kettles
- Blocking access to a person or location
- Racking up charges against protesters (Charges for touching police horses can include aggravated assault, assaulting an officer, taunting a police animal, reckless endangerment, etc)
- Blocking or separating individuals and groups
- Gaining leverage for downward strikes, facilitating the cop's ability to strike someone on the head from above

Police horses are generally specially selected for their calm demeanor. Some departments select draft cross horses for their size advantage. Cops and the horses they coerce into service complete extensive training together, which is meant to desensitize horses to the sights, sounds, and smells they will encounter in the streets. These exercises also build the horse's trust in the cop on it's back.

The equipment used for riding a horse is called "tack." The type of saddle and bridle used by a mounted cop could vary with the rider's preferences, the horse's needs, and the department guidelines. Other gear you may see on a horse includes breast collars, which stabilize the saddle, martingales, which redirect the pressure the reins apply to the horse's mouth, and boots, which protect the horse's legs. Cops typically use special spiked horse shoes so that the horses can maintain traction on the pavement.

Special riot gear is made for horses, including boots, blankets, and eye shields. Horse gas masks were developed for warfare. Though not typically seen today, they could potentially be used by heavily militarized forces.

Additional gear may be used to further desensitize the horse to stimuli on the street. This could include blinders, which limit the horse's range of vision. Cops may also stuff cotton into a horse's ear canal so that loud sounds are muffled.

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We have one small advantage in this situation: horses speak a mostly visual language. As herd animals and prey animals, horses have a rich and complex verbal language. Within a herd setting this language is used to establish relationships, dominance, intent, fear, joy, etc. When used by militarized police, horses are in communication with each other as well as the cops on their backs. Reading a horse's visual language can potentially give us an idea of when cops are preparing to mobilize, what direction they may be moving in, or how much cop is distracted by trying to control their horse.

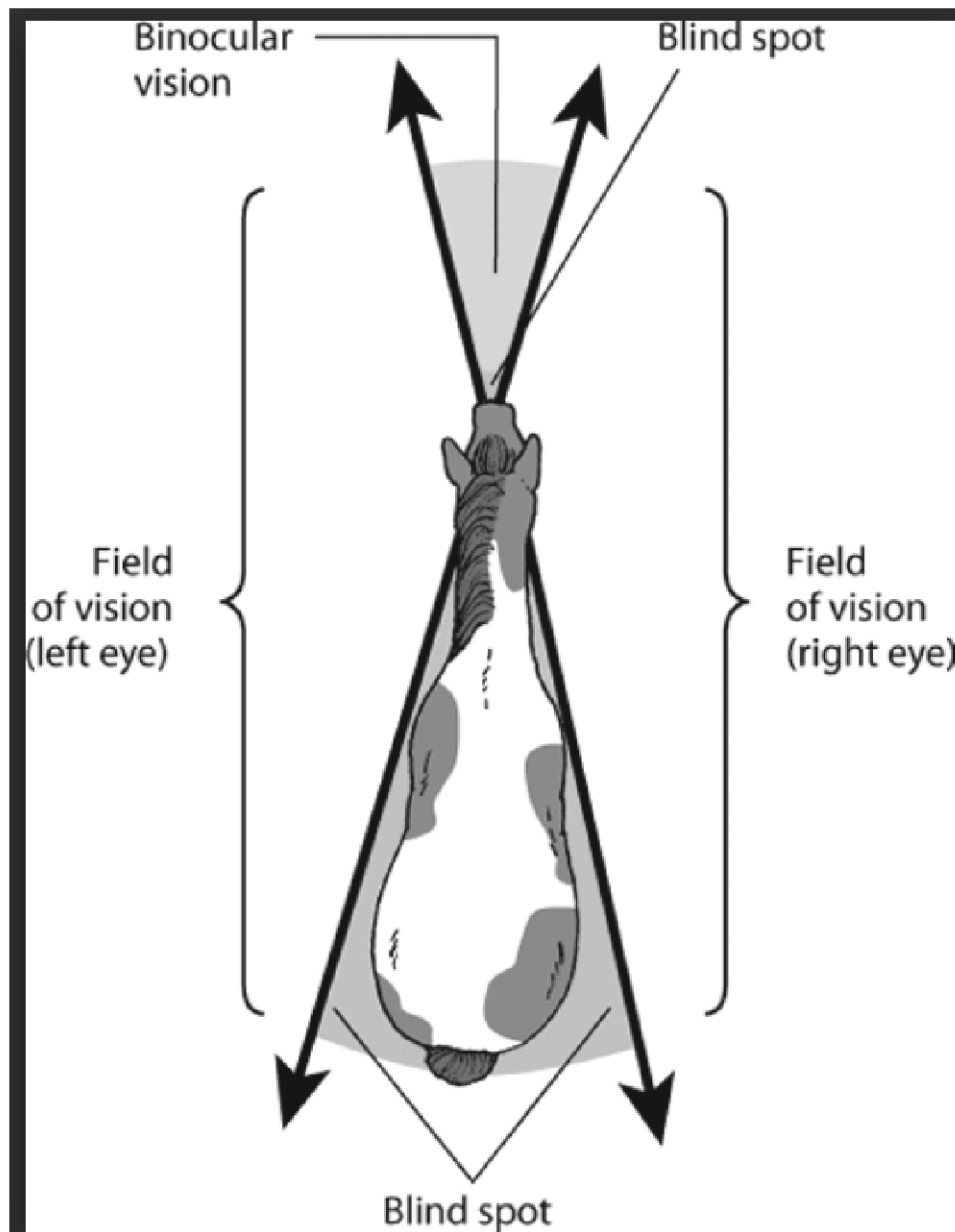
One important note: Understanding a horse's behavior improves your ability to be safer around horses, but does not guarantee your safety. Even people that are working with horses that they trust and have known for years are injured.

## Range of vision

Horses are prey animals. As a result, their eyes are on the side of their head. This allows horses to have a wider range of vision and an increased awareness of their surroundings, but it prevents them from seeing directly in front of their faces. If possible, avoid standing directly in front of a police horse at close range. A spooked horse can sometimes jump forward quickly and unexpectedly, placing an individual standing directly in front of the horse in a blind spot and potential trample zone.

Police will often place “blinders” on a horse. The purpose of blinders is to restrict the horse's field of vision from 180 degrees to about 30 degrees. They allow a horse to see what's in front of them, but prevent them from seeing behind them or out to their side. This restricts the potential stimuli a horse can react to, and forces the horse to rely more directly on the cop for direction. They also create additional blind spots and danger for those on the ground.

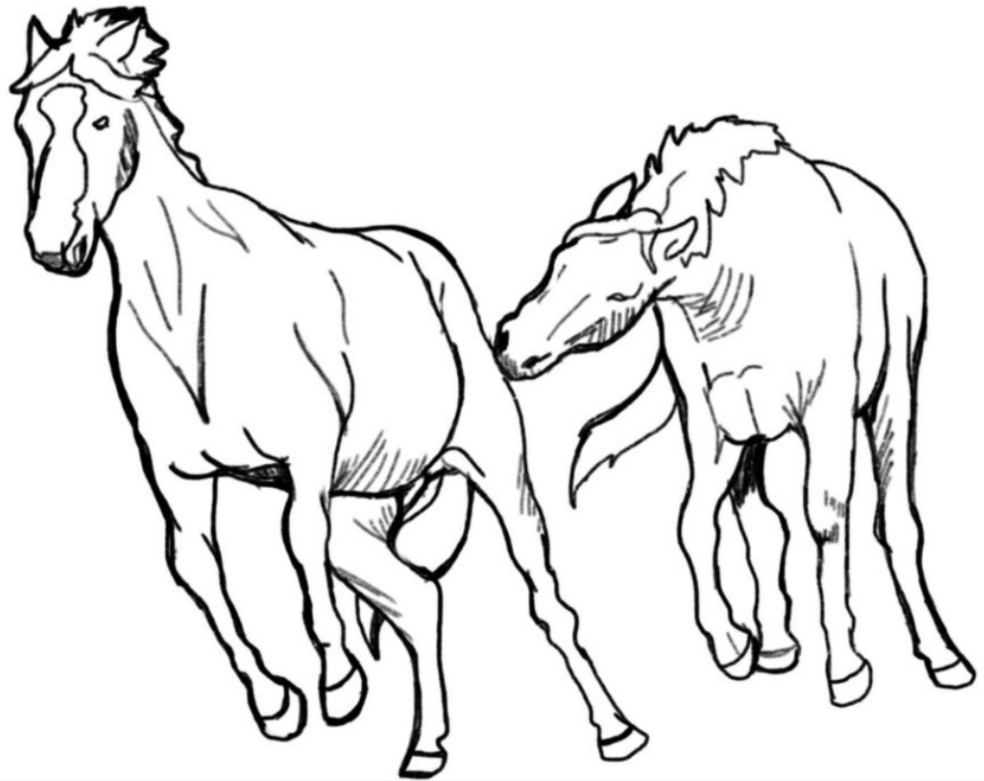
Horses are not completely unaware of objects or humans in their blind spot. A horse that does not have complete trust in the cop mounted on it may move away from objects in its blind spots so that it may see them better.



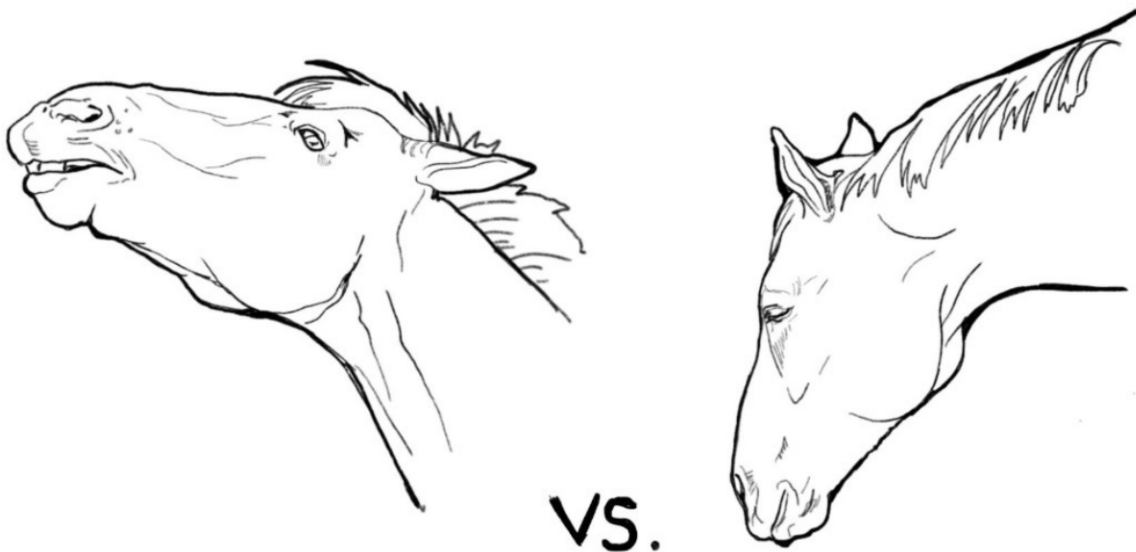
## Neck and Head Position

In a herd setting dominant horses will move individual horses to a specific location through the use of body language. Neck position is a significant part of this communication. When instructing another horse to move, a horse will often drop its head below its shoulder while maintaining intent focus on the target horse.

Horses maintain this behavior when attempting to influence the movement of animals from other species, including humans.



Horses that are unnerved by their surroundings will typically raise their head higher in the air in order to get a better perspective, regardless of whether or not blinders are utilized. Watching a horse for where it's holding its head can give you information about how tense police horses- and the cops on top of them- are. A horse holding its head up high in the air is likely nervous about its surroundings, especially if the whites of its eyes can be seen. The cop on its back is likely focused on controlling the horse, and less focused on the action around them. A horse hanging its head at a natural looking angle- anywhere from slightly above back height to slightly below- is likely relaxed. The cop mounted on a relaxed horse is more able to observe the situation around them.



## Ears

A significant amount of horse to horse communication occurs via ear position. Checking the position of a horse's ears can allow us to interpret if a horse is relaxed, focused, anxious, or angry. They can also be an indicator as to whether a horse is focused on the directions provided by the cop on its back, or if it is disregarding the cop for external stimuli.

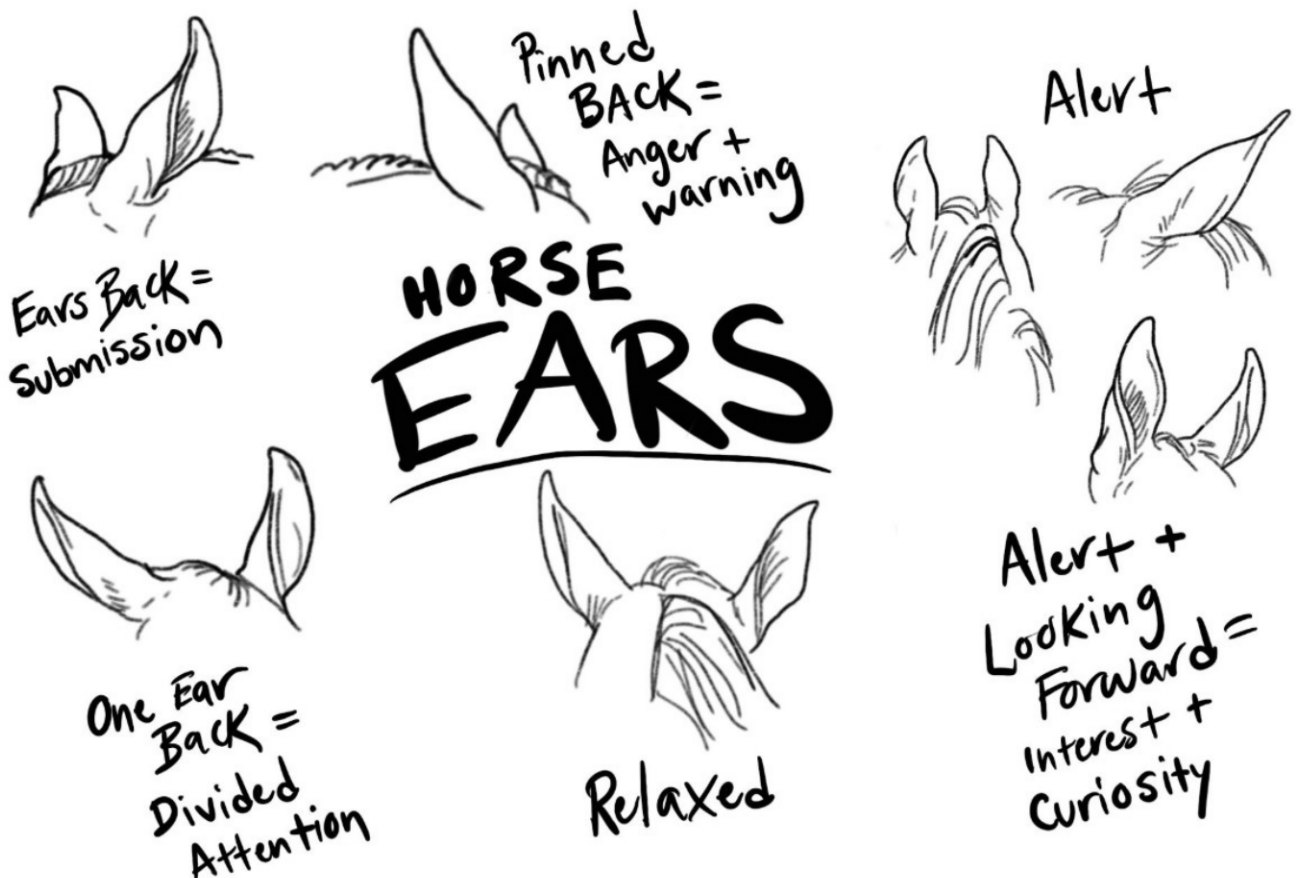
A horse with ears relaxed out or back a little is likely unconcerned about its surroundings, and may even be a little sleepy. The cop on its back is likely not concerned about controlling the horse, and is able to easily observe their surroundings.

A horse with one ear forward on its surroundings and one ear back towards the rider is focused and engaged with the directions it is receiving from the cop on its back. This horse is likely responsive to the cop's directions, and is focused on whatever task it's being asked to do. This is the best situation for the cop, and a potentially dangerous situation for a protester.

A horse that pins its ears back is unhappy or angry. This could be a result of discomfort, directions it's receiving that it does not want to comply with, or something present in its environment. Horses may also pin their ears back to threaten and establish dominance with other horses, humans, or animals.

A horse with pinned ears should be considered potentially dangerous. Horses often pin their ears as a warning before biting or kicking. A horse with pinned ears will be more challenging for a cop to control. A horse that has both pinned its ears back and raised its head is feeling very threatened or confrontational, and is likely under minimal control in that moment.

A horse with both ears pinned forward, pointing at a stimuli is entirely focused on that stimuli. This behavior is often seen when a horse is evaluating whether or not a particular stimuli is a threat. This behavior is often observed before a horse spooks or bolts. As a result, a cop mounted on a horse with ears pinned forward is likely more focused on reengaging the horse and maintaining control than a cop on a relaxed horse.



### Nostrils

Horses will use their nostrils for both visual and audible communication. The nostrils of an anxious horse will be wider than normal, sometimes flaring as the horse breathes.

### Tail

A relaxed horse will allow their tail to hang naturally. A horse that is agitated or in pain may wring their tail (not to be confused at idle swishing at flies) or hold it stiff and arched.

### Mouth

Strangely, lots of drool or foam coming from a horse's mouth is considered to be a good sign. This means a horse's mouth is relaxed and engaged with the bit (the piece of metal in a horse's mouth that the reins attach to.) If you see a horse that is drooling, assume that the horse is paying attention to the directions it receives, and the cop is in total control of the animal.

If a horse is resistant to the bit it will appear to yawn in an attempt to

relieve the pressure the rider is applying to the bit. Seeing a cop's horse fight against the bit is an indicator that the horse does not want to move in the direction the cop is asking it to. It's also an indication that the cop has at least some of their attention focused on regaining control of their horse.

### Movement

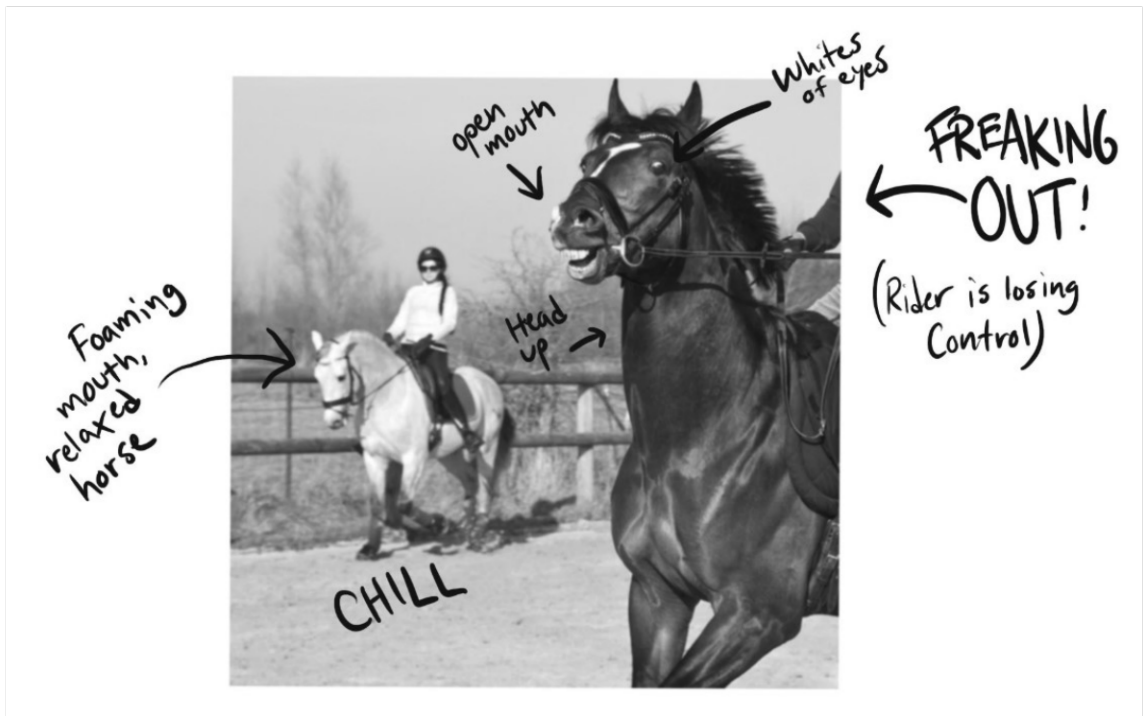
When a horse is resting it may prop up its hind leg. It will take a horse that is fully relaxed and resting a moment to collect itself up before it's ready to move. Horses that are standing still with all four feet squared underneath of them are ready to move at a moment's notice.

When moving out, most horses will move straight forward unless they are shying away from something, or have been instructed otherwise by a rider or another horse in the herd. Horses are nimble, and can move backwards, laterally, and pivot both on hindquarters and the forehand. Cop horses will be trained to move in any of these ways (often with great speed) when instructed by their rider.

Suddenly finding yourself next to a mounted unit could bring the danger of being stepped on (cop horses wear studded shoes, which can easily break feet), trampled, or seized by a cop. It is possible to make an educated guess about the direction a horse will move in. Predicting a horse's movement by observing the direction it points its head is not reliable. Horses are prey animals and need to be able to move their bodies away from a threat, while still closely observing it. Horses are fully capable of pointing their head in one direction, but moving their body in almost the exact opposite direction. A more reliable (but not foolproof) method of predicting a horse's movement is to check the horse's shoulder. A horse's body and direction typically follows the direction that it points its shoulder to.

### Sounds Horses Make

If you are especially close to mounted cops you may hear the sounds horses make. When relaxed or bored horses may sigh or blow air through their lips, allowing their lips to flap. A startled horse may snort. A horse may knicker when happy. When upset, agitated, or afraid a horse may neigh loudly or even shriek.





## Prey Animal Behavior

When these individual components are interpreted in the context of each other we can begin to understand what a horse is thinking. We can also get a better picture of the horse's thoughts and potentially increase our safety by interpreting the horse's thoughts through the mindset of a prey animal.

Humans tend to interpret information about the world around as predatory animals. Horses are prey animals, and their "fight or flight" instinct typically leans towards flight. Given the choice, most horses would rather run away from a threat than fight with it. There are exceptions, including times when a horse is cornered, or has been instructed to stay in the same space as a threat. Avoid cornering police horses to help reduce the risk of being trampled, bit, or kicked.

Here are a few examples of information we can gain by evaluating different mounted cops and their horses:



This horse is relaxed and resting. It is not prepared to move out quickly. Note the resting hind leg, and the length of the reins. The horse's neck is also relaxed and hanging at shoulder height. The horse's ears & mouth are also relaxed. The horse is wearing some special equipment, including a face shield and protective boots. This informs us that the cop is prepared to ride into the fray - he's not just there for visibility. Also notable is the rope attached to the horse's bridle. It's considered to be unsafe to tie a horse up by the reins, which attach to a metal bit in the horse's mouth. The rope attaches to a piece of the bridle that goes around the horse's mouth, rather than in it. This allows the cop to easily dismount and secure his horse so that he can engage against people on the ground.

This horse is hyper alert, and likely a lot of work for the cop on its back to control. Its ears are pointed forward, more focused on external stimuli than the cop on its back. Its head is raised to better see whatever it's looking at. You can even see the white of its eye through the shield, indicating that the horse is nervous or agitated. Further evidence that the cop is challenged by controlling this horse can be seen on the bit (the piece of metal in the horse's mouth) that was selected. This particular bit hooks up to two sets of reins, with one rein sitting lower on the "shank" of the bit. This is intended to increase the leverage the cop has on the horse's mouth, meaning the cop needs tools to physically dominate this horse rather than work in partnership with it.





This horse is very agitated, and the cop on its back is having a hard time controlling it. This is evidenced by the angle of the horse's neck, and the amount of pressure the cop is applying to the bit. This horse also is wearing a severe bit. The blanket over the horse's hindquarters covers areas that horses, as prey animals, are particularly sensitive about. It is likely intended to reduce a horse's reaction to stimuli near that region of its body. The horse's weight is mostly centered over its hindquarters, which would allow the horse to easily pivot and face a different direction.

The cop is showing especially poor form. Form affects a rider's ability to stay seated and control a horse. This cop could be unseated, should the horse move in a way he isn't prepared to react to. He is unbalanced, his heels are pointing up and his feet are starting to slide through the stirrups. His weight is centered too far back, his legs are too far forward, and the hand holding the reins is too high up in the air.

Also notable is the club/baton the cop is carrying. Historically, mounted units used heavy, broad swords in warfare rather than sharp swords. This is because the swords were used to swing hard down onto the skulls of people on the ground, cracking them open with brute force rather than cutting or slicing. Modern mounted cops used batons in an identical manner.

This horse is sending a clear warning- "I will bite you." The horse is communicating this with its pinned ears, raised head, wide eyes, and bared teeth. Compare this horse's body language to the horse next to it. The horse may be agitated because of social stuff with the other horses it's standing by, or because it's physically uncomfortable. Some horses can also be generally cranky, though this is usually a result of maltreatment from humans.

While the cop seems more equipped for regular patrol than riot duty, the horse is wearing a halter. This could allow the cop to quickly dismount and secure the horse.



# WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN FACING A POLICE HORSE?

- ▶ Check in with your friends. A fear of horses– especially when they're controlled by violent cops– is normal.
- ▶ Remember that cops can observe more and see farther due to the height vantage that horses provide.
- ▶ Try to avoid standing within arm or baton strike distance of the mounted cop.
- ▶ Be mindful of a horse's blind spots. Try to avoid standing directly in front of or directly behind a horse.
- ▶ Carefully consider tactics that involve laying on the ground– they could be especially risky. Horses don't like to step on people but will if they can't see you, or are forced to.
- ▶ Evaluate the equipment the horse is wearing to gain a better understanding for the situations the cop has prepared themselves for. Is there a lead line that the cop could use to tie the horse up if they wanted to dismount quickly? Has the horse been equipped with a face shield, indicating cops want to push their horse into a crowd?
- ▶ Evaluate the horse's body language to predict what cops are immediately prepared to do. Are the horses nervous? Calm and focused, and ready to move on? Half asleep?
- ▶ Evaluate the horse's body language to determine if a cop has lost control of their horse. A cop with an out of control horse may be less focused on you, but an out of control horse can quickly become dangerous.
- ▶ Evaluate the horse's body language to predict which direction they're likely to move in. Where are their ears pointing? In what direction is the horse's shoulder moving?
- ▶ Remember that a horse thinks like a prey animal. To survive they need to be able to go from 0 to 60 in a moments notice. Things in their environment– even something like a stray plastic bag or an opening umbrella– may startle a horse and cause them to unexpectedly spook.
- ▶ Watch your feet! Wear boots to give your toes protection. Be careful with steel toe boots– they will not provide you with extra protection, and can even be more dangerous around horses. A stomping horse can crush the steel and cause extra damage or toe amputation.
- ▶ Remember that hitting, poking, or pushing a police horse can result in extreme charges, including felonies. Courts may try to use any physical interaction with a police horse as a reason to add charges or make existing charges more severe.
- ▶ Make plans for managing your space if you expect the cops to use horses to push people around. Cops may try to use horses to divide groups of people off from a larger crowd, or to control the direction a group moves in. People are significantly more vulnerable if a cop can use a horse to successfully cut them off from a group of friends.



Additional reading:

Original source material on police horse procedures and tactics (e.g. stuff that cops wrote about how they use horses):

So called Los Angeles: [http://www.lapdonline.org/inside\\_the\\_lapd/content\\_basic\\_view/6347](http://www.lapdonline.org/inside_the_lapd/content_basic_view/6347)

So called San Francisco Police: <http://www.cophorses.com/buscovich/AcademyExpandedCourseOutline-10weekBasicTrainingAcademy.pdf>

Scotland Police Mounted Unit Standard Operating Procedures: <http://www.scotland.police.uk/assets/pdf/151934/184779/mounted-unit-sop>