

American State Nationals: The newest group of sovereign citizens

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Understanding the behavior and ideology of sovereign citizens is crucial for ensuring the safety of law enforcement officers, especially during traffic stops

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Sovereign citizens are individuals who, despite being legal citizens of their respective countries, deny the legitimacy of their governments and thus consider themselves immune to their laws. [1] The movement is loosely affiliated and not typically unified, though followers share similar beliefs and ideologies. They use terms to describe themselves such as "living man" or "woman," "natural woman" or "man," "free man" or "woman," "secured party creditor," "state national," and the newest variation, "American State National."

Sovereign citizens are anti-government, anti-democratic and anti-institution, and can be best described as modern-day outlaws. They pose a threat to the U.S. government and other governments worldwide. As legal citizens of a country who reject the jurisdiction of their government and its justice systems, they exhibit anarchist tendencies.

Accurate statistics on the sovereign citizen movement are challenging to obtain. Estimates suggest there are between 100,000 to 300,000 sovereign citizens in the United States. [2] In recent years, federal officials have noted a resurgence in the movement. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has identified the sovereign citizen movement as one of its "top threats." [3]

What are American State Nationals?

American State Nationals (ASNs) are a growing group in the United States and Canada. The group's leaders conduct monthly seminars across the United States to instruct followers on becoming ASNs. Recently, they have expanded their teaching to include "freedom coaches" in all 50 states who now host their own ASN seminars.

ASNs assert they are not sovereign citizens. They sell merchandise that says that they are not sovereign citizens and often argue the term is an oxymoron used to defame or unfairly categorize them. They reject the label because it has been associated with domestic terrorism, believing they do

not fit this characterization. However, regardless of their self-identification, their tactics, behavior, ideology and language align with those of the sovereign citizen movement. As the saying goes, "As a thing acts, so it is."

In addition to in-person seminars (\$150 to \$200 per person), ASNs also purchase materials through websites and via social media. One popular product for sale is the "Freedom Bundle," priced between \$175 to \$500. [4] This bundle contains a set of documents purported to help individuals move "into the private" and gain "standing." Individuals complete these forms and send specific documents to courts and certain government agencies. Pima County, Arizona, has become a preferred location for ASNs to file their documentation, attracting submissions from individuals who do not reside in the state.

For ASNs, recording their documents signifies the repudiation of their U.S. citizenship, thereby ending any "contract" with the U.S. government. They believe this action exempts them from the jurisdiction of all U.S. laws and codes, rendering them immune to government interference in their lives. Despite the lack of merit or legitimacy in these ideas, this ideology is currently being taught and embraced by ASNs.

Passports: Coming to a traffic stop near you

Leaders of the ASN teach that acquiring a United States passport is one of the steps to becoming an ASN. They instruct followers to apply for "non-national citizen" passports, which they believe officially recognize their status as ASNs by the U.S. Department of State. [4] They also believe that the passport holder has been placed on a special "Do not detain, do not interrogate list," and as a special bonus, the passport holder now has a concealed weapon permit valid in all 50 states [4] that cannot be revoked. However, there is no evidence to support these claims.

Followers also believe that possessing this special U.S. passport grants them diplomatic immunity, an entirely baseless notion. None of the teachings related to this special passport are valid or real, yet ASNs believe in them and act accordingly. There is a growing trend of ASNs presenting these passports to law enforcement when asked for identification during traffic stops. Encountering someone offering their passport in such a situation is an indicator you may be dealing with an ASN.

The issue of the special U.S. passport played a role in a high-profile incident in Farmington, Utah, in March 2023, which resulted in the fatal shooting of Chase Allen. During a traffic stop, for an illegal ASN-themed license plate, Allen presented a passport to law enforcement after refusing to provide his driver's license. He made several claims about the passport, including his belief that police were not authorized to stop him and that he was "on your list," presumably referring to the internal "Do not detain" list referenced above. [4] Allen engaged in a prolonged argument with law enforcement officers and refused to exit his vehicle. The situation escalated when officers attempted to remove him

from the vehicle, ultimately leading the officers to fatally shoot Allen after he appeared to be reaching for his gun. Prosecutors later declined to file any charges against the five officers involved citing “no reasonable possibility of conviction.” [5] Allen’s death is a major source of anger within the ASN community.

ASNs view police officers as “policy enforcement agents” tasked with arresting “code breakers.” This perspective aligns with the belief, common among sovereign citizen ideology, that law enforcement officials serve the “corporation” of the United States. ASNs believe that by filing certain paperwork, they have exempted themselves from the need to adhere to any U.S. codes or laws and act in accordance with these beliefs. Consequently, ASNs do not respect law enforcement and deny they have authority or jurisdiction over them.

ASNs believe that police officers need to be educated about the law, particularly concerning the ASN’s God-given “right to travel.” Some ASNs have proposed conducting training sessions for all police officers to disseminate their beliefs. They also see traffic stops as opportunities for re-educating police by presenting officers with paperwork, which ASNs carry in their vehicles. A leader of the group markets a binder of materials for \$199, which includes the “right to travel” documents designed to be handed directly to police.

If an ASN receives a ticket from a law enforcement official, they are advised to “rescind” the ticket within 72 hours. This rescission can be attempted either by visiting the police department in person or by mailing the ticket back to the police with a specific phrase written across it at a 45° angle in red ink. Those phrases include: “72-hour right of rescission; your offer to contract [with me] is not accepted while traveling in private. I provided a passport, not a license title 18 section 241 and 242.”

Recommendations for law enforcement when encountering sovereign citizens

When a police officer encounters a sovereign citizen during a traffic stop, they are not dealing with an ordinary citizen. These encounters are far from typical due to the unique ideology of the sovereign citizen or anyone adopting similar beliefs, regardless of the label they might use. For myriad reasons, “sovereign citizens” choose to live and act outside the law. They reject the legitimacy of the United States government, its laws and court system. They consider themselves immune to all United States laws and believe they are not subject to the authority of law enforcement officers or judges in a courtroom.

Sovereign citizens are neither confused nor misled; they are firmly convinced in their beliefs. When a police officer attempts to explain or clarify the law, it is not just a futile effort but can also exacerbate the situation by further antagonizing the sovereign citizen. Sovereign citizens are entirely certain of their correctness and equally convinced that all police officers are not only mistaken but also in dire

need of education on sovereign citizen ideology. They feel resentful and become agitated and angry when stopped by a police officer, believing the stop to be illegal and a waste of their time.

Sovereign citizens argue they do not need a driver's license because they are not "driving" in the legal sense but "traveling." They reject the explanation from law enforcement that operating a vehicle is a privilege that requires licensing, insisting that what they are using is not a car but a "personal conveyance." They may concede that a driver's license is necessary, but only for those engaged in commercial driving. This belief is why many of their unauthorized license plates bear the inscription "private not for hire," indicating their stance that they are not subject to the same regulations as commercial drivers.

After years of intensive study of sovereign citizens, there has never been a recorded instance where a sovereign citizen has expressed gratitude to an officer for correcting their misconceptions. Rather, their interactions with law enforcement typically involve derogatory remarks about the officer's intelligence, threats of lethal action, and refusal to comply with basic commands such as exiting the vehicle, verbally identifying themselves, or presenting a license or any form of identification.

In more extreme cases, these encounters have escalated to violence against law enforcement officers, including being dragged by vehicles, biting off fingers, and, tragically, the killing of officers. [6] This pattern of behavior underscores the profound challenges and dangers law enforcement faces when engaging with individuals who identify with the sovereign citizen movement.

Understanding the behavior and ideology of sovereign citizens is crucial for ensuring the safety of law enforcement officers. A common tactic among sovereign citizens during traffic stops is to only lower their vehicle window a minimal amount, often just an inch or two. This significantly hampers communication, frequently leading the officer to turn their head to one side and bring an ear closer to the narrow opening to hear better. However, this action compromises the officer's ability to maintain visual contact with the sovereign citizen, thereby increasing the officer's vulnerability. Given the risk this poses, it may be advisable to consider changes in laws or policies to mitigate such dangers, ensuring officers can maintain both clear communication and visual observation during these encounters.

Adjustments in laws or policies might also be needed to address the issue of excessively prolonged traffic stops, which often involve multiple police vehicles and numerous officers. Sovereign citizens are frequently instructed to request a supervisor's presence, complicating the situation further by insisting on speaking only with the elected Sheriff. Additionally, it's not uncommon for sovereign citizens to call 911 during the stop, requesting more police officers to prevent what they claim to be the theft of their cars and their own kidnapping by the officers currently on the scene. Such tactics not only strain law enforcement resources but also escalate tensions, suggesting a need for policy revisions to streamline these encounters and reduce risks for all involved.

Revising the training or policies governing police officers may indeed be necessary to more effectively handle encounters with sovereign citizens. Sovereign citizens often try to “adjudicate” their case from the onset of a traffic stop, presenting a confusing mix of legal jargon and irrelevant laws in what can be described as a “law-word salad.”

Unfortunately, officers frequently engage in these arguments, inadvertently prolonging the traffic stop and escalating the sovereign citizen’s frustration, anger and rage. Numerous videos show officers repeating legal requirements — such as the necessity to identify oneself during a traffic stop — over 30 times, or instructing sovereign citizens to exit their vehicles with similar repetition.

Since police officers represent the executive branch of government and not the judicial branch, it might be more appropriate to reserve legal debates for the courtroom. A potential strategy for officers could be to revert to the traditional but effective response of “tell it to the judge” when faced with legal arguments from sovereign citizens. This approach could help de-escalate situations by avoiding fruitless debates during traffic stops and emphasizing that legal disputes are to be resolved within the judicial system, not at the roadside.

NEXT: [Learning from deadly LE encounters in rural America](#)

References

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Dr. Christine M. Sarteschi, LCSW, is a Full Professor of Social Work and Criminology. Her current research efforts focus on extremist groups and individuals including sovereign citizens and QAnon. Christine is the author of “[Sovereign Citizens: A Psychological and Criminological Analysis](#).” She also has written articles published in scholarly journals as well as the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, Just

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