

Your vehicle, from the moment you walk toward it to the moment you park it again, is a full cycle of exposure. Parking structures, open lots, intersections, gas stations, drive-throughs — each has its own risk profile, and most people move through all of them on autopilot. This reference breaks down every phase.

Why Vehicles Are Targeted

Isolation. The moment you reach your car, the social buffer of other people disappears. Transition zones are where predators operate.

Predictability. Same spot, same time, same route. A predator doesn't need to be sophisticated. They need to watch you once or twice.

False security. The brain registers 'enclosed space' and downshifts. That psychological exhale — shoulders dropping, phone coming out — is the gap.

Phase 1: The Parking Decision

SENTINEL: Scan

- **Light over convenience.** Choose spots where you can see and be seen — overhead lights, building lights, street lights. Think about what the lighting will look like when you return after dark.
- **Visibility.** Avoid spots flanked by large vehicles, vans, or walls. If you can't see around your car from a distance, that's a problem.
- **Camera coverage.** Spots near entrances, exits, and elevators tend to be better covered — deterrence and evidence.
- **Back in.** Takes three seconds. Gives you a clear forward-facing exit and means you're not reversing blind into a lane while stressed.

Phase 2: The Approach

SENTINEL: Evaluate

- **Head up, keys ready.** Hold keys firm and quiet — not dangling, not jingling. Unlock and enter without fumbling.
- **Walk the open lane.** Move in the driving lane, not between parked vehicles. Keep distance from pillars and anything blocking your sightlines.
- **Parking structures.** Let your eyes adjust to the light change before moving in. Rushing from bright daylight into a dim structure leaves you functionally blind for several seconds.
- **Check behind you.** Every 15–20 steps, a calm deliberate look over your shoulder. This gives you information and signals to anyone watching that you are aware. Predators prefer unaware targets.

Phase 3: The Vehicle Check

SENTINEL: Neutralize Risk

- **Don't unlock yet.** From a few steps away: check the ground around the vehicle, through the windows into the back seat, and for anything placed on the windshield, hood, or attached to the car.
- **Anything unusual?** Don't stop to deal with it in the lot. Get in, lock, drive to a well-lit populated area. Objects placed on vehicles are a known lure — they keep you standing outside, distracted, for 15–30 seconds.

Phase 4: The First Ten Seconds

SENTINEL: Neutralize Risk

- **Get in. Lock. Go.** This is the most exploited window in vehicle safety. The moment between entry and departure — physically inside but not yet in motion, not yet locked. Your guard drops; that's exactly when it shouldn't.
- **Everything else waits.** Don't organize your bag, check messages, adjust mirrors, or sit with the door open. All of that happens after doors are locked and engine is running. Every second stationary with doors unlocked is unnecessary exposure.

Phase 5: In Transit

SENTINEL: Track Intent

- **Leave a gap at stops.** See their rear tires touching the pavement. That gap is your escape route — enough room to steer out if someone approaches or a situation develops. Bumper-to-bumper turns your vehicle into a cage.
- **Approaches at intersections.** Windows up, doors locked. No obligation to engage. If the approach feels wrong, use your gap and move. You don't need to wait for the light.
- **If you think you're being followed.** Don't go home. Make four consecutive turns in the same direction — if the vehicle is still behind you, drive to a police station, fire station, or busy commercial area. Call 911 while driving if needed.

Phase 6: Transition Stops

SENTINEL: Evaluate

- **Gas stations.** Doors locked while you pump. Stand facing outward — see your surroundings, not the pump screen. Never leave your car running with keys inside while you go in to pay.
- **Drive-throughs.** You're stationary, boxed in, with vehicles in front and behind — a low-escape, low-visibility channel for several minutes. Late at night especially, if something feels off, it's fine to pull out of line.

The Underlying Principle

Your vehicle is safest when it is moving. Every moment it's stationary — parked, stopped in traffic, sitting at a gas pump, idling in a drive-through — you are in a fixed position someone else can plan around. Feeling safe and being safe are not the same thing. Awareness is not anxiety. It's information.

Quick Reference Checklist

- **Park smart.** Back in. Choose light over convenience. Avoid being boxed in by large vehicles.
- **Approach aware.** Head up, keys ready. Walk in the open, not between rows. Check your surroundings.
- **Check your vehicle.** Quick visual sweep before you unlock. Anything unusual on or around the car? Don't deal with it there.
- **Get in. Lock. Go.** The first ten seconds are the most dangerous. Don't sit idle with doors unlocked.
- **Leave space in traffic.** See their tires, keep your exit. Don't let yourself get boxed in at lights.
- **Monitor in transit.** If something feels wrong, don't go home. Drive to a public place or police station.
- **Stay sharp at stops.** Gas stations, drive-throughs, and parking lots are transition zones. Treat them that way.