

## 15.5 Did the Officer Have Grounds to Arrest or Search?

- A. Probable Cause
  - B. Circumstances Requiring Arrest Warrant and Other Limits on Arrest Authority
  - C. Circumstances Requiring Search Warrant
  - D. Consent
- 

## 15.5 Did the Officer Have Grounds to Arrest or Search?

### A. Probable Cause

**Required for arrest or search.** Although reasonable suspicion is sufficient to support an officer's initial stop and certain investigative actions during the stop, an officer must have probable cause to make an arrest or probable cause or consent to search for evidence. *See, e.g., State v. Joe*, 222 N.C. App. 206 (2012) (officers did not have probable cause to arrest, and evidence discovered as a result of illegal arrest suppressed); *State v. Wise*, 117 N.C. App. 105 (1994) (officer lawfully stopped vehicle for speeding and lawfully patted down defendant, but officer lacked probable cause to open non-transparent aspirin bottle that officer found on defendant); *State v. Pittman*, 111 N.C. App. 808 (1993) (initial encounter was consensual and subsequent stop was supported by reasonable suspicion, but officers did not have probable cause to search). *Compare Maryland v. Pringle*, 540 U.S. 366 (2003) (where evidence in a car with multiple occupants indicated involvement in drug dealing and no occupants claimed ownership of the contraband, officers had probable cause to arrest each occupant).

**Scope of search.** The permissible scope of a search depends on whether the officers have probable cause to arrest or probable cause to search. For a further discussion of whether officers have probable cause to arrest or search and the permissible scope of the search, including in drug cases, see *infra* § 15.6, Did the Officer Act within the Scope of the Arrest or Search?

### B. Circumstances Requiring Arrest Warrant and Other Limits on Arrest Authority

**Arrest warrant.** Usually, when an officer develops probable cause to arrest during a stop, the officer may make the arrest without a warrant. In some instances, however, a warrant may be required. An officer who has probable cause to arrest for a criminal offense may make an arrest without a warrant in the following circumstances: (a) the crime is committed in the officer's presence; or (b) the crime was not committed by the person in the officer's presence but (i) the crime is a felony; (ii) the crime is one of certain listed misdemeanors; or (iii) the crime is a misdemeanor and, unless arrested immediately, the person will not be apprehended or may cause physical injury or property damage. *See* G.S. 15A-401(b) (also authorizing warrantless arrest for violation of pretrial release conditions).

**Violations not subject to arrest.** The U.S. Supreme Court has held that officers do not violate the Fourth Amendment if they have probable cause to make an arrest for a criminal offense even if state law does not authorize an arrest for that offense. *See Virginia v. Moore*, 553 U.S. 164 (2008) (Virginia law enforcement officers who had probable cause to arrest defendant for a misdemeanor did not violate Fourth Amendment when they arrested him and conducted search incident to arrest although state law did not authorize an arrest); *see also Atwater v. City of Lago Vista*, 532 U.S. 318 (2001) (Fourth Amendment does not bar officer from making warrantless arrest for criminal offense punishable by fine only, in this case a seat belt violation, a misdemeanor under Texas law).

An arrest permitted by the U.S. Constitution but in violation of North Carolina law may still be subject to suppression under G.S. 15A-974. Under North Carolina law, an officer has no authority to arrest for infractions, such as seat belt violations, which are noncriminal violations of law in North Carolina. *See* G.S. 15A-1113; FARB at 88–89 (noting limitation). An arrest for a noncriminal infraction also may violate the U.S. Constitution. *See Moore*, 553 U.S. 164 (U.S. Constitution authorizes arrest for minor misdemeanors; Court does not address noncriminal infractions).

An officer has no authority to arrest for a wildlife violation, whether a misdemeanor or infraction, by an out-of-state resident if the other state is a member of the interstate wildlife compact, the person agrees to comply with the terms of any citation, and the person provides adequate identification. *See* G.S. 113-300.6, art. III.

For a further discussion of the effect of state law violations, see *supra* § 14.5, Substantial Violations of Criminal Procedure Act.

### **C. Circumstances Requiring Search Warrant**

**For search of person.** If officers have probable cause to arrest a person, they may search the person incident to arrest without a warrant. For cases discussing probable cause to arrest and potential limits on a search of a person incident to arrest, see *infra* § 15.6B, Search Incident to Arrest; § 15.6C, Other Limits on Searches Incident to Arrest.

If officers have probable cause to search a person, but not arrest him or her, the officers must have exigent circumstances to conduct the search without a warrant. For a discussion of exigent circumstances and potential limits on searches, see *infra* § 15.6D, Probable Cause to Search Person.

**For search of vehicle.** Generally, if officers have probable cause to search a vehicle, they may search without a warrant. Where a vehicle is parked within the curtilage of a home, however, a search warrant may be required. *Collins v. Virginia*, \_\_\_ U.S. \_\_\_, 138 S. Ct. 1663 (2018) (holding that the automobile exception does not apply to warrantless entries of a residence or its curtilage; officer needed search warrant to approach covered vehicle parked in the driveway of the defendant’s home). For a discussion of probable cause to

search a vehicle and limits on such searches, see *infra* § 15.6E, Probable Cause to Search Vehicle.

#### D. Consent

Officers may search without probable cause and without a warrant if they obtain consent. For various reasons a purported consent to search may be invalid or insufficient.

**Effect of illegal detention.** If a person is detained illegally, a consent to search obtained thereafter is subject to suppression on two potential grounds. First, the consent is generally considered the fruit of the poisonous tree because the consent is obtained as a result of the illegal seizure. See generally *Wong Sun v. United States*, 371 U.S. 471 (1963); see also *supra* § 14.2G, “Fruits” of Illegal Search or Arrest. Second, the consent may be involuntary in the totality of the circumstances, including the circumstances surrounding the illegal detention.

**Length of detention.** Officers may not unduly detain a person for the purpose of requesting consent to search. See *supra* § 15.4E, Nature, Length, and Purpose of Detention.

**Clarity of consent.** “There must be a clear and unequivocal consent” to authorize a consent search. *State v. Pearson*, 348 N.C. 272, 277 (1988) (consent to search of car was not consent to search of person; acquiescence to frisk when officer told defendant he was going to frisk him also was not consent to search).

**Voluntariness of consent.** Consent must be voluntary. See *Schneckloth v. Bustamonte*, 412 U.S. 218 (1973) (voluntariness determined from totality of circumstances); *State v. Crenshaw*, 144 N.C. App. 574 (2001) (State has burden of proving voluntariness); *United States v. Guerrero*, 374 F.3d 584 (8th Cir. 2004) (reasonable officer would not have believed that Spanish-speaking driver knowingly and voluntarily consented to search of his car; driver’s signature on consent-to-search form written in Spanish was not sufficient); *United States v. Worley*, 193 F.3d 380 (6th Cir. 1999) (defendant did not give voluntary consent when he said, “You’ve got the badge, I guess you can” in response to officer’s request to search); see also *supra* § 14.2H, Invalid Consent.

A threat to obtain a search warrant may affect the voluntariness of consent in some circumstances. See Jeff Welty, [Consent to Search under Threat of Search Warrant](#), N.C. CRIM. L., UNC SCH. OF GOV’T BLOG (Nov. 10, 2010) (observing that threat alone may not render consent involuntary but may be considered as part of totality of circumstances); 4 LFAVE, SEARCH AND SEIZURE § 8.2(c), at 87–94 (indicating circumstances in which such a threat may render a consent involuntary).

*Miranda* warnings are not required on a request for consent to search. See *State v. Cummings*, 188 N.C. App. 598 (2008) (so holding in reliance on federal cases, in which courts reasoned that request for consent to search does not constitute interrogation for *Miranda* purposes because the giving of consent is not an incriminating statement).

**Authority to consent.** The person must have authority to consent or, at least, the officer must reasonably believe the person has authority. *See Illinois v. Rodriguez*, 497 U.S. 177 (1990) (officers must reasonably believe person has authority to give consent); G.S. 15A-222 (to same effect); *see also Georgia v. Randolph*, 547 U.S. 103 (2006) (consent to search home by one resident over the objection of another resident invalid).

Whether an officer's belief is reasonable depends on the facts of each case. *See State v. Jones*, 161 N.C. App. 615 (2003) (after seeing police, defendant entered car, removed his jacket, put it on back seat, and then exited, wearing t-shirt in freezing winter weather; driver had authority to give consent to search entire car, including jacket left by defendant); *State v. McDaniels*, 103 N.C. App. 175 (1991) (passenger failed to object when driver consented to search of car and contents; search of contents upheld), *aff'd per curiam*, 331 N.C. 112 (1992); *compare United States v. Purcell*, 526 F.3d 953 (6th Cir. 2008) (female's apparent authority to consent to search of luggage dissipated once officers realized that luggage contained only male's effects). *See also* 4 LAFAVE, SEARCH AND SEIZURE § 8.3(g), at 237–58 (discussing significance of reasonable but mistaken belief by police that third party has authority over place searched).

*See also infra* “Passenger belongings” in § 15.6C, Other Limits on Searches Incident to Arrest; “Passenger belongings” in § 15.6E, Probable Cause to Search Vehicle.

**Scope of consent.** General consent does not necessarily extend to all places within the area to be searched. *See Florida v. Jimeno*, 500 U.S. 248 (1991) (consent to general search of car would lead reasonable officer to believe that consent extended to unlocked containers that might hold object of search); *State v. Stone*, 362 N.C. 50 (2007) (officer exceeded scope of consent by pulling sweat pants away from defendant's body and shining flashlight on defendant's groin area); *State v. Pearson*, 348 N.C. 272 (1998) (defendant's consent to search of car did not authorize search of his person); *State v. Duncan*, 272 N.C. App. 341, (2020) (officer exceeded scope of consent to weapons frisk by conducting a full search of defendant's pockets); *State v. Johnson*, 177 N.C. App. 122 (2006) (consent to search of van did not authorize officer to pry open wall panel of van; general consent did not include intentional infliction of damage to vehicle), *vacated in part on other grounds*, 360 N.C. 541 (2006) (vacating portion of opinion finding that officers lacked probable cause, independent of consent, to pry open wall panel and remanding case to trial court for further findings of fact); *see also* Jeff Welty, [Scope of Consent to Search a Vehicle](#), N.C. CRIM. L., UNC SCH. OF GOV'T BLOG (Mar. 15, 2012) (suggesting that consent to search vehicle does not authorize damaging of vehicle).

**Withdrawal of consent.** A person may withdraw consent at any time before completion of the search. *See* 4 LAFAVE, SEARCH AND SEIZURE § 8.1(c), at 52–58. Before withdrawal of consent, however, officers may have uncovered sufficient evidence to justify continuing the search regardless of the presence or absence of consent.