

How to Protect Yourself When Covering a Protest

Before the Protest

1 Do your homework ahead of time.

Identify potential threats and prepare for them.

2 Find a lawyer who will be available while you are reporting.

Keep the phone number for a local criminal lawyer and bail bondsman handy (e.g., on a business card or written on your arm so you do not have to unlock your phone in the presence of police) and make sure the lawyer will be available to take your call. Contact the Reporters Committee's hotline for assistance in finding an attorney.

3 Research the location of the protest and nearby police precincts.

Give the phone numbers for those precincts to your attorney, who can call there to find you if you become unresponsive to phone calls or texts in the event you are arrested.

4 Identify who may be adversarial to the press.

If it may be protesters, stand apart from the crowd and closer to police, clearly identifying yourself as press. If you are concerned about police, stay closer to the crowd. However, use your best judgment.

5 Research riot control tactics in the area and bring personal protective equipment as appropriate.

Check with local police to make sure your equipment is permitted, at least for journalists (e.g., if you expect pepper spray or tear gas, bring a full-face gas mask; if you expect rubber bullets, bring body armor, a helmet and a trauma kit).

6 Plan for kettling.

If you anticipate kettling, bring your attorney's phone number so you can report it and so your attorney can contact the police to try to get you out of the kettle. Bring water, snacks, a medical kit and additional layers of clothing in case the weather changes.

7 Team up with another reporter.

Reporting alone is dangerous, particularly if you are operating a camera or video camera and are observing your surroundings from behind a viewfinder.

*If you have questions about covering a protest or your legal rights as a journalist, contact the Reporters Committee's Legal Defense Hotline at **800-336-4243** or **hotline@rcfp.org**.*

How to Protect Yourself When Covering a Protest

At the Protest

- 1 Bring a government-issued ID and cash.**

This can speed up processing if you are arrested and will enable you to pay for a bail bond.
- 2 Present yourself as a journalist and wear press credentials prominently.**

To avoid being mistaken for a protester, use your best judgment and try not to wear clothing that matches what protesters are wearing (e.g., all black). Also, engage with police before the protest so they know who you are and may be less likely to arrest you. However, use your best judgment under the circumstances. In some cases, police and protesters have targeted journalists.
- 3 Be aware of the situation and avoid breaking the law.**

Set the timer on your phone to go off every 15 minutes to remind you to look around, identify exits, assess police interactions with protesters, determine whether the situation is escalating, and whether you may be doing something illegal, such as trespassing on private property. This is especially important for photographers and videographers whose view is often limited.
- 4 If police issue a dispersal order or give any other directives, promptly comply and prominently display your press credentials.**

If you encounter a problem, contact your attorney.
- 5 If police stop you, politely explain that you are covering the protest as a journalist and show your press credentials.**

Record your interaction with police, if possible, so you have documentation of what happened in case you are later charged with a crime. If you are arrested, contact your attorney or the Reporters Committee's hotline as soon as possible. If you are working with another journalist, ask that person to notify your attorney and editor, as well as take your cellphone, camera or other work product or equipment for safekeeping.
- 6 If police ask to search or seize your equipment, you do not have to consent.**

The Fourth Amendment protects you from unreasonable searches and seizures, and the Privacy Protection Act of 1980 restricts law enforcement from searching for and seizing a journalist's work product and documentary materials. Rehearse your response in advance. You can say something like "I'm a journalist, and my equipment and its contents belong to my company. If you want to access it, you will first need to contact their attorney."