

## Protest Safety: Some Basics

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### Prepare Mentally

Think in advance about your own tolerances for risk, injury, and emotional engagement. Know that protesting may test some of your tolerances. Remember that this is OK and can help you become stronger and more self-aware.

Know that violence at U.S. protests is (currently) the exception, not the rule. Also, remember that choosing to protest does not mean you forfeit your right to safety or due process.

Clarify your specific **role**. Are you a leader or a follower? Are you in an official protector role, or simply hoping to step up in the event of problems? Are you engaging in debate, protest, or civil disobedience? You might expect to deploy your skills differently in each case.

### Gather Information

Find out who is organizing the protest and what actions are planned. If there are marshals or other on-the-ground leaders, make sure you can identify them and are comfortable following their instructions.

Ask if there are legal groups who will help protesters if arrests occur. If so, write their number on your arm or somewhere else you can't lose it.

Assess the protest site/march route ahead of time. Look at a map if you haven't been there before. How will you get in and out? Where are the safest places to go if there is trouble? Where can you seek medical help, food, shelter, water, and bathrooms?

Check the weather and prepare for a range of conditions.

Make sure someone who won't be at the protest knows where you are and when to expect you back.

Plan a way to connect with your group if separated. Don't just rely on cell phone contact, and don't rely on your phone to remember people's numbers—write them down. Designate a meeting place and check-in time(s).

### At the Protest

Use common sense: Bring funds for cab or bus fare, not a ton of cash. Secure your wallet. Wear purse straps across your body, not just over one arm. Wear comfortable shoes. Bring a water bottle and any medications you need.

At the protest, monitor traffic patterns and the pulse of the event. Be alert for crowding or shoving, direct confrontations (verbal or physical), shifting police barricades, and other changes to the terrain and mood.

Notice where the paths to safety are, and how they change depending on your location and the movement of the crowd.



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Remember that violence prevention skills work best when they are used early in a conflict. A few friendly words or a simple reminder of the protest's goals are the skills you're most likely to use, and the most likely to be successful at preventing violence.

If you notice individuals actively trying to start trouble—shoving people into others, or provoking cops—bring them to the attention of safety officials. Agitators may desist if a sufficient number of people make it clear that they are unwelcome ("We're not going to use violence. Please leave").

### **If Problems Arise**

If things grow chaotic, make a decision about whether to leave or stay. Don't feel bad about leaving. You can always come back later if it seems safe.

If you or others with you are especially vulnerable (children, elderly, mobility impaired, etc.), GET OUT.

If staying, identify potential exit routes in multiple directions (look 360 degrees around you). Note the hazards and obstacles: dead ends, bottlenecks like gates, bridges or doorways, police blockades.

If you choose to stay or cannot get out, decide on a role you can fill: Witness? Recorder? De-escalator? Intervener? Obstructor? It's OK to change your role as the situation develops. The point is to assert some agency, and not let yourself be swept up in events around you.

In a crowd, you want to avoid falling down or being compressed against walls or other people. Keep your wits about you and your feet beneath you.

### **Reflecting and Sharing**

After the protest, check in with others who participated and compare experiences. What did you observe and learn?

Normalize dissent. Share your experiences. We can build support for protest by talking about it as a rewarding, positive experience.

Share what you learn about effective safety practices during protest. We're all learning as we go.

For more detailed information, see

- Know Your Rights: Free Speech, Protests & Demonstrations (ACLU) (<https://www.aclunc.org/our-work/know-your-rights/free-speech-protests-demonstrations>)
- Search and seizure (EFF) (<https://www.eff.org/issues/know-your-rights>)
- Protest smartphone tips (<https://popularresistance.org/how-to-use-your-smartphone-in-a-protest/>)
- Tactical Nonviolence: philosophy & methods (Bruce Hartford) (<http://www.crmvet.org/info/nv2.htm>)
- Crowd psychology and safety (<http://www.festivalinsights.com/2015/07/bringing-crowdpsychology-event-safety-management/>)
- Activist's Guide to Basic First Aid (<http://www.urban75.org/mayday/safety.html>)
- Pepper Spray & Tear Gas: Avoiding, Protection, Remedies (<http://www.blackcrosscollective.org/page10.html>)



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