

Protest Safety: Some Basics

This handout is intended for novice protesters. 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>)
- How to use your smartphone in a protest (<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-crowd-psychology-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>)

Basic skills

- 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.
- Learn and practice basic skills in **boundary setting** (<http://thousandwaves.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Boundary-Setting.pdf>), **de-escalation** (<http://thousandwaves.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/De-escalation.pdf>), and **intervention** (<http://thousandwaves.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Intervention.pdf>). These are useful in all facets of your life but can be especially helpful in the emotionally charged atmosphere of a protest.
- 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.

Planning and reconnaissance

- 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).

- 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.

On the ground

- 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.
- Watch out for individuals actively trying to start trouble—shoving people into others, provoking cops. Agitators usually circulate and try to disrupt at multiple points. Ignore or avoid them or try setting a verbal boundary ("We're not going to use violence! Go away!").

If trouble arises

- 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 or mobility impaired, for example), 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. Public demands for redress are an integral part of American history and civic life; 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.