

How to Survive Anti-Police Protests

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Contents

Gearing Up	3
Medic!	5
Press Pass	5
Legal Protections	6
Acceptable Risk	6
Shane Burley	7

At about 9:45 pm on August 1, protesters in Portland, Oregon, heard a familiar warning: “This event has been declared an unlawful assembly,” police said over their loudspeaker system. “Failure to comply with this lawful order may subject you to arrest and the use of force, to include crowd control munitions.”

This was the 65th night of continuous protests in Portland, which began after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The police response in Portland has been notably aggressive, particularly against journalists, who have routinely been attacked by police night after night. When federal officers entered the city under orders from Trump, ostensibly to protect the federal buildings, the protest crowds only swelled as a shocking level of police violence mirrored the problems activists were trying to highlight.

A couple of days before, the federal officers had been withdrawn, prompting people to wonder if this meant the violence against protesters would recede. But without apparent provocation on August 1, riot police lined up across from the crowd at the Multnomah County Sheriff’s office and charged, beating demonstrators and spraying pepper spray.

Zippy Lomax, an independent journalist who has been documenting the protests for the past two months, attempted to follow the dispersal order by leaving in her car, but was stopped by the police.

“Then they slashed my tires and smashed my window. After I had already stopped moving. I was clearly in compliance,” she said. Video confirms this, and police argue that she was refusing to disperse and blocking the area. Over the next couple of hours, protesters and reporters were chased through the streets, tackled to the ground, and shoved from behind for not running fast enough.

Injuries due to police violence have become a regular part of a protest that is drawing tens of thousands into the streets of Portland. While this West Coast city has earned a lot of media attention, solidarity protests and Black Lives Matter events are happening around the country with similar reaction from law enforcement. Trump’s approach to federal enforcement has made these situations even more volatile.

Now, journalists and protesters are asking what they can do to stay safe as they head into the streets for one of the most contentious political issues of their lifetimes.

Gearing Up

“Press always have to be up front to the action, [photographers] have to often be literally in between the ‘battle lines’ — and so we have to be looking for things coming from both sides,” says Zach Roberts, a photojournalist covering the protests in Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia. “Which is why no matter what head protection you get it [*must*] have protection that covers the back of your head well.”

On July 12, Donovan LaBella was nonviolently protesting across from Portland’s Justice Center when federal officers fired a munition at his head, shattering his skull and sending him to the hospital with a traumatic brain injury. The shocking videos of LaBella falling to the ground with blood pouring from his head reflected the general pattern of extreme police violence.

Many protesters are protecting themselves with bike or sports helmets, but these may not be enough. “Bump” helmets, which are often used during rock climbing, can take some shrapnel and hits from blunt objects like batons. While these are relatively inexpensive (often under \$100),

they may not provide enough protection for a direct hit from a police munition. Instead, some protesters choose to spend more money to get a level “IIIA” helmet, a designation which means the helmet can block bullets from smaller caliber guns.

IIIA helmets must be “NIJ certified,” which means that the National Institute of Justice, which tests ballistic objects like helmets and body armor, has signed off on its efficacy. Many online sellers do not keep these helmets in stock and it can take a couple of months to backorder from the manufacturer, so check shipping times. Military surplus stores often provide refurbished army or police tactical helmets at lower prices.

Bulletproof vests won’t stop physical assaults, but the Kevlar and plating can help shield vital organs from bullets. “Soft armor” is commonly used, which can protect against some bullets but is not a full-scale protection against physical assaults, and these are the Kevlar “bullet proof vests” people are most familiar with. “Hard armor” is bulky, heavy and expensive, but may protect against punches, blunt objects and hand-to-hand assaults.

Goggles that seal over the eyes are one of the most important pieces of protection from tear gas. However, these are usually not rated for ballistics, so they are not effective for blocking police munitions. On the other hand, some ballistic goggles (the “Z87” rating is good, though it’s still a civilian standard rather than a military one) are not always able to block tear gas, but those used by forest firefighters are designed for protecting against smoke and explosions.

The most important thing is to avoid breathing in tear gas, which is why a majority of protesters are using some type of breathing equipment. A gas mask is the most comprehensive (and expensive) option, though most people have used respirators. These range from partial to full-face coverings with comprehensive filters that are designed to block out “organic vapor/acid gas,” usually from construction projects involving toxic fumes or dust. Respirators are easy to purchase, filters and all, for under \$75 (though many are sold out due to higher demand during the coronavirus pandemic). Military surplus masks should be avoided because they often have glass eyepieces, and could explode into your eye if struck by police munition. This is exactly what happened to freelance photographer Trip Jennings when he was photographing a Portland protest. If you have glasses, a full gas mask may be a good option, and some respirators have full face coverings as well. It is best to shave facial hair before using these devices, particularly respirators, so they can form a seal on the wearer’s face. (Vaseline can help.)

“Here’s the issue: if you choose to stand and fight, there’s an inherent acceptance of risk,” says Louis Deutsch, a reporter covering the protests in Hong Kong, who is using a pseudonym to avoid state retaliation. He recommends long pants and sleeves, pads that go under the clothes, boots instead of shoes, and notes that many of the defensive shields that protesters are using are reframed by police as “offensive” weapons and used as a pretext to assault protesters. “[Defensive] gear is being treated as offensive intent. Any shield strong enough to really protect you will be stiff and heavy enough that you could clock someone with it and get a charge.”

The fear is that a protester who is using a shield entirely to protect themselves from police assaults could be arrested and charged with some type of violent intent, which is why it is hard to make the case that a shield is always going to be interpreted by authorities as defensive and, therefore, acceptable.

Medic!

Injuries from police behavior have become common, especially with regards to tear gas. In advance of the protest, avoid wearing contact lenses because pepper spray can get behind the lens. When tear gassed or pepper sprayed, leave the space quickly and flush out your eyes. Some people use a cocktail including the antacid Maalox to wash out their eyes, but it is important to ensure there are no flavorings such as mint or dyes. Never use milk, as it can get unwanted bacteria into your eyes.

“The most important thing is to try and get the chemicals out of your eyes and mouth, and to keep breathing. Slow deep breaths as best as you’re able, trying to keep in mind that the effects will slowly wear off,” says Nate Cohen, a Portland-based protest medic who has specialized training in treating injuries. Cohen was himself hit directly in the chest, just above his heart, with a tear gas canister and was treated for severe chest wall contusion and laceration.

“Wipe your face off with a clean towel or rag if you can. When you get home, take off the clothes you’re wearing before you go into your house,” says Cohen. “Take a shower, with the water as cold as you can stand for several minutes, and wash with soap, ideally as simple as possible. Basic bar soap that doesn’t have perfume or other chemicals is best. Put your clothes in a garbage bag and take them to the washer, and wash them.”

Another big issue is the physical impact from police attacks themselves, particularly blunt-force trauma to the head, even if the victim is wearing a helmet, as police have been attacking protesters and reporters heavily with metal batons. Recently, a video showed a Navy veteran trying to reason with the police before they struck him in the chest and arm, shattering bone and leaving him in need of surgery.

“If someone gets hit in the head, the first thing they need to do is focus on staying calm and taking nice, slow, deep breaths. Have someone assess the injury. Head wounds bleed excessively, so the presence of blood does not necessarily indicate a serious injury,” says Alli Sayre, an EMT [Emergency Medical Technician] who has been attending the Portland protests and has witnessed police dispersals. “If there is serious bleeding, apply continuous pressure to the wound. If they are feeling dizzy, like they are going to pass out, nauseated or are vomiting, the best thing to do is get them evaluated by EMS [Emergency Medical Services]. Stay with them and have a few people help you walk them to a safe location where you can meet with EMS.”

Locating street medics in advance, who often wear red crosses to identify themselves, can help to speed up reaction times if an emergency does happen. Police usually do not attend to injured protesters directly, so identifying trained people inside of the protest crowd may be the fastest way to get an injury attended to and transport the injured person to a hospital for further treatment.

Press Pass

Reporters should wear identification such as “PRESS” on their helmets and clothes. Press passes — laminates that hang around your neck with your photo — are critical. Staff reporters can get these from their employer, but independent journalists have to improvise. Professional organizations and unions, like the National Writers Union or the Industrial Workers of the World

Freelance Journalists Union, prepare press passes for members. This can prove your credentials, show police that you are a journalist, and act as a protective indicator if you are arrested.

“Journalists need the story, but you only ever get one skull. Retreat when necessary. Give the cops their space, and if you have to be close, keep your hands open and in plain sight,” says Deutsch.

Press also have to be concerned about the treatment by the police during dispersals, staying aware of what is happening around them. “I comply with directives from police when they demand the crowd moves. I may not do what they wish as quickly as they would like, but I do not protest or resist, since that is not my role,” says Gabby Albano, a journalist who noted that it is good for reporters to have some distance between themselves and dense protest action.

Legal Protections

“A lot of it comes down to acceptance of risk ... there’s no circumstance where you are completely safe from governmental investigation or use of force,” says Juan Chavez, Northwest regional vice president of the National Lawyers Guild, a progressive legal organization that often supports the rights of protesters to demonstrate. “There are rules that police need to follow, but they don’t. There are three magic phrases that all people going [to a protest] should know: I assert my right to silence, I want a lawyer, and I do not consent to a search.”

People have the right to not speak without a lawyer, leave unless they are being detained and not consent to a search without a warrant. Many protesters have been seen being snatched by authorities without a clear indication of the assumed crimes. The best solution is to keep access to an attorney handy, such as their phone number written on your arm. You can then refuse to answer questions without the presence of an attorney. If an officer is stopping you or patting you down, which they technically have a right to do for their own safety, they need to be able to articulate a reasonable suspicion.

Unfortunately, most of these contentions are arbitrable only after the fact, so retaining your silence and asserting your rights can help you later if you are charged with a crime or file suit against the police. All people should be compliant during an arrest, Chavez says, stating that they are “not resisting,” and address any injustices therein afterwards.

Acceptable Risk

“There is no fool-proof protection from police violence at a protest. The police indiscriminately fire explosives and projectiles into crowds, often injuring bystanders who are neither press [nor] protester. You have to be prepared to be attacked with lethal force at all times at a protest,” says Daniel Vincent, a local photojournalist documenting the Portland protests. “Sadly, I believe the only way to avoid police violence is to stay home, which is not going to be a choice people fighting against racism and those documenting their efforts are going to make.”

All protesters and supporters interviewed discussed the importance of staying with groups, keeping in clear communication and avoiding going alone where you can be singled out by police officers.

The reality is that these demonstrations are dangerous, and as much as people prepare, there is still a level of risk. The ongoing Portland demonstrations are being struck with a shocking amount

of force from police, despite the motivations for those protests being that same police violence. The contradiction in terms is striking, and as police continue this approach, this highlights the underlying issues that the anti-brutality protesters are raising: Police can be a source of harm rather than a force for public safety. While protesters, reporters and legal observers should take measures to stay as safe as possible, the police are showing that much of the underlying danger is in their approach to the community.

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