



MOBILIZE • ORGANIZE • VOTE • EMPOWER
Safety at Mass Mobilization Events

Protest is a powerful strategy to demand justice. Safety and preparedness are essential in uncertain times. Preparation is key! We support only nonviolent actions, but sometimes things happen that are out of our control. And while police and vigilante brutality is an abstract concept for some, it's a stark reality for others. Being prepared for all possibilities is crucial for your safety. These tips are general guidance to consider when participating in any protest or rally. Every event, location and set of participants is unique.

Before the Event

- **Research the organizations hosting the event.**

Ensure that the leaders prioritize nonviolence and have a plan for de-escalation strategies. Be aware that events can change quickly and unexpectedly, so find the event organizers and marshals and follow their directions.

- **Know your rights.** The right to assemble peacefully is fundamental, and the police must facilitate rather than restrict you from doing so. Of course, there are countless examples of police violating that right, particularly for Black and brown protesters. You are allowed to document arrests and police action, including the use of excessive force, even if police officers ask you to stop. If you are arrested, you must be told why you're being detained and be given access to a lawyer and your family via phone.

- **Have a buddy system.** Protests are safer in groups. Find a buddy or a group of folks to attend together. Make sure you all maintain contact and check in

with each other throughout the event. Ensure your group discusses and agrees on a plan before heading out.

- **If heading to the event solo, identify an off-site contact who knows your plans.** Keep them posted on your status and safety during and after the event (where you will be; how you will get there; where you intend to go in an emergency; your government-registered name, emergency contacts and date of birth; and when you plan to return).
- **Have a solid understanding of the environment.** Before you go, know the local terrain. Download a protest or event map, and/or a Google Earth screenshot of the venue and surrounding areas. Identify multiple routes into and out of the protest area. Determine several predetermined meeting points where you'll meet your group if you get separated.
- **Be mindful of your phone settings.** It is highly recommended that you encrypt your phone and turn it on airplane mode before demonstrating because phones can leave behind breadcrumbs of

The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Fedrick C. Ingram
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

AFT, AFL-CIO • 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W. • Washington, DC 20001 • 202-879-4400 • www.aft.org



data that can make you vulnerable. (Authorities can also confiscate phones.) You should also disable biometric unlocking, like Face ID or fingerprint features, and use a six-digit passcode instead. If you need to carry your primary phone, turn it off until you absolutely need to use it. This will make it harder for law enforcement to track your movements; law enforcement officials can collect or purchase data that tells them which devices were at a protest they're monitoring and identify the people those devices belong to.

- **Dress appropriately.** Prepare to stay a while, and dress for the expected weather. Avoid wearing makeup or oil-based products like lotions because the irritants in dispersion measures deployed by police can stick to them. Opt for glasses instead of contact lenses because the latter can trap pepper spray in your eyes. Cover easily identifiable tattoos or scars to reduce your risk of being identified. Long sleeves and pants, gloves and goggles can also help protect your skin and eyes if you're faced with tear gas or rubber bullets. Wear comfortable, closed-toed shoes for marching and moving away from the crowd quickly, if necessary. Aside from shielding you from the sun during a long day of marching, hats and sunglasses can obscure your face from surveillance and protect your privacy. Keep the brim low if you wear a hat and are interested in further protecting your identity.
- **Prepare a "go" bag.** Pack a small backpack or waist bag with key supplies: high-protein and energy-rich snacks like protein bars and mixed nuts, sunscreen, plenty of water, cash (just like your phone can leave digital breadcrumbs indicating your whereabouts, using your debit or credit card will make it easier for the authorities to track your movements), identification and required meds. Take supplies to protect you from and safely remove chemical irritants (face towelettes). You may want extra clothes if you're protesting on a hot day. These can also come in handy if exposed to substances that can hurt your skin or are

splashed with paint, gross road water, or other people's sweat.

- **Emergency contacts.** Memorize or keep one or two emergency contact numbers on your body.
- **Be prepared for large crowds.** This may affect transportation and access to the location before and after the event.

At the Event

- **Follow the lead of organizers.** The people leading events typically have years of on-the-ground organizing experience. Look to them to start chants, guide marches along specific routes, and notify the group of any concerns. Above all, respect organizers' requests, such as not damaging property or moving in a different direction away from danger.
- **Always assume you are being audio and video recorded.** Don't say anything, or divulge private or personal information, in front of others that you wouldn't want seen or heard on the nightly news.
- **Protect fellow protesters' privacy.** Taking photos and videos at a protest can help spread a movement's message and capture any violations of your rights. But it's essential to protect the privacy of fellow protesters by refraining from posting photos or videos in which others can be identified.
- **Stay vigilant.** Although you may intend to demonstrate peacefully, realize that protests can quickly become unsafe. Opposition can range from drive-by hecklers to counter-protesters looking to incite violence to intentional police brutality. Maintain "360 situational awareness"—always know what is happening around you. With tensions high, stay aware—take notice of those around you and how they're behaving. Be alert to anything suspicious, such as a person's behavior, unclaimed packages, unusual activity or vehicles. Look at the items people are carrying. Could these items be dangerous, used to instigate or escalate

violence? If you sense danger, move away. If you see something, say something to a marshal or organizer. Avoid engaging with counter-protesters, who are often the source of escalation. And keep an eye on the exits, should you need to leave quickly.

- **Be extremely alert if rallying on a roadway or other surface large enough for vehicle traffic.** Stay on the edges of the crowd and watch for unusual vehicles or traffic. Listen for and react quickly to revving engines or squealing tires. Look for other vehicles, telephone poles, or other objects that could protect you from an oncoming vehicle. Move quickly and decisively at right angles to an oncoming vehicle.
- **Be prepared to de-escalate.** If you find yourself in a tense situation, practice de-escalation techniques: Stay calm and keep your voice steady. Avoid provocative behavior. If necessary, walk away and remove yourself from the situation. Police can order the dispersal of people at a protest, but they should only do so as a last resort if the crowd poses a threat. If you are ordered to disperse and do not, you risk arrest.
- **What to do if you're arrested or detained.** According to the American Civil Liberties Union, you should say you wish to remain silent and immediately ask for a lawyer. Do not resist arrest, even if you think what's happening is unfair. Write down the badge number of your arresting officer, if possible. Ask for a phone call. Note that arrests during protests don't always follow the typical pattern of arrests that might ensue from something like a traffic stop. You might be left waiting for hours without access to a phone. You might not have any information about what will happen next, or when. Try to stay as calm as possible and follow your instructions. You can pursue legal action once you're home and safe.

Observe, Orient, Decide, Act (OODA):

The OODA Loop is a helpful framework to stay calm and make decisions during high-stress situations.

- **OBSERVE:** Identify the source of danger and your surroundings.
- **ORIENT:** Determine where you are and where you need to go.
- **DECIDE:** Choose a course of action that minimizes risk.
- **ACT:** Implement your decision and stay aware of changes in the environment.

After the Event

- **Leave safely.** Leave the protest in a group and notify someone when you've arrived safely home.
- **Share experiences.** Discuss your experiences with others and reflect on the event.
- **Take care of yourself.** Rest, hydrate, and take care of any physical or emotional needs.

May 5, 2025

Adapted in part from: Physicians for Human Rights, Human Rights Campaign, Natural Resources Defense Council, and American Civil Liberties Union.