Safety Checklist for Action Organizers

ACTIVIST CHECKLIST

Last updated on **November 2, 2026**

This copy was made on November 5, 2026. We update our guides often as threats change and as better ways to protect yourself become available. For the latest version, visit **activistchecklist.org/action-safety/**

Who this guide is for: Organizers of civil disobedience actions where people risk arrest. These actions are public, nonviolent, and usually lead to low-level charges like trespassing or failure to disperse. Examples include sit-ins and blockades of buildings or streets.

If your action carries higher legal consequences, look for more specialized resources and support than this guide offers.

Participating in an action?

If you're participating in an action (rather than organizing), here are a few of the most important things to remember:

- [ ] **Don't bring your phone if you're risking arrest.** If you do bring it, turn it off when your risk of arrest goes up, or give it to an assigned support person who will get it back to you.
- [ ] **Don't talk to the cops** or cooperate with government repression.
- [ ] **Have a buddy** and keep track of each other.
- [ ] **Know the "magic words":** Am I being detained? Am I free to go? I do not consent to a search. I want to speak to my lawyer. I am going to remain silent.

For more tips, see our protest digital security checklist[1].

Top steps for action organizers

Here are the most important steps from this guide:

- [ ] **Talk to a movement lawyer** so everyone understands the range of legal risks they are agreeing to and knows how to assert their rights.
- [ ] **Make a plan to secure phones:** they should either stay home or with someone[2] who is not risking arrest.
- [ ] **Fill the support roles:** on-site and off-site jail support, a police liaison, a safety team, and possibly medics and legal observers.
- [ ] **Align on your security agreements:** nonviolence, not talking to the cops or cooperating with state repression, sharing plans only with people who need to know, and not writing down anything you wouldn't want read in court.

Your group & risk

- [ ] **Form an affinity group**[3] with trusted folks.
- [ ] **Discuss the risk tolerances of each person in your group.**
  Design your action with these risk tolerances in mind. Aim to take strategic risks and avoid unnecessary ones.

- [ ] **Do a risk assessment.**
  Assess how likely different risks are, based on your action design and local conditions. Risk mapping[4] with others can help you separate the risks that need your attention from fears that don't.

RESOURCES

- Worksheet: Risk & safety planning worksheet[5] (Ruckus Society)
- Tool: Risk Mapper App[4] (Activist Checklist) - Encrypted, shared risk matrix
- Workbook: Action Safety & Community Care in Times of Rapid Response[6] (Ruckus Society) - Facilitation guide for new affinity groups

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Digital security

- [ ] **Use Signal** and make sure everyone has disappearing messages turned on by default[2] for all new threads.
- [ ] **Make a plan to have most phones off-site[2].**
  Anyone risking arrest should either (A) leave their phone at home or (B) power it down and give it to one person who collects phones and returns them after arrests. Anyone who still has a phone should turn it off if the risk of arrest goes up.
- [ ] **Don't write things down[2]** that you wouldn't want read back to you in court, even on Signal.

RESOURCES

- Checklist: Digital Security for Arrestable Actions[2] (Activist Checklist)
- Checklist: Signal Security[7] (Activist Checklist)
- Checklist: Secondary phone for protests ("burner phone lite")[8] (Activist Checklist)
- Checklist: Protest Digital Security[1] (Activist Checklist) - For mass actions in the streets
- Checklist: Security Essentials[9] (Activist Checklist)
- Checklist: Doxxing Defense[10] (Activist Checklist)

Safety & de-escalation

- [ ] **Recruit a safety/de-escalation team[11].**
  Help them get trained if needed. Also recruit medics, especially if you anticipate violence from bystanders or police.
- [ ] **Hold a briefing[12]** with the safety team.
- [ ] **Make sure everyone has a buddy.**

RESOURCES

- Workbook: Get In Formation Safety Toolkit[11] (Vision Change Win) - Safety roles, planning, and de-escalation
- Handout: De-escalation handout with CLARA method[13] (DC Peace Team)
- Video: How to deal with tear gas and pepper spray[14], plus a handout[15] and step-by-step treatment[16] (Across Frontlines & Women's March)
- Workbook: Streetwise & Steady: Peacekeeper and De-escalation Workbook[17] (Daniel Hunter & Eileen Flanagan)
- Training: De-escalation and assertive intervention training[18] (Public Citizen, 25 minutes) - Best done in person if you can

- Handout: De-escalation ABCDE handout[19] and article[20] (Beautiful Trouble)
- Video: De-escalation and Protective Interventions[21] (Women's March)
- Video: Situational awareness[22], police violence[23], and exit routes[24] (Kalaya'an Mendoza)
- Training deck: Safety Teams 101[25] (Kalaya'an Mendoza)
- Handout: De-escalation 1-page script[26] (Democracy Security Project)
- Handout: Protesting While Disabled[27] (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund)
- Handbook: Handbook on protesting for people with disabilities[28] (ADAPT)

Legal support & know your rights

- [ ] **Find a movement lawyer and consult them about your action.**
  Places to look: your local NLG chapter[29], the National Lawyers Guild[30], Movement Law Lab[31], or CLDC[32]. See questions to ask your attorney about legal risks[33].

- [ ] **Hold a legal briefing** for your group with a movement-aligned lawyer, so everyone understands the range of risks and knows how to assert their rights.

- [ ] **Find trained Legal Observers**[34] to observe your action if needed.

RESOURCES

- Handout: Know Your Rights and Risks 1-pager[35] (en español[36]) (Civil Liberties Defense Center)
- Directory: Directory of Community Bail Funds[37] (en español[38]) (National Bail Fund Network)
- Article: 10 Things Noncitizen Protestors Need to Know[39] (Immigrant Legal Resource Center)
- Hotline: Activist Legal Helpline[40] (Civil Liberties Defense Center)
- Booklet: Know Your Rights and Risks Booklet for Protestors[41] (National Lawyers Guild)

Arrests, jail support, & police liaison

- [ ] **Recruit a jail support**[42] **team** with at least one on-site and one off-site person.

- [ ] **Do not talk about organizing while in custody.**
  Don't say anything about the action or other organizing while in custody. Assume you're being recorded. Find other ways to keep yourselves occupied (songs, games, etc.). And still don't talk to the cops!

- [ ] **Collect jail support forms.**
  For coordinated, pre-planned actions, collect a form from everyone risking arrest (Example 1[43], Example 2[44], Example 3[45]). Paper is best, but CryptPad[46] forms work if you need to go digital.

- [ ] **Pick a phone number folks can call from jail if needed.**
  This can be a local NLG hotline[29] (if you've arranged it with them!) or just someone in your group who is off-site. Make sure each person writes it on their body with a Sharpie.

- [ ] **Recruit a police liaison**[43].

- [ ] **Destroy all jail support info** after the action, including digital files or CryptPad forms.

RESOURCES

- Guide: Jail Support Guide & Example Jail Support Form[42] (Mvmt Catalyst)
- Guide: Police Liaison Guide[43] (Punch Up Collective)
- Guide: DIY Jail Support Plan[47] (Rosehip Medical Collective)
- Worksheet: Sample Jail Support Form[45] (Rosehip Medical Collective)

Vetting, need-to-know, & security culture

- [ ] **Develop action agreements** (Example 1[48], Example 2[49]).
- [ ] **Create a vetting or vouching[50] process.**
- [ ] **Create need-to-know agreements.**
  Don't share information with anyone outside your group who doesn't need to know, and don't talk about the action, before or after, with anyone who wasn't involved.
- [ ] **Practice solidarity against state repression[51].**
  Under this authoritarian state, names that colleagues shared have been used to expand surveillance, and jokes from Signal threads people handed over have been presented in court as serious threats. Don't talk to the cops, don't give them access to data or information, and don't become a cooperating witness. This is how we keep each other safe.

RESOURCES

- Guide: Security Culture for Activists[52] (Ruckus Society) - Start with the first 8 pages
- Article: Vouching[50] (Direct Action Movement) - One way to vet people
- Tool: Defendants Pledge[51] (NSPM-7 Defendants Union) - Good agreements to discuss, even if you don't sign
- Guide: If An Agent Knocks[53] (Center for Constitutional Rights)
- Article: Connection as Security Culture[54] (Climate Defense Project) - Building trust and vetting thresholds
- Guide: A Troublemakers' Guide: Principles for Racial Justice Activists Facing Political Repression[55] (Catalyst Project)
- Article: Why Misogynists Make Great Informants[56] (Truthout)

Emotional prep, trauma, and debriefing

- [ ] **Do a grounding exercise** before you start the action.
- [ ] **Hold a debrief** after the action to help folks integrate their experience.

RESOURCES

- Toolkit: Nervous System Regulation Toolkit for Crisis Responders[57] (The Embodiment Institute)
- Video: Holistic check-in during/after protests[58] (Kalaya'an Mendoza)
- Video: Street Somatics: Understanding stress during high risk actions[59] (The Embodiment Institute)
- Booklet: Navigating Trauma[60] (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief)
- Guide: Facilitation tips for debriefing[61] (Training for Change)
- Guide: Debrief facilitation guide[62] (Beautiful Trouble)

Keep learning with these related guides

Digital security for arrestable actions

Protect your phone and your crew when you risk arrest.

Prepare for a protest

Digital security for anyone attending a protest.

Host a security party

A template agenda for getting your group through the checklists together.

Links

1. activistchecklist.org/protest/
2. activistchecklist.org/action/
3. seedsforchange.org.uk/downloads/affinitygroups.pdf
4. riskmapper.app
5. static1.squarespace.com/static/66f1b5bcef78d304e1ceb2ab/t/69b1e3c1f4a7e9480cc50d3e/1773265857595/Safety-Planning-Handout-1.pdf
6. drive.google.com/file/d/119tz0jUeL0oufozUmIXElgNpK97w-l_m/view
7. activistchecklist.org/signal/
8. activistchecklist.org/secondary/
9. activistchecklist.org/essentials/
10. activistchecklist.org/doxxing/
11. visionchangewin.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/VCW-Safety-Toolkit-Final.pdf
12. docs.google.com/document/d/1ryCwLzeqqtrtGChBbGQzQd7e8FOyDVJloMZ0OJ0sQmA/edit?tab=t.0
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27. dredf.org/protesting-while-disabled-pocket-guide/
28. adapt.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ADAPT-handbook-2017.pdf
29. nlg.org/chapters/
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31. movementlawlab.org
32. cldc.org
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34. nlg.org/massdefenseprogram/los/
35. cldc.org/know-your-rights/
36. cldc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/KYR-Spanish-3-fold.pdf
37. communityjusticeexchange.org/en/nbfn-directory
38. communityjusticeexchange.org/es/red-nacional-de-fondos-de-fianzas
39. ilrc.org/resources/10-things-noncitizen-protestors-need-know
40. cldc.org/resource/helpline-cards/
41. nlg.org/2025-kyr-booklet-archive/
42. docs.google.com/document/d/1yVVW7_N47PKp_OW5Ge7K2452vB9Ar5BIbTcFsZXRMC8/edit?tab=t.0
43. punchupcollective.org/faq-the-role-of-police-liaison/
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50. thedirectactionmovement.com/vouching
51. nspm7union.com/defendants-pledge/
52. ruckus.org/resource/security-culture-for-activists-2026
53. ccrjustice.org/if-agent-knocks-resource
54. climatedefenseproject.org/connection-as-security-culture/
55. collectiveliberation.org/a-trouble-makers-guide/
56. truthout.org/articles/why-misogynists-make-great-informants/
57. theembodimentinstitute.org/being-the-ground
58. instagram.com/reel/CzecKC2xJNm/
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60. commonslibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/Mutual-Aid-and-Disaster-Relief-Navigating-Trauma.pdf
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