Secondary Phone Checklist ("burner phone light")

ACTIVIST CHECKLIST

Last updated on **January 22, 2026** Takes about **3 hours**

This copy was made on November 6, 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/secondary/**

A secondary phone is a low-data device you bring to protests and use for sensitive organizing. The goal is harm reduction, not anonymity. Buy a cheap unlocked phone (iPhone or Android works) or repurpose a spare, get a prepaid SIM in cash from a store, register the Apple or Google account with a fresh Proton Mail address, install Signal, and clear data after each action.

Your regular phone contains vast amounts of personal data that could put you and others at risk if seized by the cops.

"Burner Phone" vs "Secondary Phone"

- **Burner phone:** A truly anonymous burner phone that is entirely disconnected from your identity. Usually only used a handful of times before it is discarded. It requires a **great deal of work** to set up and keep it truly anonymous. We don't recommend this for most folks.
- ✅ **Secondary phone for activism:** This is a second phone that has minimal information on it in case it is confiscated. You can reuse it over many actions. The goal isn't anonymity, but harm reduction — reducing the amount of data you risk turning over.

> **You are higher risk if any of these apply to you…**
>
> - You're an **organizer or leader** in social movement spaces.
> - You're **likely to be targeted** by the cops based on identities you hold (person of color, queer, trans, documentation status, anarchist,etc.)
> - You **work closely with** communities who are likely to be targeted
> - You have **very sensitive data** on your phone (especially about other movement work)
>
> If any of these apply to you, a secondary phone might be a good idea!

Why not just bring my regular phone?

- Police can access data on confiscated phones even without your passcode, and can often crack 6-digit codes quickly[1]. A secondary phone protects your sensitive personal and organizing information by keeping it on a separate device.
- Your phone's unique identifiers can be captured by police surveillance devices like Stingrays, creating a permanent record of every protest you attend.
- Cops can use commercial tools[2] to track your location without a warrant. That locaiton data often comes from some random ads on random apps you have installed. A secondary phone can help you avoid this.

What data am I protecting?

Here's a list of some of the kinds of data on your phone that might be worth protecting

- all your **contacts** (friends, family members, and other organizers/activists)
- your **location data** and map history - This can be used to determine where you've been and deduce who you have met with. This can be used to implicate you and your comrades in legal charges.
- your **message** history (texts, Signal, WhatsApp, etc.)
- your **email** history dating back years in most cases
- your **browser history,** bookmarks, and saved passwords
- all your **photos** (including of other people, "activists" and otherwise, whose images risk capture and scrutiny without their consent)
- your **calendar** events (who you meet with, when, and where)
- your **documents** (Google Docs, and even encrypted tools like Cryptpad if you're signed in to your account)

What protection will a secondary phone offer? Why bother?

- If your secondary phone gets confiscated, the cops won't be able to extract nearly as much information.
- They also won't be able to install spyware on your normal phone which can be used to track you or compromise your passcode or anything you type.
- You're protecting not just yourself, but the people you're organizing with who may be at higher risk than you because of their identity, politics, or circumstances (person of color, queer, trans, undocumented person, Arab/Muslim, anarchist, etc.). Their contact info and messages are on your phone.
- If you are already the target of state surveillance, it's much less likely that they know about this secondary device (assuming you rarely use it). So your movements and communications are more likely to remain private and secure.

What you'll need

- **A secondary smartphone** (used phone or inexpensive new phone): $60+ or free if you can get one donated
- **SIM card:** $5
- **Prepaid plan:** Around $15/month (cheapest) or $100/year (best for long-term use)
- **Setup time:** 3 hours
- **Technical difficulty:** Moderate
- **Maintenance:** 30 minutes after each use

Setup Guide

If you want the tl;dr version of this guide: Get a phone. Make sure it's unlocked. Go to a store in-person to buy a SIM card[3] and a service plan[4] in cash. Make an email account on Proton Mail (see our guide to using Proton safely[5]) and use that when you need to make an account with your cell provider and Apple/Google. Don't use your real email/phone to register anything. Activate the phone. Install Signal.

☐ Pick a prepaid cell provider

DO: **Tracfone**[6] and **Mint Mobile**[7] are good options.

If you're buying a new phone, you might end up choosing the provider based on what is in stock near you.

We use **Tracfone** because it offers the best plan for occasional use at protests.

If you know you want unlimited data use, Mint Mobile and Tracfone are both good options and cost about $15/month.

☐ Consider paying in cash

Once again, we're not trying to achieve anonymity here, so paying with a card is fine, but why not add one additional buffer layer between your identity and this device?

If you need to buy online, you can purchase a prepaid Visa credit card (aka: "gift card") with cash (and a mask) at a store, then use that online. This will work best for services (like the prepaid plan), but if you have to buy products (like the phone), you might have to use an address anyway. It's best to buy products in-person.

☐ Get a phone (cheap vs more secure)

Most affordable phone model: ($50-60 new)

- Tracfone cheapest smart phone ($50-60 new) *Examples: Samsung a03s, Moto G Play*
- Go to the website for your prepaid carrier and search for a smartphone option under $60 dollars[8].
- The downside is that you are also buying something new, which increases the demand for conflict minerals.
- **Why are these phones so cheap?** They're cheap because they are "carrier locked" to Tracfone. This means they can't be activated on other networks. They're counting on your buying plans for a long time to pay it off. They also tend to install lots of junk for data mining purposes.

Best phone models for security

- iPhone 13 or newer
- iPhone SE (2022) or newer
- Pixel 7 or newer

Note: Our opinion is that iPhones are more secure in general than most Android phones. Newer Pixel phones are also secure.

If you have a Google Pixel 6 or newer, we highly recommend installing Graphene OS[9], which is a de-Googled version of Android OS that is incredibly secure and hard for the cops to break.

As of October 2025, these are the models we know are more resistant to cracking and data extraction.

Using an old phone someone has laying around

- If you already have an old phone laying around or know someone who does, that's a good option.
- It may be no longer receiving security updates. If so, be aware that it will be easier for the cops to crack and extract data from if they get ahold of it. Security is often about trade offs. It may be better to have a protest phone that's no longer getting security updates than to bring your normal phone that is full of sensitive information.

Notes about used phones

- Make sure it is "unlocked" (not tied to a specific carrier).
- Make sure battery will get you through a day of heavy use (or be prepared to bring a battery pack and a charging cable)
- Check if still receiving security updates
- The older the phone, the more vulnerable it is likely to be to the cracking/extraction tools cops use (like Cellebrite and Graykey)

Where to buy a cheap, new phone?

- Big Box Stores (Best Buy, etc.)
- Pharmacies (CVS, Walgreens, etc.)
- Convenience Stores (7-Eleven, etc.)

Buying online is an option, though it is even easier to track. Our goal isn't anonymity here, so that's okay. But if you're able to buy it in-person, that's better. If you're able to buy with cash, that also provides a layer of separation.

☐ Buy a SIM card

If you bought a phone new directly from the prepaid provider: it probably comes with a SIM card already. Read the box or ask whoever you're buying it from. If it has a SIM already, you can **skip to the next step**.

If you are bringing your own phone, you need to buy a SIM card.

HOW TO BUY A SIM CARD

You can buy prepaid SIM cards at the same place you can buy phones and prepaid service plans: Best Buy, 7-11, etc.

Examples:

- Tracfone's "bring your own phone" SIM kit costs $5[3]
- Mint Mobile's SIM kit costs $2[10], but they also often have a SIM card + service plan bundles, so you could just buy that instead.

☐ Buy a prepaid plan

Most phones don't come with any minutes or data, so you need to buy a prepaid service plan.

HOW TO GET PREPAID MINUTES/DATA

You can buy prepaid SIM cards at the same place you can buy phones: Best Buy, 7-11, etc.

Here's the plan we recommend to get started:

- **If you're unsure if you're going to keep using this:** we recommend starting out with a 1-3 month unlimited plan to try it out (example: $20 plan from Tracfone[11]).
- **If you're sure you will keep using this phone:** Get a 12 month plan with a set number of minutes. (We recommend the $99 plan from Tracfone[4]).

Remember to buy these in-store rather than online if you can. If you need to buy online, buy a prepaid Visa card at the store with cash (and a mask).

If you want to compare types of prepaid plans, read the section below.

Types of prepaid plans

Pay As You Go: "fixed X minutes, expires after 30, 60, 90, or 365 days."

Even though it says something like "400" minutes, that also applies to data (1 megabyte of data usually uses 1 minute). If you go over, you can recharge.

- Best for long-term use: If you can afford paying for a 12 month plan, it reduces the number of times you have to re-charge your plan (and change your phone number).
- Example: as of October 2025, Tracfone offers a $99 plan of 400 minutes that expires after 365 days[4]. The line must be used at least once every 6 months to preserve your number.

Unlimited Monthly: "Unlimited talk/text/data for 1, 3, 6, 12 months. Expires after that time."

- Most affordable option: If you need a more affordable option, or you're trying this out and unsure how long you'll use it, the unlimited for "30 days" should work well.
- As of October 2025, Tracfone offers a $15 plan for 1 month of unlimited service[12] or $192 for 12 months[13].

Notes

- **Your number will expire:** Make sure to use the phone once a month. If your prepaid plan expires, you have a short grace period before you lose that phone number. You can easily get a new one by activating a new card, but you'll have to re-activate Signal.
- **Tip:** Set a reminder to refill your plan before it expires!

Advanced: See our instructions about using a data-only SIM. There are some options that never expire, which are ideal for a secondary phone like this, but it takes more to set up.

☐ Create a separate email account

- You will use this email to set up your prepaid mobile account and your phone app store account (Apple or Google).

HOW TO CREATE AN ANONYMOUS EMAIL ACCOUNT

Option 1: Use an email alias

If you already have a Proton Mail account, you can use their "hide my email" alias feature[14] (or any other email alias provider).

Option 2: Create a new email account

1. Create a **separate email account** (we recommend Proton Mail[15]; see our guide to using Proton safely[5])
2. Use a random username generator[16] to help this account be less strongly tied to your identity. (Again, we're not aiming for total anonymity, but we are trying to create a bit of a buffer.)

☐ Set up the phone (or reset it)

HOW TO SET UP THE PHONE

1. Factory reset the device if it is used. Instructions: iPhone[17] / Android[18]
2. Skip or decline all optional account setup (phone, location tracking, analytics/tracking, cloud backup, etc.)
3. **Important:** Do NOT sign in with your normal Apple / Google Account during the initial setup process (or at any other point). You will be prompted to, but look closely for a "skip" button. Ideally you want to activate the phone BEFORE you make the Apple/Google account, since they usually require a phone number and you want to use your new number.

☐ Activate the phone

This is how you turn on phone service

HOW TO ACTIVATE THE PHONE

1. If you got a used phone, put the SIM card in the phone.
2. **Activate:** Follow the instructions on the prepaid plan card to activate it. This will usually involve:
   - Select "I want a new number" (rather than porting an existing number)
   - Telling them a zip code they can use to find a phone number for you. You can put in any zip code, it doesn't have to be near where you live. Make sure to write it down just in case.
   - The PIN code for your plan. You'll need to scratch it off the card to reveal it.
   - The IMEI number for your phone. You can find this in system settings.
3. **Make an account:** As part of activating, you'll usually need to make an account with the cell provider. When asked for an email address, use the new email you set up that is separate from your main account.
   - **Do not use your real name** when making the account.
   - **Do not give them a credit card**. This will tie your identity very closely to the account. There is almost always an option to skip this part—it is a prepaid phone, after all!
4. **Restart your phone:** After you finish the activation steps, you may need to restart the phone before it gets service.

☐ Set up a separate Apple/Google account for the app store

HOW TO SETUP A SEPARATE APPLE/GOOGLE ACCOUNT

1. Create the account
   - For iPhone: Apple ID instructions[19]
   - For Android: Google instructions[20]
2. You will need a phone number to verify your new account. Thankfully, you should be able to receive texts on your protest phone now.
3. Sign into the new account in your phone's settings
4. Visit the Apple App Store or Google Play Store to confirm that you're now able to download apps

Tips

- Don't use your real name when making this account.

☐ Install & configure Signal

Use a totally separate Signal profile for this phone, rather than your main account.

HOW TO SET UP A SEPARATE SIGNAL PROFILE

1. Follow the standard Signal activation steps[21] for this new number.
2. Then set up a username.[22]
3. Start talking to folks
   - Then tell your contacts your new signal username. Message them on your main Signal account first to verify that it really is you who is messaging them on a new account.
   - You may want to message your main Signal account from your new one so you can send information between the two. Make sure disappearing messages are turned on.
   - Have someone add you to the groups that are relevant to this action. (Make sure to leave Signal groups when they are no longer active or relevant.)
   - Note: Every Signal group you join from this phone provides more information if your phone is confiscated. The whole point of this secondary phone is to reduce the data the cops can get if they confiscate your phone. So try to join as few as possible, and make sure disappearing messages is set for a short period of time.
4. Make sure to follow our Signal Checklist[23] so that it is configured to be as secure as possible

☐ Install Magic Earth as your maps app

HOW TO

1. Install Magic Earth[24] on this phone
2. Open the app once to download the maps you need for offline use
3. **Practice using it before you need it!** It's going to feel very different.

☐ Install a secure browser

- Install Onion Browser[25] (iPhone) or Tor Browser[26] (Android) for maximum privacy.
- Or at least install Brave Browser[27] to use instead of the default browser.

☐ Write down or save your important phone numbers

HOW TO SAVE YOUR NUMBERS OFFLINE

We recommend having a way to call your 2-3 top emergency contacts. Some ideas:

- **Paper:** Having a slip of paper may be most secure, but you risk losing it or having it confiscated.
- **Memorize:** Now might be a good time to memorize a new phone number — a good thing to have for other kinds of emergencies.
- **Phone contact list:** Add a couple of contacts to your phone book. Use one letter for their name or some kind of code name.

☐ Follow the entire prepare for a protest checklist

All of the items in the Prepare for a Protest checklist still apply to a protest phone. Even though you're exposing much less data, you still have Signal installed, which contains data you want to protect.

HOW TO SECURE YOUR PHONE FOR A PROTEST

Follow the Prepare for a Protest checklist[1].

Especially important:

- Having a strong 10-digit passcode.
- Turning off location services

Using the phone for protests/actions

Before each action

1. ✅ Make sure your phone number is still active and hasn't expired
2. ✅ Check your account to make sure you still have minutes/data left if you're not on an unlimited plan.
3. ✅ Charge your phone
4. ✅ Download needed offline maps

After each action

1. ✅ Clear all app data (messages, browsing, maps)
   - Remove Signal message threads and leave Signal groups that your protest phone doesn't need to be a part of anymore
   - Clear browser history/data (if you're using Tor, this is automatic)

- Clear map/navigation history

2. ✅ if your phone was confiscated by the cops, consider selling it and getting a new one. A factory reset might help, but if they put spyware on it (which only takes them a couple of minutes), there is no guarantee it will be removed with a factory reset.

(Advanced) Use a data-only SIM and a temporary phone number

The approach above is best for most users, but it has some downsides:

- Even if you buy a year-long plan from a prepaid provider like Tracfone, it will still expire after a year
- You are paying more for a prepaid plan that includes calling and texting, even though you are just using Signal (over the data plan).

You can save money by using a data-only SIM:

- You can pay once and the data plan never expires (with certain providers)
- You can top up when you need
- Because your plan doesn't include a phone number, texting, or calling, it's much cheaper.

However, this approach is more technical because data-only SIMs don't come with a phone number or texting, and you need to receive a text to register accounts with Apple, Google, and Signal.

☐ Use a temporary number to register your Apple/Google account and Signal account

With a data-only SIM, you will still need a phone number to set up your Apple/Google account and your Signal account. You can use a temporary number service to accomplish this for a few dollars.

HOW TO USE A TEMPORARY NUMBERS SERVICE

1. Create an account on SMSPool[28].
2. **Deposit a few dollars** into your account. Each service you register will cost less than $0.20. So depositing $3-5 should be plenty.
3. Follow the steps to do a **Quick Order** and select Apple/Google/Signal as the service. You will only have access to this number for a few minutes.
4. Enter that phone number when prompted during the account registration flow with Apple/Google/Signal.
5. You will see a confirmation code show up on SMSPool next to the number you are renting. Enter that in to Apple/Google/Signal as you normally would when you get a confirmation code on your phone by text.

Remember that this phone number won't be yours to use long-term.

Get a data-only eSIM or physical SIM

HOW TO GET A DATA-ONLY ESIM OR PHYSICAL SIM

1. Check this list[29] to see if your phone model supports an eSIM or not.
2. If your phone supports eSIM, get a data-only eSIM from Keepgo (North America)[30] (Or if you want to use Monero crypto for anonymity, use silent.link[31]).
3. If your phone only supports physical SIMs, purchase one from Keepgo (North America)[32] and have it shipped to your location.
4. Follow the steps to activate your phone using this data plan.
5. Top-up the plan if you're running low on data. Make sure to check your data balance before you use it for a protest/action.

Give people your Signal username instead of your phone number

HOW TO USE A SIGNAL USERNAME

1. Go to Open Signal → Tap your profile picture → **Settings** → **Privacy** → **Phone Number** and set **Who can find me by number** to **Nobody**. This is important because you don't control the phone number you signed up with.
2. Set a Signal PIN[33] to help protect the phone number you are using in case someone else tries to register an account with that phone number in the future.
3. Create a Signal username[22].
4. When people want to connect with you on Signal, give them this username instead of your phone number.

(Advanced) How to set up a true burner phone

As mentioned above, setting up a true burner requires an incredible amount of diligence, which is why we suggest the "lighter" approach described above.

If you need a much higher degree of protection and anonymity, you could go to these lengths.

Tips to acquire and use a "true burner" phone

> **Warning:** We share this "true burner" list primarily to give you a sense of the level of work required, not as a comprehensive, step-by-step guide.

To set up a true burner, you'd want to make sure to do the following things (in addition to everything outlined in the "secondary phone" guide above):

- Purchase the phone and plan with cash and try to avoid your face being recorded. Do not bring your devices. Avoid driving your car
- Never turn the phone on at your home, work, or any place you go to frequently. (Unless it is off and in a high-quality faraday bag.)
- Never turn the phone on near other devices (phone, tablet, smart watch, etc).

- Activate it by connecting to public WiFi at coffee shop (or something similar)
- Never give the number to anyone you associate with normally and do not text/call anyone you associate with normally. This implies that you're either contacting one person (ex: a whistleblower contacting a journalist) or you're contacting a network of other folks who are using true burner phones.
- Never sign in to any of your normal accounts on this phone.
- Create separate, anonymous accounts only on the phone (not your home internet). And preferably with Tor Browser when possible.
- Avoid other pattern-of-life associations. Does your other phone suddenly stop moving/texting/calling at the same time this phone turns on? If you are experiencing targeted surveillance, you may need to find a way to reduce the correlation between the two.
- ... And many other steps that we can't go into in this guide!

And finally, this is generally a short-term use phone. Once you fail to do one of these, the phone should be considered compromised and you should "burn" it by destroying the phone and the SIM and starting the process over. What counts as "compromised" is different based on how you're using the phone. It could mean that you accidentally turn it on at home or near your primary device. It could mean that someone in your network of burner phones turned their phone on at home and implicitly revealed their location.

Even if you follow all of the guidelines perfectly, you should only use the phone for a limited period of time because it will start to develop its own "pattern of life" where it shows up at the same locations that can be tracked. If it is a very high risk action, you should only use the phone that one time.

And even if you do all of this, you shouldn't talk about sensitive topics on the phone or when the phone is nearby. You should only use the phone to coordinate and use coded language to discuss sensitive topics.

Learn More

Guides on how to create a "true burner" phone:

- Rebecca Williams - Burner Phone 101 blog and training slide deck[34] (2026)
- Mobile Phone Security for Activists and Agitators[35] (2022) - See the section on burner phones for detailed advice.
- Burner phone guide[36] (2023)
- Burner phone zine[37] (2023)

The most secure smart phone option: If you want the most security and privacy for your primary phone or secondary phone, we recommend GrapheneOS[9] with a Google Pixel phone. It may sound contradictory to use "Google" and "privacy" in the same sentence, but GrapheneOS is a de-Googled version of Android.

Keep learning with these related guides

Doxxing defense

Protect yourself from doxxing and online harassment.

Emergency planning

Establish an emergency support network in case you're detained or threatened.

Prepare for a protest

Digital security for anyone attending a protest.

Links

1. activistchecklist.org/protest/
2. 404media.co/inside-ices-tool-to-monitor-phones-in-entire-neighborhoods/
3. bestbuy.com/product/tracfone-bring-your-own-phone-mini-sim-pack-with-nano-micro-standard-multi/JXJCJWVFF4
4. bestbuy.com/product/tracfone-99-99-basic-phone-400-minutes-for-talk-text-data-365-days-prepaid-plan-email-delivery-white-digital/JXJCJWPGP2
5. activistchecklist.org/proton/
6. tracfone.com
7. mintmobile.com
8. tracfone.com/smartphones
9. grapheneos.org
10. bestbuy.com/product/mint-mobile-prepaid-sim-card-starter-kit-gold/J3RZWKZGFK
11. bestbuy.com/product/tracfone-19-99-basic-phone-60-minutes-for-talk-text-data-90-days-prepaid-plan-email-delivery-white-digital/JXJCJWPGL8
12. bestbuy.com/product/tracfone-15-unlimited-talk-text-plus-1gb-30-day-prepaid-plan-digital-delivery-digital/JXJCJW4YHJ
13. bestbuy.com/product/tracfone-192-unlimited-talk-text-plus-48gb-of-data-365-day-prepaid-plan-digital/JXJCJWVSFG
14. proton.me/support/addresses-and-aliases
15. proton.me/mail
16. strongphrase.net/username
17. support.apple.com/en-us/108931
18. support.google.com/android/answer/6088915?hl=en
19. support.apple.com/en-us/108647
20. support.google.com/accounts/answer/27441?hl=en/&co=GENIE.Platform%3DAndroid&oco=1
21. support.signal.org/hc/en-us/articles/360007318691-Register-a-phone-number
22. support.signal.org/hc/en-us/articles/6712070553754-Phone-Number-Privacy-and-Usernames
23. activistchecklist.org/signal/
24. magicearth.com
25. apps.apple.com/us/app/onion-browser/id519296448
26. torproject.org/download/
27. brave.com/en-in/download/
28. smspool.net
29. airalo.com/help/about-airalo/NFHQSUXFCZOM/what-devices-support-esim/D2N6OZSVVM9W
30. keepgo.com/products/esim-canada-north-america-prepaid-data
31. silent.link
32. keepgo.com/products/lifetime-north-america-sim-card
33. support.signal.org/hc/en-us/articles/360007059792-Signal-PIN
34. josebriones.org/dumbphone-finder
35. sproutdistro.com/catalog/zines/security/mobile-phone-activists/
36. anarchistfederation.net/anonymous-how-and-why-to-use-a-burner-phone/
37. ia804600.us.archive.org/20/items/zines-security/How_to_Set_Up_a_Burner_Phone-screen.pdf