Protect Democracy

OVER ZERO

Institute for **Constitutional Advocacy and Protection**
GEORGETOWN LAW

Covering Political Violence: Violence at a Protest or Demonstration

Protests and demonstrations can present newsrooms with unique challenges. Media coverage can inadvertently spread false narratives, deepen divisions, platform extremists, or create a narrative of widespread chaos or violence—all of which can be used to escalate violence by extremists or justify crackdowns by governments. Reporting in line with best practices can help to mitigate these risks.

Core Principles of Covering Political Violence

- ✓ Use precise language to avoid signaling that the violence on the ground is more widespread or accepted than it is, or that the ongoing threat level is more severe than is supported by evidence.

- ✓ Provide appropriate context and framing about the causes of the violence, including any intersection with extremist political movements and conspiracy theories.

- ✓ Engage with targeted communities to ensure coverage also addresses how the violence has affected them, their responses, and their needs.

- ✓ Avoid providing platforms for inflammatory rhetoric, misinformation, or extremism.

- ✓ Highlight responses to address and mitigate the violence.

- ✓ Keep the public informed with up-to-date information so they can have a clear understanding of the risks and mitigation efforts.

Guidance for Covering Violence at a Protest or Demonstration

- ■ **Contextualize the purpose and background of the protest or demonstration.**
  - ○ What were the stated goals of the organizers? Do the organizers have a history of violence or anti-democratic actions, an association with other violent groups, or a record of spreading mis- or disinformation via social media or otherwise? Were counter-protesters present? If so, do they have a history of violence?
  - ○ How many individuals were present? How many were protestors and how many were counter-protestors? Was the protest/demonstration peaceful? What form did peaceful action take, and for how long?
    - ○ Is there historical context that readers need to understand the significance of the protest/event and violence that occurred?

- **Be specific and avoid making violence seem more widespread than it is.**
  - What was the precise scope of the violence? How did it compare with the size and scope of the protest/event overall? (Note: avoid using vague or sensationalist language such as natural disaster or war metaphors.)
  - Who was responsible? Provide clarity on the sequence of events, including information on how violence was initiated and by whom.

- **Contextualize the violence.**
  - Who was involved in violence? Was it a single individual or a small group? (Note: even if the article explores connections between violent actors and larger movements, avoid conflating the actions of a few individuals with a broad group such as protesters, Republicans, or Democrats.)
  - Was the person affiliated with the protest/event or another group? Were there counter-protesters involved?
  - Did law enforcement use force? If so, what kind of force (e.g. physically touching people, using tear gas or pepper spray, etc.)?
  - Was a member of a hate group, a known provocateur, or an extremist involved? If leaders can be identified, does a review of their social media or other open-source research indicate involvement in similar episodes in the past? (Note: avoid giving fringe or extremist groups a platform by repeating their messages with direct quotes, naming their leadership, or quoting/linking to their materials. Use third-party information to discuss the motivations of violent actors, rather than relying solely on their self-descriptions.)

- **Engage with targeted communities.**
  - How are members of the targeted community responding or repairing?
  - What support or resources are they requesting?

- **Cover what's being done in response.**
  - What responses were taken to limit or de-escalate violence by law enforcement, civilian leaders, community groups, and by the targeted communities themselves?
  - What role have public officials played? Have officials responded with resources or support, heightened risks of violence with rhetoric or legislation, or failed to engage?
  - If future protests/events are planned, are there measures in place to minimize the risk of recurrence? Are there ways for people to get involved in responding or defusing risks for future violence?

Examples

Don't	Do

Don't

❌ Use language that activates fear or anxiety, such as natural disaster, war, or disease metaphors.

Example: Fiery Clashes Erupt Between Protesters and Police

❌ Use vague or sensationalizing language that obscures how many people participated in violence.

Example: The protests over confederate monuments that are overwhelming the nation have quickly grown violent and, in some cases, deadly.

❌ Use passive voice in a way that obscures who is responsible for the violence.

Example: Protestors Gassed as Violence Erupts Outside the Capitol

Do

✅ Contextualize the purpose and background of the protest.

Example: "Thousands gathered across the country Tuesday in coordinated demonstrations to protest construction of the controversial Dakota Access Pipeline.

Dozens were arrested in what organizers called a 'National Day of Action' by self-proclaimed 'water protectors' near Army Corps of Engineers offices from Los Angeles to New York City. The protests planned for more than 300 communities across the U.S. were an intended show of solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux Indian tribe, which says its drinking water and way of life are threatened by the proposed pipeline." - NBC News

✅ Be specific and avoid making violence more widespread than it is.

Example: "A demonstration in front of the Chinese consulate in Midtown Manhattan briefly turned violent on Saturday morning, with protesters throwing rocks at the building as police officers tried to get them off the street, according to demonstrators and the police.

Several people, including three police officers, sustained minor injuries, according to the Fire Department.

The police said there were several arrests." - New York Times

✅ Contextualize the violence.

Example: "A masked man who was seen in a viral video smashing the windows of a south Minneapolis auto parts store during the George Floyd protests, earning him the moniker 'Umbrella Man,' is suspected of ties with a white supremacist group and sought to incite racial tension, police said." - Star Tribune

✅ Engage with targeted communities.

Example: George Floyd's brother on protesters: 'They have pain. They have the same pain that I feel'

✅ Cover what's being done in response.

Example: A Community in Action: Residents Gather to Clean, Repair, and Rebuild Neighborhoods Hit Hardest by Looters

Further Resources

Additional Guidance for Media:
[Reporting in Contentious Times: Insights for Journalists to Avoid Fanning the Flames](#)
Over Zero in collaboration with Dr. Anna Szilágyi

[Covering protests over the war in Gaza? Here's what journalists should be asking themselves.](#)
Kelly McBride, Poynter Institute

[Five Problems With your Protest Coverage: What Reporters and News Consumers Need to Know about Protest Narratives](#)
Doug McLeod, Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin

Resources on Protests and Political Violence:
[Crowd Counting Consortium](#)
An ongoing project collecting publicly available data on political crowds in the United States, including marches, protests, strikes, demonstrations, riots, and other actions. The CCC is a joint effort between the University of Connecticut and the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School.

[Armed Conflict Location and Events Data - United States](#)
A global database of various forms of conflict events around the world, ACLED also collects data on protests.

[Protests and Public Safety: A Guide for Cities & Citizens](#)
Developed by the Institute for Constitutional Advocacy & Protection (ICAP), this is an overview of legal principles, best practices, and creative solutions for protecting public safety while respecting constitutional rights during rallies, protests, and other public events. The toolkit offers detailed legal analysis suitable for municipal and state attorneys, as well as more general legal guardrails, best practices, and frequently asked questions intended to be more easily accessible to non-lawyer elected and appointed officials, concerned residents, journalists, and activists.