

Reporting on Threats and Harassment Targeting Public Officials

Covering threats to public officials — whether elected officials, appointees, civil servants, or election officials — must be done with care to prevent further harm to those targeted and their communities. Coverage can inadvertently expose officials to further threats, misrepresent the frequency and impact of these incidents, or reduce public confidence in elections. Reporting in line with best practices can help to mitigate these risks. Below are suggestions to consider as a starting point.

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

Provide clear and accurate information about the threats or harassment that are occurring.

- What incidents involving threats and harassment have occurred? How were threats delivered? Were they specific or general? Be careful to avoid using sensational language or repeating the content of the threats in ways that spread fear more than they inform.
- What information is not yet known? If no perpetrator or motive has been identified, state that clearly. Avoid repeating others' speculation.

Put incidents in a wider context, using reliable data.

- How long have threats and harassment been occurring in this context? Have they evolved over time? The effects of threats and harassment can layer as time goes on, so a targeted official's past experiences may be relevant to understanding impact.
- How does this fit into broader local or national patterns of threats and harassment?
- Is there an origin story to the threats? Did an initial incident or existing narrative—including a conspiracy theory or misinformation—underlie the threats? (Note: Use caution to avoid implying responsibility or a motive beyond what is known.)
- How many officials are receiving these threats? Has one official been singled out, or are others similarly targeted? Are these threats targeting officials in specific types of positions, with specific backgrounds or identity characteristics?

Consider whether details make the targeted official (or others) more vulnerable to future threats or physical violence before reporting them. Time publication to avoid raising risks during sensitive periods.

- Is the threat widely known? Threats can be intended to cause widespread fear, so ensure that coverage is not inadvertently platforming the perpetrator, advancing their goals, or amplifying their message.
- Consider the timing of your reporting, and consult with the targets of threats to make sure public coverage will not further endanger them or their families by increasing attention at a high-risk period.
- Could reporting a particular detail—such as an address or office location—make it easier for the perpetrator or others to continue or escalate their actions?
- Is the public official already widely known, or will this coverage raise their profile substantially? Consider whether the prominent use of their name, story, or photograph might increase their future risk. See our guidance on [Headlines, Images, and Social Media](#).

Center the voices and experiences of the targeted official or group of officials.

- How do the threats or harassment impact the targeted official and their family, friends, or colleagues? Balance the need to tell the story with safety and security concerns to the victim(s) and their community.
- What support or solutions are they calling for?

Underscore messages that violence is not inevitable or acceptable and highlight responses from communities and leaders.

- Are other public officials, business, faith, or community leaders speaking out to condemn violence and threats? In particular, are any such messages from “surprise speakers” or those whose politics or interests may not otherwise align with the targeted official?
- Was there an investigation into the threat and, if so, what did it find? Were there any forms of accountability or consequences for the perpetrators? Explain any formal charges or other legal action such as a restraining order. Have similar instances faced consequences or other accountability processes? If there are First Amendment limitations on law enforcement responses, explain them without normalizing the underlying behavior.
- What measures are being taken to prevent or mitigate the effects of threats? Not all effective responses are from law enforcement. How are communities rejecting threats and violent rhetoric? Consider referencing reliable data about Americans’ condemnation of political violence, threats, and harassment.

Dos and don’ts for reporting on threats and harassment

✗ **Don’t quote threatening language** in headlines without additional context. See our guidance on [Headlines, Images, and Social Media](#).

✓ **Do highlight messages and actions** condemning and responding to violence.

EXAMPLE [Tea partiers condemn harassment](#), Politico

✗ **Don’t report details** that could make the target of harassment more vulnerable in the future, such as home addresses or daily routines.

✓ **Do center the voices and perspectives** of targeted officials and communities.

EXAMPLE [Since COVID, threats to local school officials have nearly tripled, research finds](#), NPR

✗ **Don’t present threats as more widespread/harmful** or more normal/commonplace than they really are.

✓ **Do ground coverage in data** on broader trends and avoid over-amplifying anecdotes or outliers. When research confirms that spikes in threats do exist, report on them even-handedly. Rely on experts to calibrate framing.

EXAMPLE [Threats against public officials persist in year after Trump assassination attempt](#), The Hill

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Understanding Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials, Bridging Divides Initiative
A regularly updated research project tracking threats and harassment of local officials and identifying effective responses, including event data, survey data, and a qualitative interview program. Media connections to impacted officials can be made upon request.
- Community Safety and De-Escalation Directory, Bridging Divides Initiative
An interactive platform that connects users with a network of community safety, de-escalation, and bystander intervention training resources that can help mitigate the risk of violence, including tools designed to support public officials.
- Election Official Security, United States Election Assistance Commission
A collection of resources for election officials who may be facing personal threats.
- The Security Map, The Impact Project
A dataset aggregating reports and court records of violent threats to public officials.

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