



SECURITY FOR ACTIVISTS

INTRODUCTION

Activism is the act of advocating for change, often through organizing, raising awareness, or engaging in direct action. In the context of reproductive rights, it means fighting for abortion access, challenging restrictive laws, and ensuring people can make decisions about their bodies without fear or interference. However, activism carries inherent risks, especially when working in spaces with legal restrictions or hostile opposition.

It is essential for activists to prioritize their safety, both physically and digitally, while advocating for abortion access. This guide provides practical steps to help you protect your privacy, reduce risks, and continue your work effectively, without unnecessary exposure to harm.

WHO PLACES US AT RISK?

Before diving into risk assessment, it's important to understand the key players that can place activists at risk. Recognizing these threats helps us anticipate potential dangers and take steps to protect ourselves.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES: Government bodies may monitor activists, track protests, or engage in surveillance to identify individuals or groups organizing against abortion restrictions. This can include local police, federal agencies, or intelligence units that collect data for investigations.

ANTI-ABORTION GROUPS AND EXTREMISTS: Some anti-abortion groups or individuals may engage in harassment, intimidation, or surveillance of activists to disrupt efforts and intimidate those involved in abortion advocacy. These groups may target activists online, at protests, or in their communities.

EMPLOYERS AND INSTITUTIONS: In some cases, employers or educational institutions may act against activists, either by reporting them to authorities or creating hostile work environments. Activists who speak out may face job loss or social backlash.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide provides practical steps for protecting your privacy and minimizing risks while engaging in abortion access activism. It includes strategies for assessing your personal risks, securing your digital communication, and reducing your online footprint. It also covers how to prepare for emergencies, understand your rights, and create safety protocols for both yourself and your community. The goal is to help you navigate activism safely, whether you're organizing, protesting, or offering support to others.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

This guide is for anyone involved in activism related to abortion. It's for activists, organizers, volunteers, and anyone taking action to challenge abortion restrictions.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND INFORMANTS: Family members, friends, or even acquaintances who do not support abortion may report activists or share sensitive information with authorities. This is especially a concern in high-stakes environments where legal consequences are severe.

DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE: Your online activity—whether it’s social media posts, search history, or location data—can be monitored and used against you in legal proceedings. Authorities, anti-abortion groups, or even data brokers may use this information to track or target activists.

HOW TO DO A PERSONAL RISK ASSESSMENT

Now that we understand who poses risks to activists, it’s important to assess your own level of risk and how to reduce it. Here’s a simple framework for evaluating your personal situation:

1. WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

Laws regarding abortion access vary greatly by location. If you live in a state with strict abortion laws or ongoing efforts to restrict access, your risk may be higher if you are organizing protests, wheat-pasting, or even gathering people to talk about abortion.

WHAT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER:

LOCAL LAWS: What are the specific laws in your state or city regarding activism, particularly related to abortion?

For example:

Wheatpasting, posting flyers, or putting up stickers in public spaces might be considered criminal trespass or vandalism in some jurisdictions.

Organizing peaceful protests could result in arrests if local ordinances are restrictive.

Online organizing for digital campaigns, such as petitions or social media outreach, may also be subject to surveillance by local authorities or anti-abortion groups.

2. WHO KNOWS ABOUT YOUR ACTIVISM?

The more people who know about your activism, the higher the risk of exposure. Family members, coworkers, or acquaintances might inadvertently or intentionally report your actions, especially if they are not supportive of abortion access.

WHAT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER:

Do people around you know what you’re organizing or advocating for? Could any of them be compelled to report you to authorities, or might they inadvertently share your plans with others?

Consider whether there are individuals who could act as informants (e.g., a disgruntled co-worker or a family member who disagrees with abortion rights).

Do you know who you are organizing with? Work with people you already know well and trust, especially those who share your commitment to the cause and understand the importance of privacy. If you want to bring in new people (which is great!) take the time to get to know them and make sure your values align.

3. HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE?

Using digital tools for organizing can increase your risk of being tracked, especially if you're not taking precautions. If you rely on unprotected communication platforms like regular text messages or social media, your risk increases. Your online activity can be monitored, and digital data can be used against you.

WHAT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER:

SECURE COMMUNICATION TOOLS: Are you using encrypted messaging apps like [Signal](#)? If not, regular text messages, emails, or social media can be used as evidence against you.

SOCIAL MEDIA: Posting about your activism, even indirectly, can make you visible to both pro-choice and anti-abortion groups.

WEB SEARCHES: Searching for abortion-related information can be tracked, and your browsing history could be used against you in some cases. Clear your search history, turn off location tracking, and consider using private browsing tools.

4. WHAT IS YOUR RISK TOLERANCE?

Understanding your comfort level with risk is crucial for deciding what kind of activism to pursue. Some people are more comfortable with exposure and legal consequences, while others prefer to stay low-profile. It's important to assess your situation and the potential impact on your family, community, and safety.

WHAT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER:

MARGINALIZED GROUPS: If you belong to historically targeted groups, like BIPOC, immigrants, undocumented individuals, or members of the LGBTQ+ community, you may face increased risk of surveillance, arrest, or discrimination. Consider the added legal and social risks of activism, especially in restrictive states.

DEPENDENTS: If you have children, family members, pets, or others who rely on you for their care, think about how your activism might affect them. Consider how arrests or legal consequences could impact your ability to care for them.

CRIMINAL RECORD: If you have a prior criminal record, you might face harsher legal consequences.

LIVELIHOOD AND COMMUNITY: Will your activism impact your job, school, or relationships? Consider how your involvement could affect your livelihood, personal safety, or reputation within your community.

WHAT TO DO ONCE YOU'VE ASSESSED YOUR RISKS

Once you've completed your personal risk assessment, it's time to take concrete steps to mitigate those risks and protect yourself and your activism. Here's a guide to help you move forward:

LIMIT EXPOSURE

If you've identified high-risk areas in your activism, consider ways to limit exposure:

STAY LOW-PROFILE:

If you prefer to stay out of the public eye, focus on behind-the-scenes work.

USE PSEUDONYMS:

When organizing events, communicating with others, or online, consider using pseudonyms or anonymous accounts to protect your identity.

AVOID HIGH-RISK LOCATIONS:

If organizing public protests or actions increases your risk, consider working from private, secure spaces or organizing smaller, decentralized actions.

STRENGTHEN YOUR DIGITAL SECURITY

Digital tools are a common target for surveillance. Protect your privacy by:

USE SECURE COMMUNICATION TOOLS:

Only use encrypted messaging apps like [Signal](#) for sensitive conversations. Set messages to disappear after a certain time.

CLEAR YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT:

Regularly delete messages, emails, and browsing history. Use secure browsers like [DuckDuckGo](#) or [Tor](#) to avoid being tracked.

REMOVE PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Services like [DeleteMe](#) removes your addresses, family member's names and addresses, and other identifying information from various corners of the internet. These services are not free but can be very helpful for more visible activists looking to protect themselves from doxxing (finding and publishing one's personal information in order to inspire harassment).

ENABLE TWO-FACTOR AUTHENTICATION (2FA):

Use 2FA for your email and social media accounts to protect them from unauthorized access.

TIP

See the list of resources at the end for tools to help keep your communications secure.

SET UP EMERGENCY PLANS

BE PREPARED IN CASE THINGS GO WRONG:

Have a list of trusted lawyers or legal support resources ready in case of arrest. Familiarize yourself with your rights during an arrest.

BAIL FUNDS AND MUTUAL AID:

Know where to find bail funds.

EMERGENCY CONTACTS:

Set up a secure way to reach out to trusted contacts in case of emergencies. Share your activism plans with someone you trust, so they know what to do if you get arrested or targeted.

CREATE SAFETY PROTOCOLS FOR YOUR COMMUNITY:

Your safety is interconnected with the safety of the people you organize with:

EDUCATE YOUR TEAM:

Make sure everyone involved in your activism knows about the potential risks and how to protect themselves. Share digital security practices and emergency protocols with your group.

WORK WITH TRUSTED PEOPLE:

Only work with people you know and trust, especially when engaging in higher-risk activities. Vet anyone new before bringing them into your circle.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Understanding your legal rights is essential for protecting yourself during activism. Here's what you need to know:

RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT

You don't have to answer questions from the police or government agents. You can politely tell them that you choose not to answer any questions, except for your name and address.

Do not consent to searches. If authorities ask to search your belongings or person, you have the right to refuse. Clearly state, "I do not consent to this search."

TIP

If detained or arrested, exercise your right to remain silent and request an attorney before speaking.

RIGHT TO PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

Peaceful protest is protected under the First Amendment. You have the right to assemble and express your views through protest.

Be aware of local laws. Some areas may require permits for public gatherings or have restrictions on where and when protests can occur.

TIP

Before organizing or joining a protest, learn about local laws to stay within legal boundaries. If you plan to take direct action that could break the law, have a plan in place to protect yourself and others.

RIGHT TO LEGAL REPRESENTATION

If arrested, you can request an attorney. Do not answer questions or sign documents without legal counsel.

Public defenders are available if you cannot afford an attorney. They are appointed to represent individuals who lack the financial means to hire private counsel.

TIP

Keep a list of trusted attorneys or legal aid organizations that specialize in activist-related cases.

RIGHT TO RECORD PUBLIC OFFICIALS

Recording public officials is generally legal. You have the right to record police officers and other public officials in public spaces, as long as you do not interfere with their duties.

RIGHTS OF NON-CITIZENS

Non-citizens have rights. Regardless of immigration status, you have constitutional rights, including the right to remain silent and the right to an attorney.

Be cautious with immigration enforcement. If approached by immigration officers, you have the right to remain silent and request an attorney.

RIGHTS DURING SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Public school students have First Amendment rights, including the right to express political views and organize protests, as long as it does not disrupt the educational environment.

Know school policies. Schools may have specific rules regarding assemblies, distribution of materials, and other activities.

RIGHTS IN AIRPORTS AND BORDER CROSSINGS

Limited rights at borders. At international borders, customs and immigration officers have broader authority to search and question individuals. However, they cannot compel you to provide passwords or unlock devices.

Be aware of searches. Officers may search your belongings, but you have the right to refuse to unlock electronic devices.

KEY WORDS

Bail Funds: Funds collected to help activists who are arrested during protests or direct actions, allowing them to be released while awaiting trial.

Civil Disobedience: The act of intentionally breaking laws to protest or challenge unjust policies, often non-violently, such as blocking roads or occupying spaces.

Digital Footprint: The trail of data you leave online, including social media posts, search history, and location data, that can be used to track or target activists.

Digital Surveillance: The monitoring of your online activities, such as social media, web searches, or location data, which could be used to track, monitor, or target activists.

Doxxing: The act of publicly sharing or publishing private or identifying information about an individual without their consent, typically with the intent to harass, intimidate, or harm them.

First Amendment Rights: Rights guaranteed by the US Constitution that protect freedom of speech, peaceful assembly, and petitioning the government, crucial for activists engaged in protests.

Immigration Enforcement: Actions taken by law enforcement to identify, apprehend, and possibly deport individuals who are in the country without legal authorization. Activists must be aware of their rights in these situations.

IP Address: An IP address is like a home address for your device on the internet. It's a unique number that identifies where your device is located on the web. Your IP address can also be used to track your location and online activity. Using a VPN can hide your real IP address to help protect your privacy.

Jurisdictions: Jurisdictions refer to the areas where certain laws or rules apply. This can be a city, state, or country. Different jurisdictions

have different laws, and what is legal in one place might not be in another. For example, the rules for protesting or organizing may be different depending on the jurisdiction you are in.

Personal exposure: In the context of activism, exposure refers to the visibility of an activist's identity, actions, or personal information to the public, authorities, or adversaries. Increased exposure can lead to risks, such as surveillance, legal consequences, or personal safety concerns.

Protocols: A protocol is a set of rules or steps that are followed to make sure something is done in the right way. In activism, a protocol can be a plan or a system for handling certain situations, like organizing protests, communicating securely, or responding to emergencies.

Pseudonym: A fake name used by activists to protect their identity when organizing, communicating, or participating in actions to minimize the risk of being tracked.

Public Defenders: Lawyers appointed by the state to represent individuals who cannot afford private legal representation. Activists can rely on public defenders if arrested.

Risk Assessment: The process of evaluating your personal risk level when engaging in activism. It involves considering factors like location, local laws, your exposure, and your digital activities.

Two-Factor Authentication (2FA): A security method requiring two forms of verification (such as a password and a phone code) to access an account, enhancing protection against unauthorized access.

Wheatpasting: The act of posting flyers or posters in public spaces as a form of activism. This may be illegal in some areas if seen as vandalism or trespassing.

DIGITAL SECURITY RESOURCES

DeleteMe: A privacy service that helps individuals remove their personal information from data broker websites (companies that collect and sell personal information) to protect their online privacy.

[JoinDeleteMe.com](https://joindeleteme.com)

Digital Defense Fund (DDF): The Digital Defense Fund provides guides, resources, and tools to help people protect their privacy while accessing abortion care. Their guides cover everything from secure communication to digital safety tips.

DigitalDefenseFund.org

DuckDuckGo: A private web browser that doesn't save your search history or track your online activity. It's a safer option for searching abortion-related information than using Google.

DuckDuckGo.com

ProtonMail: ProtonMail is a secure email service that encrypts messages to protect your privacy. For maximum security, both the sender and the recipient should use ProtonMail.

Proton.Me/mail

Signal: A free, secure messaging app that protects your conversations with end-to-end encryption. Only you and the person you're messaging can see the messages. Signal also lets you set disappearing messages to automatically delete after a set time.

Signal.org

Tor Browser: Tor is a browser that hides your location and activity by sending your internet traffic through multiple encrypted layers. It's a good option if you want to browse anonymously.

TorProject.org

VPN (Virtual Private Network): A tool that encrypts your internet connection, helping you stay anonymous online by hiding your IP address and encrypting your online activity. Examples:

[ExpressVPN](#), [NordVPN](#)

Two-Factor Authentication (2FA) Apps: Apps like Google Authenticator or Authy that help secure your online accounts by requiring a second form of identification (a code sent to your phone, for example).

LEGAL RESOURCES:

ACLU Know Your Rights: Provides clear, accessible information about your legal protections and how to assert them in various situations, including interactions with law enforcement and activism.

Aclu.org/know-your-rights

Abortion Defense Network: Provides free legal advice and representation for people facing legal threats related to abortion care. The network also has legal defense funds to pay for attorney fees and other legal expenses.

AbortionDefenseNetwork.org

National Lawyers Guild (NLG): A network of legal professionals who support activists. They provide legal support, training, and resources for protestors.

Nlg.org

Repro Legal Defense Fund: Provides financial support for people investigated or fighting charges related to their pregnancy or abortion.

ReproLegalDefensefund.org

Repro Legal Helpline: Offers free, confidential legal advice for people facing challenges related to abortion laws. They can help with judicial bypasses, emergency abortions, and criminalization of pregnancy outcomes.

ReproLegalHelpline.org