

# FILMING THE POLICE

In the fight to **end systemic police violence** and dismantle power structures that harm communities, footage of police violence can serve as evidence and a valuable tool in amplifying stories, creating counter-narratives, and driving social change.



## EVALUATE RISKS

Risks occur when you film, share, and preserve footage of police violence. The nature of these risks and the options for **harm reduction** will vary across people, contexts, and circumstances. Filming is not always the best (or only) option.

Assess risks for yourself and others before you film. Things like perceived identity (including and beyond race, gender, mental health status, etc.), a vulnerable immigration status, or history with the criminal legal system could elevate the risk level. **Be aware** that police care mainly about their safety, not yours. Moving quickly or suddenly to get a phone or reaching into your pocket could escalate the situation.



## CENTER CARE

Keep in mind that witnessing and experiencing state violence can be **traumatic or distressing** during and long after. Try to identify what can help you calm your nervous system and care for yourself and others. If you are able, ask the person experiencing violence what they need and what could help **de-escalate the situation**. Prioritize dignity, agency, and safety.



## KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

It is **legal to film police** in public places in the United States, regardless of your immigration status. **Don't interfere** and comply with orders like "back up." Regardless, police may still arrest or detain you for filming.

*Note that many states are drafting or passing legislation that criminalizes protesting or filming police. Keep informed about local policies in your area. Look to your local American Civil Liberties Union, National Lawyers Guild, Electronic Frontier Foundation or local copwatch group for guidance.*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- 👁 International Center for NonProfit Law - [U.S. Protest Law Tracker](#)
- 👁 Electronic Frontier Foundation - [You Have a Right to Film the Police](#)
- 👁 Sylvia Rivera Law Center - [Tips for Trans People Dealing with Cops](#)



## PREPARE

A **six digit passcode** (not Touch/Face ID) protects phones and videos from searches under the Fifth Amendment.

The police can't search your phone without your consent or a warrant, but they can take it as evidence. Enabling **auto backup** can prevent footage from being lost, deleted or confiscated. Cloud servers can come with risks of breaches or cooperating with law enforcement, so be mindful about keeping sensitive footage there long-term.



## FILM WITH INTENTION

Keep your camera visible. If safe, capture **steady, long, continuous** shots from multiple angles. Record as much of the encounter as you can.

Hold each shot for at least 10 seconds. Avoid zooming. **Write down** key details afterwards. If it is not safe to film, you can record audio or take written notes. Your presence as a witness may also help de-escalate.



## THINK BEFORE SHARING

Posting or livestreaming videos of police violence can traumatize viewers, dehumanize those filmed, make you target, or bring unwanted attention. **Pause before uploading** to social media to assess how to protect yourself and those you film. Consider first going to the victim or their family/community, lawyer, or a trusted journalist before making it public. If you do decide to share online, include a descriptive title, **content warning**, and description with the date and location. This decision tree might help you determine whether or not to share the footage publicly.

## WHAT TO FILM

**KEY DETAILS:** Weapons, bullet holes, injuries, bloodstains, badge, helmet, license plate numbers, uniforms, indications of ranking, police formations, others observing/filming, orders, surveillance cameras, etc.

**LOCATION, TIME, DATE:** Filming a landmark, street sign, watch, nearby businesses, etc. make it easier for lawyers and investigators to verify the content in the video. You can state the time, date, and location while recording.

## AUDIO

**ANNOUNCE YOURSELF:** If safe, let the person being detained know that you are there to observe and document the cops' behavior. Stop filming if the person being detained requests that you do so.

**LET THE VIDEO SPEAK FOR ITSELF:** If you can't get a close-up shot, clearly state the officer's badge number and name. If you add narration, keep it factual. It is important for attorneys and advocates to hear the incident.

**TESTIMONY:** If safe, collect contact info and preliminary statements from consenting witnesses so attorneys can follow up. Written notes may be safer and more efficient than film.



## PRESERVE YOUR MEDIA

Preserve the original file and **make copies** if you plan to edit. When possible, ask for support from trusted people or collectives in making complicated decisions around how to archive footage or share it for **evidentiary purposes**.