

Covering Protests & Demonstrations During The COVID-19 Pandemic: 29 May 2020

There have been violent protests in Minneapolis and other parts of the United States, in reaction to the killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minnesota. A CNN crew that was reporting live were [arrested](#) for not complying with a police instruction in the early hours of 29 May. Initially peaceful protests have now witnessed significant levels of violence, with looting and buildings set on fire, including a police station in Minneapolis.

Media workers covering demonstrations have always had to be on their guard to avoid violent attacks, but because of the Covid-19 pandemic media workers are now even more at risk while doing their job.

Demonstrators and law enforcers are often ignoring social distancing guidance, so journalists should be aware that these conventions are not being observed; this particularly applies to angry protesters who may be spitting and/or coughing at police officers and/or media workers as a means of intimidation.

After a relative lull during the lockdown period, demonstrations are once again erupting around the [world](#). Now often fuelled by the economic disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, incidents of mob violence against state forces and also health care workers and journalists have raised reporters concerns.

[HP Risk Management](#) has been supporting journalists and newsrooms covering the recent unrest. This advisory provides safety guidance for journalists to assist them when covering civil disorder during the Covid-19 pandemic.

With examples of protestors [ignoring physical distancing guidelines](#), journalists should be aware of the risk of exposure to Covid-19 whilst covering demonstrations, and consider the following safety information:

Pre-Assignment Planning

- Media workers should not be expected to work alone. If necessary hire a 'backwatcher' or security guard to work alongside them.
- Thoroughly research the protest location and plan in advance what you will do in the event of an emergency.

- Ensure a regular check-in procedure is agreed with the management team, with a clear plan of action should any check-in fail to materialise.
- Consider what equipment you will take with you. Long distance lenses should help you maintain physical distance with individuals whilst helping you obtain good quality footage. If you plan on interviewing people on the ground, take directional 'fishpole' microphones. Use mobile battery powered equipment rather than those with cables.
- Media workers should take an adequate supply of alcohol based hand sanitiser with them to last the duration of the assignment, as well as alcohol based wipes. Consider the necessity of wearing PPE (personal protective equipment) on assignment, such as disposable gloves and a [N95 facemask](#) (or FFP2 / FFP3). If wearing a facemask it is essential to follow the relevant [face mask safety guidance](#).

Reporting On The Ground

- Remain vigilant at all times to the risk of people spitting or coughing close to or on you, be it accidentally or deliberately. If individuals are anti-media - minimise your proximity to them.
- Comply with law enforcement officers at all times. Note that tensions will likely be high, which could result in media workers being arrested.
- Identify where you will position yourself during reporting, noting the recommended safe minimum distance of at least 2 metres with everybody at all times. A rooftop vantage point or a balcony affords a greater degree of protection over reporting from ground level amongst the crowd.
- Choosing a safe 'live' position becomes even more important if live streaming for any length of time; consider the benefit vs the risk to media workers, who will likely have to maintain a presence by the camera throughout.
- Continuously observe and read the mood of the authorities in relation to the crowd dynamic. Police can become more aggressive if the crowd is agitated or vice versa. Visual queues such as the appearance of police dressed in riot gear, shield walls or throwing of missiles are potential indicators that aggression can be expected. Pull back to a safe location, or plan a quick extraction when such 'red flags' are evident.
- Identify the risk of tear gas, rubber bullets and/or live ammunition being used. PPE such as a full face respirator and ballistic goggles may be necessary for the assignment, especially if reporting from amongst the protesters.
- Wear clothes and footwear that allow you to move quickly. Avoid wearing flammable materials such as nylon, and any clothing that identifies the outlet you work for (e.g. clothing with a company logo on it).
- If working in or close to a crowd, plan your strategy in advance. Maintain situational awareness at all times and keep to the outside of the crowd. Avoid being sucked into the middle of the crowd where it is hard to escape, and avoid getting trapped between

the police and the protesters. Try to keep your back against a wall or something similar to protect your back/rear.

- Identify all possible escape/evacuation routes. Identify agreed emergency rendezvous points to meet with others should you become separated.
- Do not wear loose jewellery such as necklaces and bangles, lanyards around your neck, or anything else that can be grabbed. Ensure long hair is tucked up and put away (e.g under a hat). If wearing a rucksack, put it on your front rather than your back.
- Limit valuables in your possession, such as jewellery and watches. Do not leave any equipment or other valuable items in vehicles.
- Keep your media credentials with you, and easily accessible at all times in case the police ask to see them.
- Plan and take regular rest breaks, noting that tired individuals are more likely to make mistakes with hand washing and hygiene routine.
- Continually monitor local sources for news of any location specific movement restrictions in place.

Dealing With Aggression

- Use your own body language to pacify any situation. Maintain eye contact with an aggressor, use open hand gestures, and keep talking to them with a calm manner.
- Keep an extended arm's length from any aggressor. Back away, and if someone grabs hold of you, break away firmly without aggression. If cornered and in danger, shout to raise the alarm.
- If the situation escalates, keep a hand free to protect your head. Move with short, deliberate steps to avoid falling. If in a team, stick together and link arms.
- Be aware of the situation and your own safety. While there are times when documenting aggression can be newsworthy, taking pictures of aggressive individuals can escalate a situation

Post-Assignment

- Wipe down all equipment on location using alcohol based wipes before placing it back in cases, bags and/or in your vehicle.
- All clothes and footwear worn on assignment should be removed before entering your home.
- Any PPE used should be safely disposed of in a sealed bag immediately after use.

- Ensure you always wash your hands thoroughly and properly with hot water and soap after any cleaning and/or removing PPE. A useful guide on how to wash and dry your hands properly can be found on the [WHO website here](#).

HP Risk Management works with a number of newsrooms and journalist associations, providing on-call risk assessment support, safety advice and training. We have recently launched a new risk assessment platform, [RiskPal](#), to streamline the risk process. RiskPal contains a large amount of protest and safety advice, as well as specific mitigation regarding Covid-19 related risks for the media. It gives organisations a record of all risk assessment activity in an easy-to-use and secure online platform.

For more information please contact info@hpriskmanagement.com

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