

Risk Assessment for New Activists

Let's be real about safety

Fear of consequences can paralyze us into inaction. This guide helps you understand real risks, protect yourself effectively, and take action with confidence. Knowledge is power, and power conquers fear.

 Estimated read time: 20 minutes

In this guide:

- [Reality Check: Understanding Risk](#)
- [Risk Matrix by Tactic](#)
- [Protection Strategies](#)
- [The Escalation Ladder](#)
- [De-escalation Skills](#)
- [Legal Resources & Rights](#)
- [Your Next Steps](#)

Reality Check: Understanding Risk

Let's start by naming the elephant in the room: activism can have consequences. Pretending otherwise doesn't help anyone. But here's what's equally true: most activism carries far less risk than your fears suggest, and there are proven ways to protect yourself while still making change.

Risk isn't a yes-or-no question. It's a spectrum that depends on:

- What tactics you use
- Where you organize
- Your personal circumstances
- Current political climate
- How you prepare and protect yourself

This guide gives you tools to assess risk realistically, not anxiously. Because the biggest risk of all? Letting fear keep you from acting while our communities and planet suffer.

Critical Note: Laws and enforcement vary dramatically by location. This guide offers general principles, but always research your local laws and consult with experienced organizers in your area. What's safe in one city might not be in another.

Risk Matrix by Tactic

Different organizing tactics carry different levels of risk. This matrix helps you understand the spectrum and choose tactics that match your situation and comfort level.

Tactic	Risk Level	Common Consequences	Protection Priority
Calling/Writing Officials	Very Low	None (it's your right)	Basic privacy (if desired)
Permitted Protests	Low	Usually none if you follow permit terms	Stay in permitted areas, have emergency contacts
Voter Registration	Low	None (protected activity)	Follow local regulations
Community Organizing	Low	Possible surveillance in some areas	Digital security, meeting safety
Unpermitted Protests	Medium	Possible arrest, fines	Legal support, jail support plan
Civil		Likely arrest,	Legal team, know

Disobedience	Medium	possible charges	your rights
Strikes/Walkouts	Medium	Job loss risk, legal protections vary	Know labor laws, collective action
Direct Action/Blockades	High	Arrest likely, charges possible	Full legal support, affinity groups

Remember: "High risk" doesn't mean "don't do it." It means "prepare thoroughly." Throughout history, people have taken calculated risks to create change. The key word is "calculated."

Protection Strategies

Good security isn't paranoia - it's community care. These strategies help you stay safer without living in fear.

Digital Security Basics

Essential Digital Protections

- **Use Signal or encrypted messaging** for organizing conversations
- **Separate email for activism** (ProtonMail, Tutanota)
- **Strong, unique passwords** with a password manager

- **Two-factor authentication** on all accounts
- **Regular phone/computer updates** for security patches
- **Be thoughtful about photos** - faces at protests can be identified

Physical Safety

At Actions and Events

- **Buddy system** - never organize alone
- **Write emergency contact on arm** (in case of arrest)
- **Dress appropriately** - layers, comfortable shoes, nothing loose
- **Bring water, snacks, medications** you might need
- **Know your exits** - always have an escape route
- **Trust your gut** - if something feels wrong, leave

Legal Preparation

Before Any Action

- **Know the legal support number** - write it on your body
- **Understand likely charges** for your planned tactics
- **Have jail support plan** - who to call, who feeds pets

- **Clean out pockets/bag** - nothing you don't want police to see
- **Consider legal observer training** to support others
- **Know your rights** - and practice asserting them

Important: Never bring weapons (even pocket knives) to protests. Don't bring drugs or anything illegal. These dramatically increase your risk and can endanger others.

The Escalation Ladder

Smart organizing starts low-risk and builds. You don't start with blockading pipelines - you build skills, relationships, and confidence through escalating engagement. Here's a typical progression:

1 **Education & Awareness**

Read, watch documentaries, attend talks. Zero risk, builds knowledge foundation.

2 **Digital Engagement**

Sign petitions, share content, join online groups. Minimal risk, builds connections.

3 **Institutional Participation**

Vote, call representatives, attend town halls. Low risk, uses official channels.

4 **Community Organizing**

Join groups, attend meetings, volunteer. Low-medium risk, builds relationships.

5 **Public Demonstration**

Permitted marches and rallies. Medium risk, visible collective action.

6 **Civil Disobedience**

Sit-ins, unpermitted protests. Medium-high risk, disrupts business as usual.

7 **Direct Action**

Blockades, occupations. High risk, directly interferes with harmful systems.

You can stop anywhere on this ladder that feels right for you. There's no shame in finding your comfort zone and working within it. Every level contributes to change.

De-escalation Skills

Knowing how to calm tense situations protects everyone. These skills work whether you're dealing with angry counter-protesters, nervous police, or conflicts within your own group.

Core De-escalation Principles

- **Stay calm yourself** - take deep breaths, lower your voice
- **Create space** - step back, don't crowd
- **Open body language** - hands visible, non-threatening posture
- **Acknowledge emotions** - "I see you're upset..."
- **Redirect to shared goals** - find common ground
- **Know when to disengage** - sometimes walking away is best

With Law Enforcement

Key Strategies

- **Stay calm and polite** - but assert your rights

- **Keep hands visible** - no sudden movements
- **Film if possible** - or ensure someone else is
- **Don't argue law on scene** - save it for court
- **Remember the human** - but don't expect reciprocation
- **Have designated police liaisons** - not everyone should engage

With Counter-Protesters

Safety First Approach

- **Don't engage with provocateurs** - they want conflict
- **Form protective lines** - link arms, face outward
- **Use chants/songs** - harder to fight while singing
- **Document everything** - but don't provoke for footage
- **Have safety team ready** - trained in intervention
- **Know your exits** - always have escape routes

Remember: Your safety comes first. No action is worth serious injury. Live to organize another day.

Legal Resources & Rights

Knowledge of your rights is your first line of defense. But remember: knowing your rights and being able to exercise them safely are sometimes different things.

Your Basic Rights (US Context)

- **First Amendment** - protects speech, assembly, petition
- **Fourth Amendment** - protects against unreasonable search
- **Fifth Amendment** - right to remain silent
- **Sixth Amendment** - right to attorney

Reality Check: Having rights doesn't mean they'll be respected in the moment. Document violations for later legal action, but prioritize safety during encounters.

If You're Arrested

Remember These Key Points

- **Stay calm and be polite** - but not chatty
- **Say: "I am exercising my right to remain silent"**
- **Say: "I want to speak to a lawyer"**
- **Don't sign anything** without lawyer present

- **Don't discuss your case** in jail - walls have ears
- **Remember badge numbers** and officer names

Finding Legal Support

Before any action, identify:

- **National Lawyers Guild chapter** in your area
- **ACLU contacts** for your state
- **Movement lawyers** recommended by local organizers
- **Legal observer trainings** to support others
- **Bail funds** that support activists
- **Know Your Rights trainings** specific to your area



Also covered in: Check our "Plain English Guide to Civic Engagement" for understanding legal terms and processes you might encounter.

Your Next Steps

Fear fades with preparation. Here's how to move from anxiety to action:

This Week

1. **Assess your situation** - What are your specific vulnerabilities? Job? Immigration status? Family?
2. **Choose your first tactic** - Start with something low-risk from the matrix
3. **Find a buddy** - Never organize alone, even for safe activities
4. **Set up basic security** - Encrypted messaging, strong passwords

This Month

1. **Attend a Know Your Rights training** - Knowledge reduces fear
2. **Connect with experienced organizers** - Learn from their wisdom
3. **Practice one de-escalation technique** - In a safe environment
4. **Create your emergency plan** - Who to call, what to do

Ongoing

- Regular security culture check-ins
- Update your risk assessment as situations change
- Share knowledge with newer activists
- Balance security with accessibility

Final Thought: Perfect safety doesn't exist - in activism or in life. The goal isn't to eliminate all risk, but to take smart risks for things that matter. Our movements need you, and they need you sustainable and safe. Find your balance between courage and caution, then act.

