

World Press Freedom Day: ‘Startling Extent of Police Violence Against Journalists’

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press found that as the country faced a wave of demonstrations last year, "journalists covering those protests were arrested and attacked in record numbers."

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First published in 2021 for World Press Freedom Day

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press released its fourth annual report about conditions that members of the U.S. media faced while on the job last year—and [revealed](#) “the startling extent of police violence against journalists during a year of protest.”

The new [report](#) (pdf), published on [World Press Freedom Day](#), analyzes data from the [U.S. Press Freedom Tracker](#). Launched in 2017, the tracker is led by the Freedom of the Press Foundation and Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) along with other organizations including Reporters Without Borders and the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press.

“The importance of the tracker and its role documenting press freedoms in the U.S. came into sharp focus in 2020—only the fourth year of its existence—when the country faced a wave of protests, and journalists covering those protests were arrested and attacked in record numbers,” the report says.

Since its founding in 2017, [@uspresstracker](#) has documented [#pressfreedom](#) violations. In 2020, journalists experienced:

- ▣ 438 physical attacks
- ▣ 139 arrests
- ▣ 110 cases of damaged equipment
- ▣ 31 subpoenas

Full report from [@rcfp](#): <https://t.co/Adjfah2zFo> pic.twitter.com/84PnWV9IH5

— International Women's Media Foundation (@IWMF) [May 3, 2021](#)

While noting that “protests have long been one of the most dangerous places for journalists to report the news,” the report highlights some startling figures:

Ignited by the May 25 murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, protests for racial justice and against police brutality erupted across the country, marking a tumultuous moment for press freedom in the U.S. As journalists reported on these historic demonstrations (collectively referred to as Black Lives Matter protests by the tracker), they faced a record number of attacks (400) and arrests (129)—more than 11 and 15 times the number reported for 2019, respectively. The press freedom incidents that occurred during these protests, which included damaged equipment, represented the vast majority—at least 82% (517)—of the total number of incidents documented by the Tracker in 2020 (625).

While private individuals assaulted many journalists, law enforcement was responsible for 80% of these attacks. In cities across the country—from Portland to Miami, Minneapolis to Los Angeles—police officers shot journalists with various forms of projectiles, like rubber-coated bullets, which can be lethal at close range. They caused serious injuries to reporters, permanently blinding one of them. Police also sprayed tear gas, fired pepper balls, and used their batons and fists. Officers often ignored journalists' press credentials and flouted news media exemptions to local curfew ordinances. Police also detained reporters during mass arrests—and, in at least one case, even handcuffed a TV news journalist as he reported live, on-air.

In another case, the report says, a Buffalo officer reportedly told a freelance photojournalist, “F*ck your First Amendment,” as police pointed guns at his head.

5 takeaways from [@rcfp](#)'s annual U.S. [#pressfreedom](#) report:

- Police responsible for majority of attacks on journalists
 - 15x increase in arrests
 - Subpoenas increased for 3rd consecutive year
 - Journalists denied access due to their coverage
 - Trump accelerated [#AttacksOnPress](#) pic.twitter.com/C2IAbVsvuF
- Committee to Protect Journalists (@pressfreedom) [May 3, 2021](#)

“2020 marked the third consecutive year that the number of subpoenas reported to the tracker increased, renewing concerns that journalists may be facing these legal threats more frequently,” according to the report. It also notes that “although 2020 saw a drop in prior restraint cases, three lawsuits over the summer involved unsuccessful efforts to block the publication of books about former President Donald Trump.”

Other key findings include:

- Despite Covid-19, many courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, live-streamed proceedings, but federal, state, and local officials excluded journalists from press briefings in apparent retaliation for their coverage;
- Trump set a new record for anti-press tweets, while state legislators repeated his attacks, and the Department of Homeland Security compiled “intelligence reports” about journalists; and
- In 2020, federal officials again excluded specific news outlets or reporters from

press events in apparent retaliation for their coverage, in violation of the First Amendment.

Former President Trump tweeted a record 632 attacks on the press during his last year in office — the highest count of his term, according to [@uspresstracker](#) — up until Twitter permanently suspended his account in January 2021. pic.twitter.com/FEhfGSm69B

— Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (@rcfp) [May 3, 2021](#)

Although the report concludes that “there are reasons for optimism in 2021,” it also points out that President Joe Biden’s administration “has continued to pursue a historic criminal prosecution against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, which includes charges based solely on the act of publicly disclosing government secrets—the first time such a legal theory has advanced beyond the grand jury stage.”

In a lengthy statement [acknowledging](#) World Press Freedom Day, Biden said that “we celebrate the courage of truth-tellers who refuse to be intimidated, often at great personal risk, and we reaffirm the timeless and essential role journalism and a free media play in societies everywhere.”

Journalists “are indispensable to the functioning of democracy,” Biden continued. “Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists and media workers have been on the frontlines to keep the public informed, at significant risk to their own health. And, at a time when the truth is increasingly under attack, our need for accurate, fact-based reporting, open public conversation, and accountability has never been greater.”

“It is incumbent on all of us to counter these threats to a free and independent media, including physical risk and arbitrary detention,” the president added, citing the CPJ’s imprisonment findings for 2020. “Online abuse and harassment of journalists, particularly women and journalists of color, continues to increase. Authoritarians are striving to undermine the free press, manipulate the truth, or spread disinformation even as a shrinking news industry is creating more and more ‘news deserts,’ areas without local media, around the world. These attacks are nothing less than a threat to democracies everywhere.”

Though Biden’s administration has faced some criticism from reporters and press freedom advocates—particularly for his [refusal](#) to hold Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman accountable for the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi as well as for [delaying](#) media access to U.S. government facilities used to temporarily detain unaccompanied migrant children—his statement still stood in stark contrast to those of his predecessor.

On [#WorldPressFreedomDay](#), the 46th [@potus](#) called journalists “indispensable to the functioning of democracy” & celebrated the “integral role a free press plays in building prosperous, resilient and free societies.” <https://t.co/Kkt2LVccao> <https://t.co/L92hLzPsdG>

— Alex Howard (@digiphile) [May 3, 2021](#)

CPJ program director Carlos Martinez de la Serna [told](#) *Newsweek* that “Biden’s statement is an important reminder of the essential value of press freedom and the role of the U.S. in defending it.”

“It is critical for the safety of journalists around the world that his administration restores U.S. press freedom leadership after the attacks on journalists and their work became a defining feature of the Trump years,” Martinez de la Serna said, “and is vocal about its support of a free press as a matter of principle and a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy, one of the six steps we laid out in our white paper released in November.”

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