

THE SAFETY MANUAL

The Medill Innocence Project

Getting the Story Safely:

From the Front Lines to the Home Front

The mission of the Medill Innocence Project is to support journalism students in their investigations of potential miscarriages of justice. Uncovering the truth—be it on the front lines of an international crisis or on the gritty streets of Chicago—is noble. But it does not give journalists license to be daredevils. Reporter safety is a serious issue facing news organizations, yet many of them do not have formalized or written safety procedures for their staff. Some do not share this information, considering it proprietary. The Medill Innocence Project, however, aims to support students with basic safety knowledge to help them as they investigate murder cases, which often means traveling in tough neighborhoods, as well as interviewing sources who may have criminal records.

According to the International News Safety Institute (INSI), a nonprofit organization that raises safety awareness and develops safety strategies for journalists worldwide, 124 journalists and media staff died in 2011, up almost 12 percent from a decade ago. Last October, the United Nations human rights chief called for reporters to get protection. ([Read the INSI article about this call for protection.](#))

Resources for journalists covering conflicts abroad are plentiful. Nearly all American journalist casualties have occurred overseas. Common sense in these critical situations is not enough for reporters. They must acquire protective gear, secure transportation and significant first-aid acumen.

The following safety manuals and self-directed course are valuable to the international and domestic reporter, as the INSI recommends stateside reporters protect themselves much as they would abroad. Consider:

[Reporters Without Borders safety handbook, compiled by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#)

[Committee to Protect Journalists' safety guide](#)

[Self-directed course on international reporting News U \(a Poynter initiative\)](#)

[International Federation of Journalists survival guide](#)

Although the United States is a relatively low-risk country for reporters, reporting stories stateside presents inherent dangers. Basic shoestring journalism compels us to knock on people's doors, not always knowing what's on the other side.

Consider the story of the first journalist to be killed on American soil in 30 years, Chauncey Bailey, who was shot-gunned to death while reporting a story in 2007. In Bailey's case, he wasn't reporting in a dangerous crowd or at a fitful demonstration. He was covering a story about the finances of a bakery in Oakland, Calif. Bailey was killed walking into work at The Oakland Post, a weekly newspaper covering San Francisco's East Bay. Police say he was probably killed to keep the paper from writing about the bakery. According to the American Journalism Review, more than 24 Bay Area journalists from competing news outlets joined forces to complete Bailey's story. Other journalists have raised questions about whether police had fully addressed the safety threats surrounding the bakery, accused of rampant corruption, prior to Bailey's death. ([Watch Anderson Cooper's "60 Minutes" piece about Bailey](#)).

Other stories on the home front present inherent dangers. Consider the Occupy movement and the toll it has taken on reporter safety and confidence in police protection. Coverage of the Occupy movement has resulted in the attacks on more than a half dozen journalists, according to the INSI. One such attack was captured on film as journalist Faith Laugier was slammed to the pavement while covering a November 2011 demonstration. ([Watch the video of her attack](#)).

Consider the following headlines, as documented by INSI over a mere two months:

[Photojournalist attacked by protesters in Oakland, U.S.](#)

[Occupy protests present a new terrain of risk for reporters](#)

[At Occupy protests, U.S. journalists arrested, assaulted](#)

[Fox reporters injured in Occupy Wall Street clashes](#)

The Occupy movement has not only raised safety concerns for journalists, it has also prompted news organizations to clarify their policies and openly choose reporter safety over breaking a story. In a memo to all Associated Press employees, AP senior vice president and executive editor Kathleen Carroll explained why staffers covering Occupy Wall Street were cautioned not to tweet about two journalists caught up in the protestors' eviction from Lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park. Carroll said in the memo that staffers seemed more concerned about getting the story out that two of its reporters had been rounded up, rather than advising their own news organization about the potentially dangerous situation. ([Read an article about Carroll's memo here](#)).

HAVE THE CONVERSATION

Carroll's memo, however it was perceived, highlights an important aspect about reporter safety: communication. As many news organizations, such as The Chicago Tribune or WBEZ, do not have written protocol about safety, conversations with editors—or with Prof. Alec Klein if you're a student in this investigative journalism class—must be conducted constantly.

Angela Rozas, assignment editor at the Chicago Tribune, told the Medill Innocence Project she follows no written safety protocol, yet the topic of safety is ever-present in her newsroom. "It's a conversation that I regularly have with reporters."

Kate Cahan, a metro editor at WBEZ, Chicago's NPR member station, told the Medill Innocence Project her reporters travel to a lot of places that she hopes "their mothers never find out about."

"They regularly go in all manner of neighborhood, and they also make people mad," Cahan said. "We would talk about sending someone at night into what we consider to be a dangerous situation. ...I would never, as an editor, make somebody do something they felt unsafe doing. That's a bottom line. I just wouldn't do that."

Cahan noted that the dangers for American-based journalists are much slimmer than elsewhere: "We're much more likely to be sued than to be shot for what we do."

Cahan's advice is an echo of what Rick Kramer, news operations manager for Chicago's CBS affiliate, said about reporter safety: "For going into hostile neighborhoods, if you have any feeling that it's an unsafe situation, you get out. No story is worth risking your safety."

When Poynter Institute journalist Bob Steele interviewed the former president of CNN International, Chris Cramer, Cramer said, "They should never take undue risks in pursuing a story. There is always another day and another road to drive down."

Likewise, Candy Altman, vice president of Hearst television, told Poynter that reporters should be fully aware of potential dangers before they enter a situation. "We tell them in all situations to exercise common sense and use all of their instincts to keep them out of trouble," Altman told Steele. "We tell them to look for the story, but not look for trouble."

COLLECTIVE ADVICE

The following guidance comes from the International Federation of Journalists, the International News Safety Institute, interviews with editors at several news organizations—and common sense. This list is by no means exhaustive, nor could it be, as reporting always presents

certain dangers. It is essential that students in this class frequently communicate with Prof. Klein:

1. Always report in pairs or groups.
2. Make sure Prof. Klein know where you are going before you head out. You are required to send him a text or email with the name, address and telephone number of the person/place where the interview will take place, as well as the approximate time of your trip. Also include the team members on the trip. Immediately notify Prof. Klein by text or email upon your safe return.
3. Carry your Northwestern student identification and present it to those you approach for information. Always identify who you are—a student at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Never use deception. Respect others and hope they will respect you, too.
4. Do not report after dark without discussing it with Prof. Klein.
5. Know who it is you will be interviewing. Research their background beforehand to know if they present a safety threat.
6. Research the culture and environment you'll be reporting in—whether it's overseas or in a city neighborhood with which you're not familiar. Know your route ahead of time. Print out directions. Do not rely on smart phone or GPS service to guide you.
7. Be aware of your surroundings and pay attention to the body language of those around you. Keep a safe, reactionary distance from people. When you are in doubt about a person's intentions, leave. When in doubt about a situation, get out. Try to stay clear-headed and control your emotions and reactions.
8. Display confidence while you are walking in an unfamiliar neighborhood.
9. If you feel you are being followed, cross the street and look at the person. Would-be attackers do not want to be identified. Call police as soon as safely possible.
10. Stay in well-lit areas. Avoid alleys, short-cuts, secluded areas or spaces with heavy vegetation.
11. Stay on major streets with heavy car and pedestrian traffic. Walk on the side of the street facing traffic so that a car cannot pull up behind you and catch you off guard.
12. If you are followed by a car while you are walking, intentionally walk the wrong way on a one-way street.

13. Avoid confrontation. If you are being hassled or provoked, walk away.
14. Avoid getting too close to cars while you are walking. Stay on the sidewalk. If someone pulls up to you to ask a question, keep a safe distance. Do not get close to the car window.
15. Avoid passing occupied or stationary cars when you are walking.
16. Beware of someone who warns you of danger or offers to accompany you to safety. This can be an attacker's ploy.
17. If a car pulls up to you and someone threatens you to get inside of it, do not do it. Scream, shout or run in the opposite direction.
18. Have a plan in mind if you are attacked. Try to calm the attacker and persuade him/her not to harm you. Cry hysterically, act insane or incapacitated. If you decide to defend yourself, aim for eyes, feet or anywhere the attacker would not expect. Use whatever is at your disposal as a weapon (i.e. an umbrella, hot beverage).
19. Do not carry large quantities of cash. If someone demands your money, do not fight or negotiate—give it away.
20. If you are a victim of a robbery, try to stay calm. Do not resist. Do not make sudden moves. If you must move, tell the robber why you are moving. Make sure the robber has left before calling for emergency help.
21. Do not carry more valuables than you need—better yet, do not carry valuables.
22. If you must carry a laptop, tote it in a non-descript bag. Do not carry a computer case. Do not leave your laptop in your car.
23. Do not carry a lot of credit cards. Make photocopies of the credit card you choose to carry and keep the photocopy in a separate place.
24. Never leave your belongings unattended.
25. Never keep your wallet in your back pocket.
26. Carry a simple wallet. Avoid labels.
27. If someone wants your wallet, toss it to them and leave the situation. Avoid making contact.
28. Avoid people who bump into you repeatedly. They could be pickpockets.

29. Hold your purse or bag close to you at all times.
30. Know the area well. Familiarize yourself with a map. Know where you are at all times.
31. Carry a list of emergency numbers apart from your cell phone.
32. Charge your cell phone fully before leaving for field reporting.
33. While walking, do not use a cell phone, iPad or other distracting devices. If you do make a phone call in public, be careful of what information you are speaking aloud.
34. Prepare any gear or supplies you may need during the course of your reporting and keep them handy. Do not secure them in the trunk of your car, only to walk away from them. Keep these supplies near you and with you, preferably in non-descript bags to avoid unwanted attention.
35. Carry a whistle (or make a lot of noise if there is a problem). You can even shout out “Hey, you! Call police!”—even if no one is there.
36. Prepare your car (make sure it is fully fueled before leaving on a trip and check that the tires and brakes are sound). If you must fuel up while in the field, choose a well-lit, busy service station with video surveillance at the pump. Lock your car while pumping gas. Do not use your cell phone. Be aware of your surroundings. Take your receipt with you.
37. Wear weather-appropriate, walkable and runnable footwear. Shoes should be fully enclosed.
38. Avoid unwanted attention in dress, make-up and action. Avoid labels. Do not advertise affiliations. Dress in loose-fitting, plain clothes. Avoid wearing scarves or belts as they can be used to hold you back from running free. Do not wear hats or hoods that obstruct your peripheral vision. Behave modestly.
39. Lock your car doors, whether you are inside or outside it.
40. Do not leave anything in plain view inside your car when it is parked. Stow items in the trunk of your car, unless you feel you are being watched.
41. Have your keys ready when you approach your parked vehicle to leave.
42. Park on the lower levels of garages.
43. Keep an emergency kit in your car (i.e. first-aid, water, blankets, snacks, flashlight)

44. Be aware of the “bump and rob” technique, which is when a car bumps into you on purpose to provoke you to vacate your car, leaving it and you vulnerable to robbery. Call police if you are in an accident in an unsafe area. Do not get out to survey the damage. Wave to the driver to meet at a safe, public place up the road.
45. If you must use the shoulder of a road, park as far away from traffic as possible.
46. When you are dropping people off at their homes, make sure they get inside safely. Ask that they do the same for you when you are being dropped off.
47. Park in well-lit areas near high pedestrian traffic. Do not park near heavy vegetation, dumpsters, large cars or other areas that may conceal you.
48. Trust your instincts.

For more safety tips, please visit Northwestern University Police’s [website](#).

Finally, reporters should remember to do what they do best: report. Speak up and speak out when you have encountered a threatening situation. Do not concern yourself with how it might affect your future stories. The sexual assault of CBS correspondent Lara Logan while reporting on the Egyptian protests in February 2011 was a sobering reminder for journalists everywhere about how quickly danger can arise in the field. In Logan’s case, she became separated from her colleague in the field when a camera battery went down. ([Watch her “60 Minutes” interview here](#)). Her experience prompted other journalists to attest to the risks they have faced, but never reported, for fear of being considered weak. Journalists should always tell the truth.

MORE RESOURCES

For more information about support for journalists, including safety information, please consult the following organizations:

[Committee to Protect Journalists](#)

[Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#)

[International Federation of Journalists](#)

[International News Safety Institute](#)

[International Press Institute](#)

[Media Diversity Institute](#)

[Poynter News University](#)

[Reporter Without Borders](#)

[Society of Professional Journalists](#)

Special thanks to Northwestern University's Office of General Counsel, Office of Risk Management and University Police for reviewing and contributing to this report.