

# PROTEST IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

We've got a million reasons to be in the streets in the United States. White supremacist fascists are preparing for a civil war, Black folks continue to be targeted by law enforcement and vigilantes, ten million adults (<https://www.scarleteen.com/glossary#adults>) are unemployed while millions more are otherwise struggling to survive.



**Tasha Fierce**

But not everyone is okay with — or even able to engage in — active protest right now. There's one big reason why many people here, especially sick and disabled folks, may be hesitant to bring their bodies together as a show of force: COVID-19.

Our leadership has handled this pandemic predictably, and we're now heading into another crest of the same unbroken hellwave we've been riding since February. The myth of young people's low infection (<https://www.scarleteen.com/glossary#infection>) risk has been used as a pawn in the debate over schools and universities opening, while teens and emerging adults are actually dying and becoming disabled from this disease (<https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2020/07/418081/1-3-young-adults-may-face-severe-covid-19-ucsf-study-shows>). The CDC has recently confirmed that the novel coronavirus is airborne (<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/s1005-how-spread-covid.html>), that it can spread beyond six feet and linger in the air, shifting the terrain of the pandemic.

It's all exhausting and terrifying, but not less so than a fascist dictatorship with the current president at the helm. So, we continue on.

In the age of COVID-19, how can we make our voices heard without spreading the virus? If we are organizers, how do we organize actions that are as safe and accessible as they can be for as many people as possible?

## Safe(r) Protest During the Pandemic

There's some good news on both counts: Black Lives Matter protests from May-June did not cause significant spikes in infection rates (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/nyregion/nyc-coronavirus-protests.html>). We

also already know transmission outside is less likely than transmission in an indoor space with poor ventilation, so outdoor rallies and marches are at an advantage. Wearing masks, maintaining a distance of six feet or further from other people, hand sanitizing and washing hands when running water is available--these are basics that I hope everyone has internalized into our everyday routines by now, and these practices go double for active protest. If you are engaging in active protest, take extra face coverings in case you are teargassed and need to change.

This is important because COVID-19 can be transmitted by surface contact -- like the inner surface of your asymptomatic buddy's mask. It just needs to touch your nose, eyes, or mouth, or close to them. You can also get it by touching something that has virions on it, like a shared water bottle, and then touching your face. Bring your own stuff to protests, don't share stuff, and if you do, [clean](https://www.scarleteen.com/glossary#clean) (<https://www.scarleteen.com/glossary#clean>) it with 70%-95% isopropyl alcohol before you use it again. You might also want to get some gloves, disposable or washable, that you can wear if you need to handle communal items. Just don't touch your face or adjust your mask with your gloved hands, because that defeats the purpose.

COVID-19 has a 2-14 day incubation period (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>). It's possible to transmit the virus even if you don't have any symptoms. Best practice is to quarantine for two weeks in between actions.

Even if everyone's social distancing is perfect, it is still possible to get infected if someone is actively shedding the virus. Get tested if you can, but regardless, wait 14 days after you last protested to make sure you aren't still in the incubation period.

For organizers, make sure you are very clear on your mask policy and your social distancing policy when publicizing your event. Consider using something like stomping, clapping, noisemakers, *anything* other than chanting, yelling, and singing when you're trying to build energy. If someone is infected, those activities are the most likely to spread the virus to others.

## **Accessible Protest During the Pandemic**

There are lots of ways we can protest that don't involve any risk at all, and we'll get to those in a bit. But before we do, let's talk a bit about how in-person protest can be made more accessible specifically in the context of COVID-19.

Accessibility needs to be foundational to any action, as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha teaches us in *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, (<https://brownstargirl.org/care-work-dreaming-disability-justice/>) it can't be an afterthought. You must include disabled and chronically ill people in the process of planning any protest. In lieu of that direct input, here are some perennial basics on accessibility, tailored for the outdoors:

Make sure any outdoor venue has ramps and pathways wide enough for wheelchairs

Provide ASL translation and CART transcription for speakers

Create audio and image descriptions for outreach materials

Provide written materials in large type and Braille

Make sure there are accessible and gender

(<https://www.scarleteen.com/glossary#gender>)-neutral bathrooms nearby

Provide seating (folding chairs work--check weight limits on these)

Ban fragrances from the space

Designate an accessibility point person for disabled protestors to seek guidance from

Allow disabled protestors to set the pace if you are marching

If marching, describe the route verbally and with ASL translation before you begin

Use megaphones or other speech-amplifying devices to communicate instructions

Allow disabled folks and elders to drive cars along the route with marchers

Car caravans and other mobile protests are probably the safest form of in-person protest, and one of the more accessible ones. I attended one over the summer; it was necessary catharsis for me as a queer (<https://www.scarleteen.com/glossary#queer>) disabled Black person heartbroken over the death of their kin. But when I was a teenager and emerging adult, caravans wouldn't have been accessible to me if I had to be a driver -- I couldn't drive due to the heavy medication I was on.

## **What can I do to fight back if the only things that are accessible to me are my bed and a phone or laptop?**

For registered voters, city council meetings for many municipalities have moved online, so it's a lot easier to let our local representatives know how we feel. Find out when your city's next meeting is and what the procedure is for making a public comment. Prepare a

short statement, for example, demanding that your local police department be defunded or supporting a rent moratorium during the pandemic, and read it when the time comes.

Everyone can follow abolitionist organizations on Twitter like *Survived and Punished* (<https://survivedandpunished.org/>). They and other organizations amplify phone banking actions and phone protests against correctional facilities and police precincts. While you're on Twitter, you can follow hashtags like #FreeThemAll, #BlackLivesMatter, and #CareForBlackWomen. And if you're following that last hashtag and you have some extra cash, you can engage in some mutual aid.

**What's Mutual Aid?** Mutual aid is what anarchists and other radicals call it when we claim responsibility for the material, spiritual, and political well-being of our community and its members. The system isn't built for us, so we have to figure out how to take care of ourselves while we organize to bring it down. When we engage in mutual aid, we pool our time, money, knowledge, living space, skills, energy, or other resources, so that everyone can get their needs met.

We need cultural workers, too. Writers and artists, performers, singers, all are called to create work that uplifts and inspires the movement. If you're a healer, an astrologer, if you have knowledge of first aid or herbalism or some drawings that you want to collect into a zine and distribute among your community, we need you. We do ourselves a disservice when we limit the spectrum of political activism to direct action and agitation. Building the new world first requires us to create a clear vision of it, a blueprint. That's where cultural work comes in.

Education is also cultural work. For example, my political home, the Los Angeles Spoonie Collective, holds workshops and panels on disability justice and intersectionality in the hopes of educating our community into being a more hospitable place for its disabled and chronically ill members. Get out there and share your knowledge, what you've learned so far on this Earth, your lived experience. Don't pay any mind to folks who tell you that you aren't old enough to know what you're talking about.

**For more ways to engage with movement from home, read this excellent resource by Ejeris Dixon, Kay Ulanday Barrett, and others: 26 Ways To Be in The Struggle When We're Not in the Streets**

**(<https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2020/06/06/26-ways-to-be-in-the-struggle-beyond-the-streets-june-2020-update/>). If you'd like more information on how to protest in general, check out Scarleteen's guide *Rebel Well: A Starter Survival Guide To A Trumped America***

**([https://www.scarleteen.com/article/politics\\_etc/rebel\\_well\\_a\\_starter\\_survival\\_g](https://www.scarleteen.com/article/politics_etc/rebel_well_a_starter_survival_g)**

Rebellion, always a risky proposition, is made even more so by this respiratory pandemic. But there are as many ways to be of service to the movement that don't involve breathing the same air as there are different people breathing. And with care and consideration, actions where we do come together to breathe the same air can be made safer, more accessible, and more reflective of the world we want to live in -- within and without this pandemic.