

From Capitol riots to LA protests, 2021 was another dangerous year for press freedom in the US

Press Freedoms in the United States 2021

RCFP's annual review of data from the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker

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It would be easy for you to look at the total number of press freedom violations in the United States in 2021 and conclude that last year wasn't anywhere near as dangerous for journalists as 2020. And you would be right. That's because 2020 was an outlier, marked by a shocking wave of assaults and arrests of journalists during nationwide protests against police brutality and systemic racism.

Compared to previous years, however, 2021 was clearly another sobering year for press freedom — and a reminder that threats to journalists and your right to know didn't end when we turned the page on one of the darkest chapters in recent memory.

Starting today, [World Press Freedom Day](#), we are analyzing press freedom violations confirmed by the [U.S. Press Freedom Tracker](#) last year in a four-part newsletter series, beginning with the big-picture takeaways from reported incidents of assaults and arrests of journalists. In later installments, we'll drill down into some other interesting data points, offering analysis that connects the documented press freedom incidents with the Reporters Committee's broader body of legal work.

There's a lot of data we won't be covering in this series, so we encourage you to take a look at the Tracker's [2021 year-in-review](#) and spend some time [exploring the documented press freedom violations](#) from last year (and previous years) using the Tracker's [newly redesigned website](#).

Assaults

In 2021, the Tracker documented a total of [144](#) assaults against journalists. While that is far lower than the [624](#) assaults in 2020, it's higher than the total number of attacks for each of the previous three years combined, Kirstin McCudden, the Tracker's managing editor, [wrote](#).

The year began on a somber note — for democracy and for press freedom. As journalists covered the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, many of them were targeted by supporters of then-President Donald Trump who sought to disrupt the peaceful transition of power. New York Times photographer Erin Schaff, for example, said she feared for her life when [rioters surrounded her inside the Capitol building](#).

The Tracker documented [18 total assaults](#) of journalists during the storming of the nation's capital. In all but [two cases](#), journalists were attacked by rioters.

As it turns out, private individuals weren't just responsible for most of the assaults against journalists on Jan. 6 — they were also responsible for [the majority of all documented physical attacks against journalists in 2021](#), a significant change from the previous year, when roughly 80% of attacks were [committed by law enforcement](#).

A review of the Tracker data shows that the change is at least somewhat attributable to the hostile treatment reporters endured while covering protests against health measures imposed by government officials to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including mask and vaccine mandates. The Tracker documented [more than a dozen](#) assaults of journalists related to the coronavirus — most of them at protests, and all of them committed by private individuals.

More than half of those attacks occurred at anti-vaccine rallies in Los Angeles. In August, protesters attending a demonstration against vaccine and mask mandates outside city hall [shoved and kicked Frank Stoltze](#), a reporter for NPR station KPCC and LAist. Just a couple of weeks earlier, anti-vaccine

protesters at a restaurant in Los Angeles [punched independent videographer Vishal Singh](#) multiple times, leaving him with several breaks to his nose and eye sockets.

To be clear, law enforcement officers were still responsible for a significant number of physical attacks against journalists in 2021 — [69](#), according to the Tracker, amounting to a little less than half of all documented assaults.

Arrests

The Tracker confirmed a total of [59](#) arrests of journalists in 2021. That tally is well below the 143 arrests in 2020, but as the Tracker’s Kio Herrera reported, it [“nearly equals the total number of journalists arrested in 2017, 2018 and 2019 — combined.”](#)

More than two-thirds of the arrests or detentions in 2021 occurred in just two locations: Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, and Echo Park Lake, in Los Angeles.

The former was the site of demonstrations last spring protesting the fatal shooting of 20-year-old Daunte Wright. The April 11 killing of Wright, a Black man, by a white police officer happened as the nation followed the criminal trial of the Minneapolis police officer who murdered George Floyd, the incident that sparked the national Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.

The Brooklyn Center protests accounted for [21](#) of the 59 arrests of journalists last year. Freelance photojournalist Tim Evans, for example, was detained by law enforcement officers after being physically assaulted while covering the demonstrations on April 16, 2021. Despite holding up his press badge, [Evans told the Tracker](#) that officers sprayed him in the face with mace, tackled him to the ground and punched him in the face before placing him under arrest.

The protests in Brooklyn Center were notable for more than just the sheer number of arrests and the assaults that preceded many of them. In a scene that Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz described as [“Orwellian,”](#) many journalists covering the demonstrations last April were rounded up by law enforcement officers and forced to be photographed without their consent.

Jasper Colt, a photojournalist with the USA Today Network, [was one of them](#). “They were the ones with the guns,” [he told USA Today](#), “so we were like, ‘OK, well, we have to do this.’”

As the Reporters Committee and more than two-dozen news media organizations explained in a [letter to the governor](#), however, journalists absolutely should *not* have had to do that. The letter condemned a number of law enforcement attacks against journalists during last April’s protests, but it called the cataloging of journalists “particularly disturbing.”

At Echo Park Lake, in Los Angeles, the Tracker documented [19](#) arrests of journalists covering protests against the city’s plans to clear a homeless encampment. All of the journalists arrested were detained by police using a tactic known as “kettling,” in which officers corral a large group of people into a confined space before making indiscriminate mass arrests.

Among the journalists detained by police was [Kate Cagle](#), an anchor and reporter for Spectrum News 1. Despite clearly identifying herself as a journalist and showing her press pass, she said, “[They still handcuffed me.](#)”

In all cases, journalists detained at Echo Park Lake were either not charged or charges were later dropped. Still, journalists should never be arrested or detained for lawfully covering the news, including at protests. That’s why the Reporters Committee urged California Gov. Gavin Newsom to sign legislation that would [codify important constitutional protections for newsgathering](#) and safeguard journalists’ right of access to protest scenes.

Newsom [signed the bill](#) last fall, roughly a year after he [vetoed a similar bill](#). But as NPR recently reported in a story [marking the one-year anniversary](#) of the mass arrests at the homeless encampment, reporters in California “remain wary, with strong memories of Echo Park.”

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As a member of the Tracker’s advisory board, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press has published detailed annual reports analyzing press freedom violations confirmed by Tracker researchers each year and highlighting the Reporters Committee’s work to protect journalists and the public’s right to access information. You can find reports from [2017](#), [2018](#), [2019](#) and [2020](#) on our website.

Over the next few weeks, the Reporters Committee will share our analysis of the 2021 data from the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker. **In next week’s newsletter**, we’ll take a close look at data concerning the aftermath of the assaults and arrests in recent years and explore journalists’ efforts to hold law enforcement legally accountable for their actions.

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