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How to Film ICE

Filming federal agents in public is legal, but avoiding a dangerous—even deadly—confrontation isn't guaranteed. Here's how to record ICE and CBP agents as safely as possible and have an impact.

PHOTOGRAPH: GENARO MOLINA/GETTY IMAGES

IN JANUARY 2026, two Americans were killed in the act of watching Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations in Minneapolis. Renee Nicole Good was acting as a legal observer while her wife recorded the federal immigration agents they encountered. Alex Pretti was holding a phone in his hand, filming the agents who would soon take his life. Yet as dangerous as the mere act of observation became for these victims of ICE and Border Patrol's violence, video is also what documented their murders and is now holding federal agents accountable.

That's the paradox United States residents face as they decide how to resist—and record—ICE's incursion into American cities.

"Unfortunately, there is no way to film 'safely' right now—I think everybody may be taking a risk because of how aggressive and brazen and outright illegal ICE's conduct has been," says Trevor Timm, cofounder and executive director of Freedom of the Press Foundation. (Disclosure: WIRED's global editorial director sits on Freedom of the Press Foundation's board.) "Alex Pretti was killed in part because he was filming ICE, which is an absolute travesty. But we saw that shooting from half a dozen angles because there were other people there who were filming as well. And because they were filming, we saw the egregious lies that the Trump administration was spreading almost immediately."

This tension has existed for more than two decades around the world as widespread access to smartphones has made video documentation and livestreaming a pivotal tool for activists and other concerned people looking to

Amendment of the US Constitution protecting the activity of recording government operators in public spaces.

Trump administration officials have attempted to cloud this fact, though, as immigration enforcement operations have escalated around the country. In July, Department of Homeland Security secretary Kristi Noem called documenting federal agents "violence," claiming: "It is doxing them. It is videotaping them where they're at."

DHS spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin similarly told WIRED in a statement that "videoing our officers in an effort to dox them and reveal their identities that is a federal crime and a felony." DHS has maintained this position—despite the fact that, by DHS's own questionable definition, ICE agents are "doxing" themselves.

That rhetoric represents a direct threat to anyone recording ICE agents, whether they're legal observers, activists or reporters, says Jackie Zammuto, associate director at Witness, a nonprofit devoted to using video to fight human rights violations.

"Video documentation has the power to expose abuses, to help call for accountability, and to challenge official narratives," Zammuto says. "At the same time, we're absolutely seeing an increase of documenters being targeted—including journalists who are marked as journalists—even when they're doing it legally, even when they're respecting orders from the police. It is a massive risk, and I think that it's important for people to weigh that risk and their own comfort in taking it."

Yet Zammuto also notes there are practical tips to protect yourself in the act of recording authority figures like ICE agents. "There are ways to be safer, to consider your own security and also the security of those around you," Zammuto says.

Here are some of those tips that WIRED has assembled from speaking to those who have used the radical act of pointing video cameras at authority figures for activism, in the media, and in court.

When filming ICE or Customs and Border Protection agents, or more generally recording events at a protest, using an alternative or burner phone can help protect your privacy and that of those around you. Still, leaving no digital trace at all is difficult to achieve: Immigration officials have built vast surveillance capabilities, including buying up online advertising data, deploying surveillance drones, tapping into license plate reader networks, and accessing systems that can monitor mobile phones across entire neighborhoods.

Beyond widespread surveillance, ICE or Border Patrol access to your phone could pose direct digital surveillance risks, either while you're on the scene or at a later date if you're detained and they take your device to extract data. If you are bringing your daily device to a protest, turn off biometrics, disable all Face ID and fingerprint unlocking systems, and instead use a password or a PIN to secure your device. Officials must have a warrant or court order to demand a PIN or passcode from you, whereas it is legally easier for them to compel you to unlock your device using a biometric.

In practice, though, you may feel pressured to unlock your device for agents no matter how it's secured, so using an alternative device that doesn't have your whole digital life on it helps minimize how much gets revealed in a worst-case scenario.

While Filming

When filming, you should start recording as soon as possible when you're in the vicinity of an incident, and keep the camera rolling as long as you can. Filming horizontally rather than vertically includes more of the scene. "We think it's really important to try to capture as much of the situation as possible continuously. If you start and stop your footage, it's easier for people to say it's been manipulated or things have been cut out," Witness' Zammuto says.

With cheap, easy-to-use video generation tools available to virtually anyone, it is straightforward to create AI videos of ICE agents and false scenes. Filming a slow 360 degree pan can show the full surroundings and make it harder for people to claim video footage isn't real. The New York Civil Liberties Union

street signs—as well as potentially filming a smartphone home screen, or a clock, that shows the time or date.

The NYCLU recommends focusing on ICE agents themselves where possible to document their activity, rather than using the camera to follow the people impacted by agents' actions. Keeping the lens on agents makes it more likely that you will capture footage of any visible badges, officers' clothing, license plates on vehicles, or other potentially identifying features to further transparency and accountability. Additionally, recording for as long as possible, even after interactions with agents appear to be over, is a way of ensuring that you capture any unexpected activity that could crop up as a crowd is dispersing.

Intimidation and deterrence to filming can be a reality on the scene. For example, independent journalist Ken Klippenstein shared a video showing what appears to be an ICE agent scanning a legal observer's car. The observer asks why the agent is scrutinizing their vehicle and the agent says, "We have a nice little database, and now you're considered a domestic terrorist. So have fun with that."

When interacting with federal agents while filming, it is important to show clear compliance in an attempt to deescalate tension, experts say. The aim of documenting ICE is to create accountability, not to intervene in their operation. When possible, it can be helpful to capture yourself on video interacting peacefully with agents and complying with their orders.

"If they're saying to step back, step back, so that they don't say that you're interfering," Zammuto says. "You can say, 'I am exercising my First Amendment right to observe and document this interaction, and I'm complying with orders,' and it can be helpful to document yourself complying with those orders. So film yourself taking some steps back and saying 'I'm backing up.'"

If you need to go further in an attempt to deescalate, experts say that you should show agents that you've stopped filming or do whatever it takes to protect your safety. Given the fraught climate, they do not advise recording secretly or attempting to trick agents.

ways," Timm of the Freedom of the Press Foundation says. "I think the best defense against an ICE officer potentially seizing your camera in a public space is other people recording that action and then being able to use that footage as evidence in court when you sue them for violating your constitutional rights."

After Filming

While it may be tempting (and often newsworthy) to immediately post video footage of ICE or other immigration official activity to social media as soon as it is safe, you may want to pause before doing so. "It can expose people in the video to harm as well as the person who filmed it," says Zammuto from Witness. This includes potentially subjecting people's likenesses to the FBI's face recognition systems, which the bureau may run against photos and videos of protesters posted to social media.

You should consider who is being shown in the video and if there are risks to them by publishing it, if you may face repercussions from publishing the video, and whether there are alternative routes to get it online. Precautions you could take, depending on the situation, include blurring the faces of bystanders in the video, scrubbing metadata from files, and removing location data.

Instead of posting footage online from your own accounts, you may want to directly share footage with media outlets, investigators, lawyers, victims of immigration activity, or civil society groups. You should create backups of the footage, such as sharing it with trusted contacts or uploading to cloud storage. Zammuto says you should not edit footage or change file names; if edits or alterations need to be made, they should be done on a duplicate copy so the original is preserved.

"While it is important to share content on social media, these platforms modify content by reducing resolution and quality and stripping informative metadata," says Hany Farid, a professor at the University of California and digital forensics expert. "As such, I advocate always saving the original recordings that can be shared with reporters and forensic analysts like me."

storage, though, is that law enforcement officials can potentially subpoena companies for access to files stored on their servers. DHS has issued at least one subpoena asking for information about those documenting ICE's activity.

Aside from showing ICE's actions on social media, there are multiple other efforts ongoing to gather and document immigration enforcement activities on video. Around the country, multiple state attorneys and local governments have set up online portals where videos or other imagery can be uploaded to aid any potential investigations. Attorneys general and officials in New York, Arizona, California, Colorado, Maine, Oregon, Illinois, and Minnesota, have all published complaint forms where people can share details of incidents to help track actions of federal agents.

Media organizations, civil society groups, and various community projects are also aiming to gather and document information about ICE activities. Local town or city "ICE watch" groups and tiplines may, as part of their organization efforts, create shared online drives where photos and videos can directly be uploaded.

While many efforts may backup videos, often the most value can be gained from them by systematically geolocating footage, adding metadata, and uploading them to databases. Collecting as many videos as possible and verifying details about them can be incredibly useful for investigations over time, says Eliot Higgins, the founder of investigative journalism outlet Bellingcat. "You can see patterns of behavior, look at incidents that wouldn't normally break through on social media, because they aren't as violent or lethal as some of the other ones, but still show stuff that is at best dubious and possibly illegal or violations of human rights."

Bellingcat, which has published detailed visual investigations of the two ICE killings and weapons used by immigration agents, is using open source software Atlos to archive and create databases of ICE-related footage, which can then be further investigated. "Getting training and those methodologies out there, and having people organize before it happens is very important," Higgins says, adding that many video classification and archiving techniques have

the US," Higgins says.

In Court

In addition to sharing footage with media organizations, community projects, and posting online, some people might choose to share with an attorney. ACLU branches, such as ACLU-MN and ACLU-IL, are representing observers in lawsuits against the federal government.

In those cases, attorneys have relied heavily on declarations, which are signed statements that are submitted to the court verifying the truth of something the witness saw. Ian Bratlie, an ACLU-MN attorney who is representing observers in a lawsuit against the federal government, says that because judges need to rely on the record to make facts, "declarations are a good way for the courts to hear what is happening on the ground."

Groups like ACLU-MN have intake forms where people can submit accounts of suspected unlawful conduct by federal agents. Bratlie says it's important to be as thorough as possible when submitting, and the more detail the better.

"Everybody's a little different," says Bratlie. "Some people are really good about remembering what cars look like, other people are pretty good at remembering actual quotes versus the essence of what was said."

The ACLU-MN processes the intake forms, and sometimes reaches out to people to prepare a formal declaration to submit to the courts. Bratlie says, "I tend to think video is very helpful, but even people without video should still reach out and talk to us—you don't need video to prove these are violations." But video makes the testimony hard to dispute, and more comprehensively catalogues details than fallible human memories.

While lawyers can also rely on news articles to establish facts, declarations are often seen as stronger because there are consequences if the declarant lies and commits perjury. ACLU-MN has made use of declarations in two lawsuits against Kristi Noem in her capacity as DHS secretary, and the state of

All of those means of accountability show how powerful visual evidence can be when it's recorded carefully and ends up in the right hands. "Unquestionably, video has the power to expose the tactics that ICE and authorities are using against people and to challenge the 'official' narrative," Witness' Zammuto says. "I think that's probably one of the most powerful roles we're seeing video play: The administration is saying one thing and a video shows something completely different."

As powerful as documenting ICE activity can be, remember: There is no way to film federal agents without some level of risk, so think carefully before heading into the streets. And stay safe out there.

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