

## How (not) to police a pandemic

Now more than ever, it's important to know our rights when it comes to the police. Police violence has been a defining feature of 2020 - from the brutal killing of George Floyd in the US, to violent crackdowns on protests in Belarus, Hong Kong and Nigeria.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also fuelled police abuses around the world. As Amnesty International [documents in a new report](#), law enforcement has often played far too prominent a role in what is fundamentally a public health issue.

In many countries police have abused their powers - carrying out mass arrests, beating or shooting people for violating public health restrictions, or using force against peaceful protesters. Many governments have used the pandemic as a pretext for repression, resulting in arrests and detentions of journalists, activists and health workers for sharing information, or for criticizing COVID-19 response measures.

A pandemic does not relieve police forces of their obligation to respect human rights, nor of their primary duty to serve and protect the population. Although some restrictions on certain human rights may be justifiable during a pandemic, these must have a proper legal basis, be necessary and proportionate, and they must have a legitimate aim, such as the protection of public health.

Amnesty's research shows that far too many law enforcement agencies have crossed the line – for example by using lethal force when there is no imminent threat of death or serious injury, or by imposing blanket bans on public assemblies.

So what's the right way to police a pandemic? Here's a quick guide, based on international human rights laws and standards.

### Police should:

- Exercise restraint in enforcing COVID-19-related regulations.
- Prioritize de-escalation, mediation and negotiation in all interventions.
- Always ensure their response is legitimate, necessary and proportionate, and that it is not contributing to spreading the virus.
- Ensure that law enforcement interventions do not interfere with human rights more than necessary, and do not cause greater harm than the harm they want to prevent.
- Ensure journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders and political activists can pursue their activities without interference.
- Avoid the use of force - in particular force which is likely to cause injury.
- Facilitate people's exercise of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly
- When policing public assemblies, only use wide area chemical irritants like tear gas when there is widespread violence that cannot be addressed by targeting violent individuals alone - and only as a last resort.
- As far as possible, use arrest and detention as a last resort – this will reduce the risk of contagion.
- When arrest and detention is unavoidable, take all measures available to prevent contagion in these settings.

### Police should not:

- Discriminate
- Enforce COVID-19-related regulations on people who are unable to follow them (e.g. homeless people unable to confine themselves).
- Use humiliating measures to enforce COVID-19-related regulations.
- Use police powers to repress the right to freedom of expression.
- Carry out forced evictions.
- Carry out illegal expulsions of refugees and migrant workers
- Use force against people who are acting against COVID-19-related regulations solely to meet their basic needs (e.g. in search for food, medicine, medical assistance).
- Use force likely to cause injury solely to enforce COVID-19-regulations – it is counterproductive and disproportionate.
- Use firearms to enforce COVID-19-related regulations.
- Use spit hoods as a means to protect themselves against COVID-19: it does not work and can cause serious harm
- Impose blanket bans on public assemblies.
- Forcefully disperse an assembly that is peaceful, including for the purpose of enforcing COVID-19 regulations
- Keep people in overcrowded detention facilities, or other circumstances likely to spread the virus.

The most important thing to remember is this: it is the utmost obligation of state authorities, including police, to respect and protect the right to life. For more information, see [Amnesty International's detailed guidelines on use of force by law enforcement](#).