

SECONDARY PHONE SECURITY

MARCH 2025

ACTIVIST  CHECKLIST

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“Burner Phone” vs “Secondary Phone”

- **Burner phone:** A truly anonymous burner phone that is entirely disconnected from your identity. Usually only used a handful of times before it is discarded. It requires a **great deal of work** to set up and keep it truly anonymous. We don't recommend this for most folks.
- **Secondary phone for activism:** This is a second phone that has minimal information on it in case it is confiscated. You can reuse it over many actions. The goal isn't anonymity, but harm reduction — reducing the amount of data you risk turning over.

DO YOU NEED A SECONDARY PHONE?

You are higher risk if any of these apply to you...

- You're an **organizer or leader** in social movement spaces.
- You're **likely to be targeted** by the cops based on identities you hold (person of color, queer, trans, documentation status, etc.)
- You **work closely with** communities who are likely to be targeted
- You have **very sensitive data** on your phone (especially about other movement work)

If any of these apply to you, a secondary phone might be a good idea!

Why not just bring my regular phone?

- Police can access data on confiscated phones even without your passcode, and can often crack 6-digit codes quickly¹. A secondary phone protects your sensitive personal and organizing information by keeping it on a separate device.
- Your phone's unique identifiers can be captured by police surveillance devices like Stingrays², creating a permanent record of every protest you attend.

1 <https://activistchecklist.org/protest/#passcode>

2 <https://sls.eff.org/technologies/cell-site-simulators-imsi-catchers>

What data am I protecting?

Here's a list of some of the kinds of data on your phone that might be worth protecting

- all your contacts (friends, family members, and other organizers/activists)
- your location data and map history - This can be used to determine where you've been and deduce who you have met with. This can be used to implicate you and your comrades in legal charges.
- your message history (texts, Signal, WhatsApp, etc.)
- your email history dating back years in most cases
- your browser history, bookmarks, and saved passwords
- all your photos (including of other people, "activists" and otherwise, whose images risk capture and scrutiny without their consent)
- your calendar events (who you meet with, when, and where)
- your documents (google docs, and even encrypted tools like Cryptpad if you're signed in to your account)

What protection will a secondary phone offer? Why bother?

- If your secondary phone gets confiscated, the cops won't be able to extract nearly as much information.
- They also won't be able to install spyware on your normal phone which can be used to track you or compromise your passcode or anything you type.
- You're protecting not just yourself, but the people you're organizing with who may be at higher risk than you because of their identity or circumstances (person of color, queer, trans, undocumented person, Arab/muslim). Their contact info and messages are on your phone.
- If you are already the target of state surveillance, it's much less likely that they know about this secondary device (assuming you rarely use it). So your movements and communications are more likely to remain private and secure.

What you'll need

- **A secondary smartphone** (used phone or inexpensive new phone): \$60+ or free if you can get one donated
- **SIM card:** \$5
- **Prepaid plan:** Around \$15/month (cheapest) or \$100/year (best for long-term use)
- **Setup time:** 3 hours
- **Technical difficulty:** Moderate
- **Maintenance:** 30 minutes after each use

SETUP GUIDE

TLDR

Get a phone. Make sure it's unlocked. Go to Target in-person to buy a SIM card and a service plan in cash. Make an email account on Proton Mail and use that when you need to make an account with your cell provider and Apple/Google. Don't use your real email/phone to register anything. Activate the phone. Install Signal.

Pick a prepaid cell provider

If you're buying a new phone, you might end up choosing the provider based on what is in stock near you.

We use Tracefone because it offers the best plan for occasional use at protests.

If you know you want unlimited data use, Mint Mobile and Tracfone are both good options and cost about at \$15/month.

Consider paying in cash

If you want to have the option to communicate more anonymously on Signal, protecting your name is a good idea.

Get a phone (cheap vs more secure)

Most affordable phone model: (\$50-60 new)

- Tracfone cheapest smart phone (\$50-60 new) Examples: Samsung a03s, Moto G Play
- Go to the website for your prepaid carrier and search for a smartphone option under \$60 dollars³.
- Why are these phones so cheap? They're cheap because they are "carrier locked" to Tracfone. This means they can't be activated on other networks. They're counting on your buying plans for a long time to pay it off. They also tend to install lots of junk for data mining purposes.

Best phone models for security

- iPhone 13 or newer
- iPhone SE (2022) or newer
- Pixel 7 or newer

Note: Our opinion is that iPhones are more secure in general than most Android phones. Newer Pixel phones are also secure.

If you have a Google Pixel 6 or new, we highly recommend installing Graphene OS⁴, which is a de-Googled version of Android OS that is incredibly secure and hard for the cops to break.

As of March 2025, these are the models we know more more resistant to cracking and data extraction.

3 <https://www.tracfone.com/smartphones>

4 <https://grapheneos.org/>

Using an old phone someone has laying around

- If you already have an old phone laying around or know someone who does, that's a good option.
- It may be no longer receiving security updates. If so, be aware that it will be easier for the cops to crack and extract data from if they get ahold of it. Security is often about trade offs. It may be better to have a protest phone that's no longer getting security updates than to bring your normal phone that is full of sensitive information.

Notes about used phones

- Make sure it is "unlocked" (not tied to a specific carrier).
- Make sure battery will get you through a day of heavy use (or be prepared to bring a battery pack and a charging cable)
- Check if still receiving security updates
- The older the phone, the more vulnerable it is likely to be to the cracking/extraction tools cops use (like Cellebrite and Graykey)

Where to buy a cheap, new phone?

- Big Box Stores (Target, Best Buy, etc.)
- Pharmacies (CVS, Walgreens, etc.)
- Convenience Stores (7-Eleven, etc.)

We've had the most luck at Target,

Buying online is an option, though it is even easier to track. Our goal isn't anonymity here, so that's okay. But if you're able to buy it in-person, that's better. If you're able to buy with cash, that also provides a layer of separation.

Buy a SIM card

If you bought a phone new directly from the prepaid provider: it probably comes with a SIM card already. Read the box or ask whoever you're buying it from. If it has a SIM already, you can **skip to the next step**.

If you are bringing your own phone, you need to buy a SIM card.

HOW TO BUY A SIM CARD

You can buy prepaid SIM cards at the same place you can buy a phones and prepaid service plans: Target, Best Buy, etc.

Examples:

- Tracfone's "bring your own phone" SIM kit costs \$5
- Mint Mobile's SIM kit costs \$2, but they also often have a SIM card + service plan bundles, so you could just buy that instead.

Buy a prepaid plan

Most phones don't come with any minutes or data, so you need to buy a prepaid service plan.

HOW TO GET PREPAID MINUTES/DATA

You can buy prepaid SIM cards at the same place you can buy a phones: Target, Best Buy, etc.

Here's the plan we recommend to get started:

- **If you're unsure if you're going to keep using this:** we recommend starting out a 1-3 month unlimited plan to try it out (example: \$20 plan from Tracfone⁵).
- **If you're sure you will keep using this phone:** Get a 12 month plan plan with a a set number of minutes. (We recommend the \$99 plan from Tracfone⁶).

Remember to buy these in-store rather than online if you can.

If you want to compare types of prepaid plans, read the section below.

5 <https://www.target.com/p/tracfone-prepaid-card-email-delivery/-/A-53041495?preselect=52580738#lnk=sametab>

6 <https://www.target.com/p/tracfone-prepaid-card-email-delivery/-/A-53041495?preselect=52580731#lnk=sametab>

Types of prepaid plans

Pay As You Go: “fixed X minutes, expires after 30, 60, 90, or 365 days.”

Even though it says something like “400” minutes, that also applies to data (1 megabyte of data usually uses 1 minute). If you go over, you can recharge.

- Best for long-term use: If you can afford paying for a 12 month plan, it reduces the number of times you have to re-charge your plan (and change your phone number).
- Example: as of March 2025, Tracfone offers a \$99 plan of 400 minutes that expires after 365 days. The line must be used at least once every 6 months to preserve your number.

Unlimited Monthly: “Unlimited talk/text/data for 1, 3, 6, 12 months. Expires after that time.”

- Most affordable option: If you need a more affordable option, or you’re trying this out and unsure how long you’ll use it, the unlimited for “30 days”
- As of March 2025, Tracfone offers a \$15 plan for 1 month of unlimited service or \$192 for 12 months.

Notes

- **Your number will expire:** Make sure to use the phone once a month. If your prepaid plan expires, you have a short grace period before you lose that phone number. You can easily get a new one by activating a new card, but you’ll have to re-activate Signal.
- **Tip:** Set a reminder to refill your plan before it expires!

Create a separate email account

You will use this email to set up your prepaid mobile account and your phone app store account (Apple or Google).

HOW TO CREATE AN ANONYMOUS EMAIL ACCOUNT

Option 1: Use an email alias

If you already have a Proton Mail account, you can use their “hide my email” alias feature⁷ (or any other email alias provider).

Option 2: Create a new email account

1. Create a separate email account (we recommend Proton Mail⁸)
2. Use a random username generator⁹ to help this account be less strongly tied to your identity. (Again, we’re not aiming for total anonymity, but we are trying to create a bit of a buffer.)

7 <https://proton.me/support/addresses-and-aliases#hide>

8 <https://proton.me/mail>

9 <https://strongphrase.net/#/username>

Set up the phone (or reset it)

You will use this email to set up your prepaid mobile account and your phone app store account (Apple or Google).

HOW TO SET UP THE PHONE

3. Factory reset the device if it is used. Instructions: iPhone¹⁰ / Android¹¹
4. Skip or decline all optional account setup (phone, location tracking, analytics/tracking, cloud backup, etc.)
5. **Important:** Do NOT sign in with your normal Apple / Google Account during the initial setup process (or at any other point). You will be prompted to, but look closely for a “skip” button. Ideally you want to activate the phone BEFORE you make the Apple/Google account, since they usually require a phone number and you want to use your new number.

10 <https://support.apple.com/en-us/108931>

11 <https://support.google.com/android/answer/6088915?hl=en>

Activate the phone

This is how you turn on phone service

HOW TO ACTIVATE THE PHONE

6. If you got a used phone, put the SIM card in the phone.
7. **Activate:** Follow the instructions on the prepaid plan card to activate it. This will usually involve:
 - Select “I want a new number” (rather than porting an existing number)
 - Telling them a zip code they can use to find a phone number for you. You can put in any zip code, it doesn't have to be near where you live. Make sure to write it down just in case.
 - The PIN code for your plan. You'll need to scratch it off the card to reveal it.
 - The IMEI number for your phone. You can find this in system settings.
8. **Make an account:** As part of activating, you'll usually need to make an account with the cell provider. When asked for an email address, use the new email you set up that is separate from your main account.
 - **Do not use your real name** for when making the account.
 - **Do not give them a credit card.** This will tie your identity very closely to the account. There is almost always an option to skip this part—it is a prepaid phone, after all!
9. **Restart your phone:** After you finish the activation steps, you may need to restart the phone before it gets service.

Set up a separate Apple/Google account for the app store

HOW TO SETUP A SEPARATE APPLE/GOOGLE ACCOUNT

1. Create the account
 - For iPhone: Apple ID instructions
 - For Android: Google instructions
2. You will need a phone number to verify your new account. Thankfully, you should be able to receive texts on your protest phone now.
3. Sign into the new account in your phone's settings
4. Visit the Apple App Store or Google Play Store to confirm that you're now able to download apps

Tips

- Don't use your real name when making this account.

Install & configure Signal

You have two options for how you use Signal:

Option 1: Use a totally separate Signal profile for this phone (recommended)

- Pros: Your phone is always ready to go, no additional set up needed. More data is secure.
- Cons: You may miss communication from people who don't know about this separate account

HOW TO SET UP A SEPARATE SIGNAL PROFILE

1. Follow the standard Signal activation steps¹² for this new number.
2. Then set up a username¹³.
3. Start talking to folks
 - Then tell your contacts your new signal username. Message them on your main Signal account first to verify that it really is you who is messaging them on a new account.
 - You may want to message your main Signal account from your new one so you can send information between the two. Make sure disappearing messages are turned on.
 - Have someone add you to the groups that are relevant to this action. (Make sure to leave Signal groups when they are no longer active or relevant.)

¹² <https://support.signal.org/hc/en-us/articles/360007318691-Register-a-phone-number>

¹³ <https://support.signal.org/hc/en-us/articles/6712070553754-Phone-Number-Privacy-and-Usernames>

- **Note:** Every Signal group you join from this phone provides more information if your phone is confiscated. The whole point of this secondary phone is to reduce the data the cops can get if they confiscate your phone. So try to join as few as possible, and make sure disappearing messages is set for a short period of time.
4. Make sure to follow our Signal Checklist so that it is configured to be as secure as possible

Option 2: Migrate your existing account to this new number temporarily

- **Pros:** Anyone who is trying to reach you using your standard Signal profile will be able to reach you on this new device.
- **Cons:** You can only have one phone linked to your Signal account at a time, so you will be signed out of Signal on your main account. More data is exposed (contacts, messages) if your phone is confiscated. You have to move it back and forth every time you want to use your protest phone.
- Consider this option if you really need to know that you don't miss any messages from someone who didn't hear about your secondary account.

HOW TO MIGRATE YOUR EXISTING SIGNAL ACCOUNT TEMPORARILY

Follow these steps to change your number on Signal.

Install Organic Maps

1. Install Organic Maps on this phone
2. Open the app once to download the maps you need for offline use

Install a secure browser

1. Install Onion Browser¹⁴ (iPhone) or Tor Browser¹⁵ (Android) for maximum privacy.
2. Or at least install Brave Browser¹⁶ to use instead of the default browser.

14 <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/onion-browser/id519296448>

15 <https://www.torproject.org/download/#android>

16 <https://brave.com/en-in/download/#brave-mobile>

Write down or save your important phone numbers

HOW TO SAVE YOUR NUMBERS OFFLINE

We recommend having a way to call your 2-3 top emergency contacts. Some idea:

- **Paper:** Having a slip of paper may be most secure, but you risk losing it or having it confiscated.
- **Memorize:** Now might be a good time to memorize a new phone number — a good thing to have for other kinds of emergencies.
- **Phone contact list:** Add a couple of contacts to your phone book. Use one letter for their name or some kind of code name.

Follow the entire prepare for a protest checklist

All of the items in the Prepare for a Protest checklist still apply to a protest phone. Even though you're exposing much less data, you still have Signal installed, which contains data you want to protect.

HOW TO SECURE YOUR PHONE FOR A PROTEST

Follow the Prepare for a Protest checklist¹⁷. Especially important:

- Having a strong 10-digit passcode.
- Turning off location services

¹⁷ <https://activistchecklist.org/protest>

USING THE PHONE FOR PROTESTS/ ACTIONS

Before each action

1. Make sure your phone number is still active and hasn't expired
2. Check your account to make sure you still have minutes/data left if you're not on an unlimited plan.
3. Charge your phone
4. Download needed offline maps

After each action

1. Clear all app data (messages, browsing, maps)
 - Remove Signal message threads and leave Signal groups that your protest phone doesn't need to be a part of anymore
 - Clear browser history/data (if you're using Tor, this automatic)
 - Clear map/navigation history
2. If your phone was confiscated by the cops, consider selling it and getting a new one. A factory reset might help, but if they put spyware on it (which only takes them a couple of minutes), there is no guarantee it will be removed with a factory reset.

SIMPLE GUIDES TO KEEP US MORE SAFE

We built this because digital security shouldn't be overwhelming. We take a harm reduction approach: start where you are and do what you can.

Find more guides like this on *activistchecklist.org*

