International Press Institute

IPI EXPLAINER



Why breaking the cycle of impunity for crimes against journalists strengthens the rule of law and helps build free and fair societies

Journalists around the world face increasing harassment, arrests, violence, and even murder for the vital work they do in holding power to account. Often these crimes occur without consequence. This impunity has corrosive effects across society that reach far beyond the media: the rule of law breaks down, corruption grows, inequality deepens, and democratic institutions erode. The result is a cycle of escalating, unchecked abuses by state and non-state actors that is driving alarming declines in democracy worldwide.

Breaking the cycle of impunity for crimes against journalists is therefore an essential step to safeguarding the rule of law, restoring trust and accountability, and ensuring everyone can exercise their rights and freedoms.

What is impunity?

Impunity means getting away with criminal wrongdoing. The United Nations defines impunity as the failure to hold criminal wrongdoers accountable through investigations, prosecution, and punishment.[1]

[1] UN Commission on Human Rights, Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity, E/CN.4/2005/102/Add.1 (February 8, 2005), https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.4/2005/102/Add.1.

Impunity can result from a lack of capacity to investigate crimes, from weak or captured judicial and law enforcement systems, or from a lack of political will when powerful individuals or institutions are implicated. As a result, powerful actors are able to commit crimes — ranging from fraud, corruption, and illegal environmental destruction to serious human rights abuses, violence, and murder — without consequence.

A culture of impunity develops when powerful actors routinely violate and abuse human rights and commit crimes without facing accountability, prosecution, or punishment. Journalists, human rights defenders, and activists around the world are threatened, attacked, or killed for exposing wrongdoing while perpetrators walk free. Victims of crimes and harmed communities are denied their rights to remedy and justice.

How attacks on the press drive a wider breakdown of accountability systems

At the global level, impunity is increasing as illiberalism, authoritarianism, and conflict proliferate, entrenching systems of unaccountable power in growing parts of the world where democracy is in retreat.[2]

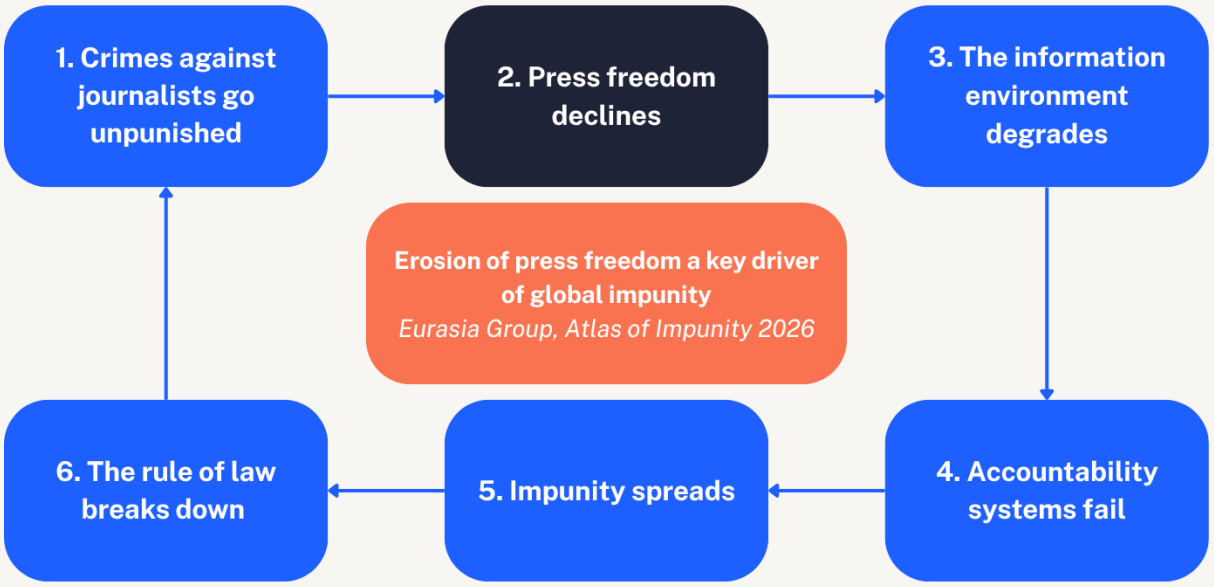
Eurasia Group's *Atlas of Impunity* identifies declining press freedom as a key driver of these trends.[3] When attacks on journalists carry no consequences, press freedom declines, vital public interest reporting is silenced, and self-censorship spreads. That erosion extends to the wider information environment, leaving courts, citizens, and watchdogs with fewer sources of independent information to make informed decisions and hold power to account.[4] As accountability and the rule of law break down, human rights abuses, economic exploitation, violence and conflict, and environmental crimes proliferate, often without recourse. Governments, corporations, powerful elites, and criminal actors are emboldened to commit further abuses, creating a cycle of escalating and unchecked violence, crime, and exploitation.

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[2] Eurasia Group, *Atlas of Impunity 2026* (New York: Eurasia Group, June 2026), https://www.eurasiagroup.net/live-post/the-atlas-of-impunity-2026.
[3] Eurasia Group, *Atlas of Impunity 2026*.
[4] Eurasia Group, *Atlas of Impunity 2026*.

The cycle of impunity

Impunity for crimes against journalists drives declines in press freedom, which in turn breaks down accountability mechanisms, rule of law, and perpetuates corruption, violence, and further societal harms.



Sources: Eurasia Group, Atlas of Impunity (2026), UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists; UNESCO Director-General's Report on the Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity (2024);

1. Crimes against journalists go unpunished

- Journalists around the world face threats and harassment, unlawful surveillance, arrests, violence, and even murder — often with no consequences.
- In the past two decades, more than 1,600 journalists have been killed[5] in relation to their reporting, both inside conflict zones and out.
- Six out of seven cases, or 85%, of killings of journalists go unsolved.[6] When arrests and prosecutions do take place, often those responsible for ordering the murder evade justice.

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2. Press freedom declines

- When crimes against journalists and other watchdogs go unprosecuted, state and non-state actors learn that targeting members of the press carries no cost.
- Unpunished crimes against journalists creates a chilling effect on the media. Journalists increasingly drop sensitive investigations into corruption, organised crime, or human rights abuses to protect themselves and their families.[7]
- Fear and uncertainty lead to fewer in-depth investigations and low morale in newsrooms, which erodes robust watchdog journalism and leaves citizens without access to vital independent news and information.[8]

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3. The information environment degrades

- As the information environment erodes, the public follows political affairs less closely, votes less often, and has less confidence in elected bodies.[9]
- Misinformation and disinformation proliferate. In the absence of independent news, communities are vulnerable to disinformation, which costs hundreds of billions of dollars each year,[10] threatening public health and safety, and fuelling political polarisation and distrust in public institutions.[11]
- Corruption and abuses of power remain hidden and unreported, leaving citizens without the news and information they need to make decisions about their lives and livelihoods.[12]

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[5] UNESCO, "International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists," accessed October 28, 2026, https://www.unesco.org/en/days/end-impunity.
[6] UNESCO, "International Day to End Impunity."
[7] Media Freedom Coalition, "Media Freedom Coalition Statement on the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists 2025," November 3, 2025, https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/joint-statement/2025/mfc-statement-on-idei-2025/; Lambrini Papadopoulou and Mária Žuffová, "Getting Away with Journalists' Murder? Impunity and Its Impact on Investigative Journalism and Press Freedom," *Journalism Practice* 20, no. 5 (2026), https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2596813; ARTICLE 19, "Ending Impunity for Crimes against Journalists," accessed October 28, 2026, https://www.article19.org/resources/ending-impunity-for-crimes-against-journalists/.
[8] ARTICLE 19, "Ending Impunity."
[9] *The Value of Journalism: Global Evidence on Why Media Matters to Economies, National Security and Crises* (Paris: UNESCO, DW Akademie, and International Fund for Public Interest Media, 2026), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000398492.
[10] *Value of Journalism*, UNESCO, DW Akademie, IFPIM, 2026.
[11] OECD, "Disinformation and Misinformation," accessed October 28, 2026, https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/disinformation-and-misinformation.html.
[12] Eurasia Group, *Atlas of Impunity 2026*.

4. Accountability systems fail

- Courts, authorities, and voters cannot examine wrongdoing or impose consequences, as they lack accurate information about it.
- Political actors, corporate elites, and financial institutions act in the absence of checks on their power, increasing human rights abuses, economic exploitation, conflict, and environmental crimes.[13]
- Citizens' trust in democratic institutions and the rule of law weakens, leading to cynicism and social instability,[14] fuelling the rise of authoritarianism.[15]

5. Impunity spreads

- Power without accountability allows government and military actors, corrupt officials, powerful elites, and criminal networks to commit crimes and human rights violations with no recourse.[16]
- Journalists, human rights defenders, and activists are threatened, attacked, or murdered while covering conflict and war, or for exposing official or corporate wrongdoing, while the perpetrators are never investigated or charged.

6. The rule of law breaks down

- A culture of pervasive impunity takes hold, in which the powerful commit crimes and abuses without consequence.[17]
- Corrupt elites and dominant groups routinely exploit public resources and economic opportunities for personal gain, entrenching inequality and corruption.[18]
- People, including journalists, civil society, and other public watchdogs, are exposed to violence, crime, and exploitation, without access to justice or legal protections.
- Unrestrained and unpunished actors are emboldened to commit further abuses, creating a cyclical environment where violence and crime, including against journalists, escalate unchecked.

[13] Eurasia Group, *Atlas of Impunity 2026*.
[14] Francisco Cribari-Neto and Marcelo A. F. L. Santos, "An Empirical Analysis of Worldwide Impunity," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03803-x.
[15] Attila Antal, "Concepts and Dangers of Authoritarian Law and Politics," *Politics in Central Europe* 21, no. 4 (2025): 495–519, https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2025-0020.
[16] Impunity Watch, "What Is Impunity?," accessed October 28, 2026, https://www.impunitywatch.org/what-is-impunity/; Cribari-Neto and Santos, "Empirical Analysis."
[17] TRIAL International, "Impunity and Sustainable Peace Are Irreconcilable," January 6, 2017, https://trialinternational.org/latest-post/impunity-and-sustainable-peace-are-irreconcilable/.
[18] Impunity Watch, "What Is Impunity?"; Cribari-Neto and Santos, "Empirical Analysis."

What a culture of pervasive impunity looks like

Military forces commit atrocities against civilians, including journalists, without facing domestic or international accountability, allowing war crimes to go unprosecuted and weakening multilateral mechanisms.

Government actors misappropriate public funds, engage in embezzlement, bribery, or other corruption that goes unpunished. Public resources are lost and trust in institutions collapses.

Large corporations and powerful elites engage in fraud, corruption, and illegal environmental pollution, but evade criminal charges or investigations, while public funds are drained, ecosystems suffer, and inequality deepens.

Criminal networks engage in human trafficking, drug smuggling, extortion, and other illicit activities harming public safety and fuelling violence and exploitation, while victims of these crimes are denied legal rights and protections.

Victims and their families are denied justice and reparations, leaving them open to intimidation, retaliation, and lasting trauma. Across society, impunity breeds distrust, shrinks civic space, and silences journalists and advocates. In post-conflict settings it blocks reconciliation and leaves the root causes of violence unresolved.

● What can policymakers do to address impunity for crimes against journalists?

At the national level:

- Ensure impartial, speedy, thorough, independent, and effective investigations into all alleged violence, threats, and attacks against journalists and media workers, including by following and exhausting lines of enquiry that determine whether violence, threats, and attacks result from the journalistic activities of the victim;
- Create special investigative units or independent commissions;
- Appoint a specialised prosecutor for investigating crimes against the press;
- Adopt specific protocols and methods of investigation and prosecution that are in line with states' obligations under international law, gender-responsive, and take into account relevant international human rights standards; and
- Consider the designation of a government focal point to coordinate policies and liaise with other relevant stakeholders on the issue of the safety of journalists.[19]

At the international level:

- Call out and condemn actions by other members of the international community that violate states' obligation to respect freedoms of opinion and expression and protect journalists from harm;
- Use diplomatic means to pressure states to fulfil their obligations under international law to investigate, prosecute, and punish crimes against journalists;
- Prioritise the establishment of an international taskforce to investigate crimes against journalists.

[19] UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 59/15, *The Safety of Journalists*, A/HRC/RES/59/15 (adopted July 7, 2025), https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/59/15.