

Under Pressure: Exploring the effect of legal and criminal threats on security researchers and journalists

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Key takeaways

- Three-quarters of respondents in a pilot survey of journalists and security researchers reported receiving one or more threats due to their work; one-quarter reported never receiving any threats.
- Overall, half of the respondents reported receiving at least one legal threat. Researchers and journalists were equally likely to receive legal threats, but journalists were a lot more likely to be threatened by criminals.
- Despite receiving threats, the majority of respondents did not retract or change their research or reporting.
- Legal and criminal threats can have chilling effects, and more research is needed to determine what support researchers and journalists need to prevent, assess, and respond to them.

Introduction

By January 15, 2026, one of the authors of this report had already experienced a distributed denial-of-service attack and the other had received a legal threat letter.

But these things were just a drop in the bucket compared to what some researchers and journalists have had to deal with, and to say that security researchers and journalists live in challenging times would be an understatement.

Threats to journalists are nothing new. A number of surveys have documented legal, physical, and workplace threats journalists experience. As examples:

A 2023 report by the Thomson Reuters Foundation and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism [found](#) nearly 50% of journalists in its alumni network reported they or their media organizations faced legal threats. "The physical, emotional and financial consequences are enormous for journalists who are continually facing the risk of going to jail, being bankrupted, or repeatedly being dragged into court," the researchers wrote.

And, a 2024 report survey of female and non-binary journalists by the International Women's Media Foundation also reported [troubling findings](#), with at least one-quarter of all respondents reporting harassment or legal threats, and over one-third reporting being threatened with or experiencing physical violence.

While threats to journalists are not new, the assault on press freedoms and the First Amendment by the Trump administration, [documented during 2020](#) when he was a candidate, has escalated during his second term, including [attacks on female journalists](#), as well as:

- The Department of Defense now requires certain [conditions for press access](#) to the Pentagon and for reporting on the Pentagon, which constitute government control and censorship.
- President Trump has filed [lawsuits against CBS](#) and other news outlets in response to their coverage. Some have caved in to pressure and settled.
- The FBI recently [raided the home](#) of Washington Post reporter Hannah Natanson in an attempt to find classified information from a government contractor. Natanson was not a target of the investigation.

The U.S. government is not the only threat to journalists. State governments and private sector entities have attempted to chill reporting on breaches and vulnerabilities, as evidenced by:

- The increasing use of court injunctions that prohibit individuals, including journalists, from downloading any stolen data leaked on the internet or reporting it, and;
- The use of "lawfare," i.e., the use of systematic legal action intended to stifle critical reporting. In some cases, journalists or their employers are hit with [DMCA takedown notices](#), [SLAPP suits](#), defamation lawsuits, or other attempts to chill or censor reporting.

While threats to journalists have been documented in studies, threats to security researchers have not generated the same level. Although [attrition.org](#) and [disclose.io](#) have compiled a wealth of significant news stories about legal threats [against security researchers](#), the topic has not been systematically explored.

To address the gap in our understanding, we created a pilot survey to explore how legal threats and criminal threats affect researchers and journalists.

How we conducted this survey

This survey was created by journalists “Dissent Doe” and Zack Whittaker using Google Forms' survey tool. The survey was promoted on [DataBreaches.net](#), [this week in security](#), [Mastodon](#), [Bluesky](#), [across LinkedIn](#), and elsewhere.

The survey was open between December 20, 2025, and January 18, 2026.

The survey announcement:

Are you a security researcher or a journalist in the cybersecurity/cybercrime space?

[DataBreaches.net](#) and Zack Whittaker at [this.weekinsecurity.com](#) are conducting a survey on the types of threats that researchers and journalists have experienced, including legal threats or legal process and threats of violence by cybercriminals.

The survey is at <https://forms.gle/>.

Please complete the survey and share the link on social media and with your colleagues and friends to help us understand how widespread some problems may be.

At the outset, we note that given our recruitment methods, respondents do not represent a random sample of security researchers and journalists, although they may be representative in certain respects. Given sampling bias, it seemed likely that those who had experienced threats might be more inclined to respond to a request to participate than those who had never experienced threats.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the expected bias, a quarter (23%) of our survey respondents reported never experiencing a threat in response to their work. Whether this reflects the broader population remains to be seen in future research.

Data collection and some data visualizations were performed by Google. Other analyses were conducted by the investigators.

A list of survey questions is provided in the appendix to this report.

Results

Overview of the sample

A total of 112 people responded to the survey.

Of these, 90 respondents (80%) self-identified as researchers and 22 respondents (20%) self-identified as journalists. When data were analyzed by researchers vs. journalists and employed vs. self-employed, we found that the largest overall subgroup (56%) identified as employed security researchers.

In response to a broad question, “Have you ever been threatened or experienced a threat in connection with your reporting or research?” 76% of researchers and 82% of journalists responded “yes,” for an overall sample statistic of 77%.

About the researchers

When asked to describe their work, 69% of researchers reported researching malware and security flaws, while 43% reported investigating cybercriminals, gangs, and other threat actors. The third largest subgroup (32%) reported discovering leaks, breaches, and other data lapses.

The majority of researchers (62%) reported having worked in this field for 7 years or more. Another 32% have worked in this field for 3 to 6 years; the remainder are newcomers with 1 to 2 years of experience.

When publishing their work, 74% of researchers attach their name to their reports.

About the journalists

Most journalists (81%) responding to the survey said they covered cybercriminals, gangs, and other threat actors, followed by an equal split between investigating leaks, breaches, and other data lapses (73%) and reporting on malware and security flaws (73%).

In total, 77% of journalists have worked in this field for 7 years or more, 18% for 3 to 6 years, and 1 respondent was a relative newcomer.

When reporting on their work, all but one reported using their names.

Responses to legal threats

Overall, 69% of survey respondents said that they or their employer had been threatened with legal process or legal action, such as a lawsuit or arrest. Of those:

- 79% received a verbal or indirect threat (such as an email, call, or message);
- 69% received a legal demand or letter (such as from a law firm);
- 17% received a subpoena or demand for information;
- 12% said they received a legal process from another country;
- 8% cited a federal investigation;
- 8% reported a lawsuit was filed and/or they had been sued.

When the data were analyzed by occupation, 52% of researchers and 55% of journalists reported having ever received a threat:

- 58% of respondents reported having received 1-2 threats;
- 27% of respondents reported having received 3-4 threats;
- 15% of respondents reported having received 5 or more threats.

The level of concern experienced by researchers and journalists in response to legal threats varied considerably. The majority of responses reported concern levels between 3-8, where the higher the number, the greater the concern the respondent felt in response to a legal threat.

Based on some comments, some researchers receiving legal threats may not have been confident that they understood or could assess their legal risk. Their uncertainty may have resulted in elevated concern levels in some cases.

We found that 73% of respondents who received legal threats consulted a lawyer. Such consultations may have been arranged by employers who contacted in-house counsel or external counsel. While the majority consulted a lawyer, 63% of respondents did not retract or change their research or reporting after receiving a legal threat.

One question we explored was whether the level of concern experienced in response to legal threats predicted or correlated with the decision to retract or change their reports or not.

““ My company didn’t want to deal with legal intimidation, I wouldn’t have had support to keep going.”

— a security researcher who said they delayed publishing following a legal threat.

For all respondents who provided concern scores and decisions about retracting, lower concern scores (1-5) tended to be associated with the decision not to retract or remove, while higher scores (6-10) were associated with a mix of people retracting and others not.

Inspection of the comments explaining the decision to retract or not revealed that, for some people, the decision to retract was made by their employer, who did not want to fight a lawsuit or risk one. In other cases, a decision to retract was made because the individual had no support from an employer or a lawyer to defend against a threatened lawsuit. In cases where researchers or journalists had no lawyer to help them understand their risks, the decision to retract may have stemmed from a mentality of “better safe than sorry.”

Other respondents offered additional context that affected their decision to retract, change, or neither. For example, one respondent reported that their media outlet decided to retract so they would not have to reveal their source in court.

Responses to criminal threats

Out of 86 respondents, 39 people reported they had been threatened by criminals because of their work.

Of those 39 respondents, 26 (67%) described threats delivered by email or message, and 5 (13%) received both digital and real-world threats. Other threats included distributed denial-of-service attacks on their infrastructure and being contacted by law enforcement.

When the data were analyzed by occupation (researchers vs. journalists), 31% of researchers and 50% of journalists reported that they had received a threat from a criminal at some point:

- 64% had received between 1 to 2 criminal threats;
- 21% had received between 3 to 4 criminal threats;
- 15% had received 5 or more threats.

The types of threats varied. Although respondents reported a variety of threat types, we are not listing them to avoid encouraging further threats.

We note that while some respondents reported threats from cybercriminals, others reported that their most concerning threats came from nation-state actors or extremist political groups, rather than gangs engaged in hacking and extortion.

For the 39 respondents, 25 (64%) reported receiving a threat of physical violence, even if it was not always clear if the threat was credible, and 14 (36%) reported not receiving any threat of physical violence to themselves or their family. Three people reported having been swatted, whereby armed police are tricked into being sent to a person's location where there is no real threat.

As we saw with legal threats, the level of concern for criminal threats varied.

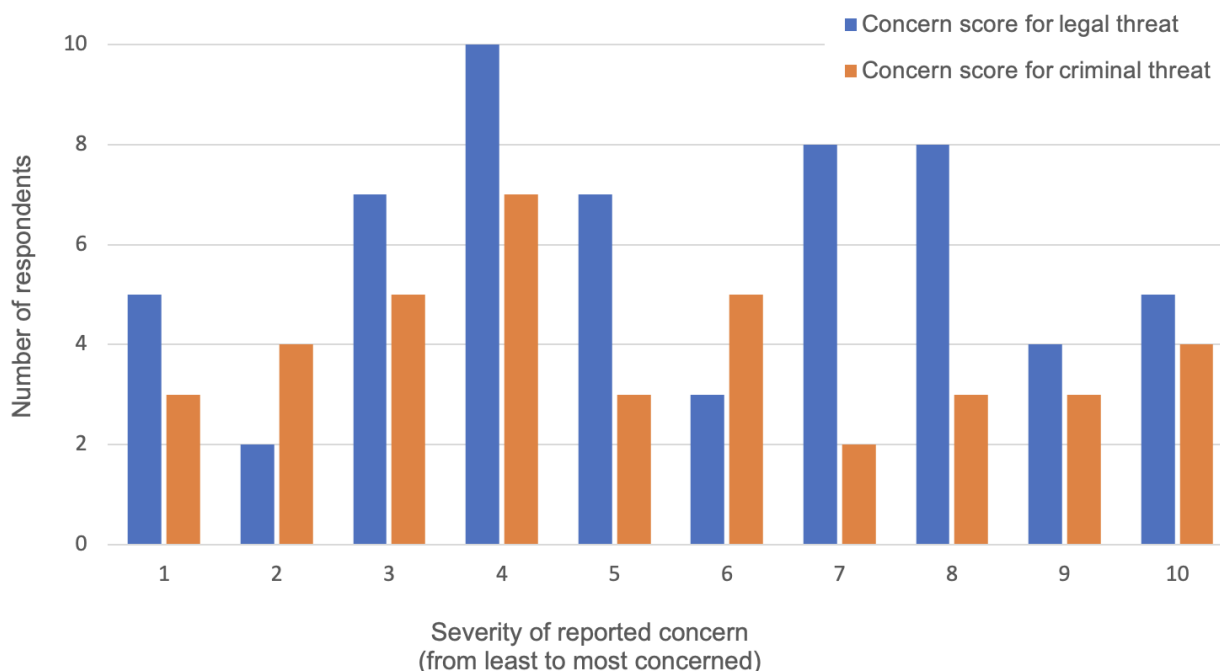


Figure 1: Comparing the frequency distribution of concern scores in response to legal threats (blue) and threats by criminals (orange). Many received both types of threats.

Figure 1 depicts the levels of concern reported in response to legal threats and criminal threats. The majority of responses to criminal threats were relatively low levels of concern. In the four cases in which respondents reported the highest level of concern about criminal threats, three respondents found the threats credible.

Although 25 respondents reported receiving threats of violence directed towards themselves or their family, only six people viewed the threats as credible. In four of those cases, the FBI warned them of credible threats.

“ “ While I continue to conduct and publish my research, I can confirm that increased targeting by threat actors has a mental impact.”

— a researcher who did not remove or retract their work following a criminal threat.

Only 41% of respondents contacted law enforcement after receiving a threat from a criminal.

We note that 85% of researchers did not retract or change their findings after receiving a criminal threat, even though some researchers received death threats.

The general failure of threats to intimidate security researchers and journalists requires some further evaluation, especially when one might expect death threats would result in many researchers or journalists backing off or complying with demands by criminals.

One possible explanation is that some respondents did not view the threats as credible.

Another possibility is that even when threats were viewed as credible, researchers and journalists were determined not to capitulate.

On respondents receiving no threats

As noted earlier, 23% of respondents reported never receiving any legal or criminal threats. The majority of respondents who had not received any threats reported having worked 3 to 6 years, or 7 years and more, with a few working for 1 to 2 years.

Some respondents shared a sense of how they had avoided both legal threats and threats from criminals. We note two major themes:

- Some respondents said they took efforts to remain anonymous, or report their findings under their organization's or institution's name.
- Some respondents said they tried to ensure coordinated disclosure, including "trying any means possible to reach out" to the vendor or owner. Several said they also relied on publishing their evidence in their findings.

Do threats differentially affect researchers vs. journalists?

For the most part, researchers and journalists reported the same patterns, within less than 10 percentage points of each other.

One exception is that researchers appeared less likely to retract or remove reports following threats by criminals than journalists were.

Do threats differentially affect those who are self-employed vs. employed?

For the current sample, 31% of researchers and 50% of journalists were self-employed or unpaid. In this regard, preliminary analyses did not reveal any significant differences among researchers who received legal threats regarding consulting a lawyer. Self-employed researchers and paid researchers appeared equally likely to have consulted lawyers. For journalists, however, there may be a difference, but the small sample size makes it impossible to determine with any confidence.

Responses regarding chilling effects

Although the majority of respondents in this survey reported that they did not retract or change their reporting or research, threats did have some impact.

In response to another question, 44% of respondents (49 people) said that the fear of threats affected their research or reporting. Even when they had not been threatened, the fear of being threatened affected some respondents' decision-making.

“ I do not submit anything with my name on it now.”

— a security researcher investigating malware and vulnerabilities, who received legal demands and a subpoena for information about their work.

Although there was no specific question about the media attention resulting from threats, respondents' comments offered no indication that harassment or threats by criminals led to greater media coverage.

Some respondents reported that harassment or threats led them to decide not to pursue a story or line of research. Others tried to report under their organization's name, rather than their own.

Despite facing threats from criminals, the majority of researchers and journalists who are threatened — even with violence — continue with their research or reporting.

One security researcher noted that for a while, their organization had a standing policy that they did not publicly comment on or mention a specific gang because of overarching fear of individuals or their families being targeted with threats of physical violence. And a journalist who had never received any threats from criminals wrote, "I have avoided writing about certain entities for fear of retaliation... For some people, then, threats had a chilling effect even when the threats were not directed at them.

Discussion and conclusion

A total of 112 security researchers and journalists who investigate or report on cybersecurity and cybercrime participated in our online survey about their experiences with legal threats and criminal threats.

Given the non-random nature of the sample and the relatively small number of responses from journalists, we would cautiously note that journalists' responses appear consistent with other surveys of journalists, which reported that approximately half of journalists received legal threats.

To our knowledge, this is the first survey to assess how often security researchers receive legal threats and how often researchers and journalists are threatened by criminals.

Researchers and journalists were equally likely to receive legal threats related to their work. However, while half of all journalists reported receiving a criminal threat, only a third of researchers did.

Whether that difference would be replicated in a larger study remains to be seen. A larger study would also permit analysis of factors, such as whether researchers being threatened are those who publish reports on gangs and campaigns or those who investigate malware or vulnerabilities.

In the past year, we have noted frequent threats against named researchers from prominent security or intel firms. Consistent with respondents in this survey, those named researchers do not appear to have changed their reporting or research in response to threats of violence.

Journalists also receive threats from criminals. The criminals' motivations appear to vary, but there was insufficient data to analyze.

The results of our preliminary survey suggest that greater public discussion of threats and responses would help guide researchers and journalists in the future.

“ Being in the midst of big legal actions feels very isolating as it is so hush-hush... glad you are helping people share their experiences.”

— a security researcher who retracted in response to a legal threat, but did not retract when threatened by a criminal.

Future research

There is much we do not know, and more research is needed, but one of the most encouraging results of this survey was that the majority of researchers and journalists did not retract or remove their work in response to threats. A future survey should aim to refine our understanding of why, and under what circumstances, researchers and journalists do — or do not — retract their work.

Participants in the current survey provided us with helpful feedback and suggestions, some of which we would gladly integrate into any future survey. A few of the ideas we received include:

- Consider factoring in threats, bullying, toxic behavior, or similar from coworkers;
- Asking lawyers what they advised when contacted about legal threats;
- Several respondents had questions about how supportive employers were when employees received criminal threats.

One respondent asked about the legal ambiguity that security researchers face when engaging in good-faith vulnerability disclosure, since many fear retaliation not only from threat actors but also from companies and governments that conflate bug hunting with criminal behavior.

This respondent raised an important point, and we could ask how uncertainty about legal issues generated by ethical research and responsible disclosure. To offer support to researchers, we have included a 2024 resource on legal risks for researchers published by the Harvard University Cyberlaw Clinic in the References section below.

And because many respondents reported receiving more than one legal threat and/or more than one criminal threat, future research should provide more opportunities for respondents to share multiple incidents or experiences to explain why they decided to retract in one case but not another.

Acknowledgements

We thank everyone who participated and shared their experience and ideas. Thank you to those who shared our survey. We hope to see more research on these questions and are willing to pursue this. We would welcome and appreciate any support from organizations supporting press freedom and safe harbor laws for good-faith researchers. The authors can be contacted by email on the cover of this report.

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Appendix

Start of survey

How would you best describe yourself?

- Security researcher (employed)
- Security researcher (self-employed)
- Security researcher (volunteer)
- Journalist (employed)
- Journalist (self-employed/independent)

About your work as a security researcher

What best describes the work that you do?

- Researching malware and security vulnerabilities
- Investigating cybercriminals, gangs, and online threat actors
- Uncovering leaks, breaches, exposures, and security lapses

If your research is published, is your name or identity attached to it? *

- yes/no

How long have you been a researcher?

- 1-2 years
- 3-6 years
- 7+ years

About your work as a journalist

What would best describe your reporting? *

- Investigating leaks, breaches, exposures, and security lapses
- Reporting on cybercriminals, gangs, and online threat actors
- Covering malware, surveillance, and government actors
- Other:

If your work is published, is your name or identity attached to it? *

- yes/no

How long have you been a journalist?

- 1-2 years
- 3-6 years
- 7+ years

Receiving or experiencing threats

Have you ever been threatened or experienced a threat in connection with your reporting or research?

- yes/no

Experiences with legal threats

Have you (or your employer) been threatened with legal process or legal action, such as a lawsuit or arrest, because of your research or reporting?

- yes/no

Your experiences with legal threats

Have you ever received or been the target of any of the following kinds of legal process?

- Verbal or indirect threat (email, text message, phone call, etc.)
- Legal demand or letter (such as a cease-and-desist from a law firm)
- Subpoena or demand for information
- Lawsuit was filed / was sued
- Court injunction barred disclosure
- Federal investigation
- State investigation
- Criminal charges
- Legal process from another country/region
- Other:

Was the legal threat concerning your research or your reporting?

- My research, or research that I was involved with
- My reporting, or reporting that I was involved with
- Both

How many times have you received a legal threat for your work?

- 1-2 times
- 3-4 times
- 5+ times or more

What is the most concerned you have ever been when receiving a legal threat?

- Not (1) — So concerned that I stopped work (10)

Did you consult a lawyer when you received any legal threats?

- yes/no

Did you ever retract or change your research or reporting because of a legal threat?

- yes/no

If you retracted or changed your research or reporting following a legal threat, what specific reason was behind the decision to remove or change the work? (For example, was the threat justified in part or in full? Did you retract due to lack of legal support?)

- Written response

Not all legal threats are created equal or have equal effect. If one type of threat or specific threat was most worrying to you or resulted in you changing your research/reporting or abandoning it, what kind of legal threat was it?

- Written response

Please use the space below to describe what was the final result following the legal action, or let us know if the case is still ongoing? How was the legal action resolved?

- Written response

Experiences with threats from criminals

Have you been threatened by criminals because of your work?

- yes/no

Your experiences with criminal threats

How did you receive the threat?

- Threat via email or other message
- Contacted in the real-world, such as in-person or mail delivery
- Both
- Other:

Was the threat relating to your research or reporting?

- My research, or research that I was involved with
- My reporting, or reporting that I was involved with
- Both
- Other:

How many times have you received a threat for your work?

- * 1-2 times
- * 3-4 times
- * 5+ times or more

What is the most concerned you have ever been by any threat you have received related to your research or journalism?

- Not (1) — So concerned that I stopped work (10)

What was the most concerning thing you felt due to a threat?

- yes/no

Did you ever consult law enforcement when you received a threat?

- yes/no/other

Did you ever retract or change your research report or reporting because of a criminal threat?

- yes/no

Not all threats are created equal or have equal effect. If one type of criminal threat or specific threat was most worrying to you or resulted in you changing your research, abandoning it, or changing your reporting, what kind of threat was it?

- Written response

Have you ever been swatted or assaulted because of your research report or reporting?

- yes/no

Has someone ever threatened physical violence at you or your family?

- Yes, but the threat wasn't credible
- Yes, and the threat was credible
- Yes, but I don't know if the threat was credible
- No

Chilling effects

Has the fear of threats ever affected your research or reporting?

- yes/no

In the space below, please share with us any threats that had a chilling effect on your work or that tried to have a chilling effect on your work.

- Written response

If you have not been threatened or faced any legal or criminal threats, can you attribute this to a particular reason? For example, are there efforts or practices that you take to try to limit your exposure to threats?

- Written response

Thank you

Is there anything about your experiences with threats that we haven't asked you but you wish we had asked, and why?

- Written response

If we can quote what you share, please include your name or your online moniker/handle. Or, simply leave blank or "*Anonymous*" if you do not wish to leave your name.

- Written response

