

‘Knife in your back’: The dangers of being a whistleblower

Nov 28, 2025 at 10:00 AM PST

[Karah Rucker](#)

Summary

Whistleblower laws

Whistleblowers play a crucial role in exposing wrongdoing, but one whistleblower lawyer says navigating U.S. laws and protections can be complex.

Protections vary

Federal employees generally have broad safeguards, while private-sector and emerging industries like AI have limited or no protections.

Falling behind

One whistleblower lawyer says the law is falling behind in emerging fields like artificial intelligence, leaving protections unclear for insiders with concerns.

Full story

Whistleblowers can play a critical role in exposing wrongdoing, safety risks and fraud. From government agencies to Wall Street to emerging industries like artificial intelligence, insiders must navigate a complex web of laws and procedures to safely share information.

“Ninety-five percent of whistleblowers think they’re going to get a handshake for reporting a violation. It’s like, ‘no, you’re going to get a knife in your back,’” Stephen Kohn, co-founder of the [National Whistleblower Center](#) and [founding partner at Kohn, Kohn, & Colapinto LLP](#), said. “When a whistleblower comes into our office, they’re stressed, anxious, and they should be.”

Navigating complex situations and laws

[Recent revelations about Thomas Crooks](#), the man who attempted to assassinate President Trump at a Pennsylvania rally, were only made public after a whistleblower came forward. They provided previously unseen photos, videos, and social media posts, shedding new insight into Crooks’ activities while so far remaining anonymous. While the case did not involve exposing any illegal activity, it highlights the challenges for whistleblowers in safely sharing sensitive information.

“Whistleblowing always has a lot of risk. It’s inherent. But by keeping confidential, following the laws, and being smart, you do have a really strong opportunity to end up on top,” Kohn said.

Kohn says the U.S. lacks a cohesive whistleblower law. Instead, protections exist across roughly 65 statutes, often created reactively after crises. Aviation whistleblowers gained safeguards after [the deadly ValuJet](#) and [Alaska Airlines crashes](#), and the Dodd-Frank Act followed the 2008 financial crisis to protect whistleblowers who report Wall Street fraud.

“It’s massively confusing,” Kohn said. “Ninety-two percent of whistleblowers who suffer retaliation did not use the proper filing procedures. The moment you don’t follow the rules, you’re open to bad things.”

Going to the media

Kohn said going to the media can complicate protections.

“If the whistleblower goes to the media, they can lose all their rights fairly quickly,” Kohn said.

Anonymity is not guaranteed, and there is no federal shield law, so courts can compel journalists to reveal sources. But Kohn said there are resources available to navigate the press without fear of retaliation. Government whistleblowers can sometimes use pre-publication procedures to safely share sensitive information.

“If you’re afraid of the government coming in with subpoenas or a grand jury — trying to throw you in jail, which they can do — there’s a way around that by using these anonymous and confidential programs,” Kohn said.

Emerging risks

Kohn warned that whistleblower protections have not kept pace with emerging technologies like artificial intelligence.

“There are no whistleblower protections for AI,” he said. “If someone working for a multi-billion-dollar AI company believes their work could lead to catastrophic consequences — like enabling chemical weapons, terrorism, or other large-scale harm — there’s no law, no legal safeguard to protect them.”

Having worked with whistleblowers since 1984, when protections were virtually nonexistent, Kohn said the U.S. has come a long way in shielding insiders, but he warned there is still progress to be made.