



How to Get Public Records Using U.S. Public Records Laws

A practical guide to requesting police reports, casefiles, and related government records.

YOUR RIGHT TO ASK • KNOW WHERE TO LOOK • MAKE A CLEAR REQUEST

Public-records laws can help people access government information. This guide explains how to identify the right agency, submit a request, and understand common limits on access.

“Clear information can help you take the next step when you are ready.”

Impacted Survivors of Murder-Suicide (ISMS)

www.impactedsurvivors.org

Educational information only — not legal advice. Laws and procedures vary by jurisdiction.

Start With the Right Agency

To request police reports, policy documents, and other government records, first identify the government agency that created or maintains the records.

Look for these links on an agency's official website:

Public Records • Records Request • FOIA / Open Records
Online Records Portal • Records Division

Provide Helpful Details

The more precisely you identify the record, the easier it may be for the agency to locate it. Include information such as:

Incident or case number	Date of incident
Location or street address	Names of involved parties

How Public Records Laws Apply to Police Reports

Legal Framework

Federal executive-branch records are generally governed by the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). State and local police departments are generally governed by individual state public-records or open-records laws.

Important: Federal FOIA generally does not apply to state or local police departments. State and local rules vary.

What Records May Be Available?

Public vs. Exempt Records

Some basic incident, arrest, or administrative records may be available to the public. Agencies may also withhold or redact information protected by applicable law.

Records that may be restricted include:

- Active investigative records
- Personal identifying information
- Information involving minors or victims
- Certain medical information
- Confidential law-enforcement information
- Certain body-worn camera or other video footage

Right to Access

Many state public-records laws allow members of the public to request government records without explaining why they want them. Eligibility requirements and procedures can vary by state.

Public Records and Case Files

Depending on the type of information you are seeking, these three sources may be helpful:

Local Law-Enforcement Agencies

Contact the police department, sheriff's office, or other law-enforcement agency responsible for the incident. You may be able to request incident reports, arrest reports, calls-for-service records, investigative summaries, and other records available for public release.

Medical Examiner & Coroner Records

Depending on state and local law, you may be able to request autopsy reports, official cause-of-death determinations, manner-of-death determinations, and other legally available records from the county or state medical examiner or coroner.

Local Court Records

Court websites and clerk's offices may provide access to criminal court dockets, civil cases, estate filings, protective orders, and other publicly available court documents. Some records may be sealed or confidential.

Steps to Request a Report Online

Follow this simple five-step process to make your request clear and easy to track.

1

Search Official Portals

Check the relevant agency's official website for Public Records, Records Request, FOIA/Open Records, or an online portal.

2

Submit Your Request

Use the agency's designated online portal, public-records email address, or official request form.

3

Provide Specific Details

Include exact dates or date ranges, the location, names of involved parties, and any incident or report numbers.

4

Request Electronic Delivery

When available, request PDF or other electronic copies so documents can be received, reviewed, searched, and stored electronically.

5

Understand Possible Fees

Some information may be free, while agencies may charge for copies, extensive searches or processing, certified records, or specialized formats.

PRO TIP: Consider asking the agency to notify you before fees exceed a specific amount.

Your Public Records Request Checklist

Use this checklist to prepare, submit, and follow up on your request.

- Identify the government agency that holds the records
- Find the agency's official public-records portal or contact
- Gather case numbers, dates, names, and locations
- Clearly describe the records you are requesting
- Submit the request through the designated process
- Request electronic copies when available
- Keep copies of all communications
- Track deadlines, fees, and agency responses
- Review any denials or redactions and available appeal options

Important Disclaimer

This guide provides general educational information and is not legal advice.

Public-records laws, exemptions, fees, response times, and appeal procedures vary by federal, state, and local jurisdiction. Always check the applicable law and the specific agency's current procedures.

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Created as an educational resource by and for survivors.