

POLICING THE POLICE:
BARRIERS TO ACCESSING LAW ENFORCEMENT PUBLIC RECORDS

By

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A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree
With Honors in
Journalism

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

M A Y 2 0 2 1

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Abstract

Police, the ones responsible for maintaining safety and public order, are often unaccounted for and able to slip past requirements for transparency. Journalists know too well how hard it can be to obtain public records. But why is this? This study attempted to answer that question by reviewing literature that relates to police department transparency and public records issues. Findings indicate that barriers to law enforcement information include legal loopholes, excessive controls by public information officers, friction between government and journalists, and flaws in the public records process. This thesis concludes with recommendations for journalists and others who want to shed more light on law enforcement.

Policing the Police: Barriers to Accessing Law Enforcement Public Records

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police responded to a 911 call at a convenience store over a man using a \$20 counterfeit bill to buy cigarettes. Only minutes later, George Floyd lay lifeless under the knee of Derek Chauvin as a bystander took a video of officers standing by while Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's knee for eight minutes and 15 seconds (Hill, 2021). This video spurred thousands of protests throughout the United States against the killing of George Floyd, among other high-profile police killings. With these protests came police backlash and more brutality.

The New York Times started an entire beat on police abuse of power and misinformation following the summer of 2020. After two officers reported that a man was injured when he “tripped and fell,” a video revealed that they had instead shoved the 75-year-old man to the ground in Buffalo, New York, leaving him with blood pouring out of his ear.

As most journalists may know, obtaining public records about such incidents is tricky and often feels like a wild goose chase. This study asks two important questions: 1) Why is it so hard for journalists to get information from police, and 2) what can be done to overcome that?

Access to government records is important for citizens to hold people of power accountable, especially when it comes to law enforcement.¹ The importance of holding police

¹ Author's perspective: As a student journalist, I've had to jump over hurdles when it comes to obtaining public records from police. I've had my records requests and follow-up attempts ignored. I've been told that the records didn't exist in a certain format or that my request would take months to complete and then I have not heard back. I've waited months with copious amounts of follow-up, only to receive public records back that were not what I asked for. In my own experience, dealing with police agencies has been frustrating and difficult. Other journalists have told me their horror stories too. I was curious why it's seemingly so hard for journalists to get records requests taken seriously when national and state laws mandate that transparency and access to public information is required for all government agencies, especially law enforcement agencies.

officers accountable was brought to light in the summer of 2020 when thousands of protesters gathered across the country to protest police brutality and abuse of power.

The New York Times listed four other times that police had made serious false reports and changed narratives to fit their own within one week. “False police reports are not a new problem. What’s new are the videos that have caused people to realize how common they are. ‘When I was a reporter, it was the police officer’s word against the victim’s or suspect’s,’ Jamie Stockwell, a deputy national editor at The Times, told me. ‘Cellphone video has changed the debate over policing’” (Leonhardt, 2020).

Human Rights Watch conducted interviews and written accounts from 81 people who participated in the Mott Haven protest against police violence in New York, which ended with police beating people, mass arrests of crowds, and firing tear gas, pepper spray, stun grenades and rubber bullets into the crowd of protesters. Human Rights Watch (Ciccolini, 2020) conducted interviews with 19 other community members, lawyers, activists, and city officials, analyzed 155 videos of the protest and reviewed legal documents and sent questions to the New York Police Department. They wrote:

The protesters in Mott Haven on June 4, and others who joined the massive movement against police violence and systemic racism across the United States since the killing of George Floyd, have articulated powerful demands to hold police officers accountable for their misconduct and to re-envision public safety.

Instead of cracking down on protesters and stifling their calls for change, policymakers and elected officials in New York City and across the country should listen to their demands. This means exhibiting bold leadership, standing up to powerful police departments and unions, and pushing forward comprehensive and meaningful reforms to

end the structural racism and systemic police abuse that people in Mott Haven and communities like it have experienced for far too long (Ciccolini, 2020).

Now that the spotlight is shining on police, many journalists are using this opportunity to push even harder for the right to information. The Boston Globe (Campbell, 2020) wrote:

Time and again, the BPD has proved that it cannot be trusted to police itself... Some may wonder whether reallocating resources and pushing for transparency and accountability would create a divide between the city's elected leadership and its police force. The answer is no. Residents I've spoken with — including many officers — believe that a transparent, diverse, just, and accountable department is essential to public safety and will shift the culture inside the police department. These efforts won't drive us further apart; they will bring us all closer together.

Many government officials agree with these statements on the national, state, and local level, which is why the Freedom of Information Act and state sunshine laws were created. However, problems exist with making sure freedom of information (FOI) legislation is enforced and taken seriously by government agencies.

This thesis will lay out the previous research on police transparency, barriers to obtaining public records, and potential solutions for shedding more light on law enforcement.

Freedom of Information

Access to government information is fundamental to a democracy, for people to self-govern (Blasi, 1977). The concept is that any person should be able to see any records created or maintained by government agencies, unless a legal exemption allows the document to remain secret.

The first country to adopt a freedom of information law was Sweden in 1766 (Halstuk, 1999, p. 512). The United States adopted the FOIA when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed it into law on July 4, 1966, grounded in the idea that a democratic society depends on government transparency and access to public information. Some states already had public record laws, but this pressured all states to adopt them. FOIA makes records available to “any person” upon request, and a FOIA requester is not required to explain his or her purpose for requesting a record or why a record should be disclosed (The Freedom of Information Act, 2016). It makes it the government’s duty to explain its decisions to refuse access to public records. “The term ‘records’ has been defined broadly by the statute and the courts and includes documentary information, such as reports, letters, manuals, photos, films and sound recordings” (Halstuk, 1999, p. 512).

FOIA permits citizens to examine records held by 100 federal administrative and regulatory agencies, as well as government-controlled corporations (FOIA.gov, 2021). “FOIA does not apply to records held by Congress, state or local governments, the courts, private individuals or private companies, including private entities under federal contracts. Nor does it apply to the President, the personal staff of the President and those whose sole function is to advise and assist the President, such as the Council of Economic Advisors” (Halstuk, 2010, p. 515).

Public records requests are often submitted through a form online provided by the government agency and can be turned in online, through the mail, in person or email. There are often copy fees for printing out paper versions of records. For FOIA requests, a person will often write a letter explaining that they are submitting a FOIA request, detailing the records they need

and by when. Government agencies must submit these records within a reasonably timely manner or must explain why they cannot make the records available.

These public records have been proven to be valuable to society, as they reduce corruption and improve financial management. An examination of published research between 1990 and 2015 found that while transparency seemed to be contingent with trust, overall greater transparency appeared to “consistently improve the quality of financial management and reduce levels of public sector corruption” (Cucciniello, 2017). The study pointed out that while there is a growing interest in the topic of government transparency, more research is needed to better understand how much the public trusts the government to publicly disseminate information.

Access to Federal Records

The Government Accountability Office examined FOIA request backlogs in June 2018 after receiving large amounts of complaints across the nation. This examination was sparked due to concerns about federal agencies compliance with FOIA, especially when it comes to timeliness and alleged political screening of information requests. In 2014, 714,231 FOIA requests were received by the federal government but a gigantic federal backlog of FOIA cases was not processed in the statutory time limit of 20 business days, increasing by 67 percent to a total of 159,741 backlogged cases. A GAO study stated, for example, “DOI (Department of Interior), according to agency officials, has also tried to incorporate reduction methods and best practices, including proactively releasing information that may be of interest to the public, thus avoiding the need for a FOIA request; enhanced training for its new online FOIA tracking and processing system; improved interoffice collaboration; production of monthly reports on backlogs and of weekly charts on incoming requests, to heighten awareness among leadership; and monitoring trends” (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018, p. 35).

However, DOI has still seen a 51 percent increase in the FOIA backlog, from 449 in 2012 to 677 in 2016. They claimed the backlog was due to “the loss of FOIA personnel, an increase in the complexity of requests, an increase in FOIA-related litigation, an increase in incoming requests, and the fact that staff have additional duties” (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018, p. 35).

Access at the State Level

Most journalists do not use federal FOIA to get records from their local government, instead using state public record laws, which are prevalent in every state, as well as the District of Columbia. These laws are similar to federal FOIA, applying to state and local government agencies, yet vary widely across the nation.

Christina Koningisor (2020) calls these increasingly secretive areas of state and local agencies “transparency deserts.” Koningisor’s analysis of state and local government transparency and public records laws “reveals that these transparency statutes, although flawed, play an even more critical role at lower levels of government than they do in the federal context, where there is a wealth of statutory and constitutional alternatives to FOIA to check government power.” The study uses public record data sets and qualitative interviews to contrast federal laws state transparency laws with other barriers made by the government. The article also attempts to shed light on areas in the nation where local governments have “poorly drafted transparency laws, hostile government actors, and weak local media and civil society.”

Kansas’s statute for public records, for example, contains 55 exemptions, including a general exemption for all correspondence between a public agency and a private individual. Koningisor’s case study sheds light on the weak nature of state public records laws. In addition to weak legislation, the hostility toward transparency requirements among government agencies,

especially law enforcement, have created barriers for access to public information and watchdog journalism. Additionally, half of the counties in Kansas do not have a daily newspaper and the state has the second highest number of newspaper closures in the nation. Without an emphasis on transparency in the legal and legislative system and a comprehensive state transparency law, there is a lack of effective implementation of freedom of information laws and an inability for the already spread-thin local media to hold state officials responsible.

Journalists and clerks at public records offices sometimes have good relationships, but sometimes they are hostile. Many state and local agencies are not willing to comply with transparency requirements because of a broader culture within the governmental agency (Koningisor, 2020). A culture of “secrecy and willful disregard for state public records law” leaves journalists in a bad position. Records officers have significant power over the availability of public information, and create large roadblocks for journalists trying to access public information (Bush Kimball, 2003).

Backlogs cause major delays and sometimes block journalists completely from publishing stories. Often the governmental bureaucracy halts reporters from ultimately doing their jobs and serving as watchdogs. In Cuillier’s *Forecasting FOIA* (2017), the most significant issues for FOIA requesters were delays and procedural roadblocks. Government agencies response times, copy fees, and ignoring of requests all create extra frustration for people dealing with records agencies. Only about 5 percent of survey respondents said delays were not problematic at all and almost all respondents said delays and procedural roadblocks such as redacting information, denying fee waivers, and speed of request were issues. The second biggest problem for survey respondents was lack of enforcement of public records laws. Over 60 percent of respondents said lack of enforcement of public records law was very problematic or extremely

problematic. Only 18.4 percent said lack of enforcement for public records laws was not at all problematic.

Koningisor addresses how public records laws on a local level need to be improved. “Based on this analysis, the article maps out the three central features that comprise a local transparency ecosystem: the substance of these transparency statutes; the attitudes of the government officials that implement them; and the strength of the media and civil society actors who monitor the government externally. It argues that when all three prongs of this transparency ecosystem fail – when the statutes themselves are poorly written, implemented by government actor’s hostile to transparency efforts, and enforced by weak or nonexistent civil society organizations – this creates a downward spiral of reduced government disclosure and public oversight, what I refer to as a ‘transparency desert’” (Koningisor, 2020, p. 1466).

Access to Law Enforcement Information

Access to police information is one of the most difficult areas in public record laws, at the federal, state, and local levels.

Halstuk (1999) addresses U.S. FOIA exemptions for law enforcement and the history behind FOIA laws and breaches in privacy, stating that the Supreme Court’s interpretations of FOIA’s exemptions miss the mark in meeting Congress’s intent (p. 130). Halstuk analyzed U.S. Supreme Court cases to come to this conclusion, one of which focused on the case *FBI v. Abramson* in 1982, regarding law enforcement records. Abramson had filed a request under FOIA for information concerning FBI records on persons whom Nixon believed were enemies of his administration. The FBI said that the unredacted information would be an “unwarranted invasion of privacy” and stated that the information could be withheld. The court sided with the FBI, saying that information contained in records compiled for law-enforcement purposes does

not lose its exemption protection when the information is reproduced or summarized in a new document for purposes other than law-enforcement.

In 1989, the Supreme Court then ruled unanimously in *U.S. Department of Justice vs. Reporters Committee for Freedom of Press* that federal agencies can withhold computerized FBI compilations of criminal “rap sheets” on private citizens, even though the information might be available in public records in local or state offices, making it very difficult for reporters to obtain a criminal record when someone has been in multiple states (Halstuk, 1999, p.133). This unavailability of information makes it difficult for reporters writing about crimes committed in multiple states and municipalities.

At the state and local level, journalists often are told by police departments that there is a backlog in public records requests, and it will take a long time — months, sometimes — to get their records requests fulfilled. Backlogs differ in different states and local police agencies, depending on many factors. MuckRock staff members examined requests submitted through their site in 2019, which showed out of 4,208 requests with Massachusetts agencies, only 1,598 requests were completed, and 52 of which were still pending at the Boston Police Department (Gomez, 2019).

It’s not just Massachusetts that struggles with the secrecy. According to The Associated Press, during the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement agencies throughout the country said they had a backlog of records requests due to “remote work, outdated public-records laws, underfunded budgets and increased oversight from top administrators wanting to review potentially sensitive data before it was released” (Lieb, 2021).

In a national study, sheriff’s offices were the most difficult agencies to acquire records from (Wagner, 2018). “The bailiwick of the sheriff includes distributing legal information to the

public, ranging from disseminating crash reports or processing routine judicial records. As a result, they often have dedicated staff, or at the very least familiarity in working with public records. Nonetheless, sheriffs' offices were the least likely to respond, required the most follow-up communication, cost the most on a per request basis, were most likely to deliver hard copies and took the longest to complete the requests" (Wagner, 2018, p. 20).

One of the biggest problems with acquiring law enforcement records is requesting internal affairs documents. At the local level, many police agencies have their own internal affairs offices, which do not know how to process records requests.² Public interest in internal affairs records is only growing considering the outrage against police brutality, officer killings of colored people, and social justice protests.

Researchers in Colorado studied law enforcement transparency when it comes to internal affairs, and found incessant secrecy (DuPey, 2018). The researchers requested internal affairs files from 2015 and 2016 from various law-enforcement agencies across Colorado. They then tracked the requests and logged how long each one took, as well as the sufficiency of transparency within the agencies. Most agencies outright denied the request or failed to respond, as well as required costly fees for processing their requests. As a result, investigations into police misconduct in Colorado were nearly impossible due to law-enforcement agencies unwilling to release public information on their internal affairs. Twenty-four out of 43 law-enforcement agencies across Colorado did not provide records when requested. Out of 43 law enforcement agencies, more than half either rejected their requests or did not respond in any way. Nearly all agencies were unwilling to release a complete file.

² In my own experience, requesting police complaints becomes a long-winded goose chase, lasting months and ending with insufficient and unfulfilled records requests.

Gatekeepers

Police information also is denied to journalists and the public through public information officers serving as gatekeepers. Carolyn S. Carlson and Paymon Kashani (2016a) found that journalists must go through public information officers most of the time, creating various roadblocks, delays, and filters of information. Carlson and Kashani conducted a survey of 256 crime reporters, finding that most must go through a police public information office before they can interview police officers. Sixty percent of the reporters interviewed said that they could only rarely successfully interview police officers on their own without a public information officer. Reporters also said that at crime scenes almost two-thirds could not easily get information from officers in charge. Crime reporters most of the time must pursue other ways of accessing information, whether that's through interviewing neighbors, witnesses, going through court documents or having to file records requests. In the survey, forty percent of reporters said it is becoming more difficult to access police officers. About a third of reporters said they did not receive the records within the time required by law, and a third reported that records custodians will not answer their questions about records (Carolyn, 2016).

Another study by Carlson and Kashani (2016b) examined police public information officers' perceptions of journalists and their own experiences with records. In the survey, public information officers said they believe it is their job to convey accurate information to the public regarding their agencies matters, and about a third of them said that there are reporters or media outlets they will not allow officers to talk to because of problems with their stories in the past. Almost half of public information officers said that they feel it is necessary to supervise or monitor interviews with police officers from their agency. This is most likely due to negative publicity and the amount of comfort that officers feel with reporters, especially if they have had

negative experiences in the past or feel like there is unwarranted bias against law enforcement. A third of public information officers said that they find reporters that they have dealt with to be negatively biased towards the police, which means there is a large proportion of public information officers who may try to control what information is available to reporters and instill roadblocks for them.

Based on Carlson and Kashani's studies, it appears that while journalists see public information officers as barriers to the truth, public information officers view themselves as an important role to make sure journalists do not create a biased image of their police agencies. Oftentimes their presence while reporters interview police is to ensure it is a positive portrayal of their agency and many reporters feel this is a barrier to disseminating accurate and important information when it comes to law enforcement agencies.

Shedding Light on Law Enforcement

This final section lays out potential solutions for how journalists and the public can increase transparency of law enforcement information, with specific recommendations, based on the cited peer-reviewed research.

Ask with Authority

Studies indicate that requests submitted with authority are more likely to succeed, including with police agencies. A study conducted in 2010 by Cuillier randomly assigned "vinegar" letters (threatening records requests) and "honey" letters (friendly records requests) to 106 police agencies (79 city police departments, 15 county sheriff's offices, and 12 other law enforcement agencies). Seven agencies (14%) sent records in response to the "vinegar" study and only two agencies (4%) sent records in response to the "honey" letter. While it was difficult to

get a response regardless of the letter's tone, the threatening letter led to a higher request compliance rate (Cuillier, 2010).

A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that official FOIA requests received a much higher rate of response from local government agencies (77% responded) than informal requests for information (65% responded) (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2019). A similar study (Worthy, 2017) found that formal freedom of information requests sent to English parishes were more than twice as likely to illicit a response than those just "asked," but overall only 15% of parishes responded at all. The study said, "Perhaps the most important reasons for the low response rate lies with the fact that parish clerks, working part-time with few resources, may simply find that answering an FOI may be 'a long way down the list of pressing activities' at a time of scant resources" (Worthy, 2017, p. 493).

Ben-Aaron, et al. (2017) found that peer pressure was at play in the amount of response time between the initial responses to records requests and the rate of request fulfillment. The study found that nearby counties with a similar political, economic, and demographic characteristic correlated in each other's response times – that peer pressure influenced government transparency.

Push Back Against PIO Controls

After reviewing cases where journalists faced so much restraint from government agencies when trying to interview law enforcement officers, LoMonte (2019) asserted that such gag orders are unconstitutional. He wrote, "Journalists denied access to their desired government sources should be able to establish standing to challenge unconstitutional gag orders based on their history of success in the analogous context of challenging gag orders on trial participants" (LoMonte, 2019, p. 4), and argued that "Gagging employees from speaking to the media

manifestly diserves the public's interest in honest, accountable government" (LoMonte, 2019, p. 62).

Columbia Journalism Review interviewed Carolyn Carlson, former president of the Society of Professional Journalists who co-authored the studies on public information officers with Paymon Kashani. According to the article, Carlson said journalists should write about their interactions with public information officers and tell the public directly about their obstructions of information (Janzer, 2019). Kathryn Foxhall, a former healthcare journalist, used this technique and wrote for the Society of Professional Journalists about "Seven attempts by PIOs to stymie journalism," in which she logged journalist's stories of government blockades in the form of PIOs to key sources as a step to improve accountability and transparency (Foxhall, 2018).

Add Teeth to the Laws

Koningisor (2020) suggested the easiest way to achieve government transparency is to reform the statutes themselves. "Public records exemptions that narrowly reflect the interests of powerful corporate actors, for example, impose barriers to public disclosure without providing any real benefits to the government at large. Legislators could revise these statutes to ensure that exemptions to disclosure are clearly stated, narrowly tailored, and reflective of the public interest" (Koningisor, 2020, p. 1542-1543).

Public record laws should be strengthened with strong enforcement provisions, such as fines for agencies and individuals who break the laws. Cuillier (2017) recommends requiring mandatory attorney fee-shifting provisions, which would require agencies to pay the attorney fees of those who rightfully sought public records through court and won. Another study by Cuillier (2019) looked at a MuckRock dataset of more than 7,000 public record requests submitted to state agencies in the United States from 2014 through 2017 and found that states

that are more likely to comply with public records laws are more likely to include mandatory attorney fee-shifting provisions in their state laws.

DuPey (2018) proposes that law enforcement should be required by law to disclose internal affairs records. This puts a clear and precise requirement for public information, sets a time restriction and makes sure there are penalties when the law is not followed.

Conclusion

Based on literature relating to freedom of information laws and journalist attempts at public records requests, it seems clear that the current state of transparency and accountability for law enforcement agencies could be greatly improved by laws that are regulated and actually enforced, as well as better education and communication between the public, journalists, and law enforcement agencies regarding freedom of information laws.

Literature reviewed in this study also pointed to the unconstitutional nature of gag orders and government attempts to block journalists from accessing information that the public has the right to know. In light of current events and social justice movements that demand police accept responsibility and accountability for corruption and brutality, it seems it would be in the best interest for the government to hold law enforcement agencies to a higher level of transparency by enacting better public records laws that mandate compliance with the freedom of information act, making it easier for journalists to share important information with the public and serve as government watchdogs.

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