
Mediated Access

Crime Reporters'
Perceptions of Public
Information Officers'
Media Control
Efforts, Use of Social
Media, Handling of
Body Camera
Footage and Public
Records

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Summary

Reporters covering crime routinely must go through law enforcement public information officers (PIO) to set up interviews with police officers and investigators, even at crime scenes. Reporters tend to get their initial information on crimes from the police websites or social media accounts, which often have insufficient detail for their stories. However, when they ask the PIO for additional details reporters will usually get it within a few hours, and mostly within time to meet their deadlines.

Less than a third of the reporters have ever requested body cam footage and even fewer actually received it. Of the 27 respondents who received the footage, 17 used it in a story for air or on a website. When crime reporters asked for public records, most of the time they received them at least within the timeframe allowed by their state's open records laws, and they were generally able to get their questions answered, at least partially. However, most said their police agency's computer systems were not set up to easily and quickly access public records. And four out of five said public records were already available online only some of the time, rarely or never.

Study Sample

The survey was conducted online from January 4, 2016, to February 8, 2016. An email invitation was sent to a sample list of people identified as journalists covering crime or journalists identifying themselves as general assignment. The original list of 6,500 was purchased by the Society of Professional Journalists. Using the random number generator function in Excel, we took a sample of 1,626 to send the initial invitation to. We sent five reminder emails over the next several weeks. We were somewhat surprised that almost half of the emails either bounced back or were never opened. We made telephone calls to 41 individuals on the sample list who had not responded and half were apparently no longer employed and most of the rest were out of the office. We think that was the issue with our sample as a whole. However, 738 did open one of the emails and 256 clicked through to the survey (15.7%). Of those, 195, or 12 percent, went on to complete at least some of the survey, with 144 completing the entire survey, which was somewhat lengthy. The sample size of 1,626 carries a margin of error of 2.4% at a confidence level of 95 percent.

Of the respondents, 91.7 percent work full-time as reporters and/or editors/producers. The others worked part-time, as a freelancer, or something other. The most workers worked for a small daily newspaper (20.2%), closely followed by mid-sized daily newspaper (19.7%). The rest of the reporters working are as follows: for television (18%), for large daily newspapers (13.7%), for weekly newspapers (9.3%), for magazines (1.6%), for wire services (2.7%), for radio (3.8%), online only media (7.1%) and the rest (3.8%). Their beats were closely divided with crime and police (33.0%) and general assignment (31.9%), courts (14.8%) and other (20.3%) followed. Nearly a quarter of the participants (24.1%) said they spend 75 percent of their time contacting local or state law enforcement agencies for stories. Almost a third of participants said

they spend about 50 percent of their time doing so. Most of the respondents had a good bit of experience as a crime reporter: 29.3 percent more than 20 years, 23.8 percent, 11 to 20 years, 29.9 percent three to 10 years, and 17.0 percent less than three years.

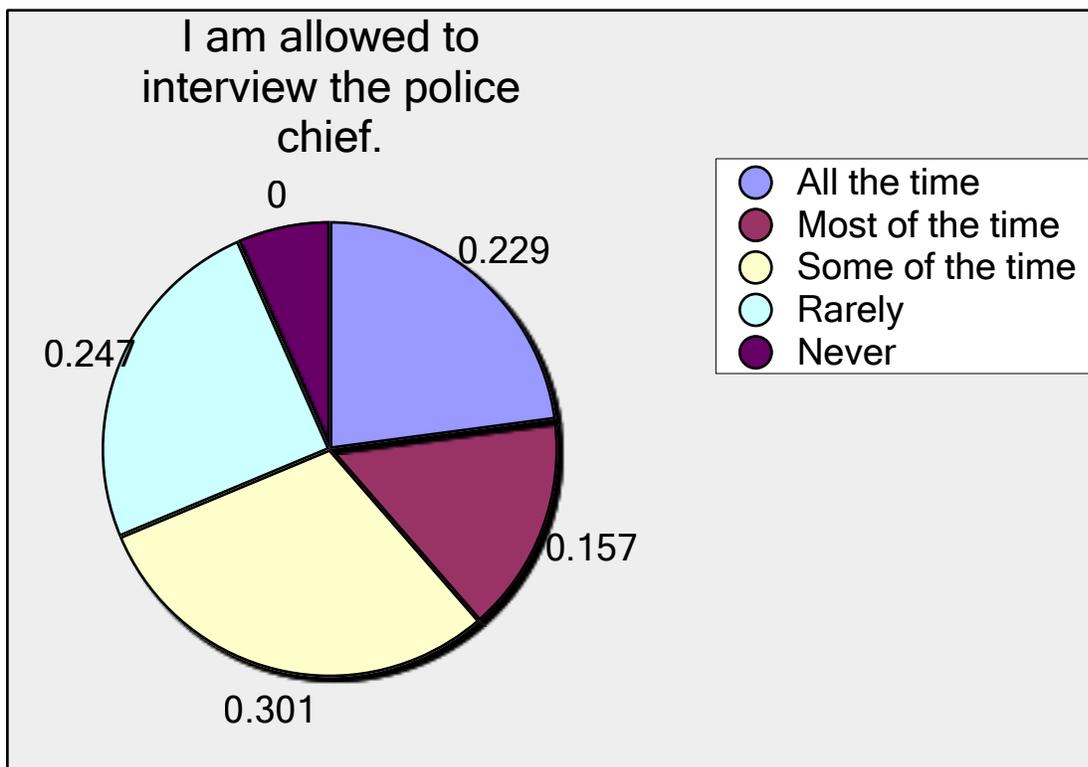
Of the respondents, roughly half (50.37%) were between the ages of 47 to 66. The largest portion of the participants worked in the Northeast (26.7%). The amount of participants from the West (21%) and the South (20.5%) were nearly identical. The rest of the participants are as follows: Midwest (15.9%), Southwest (10.8%), national (3.4%), and foreign (1.7%).

General Findings

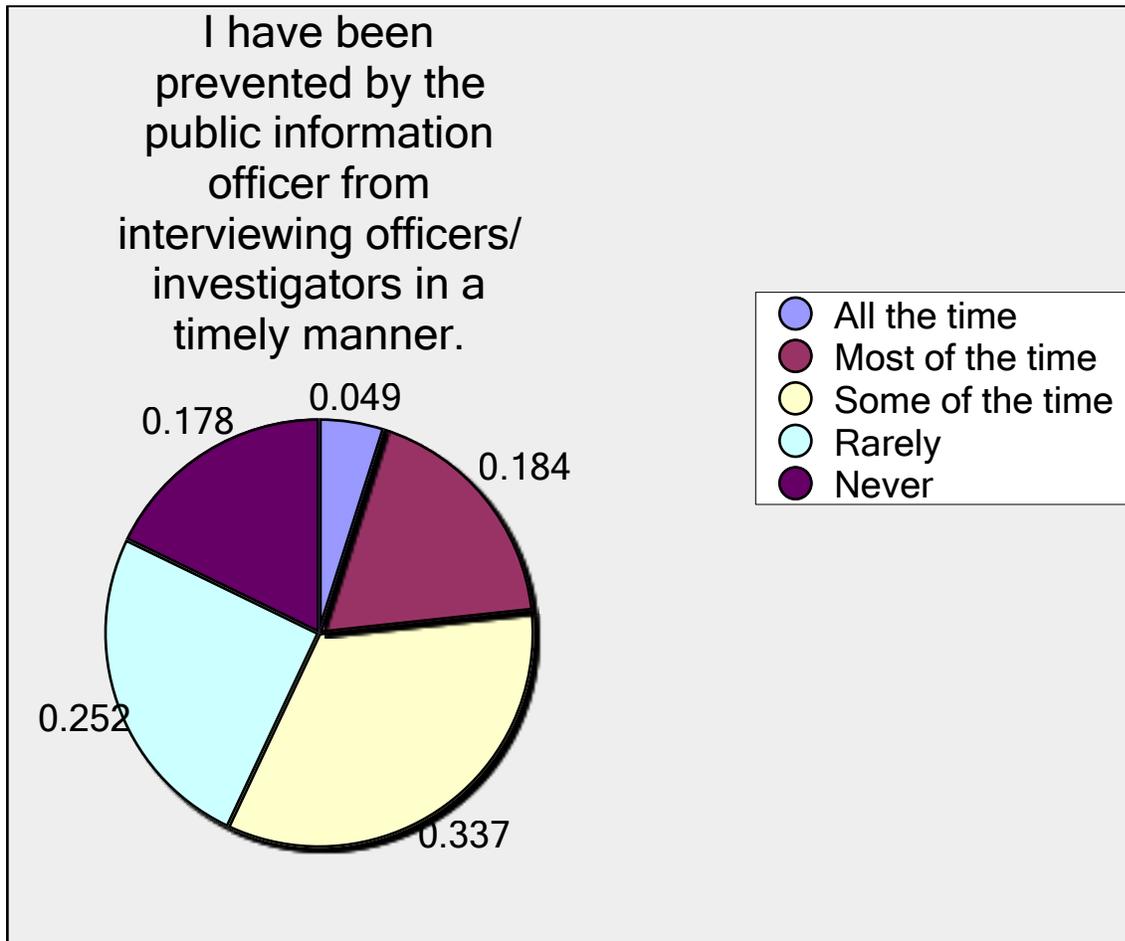
It is unusual for crime reporters to be able to interview police officers without first going through the police public information office. Almost 60 percent said they could successfully interview officers on their own some of the time or rarely, while 26.1 percent said that never happened. Only 4.8 percent said they got around the PIO all the time and 9.7 percent said they could interview without involving the PIO most of the time.

When reporters do go to the public information office with requests to set up interviews, they report the PIOs respond to the request in a timely manner most of the time (34.6%) or some of the time (36.4%). Only 16 percent said this happened all of the time, while 9.3 percent said it was rare and 3.7 percent said it never happened.

Most were allowed to interview the police chief at least some of the time (30.1%, 15.7% most of the time and 22.9% all of the time), while a quarter said it was rare that they got to speak to the chief (24.7%) and a few said it never happened (6.6%).



Access to the chief can be helpful on some stories, but in many stories about specific crimes or incidents, reporters often seek to interview a front-line officer or investigator. However, more than half reported that the PIO actually prevented them from interviewing officers and investigators in a timely manner (33.7% some of the time, 18.4% most of the time and 4.9% all of the time).

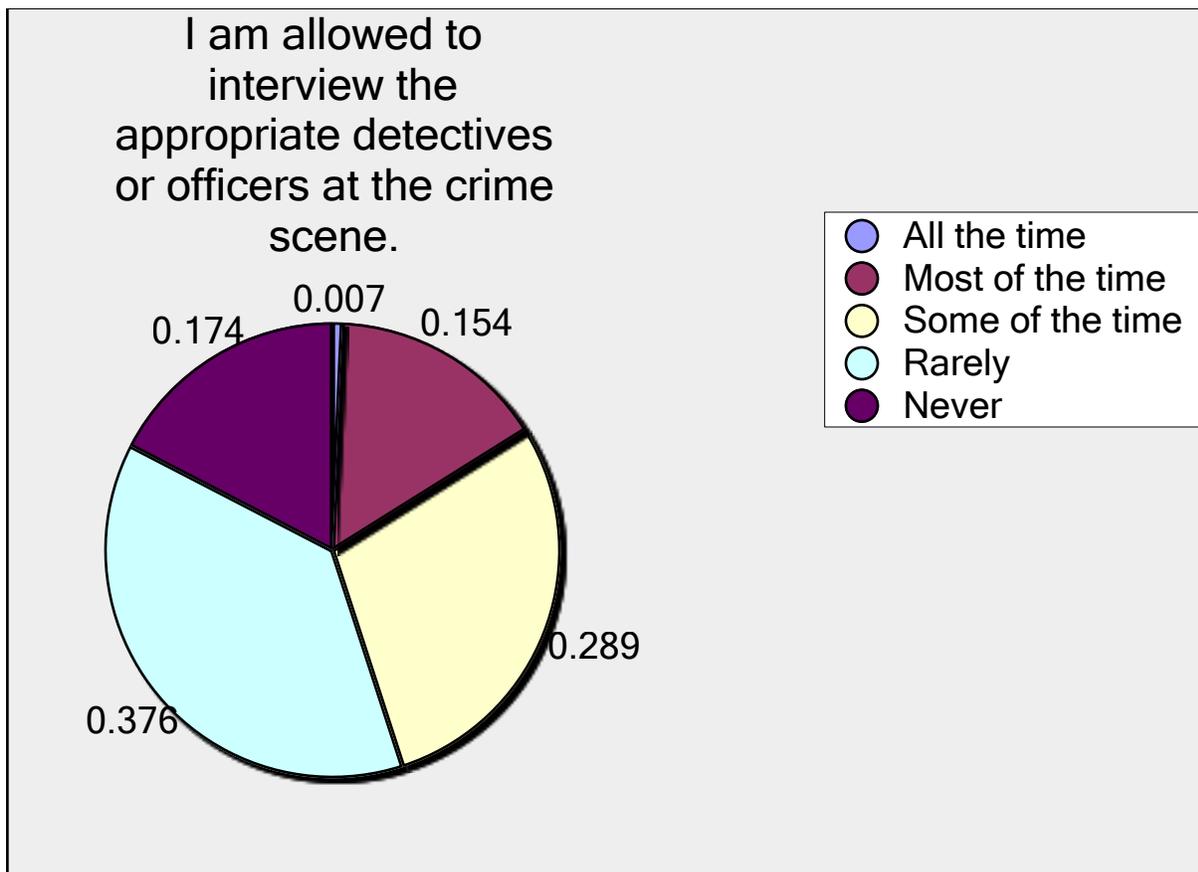


When asked to explain what reasons the respondents' were given, the largest number (35 of 108) said it was simply the department's policy to prohibit the interviews with anyone other than the PIO and sometimes the police chief, sheriff or chief deputy.

"I wanted to interview homicide detectives about a series of murders that were connected to one suspect. However, the public information officer said, 'Sorry, I'm it,'" wrote one respondent.

The two other big reasons for not getting interviews were that the officers were in the middle of an ongoing investigation (28 of 108) or that they simply were unavailable (23 of 108).

These problems persist at crime scenes, where almost two-thirds say they get information easily from the officer in charge only some of the time (40.3%), rarely (23.5%) or never (7.4%). They most often cannot interview the appropriate detectives or officers at the crime scenes (28.9% some of the time, 37.6% rarely, 17.4% never). Instead, they are required to obtain permission from the PIO before they can do any crime scene police interviews (20.3% all the time, 28.7% most of the time, 26.2% some of the time). That is, when the PIO is present at the crime scene to deal with reporters. That happens most of the time according to 29 percent of respondents, but only some of the time according to 36.6 percent and rarely according to 17.2 percent.



When police are not being cooperative, crime reporters have learned to pursue other sources of information, sometimes witnesses and neighbors (42 of 120) or court documents and records (20 of 120).

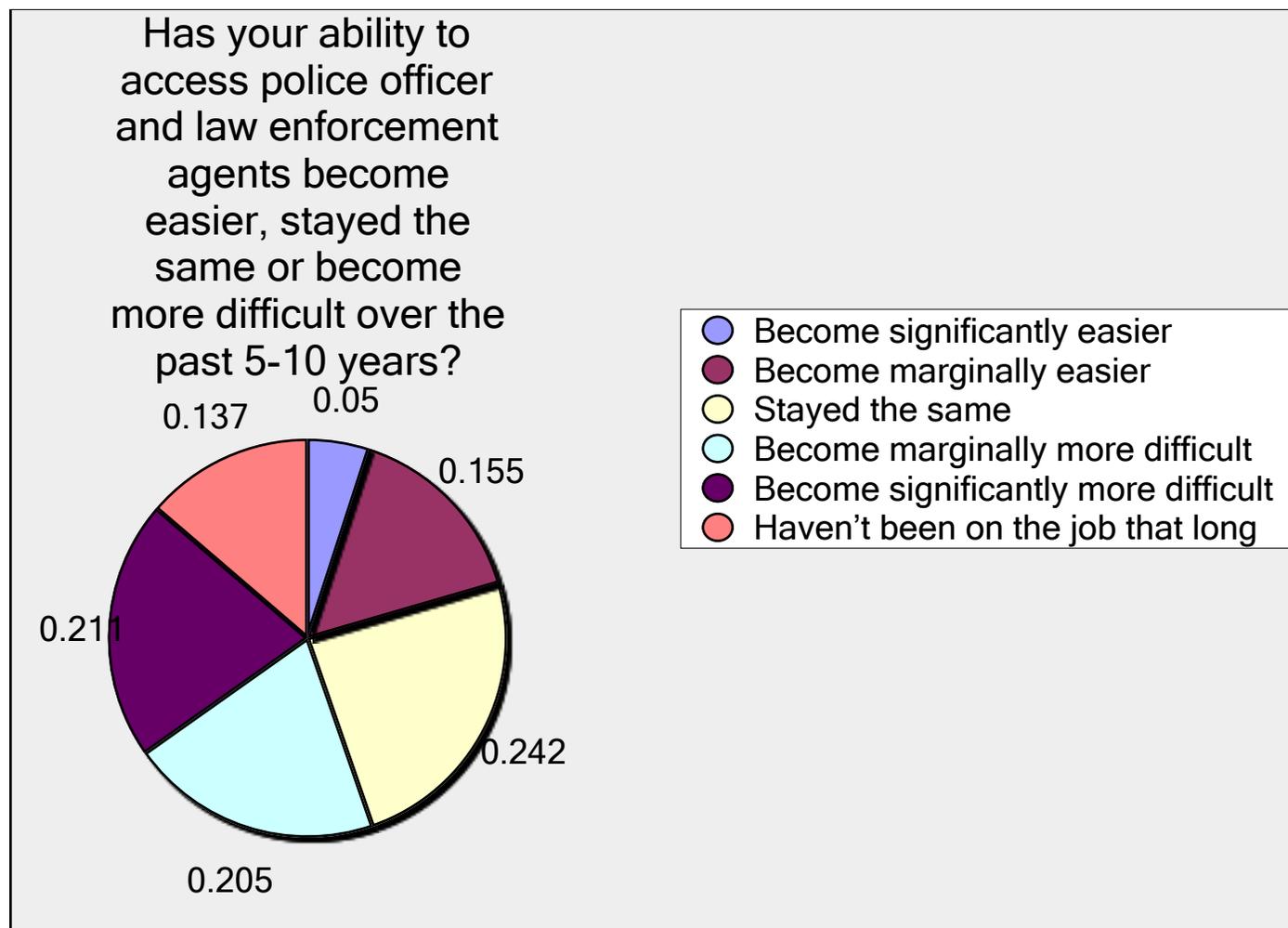
One respondent listed the way he/she would go about getting the information as “rephrase my question, ask another agency, contact attorneys, contact victims, contact suspects, contact family members involved, contact witnesses, etc.”

Another list included: “Attending funerals, interviewing families, pastors, store owners and neighbors, (and) cross referencing social media.”

Another reporter said, “We have to rely on citizens or have officers risk their careers to slip us information through back channels.”

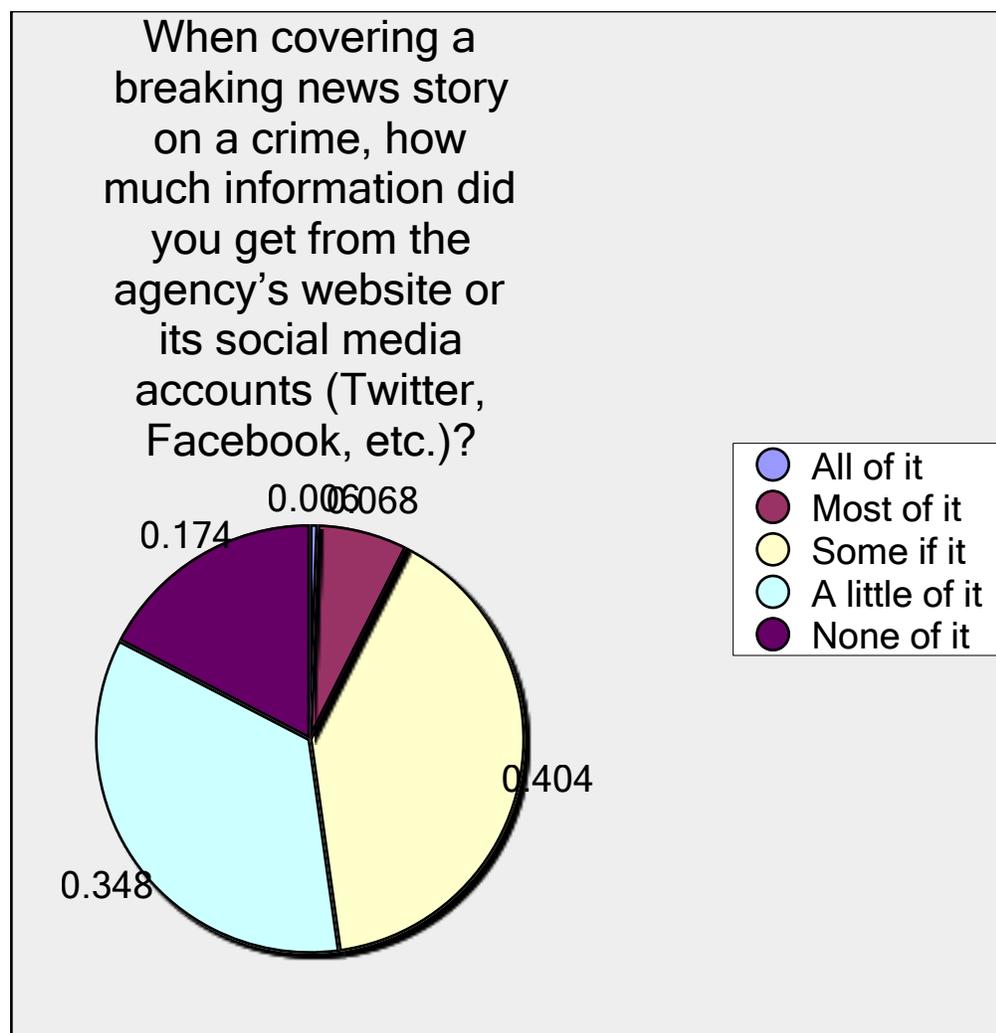
A television reporter had a numbered list: “1. Call the PIOs cell phone from a number he does not recognize, hoping he'll actually answer. 2. If it's traffic-related, call dispatch and offer to help them by immediately getting information on the air. 3. Going over the head of the PIO. 4. Talking to other witnesses, knowing that some of them may not describe things in the same manner as police. 5. Telling PIO, other officers, etc. that I really want to clear up some of the misinformation that is out there and being used by some media.”

Crime reporters were somewhat divided on whether their access to police officers and law enforcement agents has become easier (5.0% significantly, 15.5% marginally), stayed the same (24.2%), or become more difficult (20.5% marginally, 21.1% significantly) over the past 5-10 years. (The rest, 13.7 percent, hadn't been on the job long enough to say.)



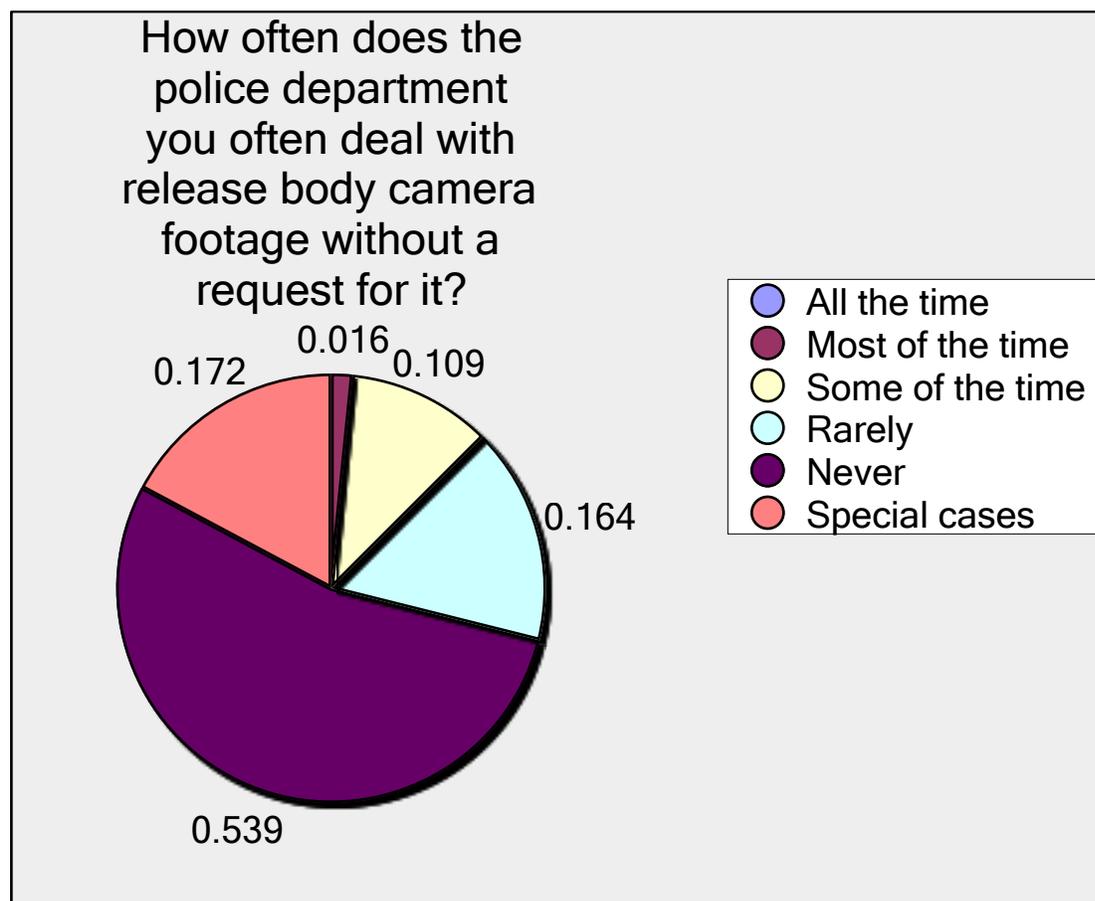
When crime reporters get information from the PIOs in the form of news releases, the releases usually provide sufficient details, including names (5.5% all the time, 37.4% most of the time, and 37.4% some of the time). If the reporter asks for additional information, the PIO most often responds within a few hours (57.9% or sooner (23.3% within minutes or 5.0% immediately). And those responses are almost always in time to meet the reporters' deadline (55.5% meets deadline, 30.3% other, with most saying the response "sometimes" met deadline).

While PIOs nowadays put news releases on the department websites and will utilize Twitter and Facebook to reach the public, crime reporters say they only use a little (34.8%) or some (40.4%) of that information in their breaking news stories on a crime. They believe the police social media accounts are updated within hours of the information becoming available (62.5%). But they almost always want additional information and will ask the PIO to help them get it, and they report that the added information is often delivered within minutes (28.4%) or hours (56.8%). And, three-fourth say the response met their deadlines (76.1%).



Forty-three of the respondents (28.9% of the 149 who answered this question) had requested footage from a police body camera. Of those, 27, or 62.8 percent, said their request was answered positively. Only three had to pay money for the footage, at costs of \$7, \$50 and \$80. For the rest it was free, or for two, the respondent didn't know how much it cost. For most, (n=13, 39.399), it was hard to tell if the footage had been edited, and seven (21.21%) said the footage hadn't been edited much, five said not at all. Seventeen said they used the footage on air, on a website or for information in a print news story. Four said they just watched it so they could see what happened during an arrest.

Asked if police ever released body camera footage without there being a request for it, no one said this happened all the time, but two (1.6%) did say it happened most of the time. More than half said that never happened (53.9%), while 17.2 percent said it sometimes happened in special cases, and another 16.4 percent said it happened rarely.



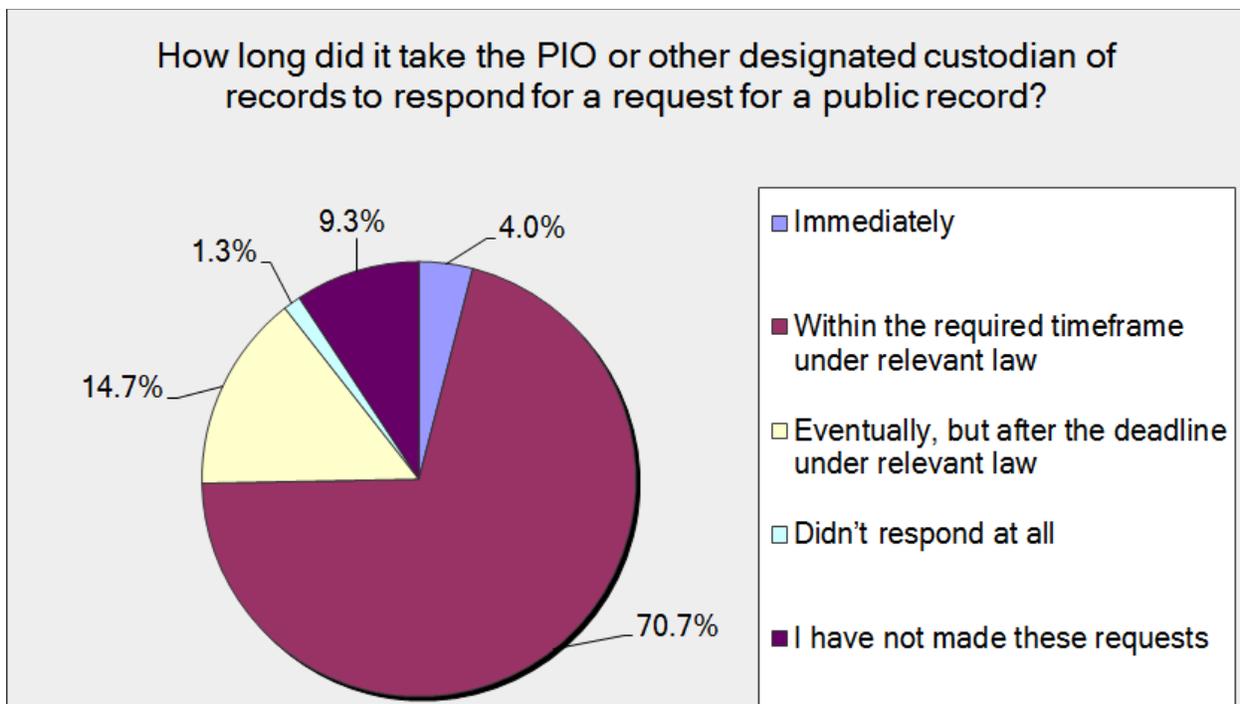
About 30 respondents (21.6% of 139 answering the question) said their state has specific laws governing public access to body camera footage, while seven more said their open records laws were currently being revised, or had recently been changed and the police departments

had not yet developed implementation policies. “Body cameras are new around here and ordinances have not yet caught up,” said one respondent.

In addition to news releases, many public information officers are putting public records, such as crime incident reports, online. More than half of the respondents said they could find public records online at least some of the time (40.7%), 12.7 percent most of the time and 2.7 percent all of the time. But finding public records is not always easy for the public or for the PIO – 50 percent said the police computer system did not make public records readily accessible, and 28.7 percent said those records were only partially accessible. Asked to elaborate on the “partially” answers, 22 of the 40 who said this explained that they had limited access to the information they needed.

“There is seldom uniformity. If a case is ‘straight up,’ with no questions about police conduct, then records are more accessible than when there are questions about police conduct,” said one respondent. Another said the online and social media information was of limited use. “Inmate rosters and arrest records are online, but contain minimal information,” this respondent said. “Press releases are texted and emailed, but they only write releases for things that make their office look good. They sporadically use Facebook for safety-related and breaking news situations.”

The majority of the time, the custodian of the public records responds to requests within the time frame allowed under their state’s public records laws (70.7%), while a few (14.7%) respond eventually but after the deadline.



Just over half of the time (56.1%) they provide the information requested. More than 37 percent say their requests tend to be only partially filled, with the law enforcement agency redacting information from the record or only giving out part of what was requested.

“Most police and law enforcement reports are heavily redacted; they provide them, but key info (names, addresses, etc.) are often redacted for a variety of reasons,” said one respondent.

“I've made several requests,” said another crime reporter. “The last one involved a request for detailed data in an electronic format. They provided aggregate data in a grainy pdf of a photocopy.”

“Sometimes the PIO gets back with redacted records, sometimes (he) doesn't respond at all hoping I will go away, sometimes (he) responds completely,” said one. “I have actually had a PIO tell me he'll give me the records this time ‘because he wants this information out’.”

Two-thirds of the time (67.7%), when the reporters get the records, they are able to get the PIO or custodian to answer any questions they have about those records. Rarely, however, do they get an explanation for the redactions.

One respondent said the custodian or PIO would “give only the bare minimum, and require questions be super specific. They play games with semantics and police definitions in ways to deny even basic information. It's a game for them to prevent info from getting out.”

Conclusion

Crime reporters find themselves dependent upon police public information officers for the most basic information on the crimes they cover, although most have learned to get additional information from interviewing witnesses and others, especially at crime scenes. Only about one in three has asked for body camera footage, but most of those have gotten the footage to use in their stories. Open records laws, ordinances, regulations and procedures covering body camera footage are still being developed in many jurisdictions.

But when crime reporters request the usual public records, more than two-thirds say they will usually receive the records within the timeframe required by law and about two-thirds of those say the records custodian will actually answer questions they have about the records. Of course, that means that the rest are not getting their record requests answered by deadline, nor is anyone necessarily answering their questions when they receive heavily redacted documents.

As for interviews, many reporters say they are restricted to interviewing only the PIO, or only the PIO and the chief and/or sheriff. But most reporters say they are able to get around the public information offices every once in a while to get the information they needed for their stories.

Sponsor and Authors

The survey was conducted by Dr. Carolyn S. Carlson, an associate professor of journalism in the School of Communication and Media at Kennesaw State University and a member of the Society of Professional Journalists' Freedom of Information Committee. Paymon Kashani is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Integrated Global Communication program in the School of Communication and Media at Kennesaw State University, and a graduate research assistant to Dr. Carlson.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

I am allowed to interview the police chief.

All the time	38	22.9%
Most of the time	26	15.7%
Some of the time	50	30.1%
Rarely	41	24.7%
Never	11	6.6%

I can successfully interview police officers without involving the public information office.

All the time	8	4.8%
Most of the time	16	9.7%
Some of the time	49	29.7%
Rarely	49	29.7%
Never	43	26.1%

Public information officers respond to my requests to set up interviews in a timely manner.

All the time	26	16.0%
Most of the time	56	34.6%
Some of the time	59	36.4%
Rarely	15	9.3%
Never	6	3.7%

I have been prevented by the public information officer from interviewing officers/investigators in a timely manner.

All the time	8	4.9%
Most of the time	30	18.4%
Some of the time	55	33.7%
Rarely	41	25.2%
Never	29	17.8%

Thinking of the last time you were prevented from interviewing a police officer/investigator, please explain the reason you were given if any.

No Reason Determined	15	13.9%
Ongoing Investigation	28	25.9%
Other	7	6.5%
PIO/Authorization/Policy	35	32.4%
Unavailable	23	21.3%

Public information officers respond to my requests for information and additional records in a timely manner.

All the time	14	8.8%
Most of the time	77	48.4%
Some of the time	53	33.3%
Rarely	13	8.2%
Never	2	1.3%

Information provided on press releases provides full and sufficient details, including names.

All the time	9	5.5%
Most of the time	61	37.4%
Some of the time	61	37.4%
Rarely	28	17.2%
Never	4	2.5%

If you asked the public information office for information not included on the press release, how quickly did they respond?

Immediately	8	5.0%
Within minutes	37	23.3%
Within hours	92	57.9%
Within days	17	10.7%
Never	5	3.1%

Did the response meet your deadline?

Yes	86	55.5%
No	22	14.2%
Other	47	30.3%

Has your ability to access police officer and law enforcement agents easier, stayed the same or become more difficult over the past 5-10 years?

Become significantly easier	8	5.0%
Become marginally easier	25	15.5%
Stayed the same	39	24.2%
Become marginally more difficult	33	20.5%
Become significantly more difficult	34	21.1%
Haven't been on the job that long	22	13.7%

What kind of educational or professional background did the PIOs you often deal with have prior to taking the job?

Sworn officers	89	56.3%
Journalists	11	7.0%
Public relations practitioners	7	4.4%
I don't know	30	19.0%
Other	21	13.3%

When covering a breaking news story on a crime, how much information did you get from the agency's website or its social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, etc.)?

All of it	1	0.6%
Most of it	11	6.8%
Some of it	65	40.4%
A little of it	56	34.8%
None of it	28	17.4%

How quickly was information posted on the website or social media accounts by a public information officer?

Immediately	1	0.8%
Within minutes	26	20.3%
Within hours	80	62.5%
Within days	20	15.6%
Never	1	0.8%

If you asked the public information office for information not included on the website or social media accounts, how quickly did they respond?

Immediately	3	2.0%
Within minutes	42	28.4%
Within hours	84	56.8%
Within days	13	8.8%
Never	6	4.1%

Did the response meet your deadline?

Yes	108	76.1%
No	34	23.9%

I am able to acquire crime information easily from the officer in charge at the scene?

All the time	9	6.0%
Most of the time	34	22.8%
Some of the time	60	40.3%
Rarely	35	23.5%
Never	11	7.4%

I am allowed to interview the appropriate detectives or officers at the crime scene.

All the time	1	0.7%
Most of the time	23	15.4%
Some of the time	43	28.9%
Rarely	56	37.6%
Never	26	17.4%

I am required to obtain approval from the public information officer of the agency in charge before interviewing officers or investigators at a crime scene.

All the time	29	20.3%
Most of the time	41	28.7%
Some of the time	38	26.6%
Rarely	15	10.5%
Never	20	14.0%

The public information officer is present at the crime scene to deal with reporters

All the time	4	2.8%
Most of the time	42	29.0%
Some of the time	53	36.6%
Rarely	25	17.2%
Never	14	9.7%
Special cases	7	4.8%

What are some of the creative ways you have used to get information or reports of crime when the police are not being cooperative?

Attitude & people skills	4	3.33%
Courts documents & records	20	16.67%
Other	21	17.50%
Others agencies	11	9.17%
Social media	14	11.67%
Witness/Neighbors	42	35%
Sources	8	6.66%

Are public records available online?

All the time	4	2.7%
Most of the time	19	12.7%
Some of the time	61	40.7%
Rarely	39	26.0%
Never	24	16.0%
Special cases	3	2.0%

Does the police department you mostly deal with have a computer system that makes public records more readily accessible?

Yes	37	24.7%
No	75	50.0%
Partially	38	25.3%

If "partially," please explain.

Info is emailed	4	11.4%
Limited access	8	22.9%
Limited/Redacted Information	14	40%
Other	9	25.7%

How long did it take the PIO or other designated custodian of records to respond for a request for a public record?

Immediately	6	4.0%
Within the required timeframe under relevant law	106	70.7%
Eventually, but after the deadline under relevant law	22	14.7%
Didn't respond at all	2	1.3%
I have not made these requests	14	9.3%

If the request was fulfilled, did they provide you with the information you asked for?

Yes	74	56.1%
No	9	6.8%
Partially	49	37.1%

If "partially," please explain.

Confidential	3	7.50%
Other	6	15%
Partial information given	15	37.50%
Redacted	16	40%

Did the PIO or custodian answer questions you had about the public records or the information you were seeking?

Yes	88	67.7%
No	17	13.1%
Partially	25	19.2%

If "partially," please explain.

Bare minimum/unaware	10	62.5%
Info on redactions	3	18.75%

Other	3	18.75%
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Does your state have any laws specially governing public access to body camera footage, aside from general public records laws?

Yes	30	21.6%
No	89	64.0%
Partially	20	14.4%

If "partially," please explain.

Developmental Stage	7	38.89%
Not Known	7	38.89%
Other	1	5.56%
Some departments	2	11.11%
Yes but not commonly used	1	5.56%

Have you ever requested for body camera footage?

Yes	43	28.9%
No	106	71.1%

If "yes," did you get it?

Yes	27	62.8%
No	16	37.2%

If yes, how much money did it cost you, if any?

\$0	18	72%
\$50	1	4%
\$7	1	4%
\$80	1	4%

Other	2	8%
Unsure	2	8%

If yes, how heavily was the footage edited?

Extensively	2	5.9%
Moderately	4	11.8%
Not much	7	20.6%
It was hard to tell	13	38.2%
Other	8	23.5%

If yes, what did you use it for?

Broadcast	3	14.29%
News Story	10	47.62%
View arrest	4	19.05%
Web	4	19.05%

How often does the police department you often deal with release body camera footage without a request for it?

All the time	0	0.0%
Most of the time	2	1.6%
Some of the time	14	10.9%
Rarely	21	16.4%
Never	69	53.9%
Special cases	22	17.2%

Appendix B: Open-ended responses

Question 13: Thinking of the last time you were prevented from interviewing a police officer/ investigator, please explain the reason you were given, if any.

I rarely get to interview anyone but the PIO, sheriff, or undersheriff. Detectives and other officers don't generally return my calls.
Against department policy
Officer off-duty
They're too busy, not authorized or not good on camera. It runs the gamut when you remember they often testify in court.
I was told that my interview could hinder an ongoing investigation and therefore compromise the legal or judicial process.
Subject "unavailable"
No reason given. Individual officers are not permitted to speak directly with the press.
Reporters are now rarely allowed to speak with investigators and must go through the PR office for official comment.
it took too long for gatekeeper to get permission and cop had left for day. then they didn't have cell number.
Officers have deferred questions to the PIO or simply not returned messages requesting information. Some imply that they don't have time or it's not their job.
department policy -- in almost all situations, the "spokesman" handles all questions
Investigation ongoing
Generally, it's blamed on the story being about an "ongoing investigation."
Officer didn't want to or was too busy
pending investigation/litigation
Availability
I was told that it wasn't necessary to speak with the officer.
No reason given
I wanted to interview homicide detectives on about a series murder that were connected to one suspect. However, the public information officer says "Sorry, I'm it!"
They prefer having the police chief do interviews, although he is not the best sound byte. I typically contact chief directly, detective on the case, or deputy chief of detectives, for information about a major case.
"Ongoing criminal investigation" and "not an authorized spokesperson"
Policy
The investigation was ongoing.
Dept. policy bars contact with anyone other than PIO, chief and upper brass
Generally the PIOs say all comment needs to come from the chief's office, which is them. The one workaround is on labor issues, the police union speaks freely about those.

Neither Bureau of Investigation officers nor individual prosecutors are permitted under office policy to speak to the media on the record.
Too busy, too political, will interfere with ongoing investigation.
Not around
grand jury investigation
They are not authorized to speak to the media
Typically the PIO will say they have to relay information because that's the department protocol.
Declined to talk about the subject matter.
It wasn't strictly that I was prevented from conducting an interview, it was that any time this happens the subject of the interview was unavailable for seemingly legitimate reasons, but we believed these were simply excuses not to talk to the press. It's part of the game.
That's their policy.
The sheriff's office PIO refused to let me interview a detective about a month old homicide case just this week. Their new policy is all information must go through PIO.
Generally speaking, officers tend to dismiss questions out of the gate by saying we have to go through the PIO
Fear of jeopardizing ongoing investigation
The police department is notoriously slow in responding, largely due to the ineffectiveness of the PIO.
He was not available
Ongoing investigation
Ongoing investigation
They are not authorized to speak to the media.
They don't work nights so after 6PM we usually only get basic information and rarely on-camera.
I wasn't given any.
The case is "still open" pending a sign-off from the homicide sergeant. The case was 14-months old at that point and I had been told by the same PIO that the investigation had been completed for months.
they were not available
The PIO has not prevented the contact, rather when I have contacted the officer directly that officer has asked that I first contact the PIO.
Sealed documents
None given
The officer deemed the site was too dangerous.
The case remained under investigation.
PIO said they were unable to locate the officer.
During the course of an investigation and the officer was still working investigation.
Because you have to go through the PIO.

After an officer involved shooting, we put in a request to speak with gang prevention specialists and officers on the gang unit. They said no, even though we were flexible with the date and time.
We generally have to go through the PIO for information. We interviewed an officer on only one recent occasion when he heroically rescued someone from a car that was about to explode into flames.
Everything is supposed to come from the Public Information Officer, that's why they have one.
"I will not be able to arrange a one one one interview for you."
Good deal of information is often withheld on active investigations. Usually that information is only released via PIO.
Officer was on paid leave after a shooting.
Was told to wait until PIO got on scene, no other officers would talk or give info.
Time restraint of officer/importance of "other duties"
Scheduling.
I was told "all information goes through" the PIO
They weren't the PIO's.
Active investigation
Requests are often met with silence.
Active investigation
Officer was working undercover
Was still in investigating
No time.
Involved a lawsuit.
No one available
Officer did not want to speak with me.
Always for "investigative security"
Policy is for the PIO or ranking officer to talk with the media
No
I was not allowed to interview the officer who shot and killed a suspect due to the ongoing investigation into the shooting by the attorney general's office.
Investigator or officer was not there.
My reporting on police department has been aggressive. The department actively seeks to prevent me and some of my former colleagues at the station from gaining access to both officers and public records. For example, the PIO/communications director recently denied a request to interview the chief or other appropriate command staff about the department's previously secret decision to allow officers to delete body cam video before it was entered into evidence. A recent public records request to see records showing when the department suspended certain training programs was met with a laughable "no such records exist" response, despite the fact that the court-ordered independent monitor (APD is in a settlement agreement with the DOJ) has stated publicly that the department has suspended training. Often, there's no reason provided or simply no response. Other times, the department sends a statement that doesn't address the questions we'd been asking of the PIO.

I am only supposed to get information from the Chief Deputy. The officers (mostly) follow chain of command protocol. While they are nice to me, they don't give me details of incidents.
Their policy - Only the administrators and public information officer can speak to the media
He/she wasn't authorized to speak about an investigation.
Inquiries typically get no response.
It was a prior department administration and they had blackballed my partners on the beat but I always remained in pretty good shape. That said, I handle breaking stores. The perimeter counties I generally have more room for depth.
that there was an open investigation
no reason given, suspect they didn't want to respond
Officer-involving shooting
Calls to specific departments need to go through PIO. Even if you call department directly, they send you to PIO
On-going investigation
Chief on vacation/time off
They didn't want to get involved/said they had no comment
The PIO is frequently gone on vacations, or at conferences or trainings. His substitute is actually better at his job than he is, but no one ever tells me about the absences, so I have to spend a lot of time figuring out whom I should call. When he simply doesn't want to deal with me, he claims to be "busy", though as far as I can tell, he drives a desk.
No reason is usually given; the spokeswoman/man is assigned to handle media
Just that they are not permitted to speak to the media, and any statement will come from the Sheriff.
We aren't doing anything on camera right now maybe later
I assume that "prevented" means anything that disallowed me from the interview, rather than a concerted block. With that in mind, the last time I was "prevented" would simply be lack of response from PIO.
on going investigation, or hasn't been adjudicated
"I've been busy."
He's not in.
They have the Option to be interviewed or not, and usually decline.
The officer is not allowed to speak to the press directly.
Department policy
procedure, rules are rules
Ongoing investigation
Ongoing investigation
I am generally not given any reason. Just not responded to.
It would compromise investigations.

Question 28: What are some of the creative ways you have used to get information or reports of crime when the police are not being cooperative?

I look at the call logs, sometimes talk to the people reporting crimes. It takes longer but sometimes the DA is more forthcoming.
Sources
Talk to witnesses, public records, open records request, FOI
I've put information on social media that certain information hasn't been released. Sometimes that speeds up the release. I've also confronted them with information that readers share on social media, asking them to confirm or deny rumors. Works sometimes.
Witnesses, bystanders and random social media. Newspaper website & news radio are helpful on background.
Rephrase my question, ask another agency, contact attorneys, contact victims, contact suspects, contact family members involved, contact witnesses, etc.
Witness contact
I usually piece together information from Twitter posted by scanner enthusiasts and police/fire support service volunteers, and also interview eyewitnesses, who are often themselves interviewed by police as part of reports anyway.
Call sources who may be at the scene but are unable to speak with you publicly.
talk with them daily. keep a professional and friendly attitude helps.
Witnesses, coroner, district attorney, district court filings.
Search warrants and other court filings
we learn more from citizens than the police
Talking to residents and speaking to cops off-the-record, but our editors are very strict, so usually we won't print anything until the police PIOs confirm.
Access information through public court documents, property databases, social media, interviews with family, witnesses, etc.
Talk to residents and/or witnesses. Some of them have often pointed me in the direction of whom they spoke with about the incident at hand.
Witnesses, bystanders, social media
Contact other area agencies that are assisting, which will often give us info that the investigating department will not.
I am the AM reporter. So, I actually have greater access to talk with responding officers, sergeants and detectives. However, we are not allowed to interview them for air. It's beneficial because more information is given in comfortable conversation with law enforcement rather than nervous cops giving police speak on television.
Talk to witnesses at the scene. Contact the detective after the scene clears to get information.
Work sources or talk casually with officers on scene but don't quote/tape them
Public information requests, making small talk with the police department record clerks, interviewing witnesses or neighbors at the crime scene

I have posted Facebook posts asking for friends or family of the victim or suspects to call me and/or leave me a FB message.
Texting sources
Police scanner traffic has been helpful in recent months, especially the internet streams that allow us to play back radio calls we may have missed. Other than that the focus turns pretty quickly to civilian witnesses.
social media accounts are very helpful
Defense attorneys, court clerks
Witnesses, 911 dispatchers, relatives of victims, court records, etc.
Facebook
File a request and talk to non-police people -- not creative but it works.
public records
I don't tell them I'm with the newspaper.
public records, tracking down civilians with information on the phone, in person or through social media
Obtain an incident report. Check jail committals. Request 911 call recordings. Call the coroner's office (for cases that might involve a death). Call the fire department (for cases that might involve arson).
Having my scanner/police radio has been critical. That might not be creative, but it's helpful. I also try to ask possible witnesses or non-police officials if they can share anything. Reaching out to emergency personnel with police/fire departments NOT involved in the crime scene sometimes helps, though it's off the record.
I can't answer this question or the previous ones on the page because I don't get sent to crime scenes.
Witnesses of course, or clergy who know the victim or criminal
we have to rely on citizens or have officers risk their careers to slip us information through back channels
Create and inquire about an "amplification" of the circumstances
Interviewing neighbors, witnesses to determine what they were told by police
I have been in the business long enough and have good relationships in multiple departments, I can work around or go over if I need to do so, and often do to assist our other reporters who do not have those relationships.
Calling prosecutors or government officials
Talk to civilians
I call other agencies in the area that responded to the scene.
It depends on the situation, often the lead law enforcement officers are busy. It is not a case of being uncooperative. If I am on the scene, I utilize my own observations. Information from law enforcement follows soon after when they become available to speak to me. The press should not be present to threaten public safety or disturb crime scene evidence.
Witness interviews.
interviewing those affected by the alleged crimes, neighbors, witnesses
Witnesses, radio chatter, social media posts.
I cover courts, not police. Public records are often readily available when prosecutors are uncooperative.
Develop my own trusted sources within law enforcement.

I make as many phone calls as I can
In dealing with the largest agencies, the PIOs are sworn officers and are very cooperative. The problems occur more frequently with smaller agencies.
Neighbors, victims, etc.
Interviewing witnesses, returning when only crime scene folks are left
Talk to neighbors, witnesses, anyone on or near the scene who is credible, & accessible.
Call the police union
I look for court documents or arrest records at the district clerk's office.
Talked to them while off duty. Took them a newspaper and explained how we needed to work together.
Almost always via court records and proceedings. Occasionally from civilians with knowledge of the situation.
Talk to witnesses who live in the area, listen to scanner.
Online court records, contacts with the District Attorney
Calling neighbors or neighboring businesses
Called other law enforcement agencies. Called the Eau Claire County Jail, which includes an automated list of prisoners and the charges they are being held on. Called private parties involved in the incident and/or business or organization officials.
Going through Crimemapping.com, court records, other law enforcement agencies like the Sheriff's Department.
Attending funerals, interviewing families, pastors, store owners and neighbors, cross referencing social media ...
Talk to neighbors, Facebook, getting contacts from Facebook, jail records, court records, press log police records, other agencies who responded ...
Back to the basics: Court documents and sourcing.
Post on Twitter or write in a story that police have not released basic info.
Interview witnesses. Interview employees of the crime location. Interview family. Talk to more cooperative law enforcement agencies.
At crime scenes, I sometimes don't go through the PIO - I would just ask an officer I knew personally or another agency official.
the district attorney's office, sometimes witnesses
interview witnesses, conduct "door knocks," etc.
neighbors, prosecutors, social media
Call officers I know. Request search warrant documents.
By interviewing victims, suspects, relatives of victims or suspects
I ask witnesses nearby and then try to corroborate with an officers officer won't go on record though.
Interviewing bystanders, monitoring Twitter, eavesdropping.
Public input, seek person in charge, PIA
contact police chief, get copies of reports

Just working the phones, or scouting nearby areas for officers hearing radio traffic who aren't directly on the scene but perhaps looking for suspects
OPRA
Open records requests, knocking on doors, bypassing police and speaking with lawyers, witnesses.
Social media
In this area, not applicable because of relatively low crime rate compared to other areas. If I am unable to get the information from PIO or releases, it is usually for good reason. Biggest problem in the area is the extremely low crime rate and for which you might not ever find out there was a crime committed unless something really unusual or high profile.
talk to the public; talk to officers; FOIL reports; watch what happens at scenes
Talk to neighbors
I am rarely on a scene. I get involved most of the time after a person is arrested and charged. My info comes from court documents. I have used info obtained from jail personnel.
I have talked to witnesses on the scene.
Ask around, like neighbors, friends, people at the scene. If you can get enough information from them, you can ask better questions to police. For example: I'm told by numerous people out here the victim is John Doe, would we be incorrect in reporting that. Oftentimes "no" is easier for them to say than to give out all the information.
Sources within the agency. Particularly at APD, a significant number of officers are upset with the way the department administration tries to manage its public image.
witnesses or victims; hunting for the beat cops at a lunch place!
Court
The Day promoted me to the police reporter in October 2015, so I haven't been on the job that long. I do go to the local superior courts to more quickly access incident reports from time to time.
Talking with witnesses or residents who live near the scene, reaching out to people on social media, going later in the day and finding an arrest warrant, waiting a couple days to see whether a search warrant has been turned in.
Nothing creative, just go to documents or go around the officer to another, more cooperative officer.
I rely on people skills and for, generally, having earned the reputation that I get it "right." That comes from being at so many scenes, writing so many stories and having dealt with situations with them. Again, it comes from getting it right, not burning sources and earning respect for finding a way to get the information despite obstacles.
Interview witnesses, neighbors, other government officials.
develop sources, real stories come from law enforcement sources, avoid PIO's as much as possible
We utilize police dispatch logs, which we subscribe to as a paper, to get specific information about events (i.e. time of call, address of event, event number). We use addresses as a starting point to reach out to neighbors and potential witnesses.
Nothing really creative - call individuals likely to be close to the subject matter, often with assurances of being off the record - with the understanding that the same info attributable to other sources would be used as needed.
Interviewing witnesses.
In one case when an officer on the scene of a fatal shooting told me I would have to wait until the next day, I found one of the lieutenants at the scene who gave me what I needed. I've also found that the probable cause statements filed in court had more information than I was getting from police.

Going to another agency at the scene or talking to witnesses or victims
The prosecutor is more prompt and organized. He will quickly return my calls and sends me probable cause statements upon request. I also became a volunteer EMT and joined a local fire department. Working with cops in another capacity makes it harder to maintain boundaries (I have to work hard to isolate my job duties for each role), but really builds my credibility and trust with patrol officers and detectives.
Interviewing witnesses, neighbors, family; public records requests; sources; call the police chief or director on his cell phone
Sources
Mostly through other agencies including state police, local police forces, fire departments, etc.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Call the PIOs cell phone from a number he does not recognize, hoping he'll actually answer 2. If it's traffic-related, call dispatch and offer to help them by immediately getting information on the air 3. Going over the head of the PIO 4. Talking to other witnesses, knowing that some of them may not describe things in the same manner as police. 5. Telling PIO, other officers, etc. that I really want to clear up some of the misinformation that is out there and being used by some media.
court records, social media, eye witnesses, perp or victims family
Go to scene myself-interview neighbors, family, etc.
Calling another agency chief
meeting them at private locations
Search warrant affidavits
social media, talk to bystanders
Charm
Neighbors, witnesses or police phone line (essentially PIO type officers).
I don't know how creative this is but I've used more victim's assistance organizations, lawyers and lawyer groups and other crime related/social service organizations more than I ever have in the past. I also look for grant applications to give me more insight into needs.
I have a good source at the courts who will often provide names of suspects under 18 when police refuse to release names.
Public information requests for officers' crime scene reports.
Indirect records; knocking on doors; sources

Question 31: Does the police department you mostly deal with have a computer system that makes public records readily accessible? If “partially,” please explain.

It's their own system, and access is limited to what they can retrieve from their own computers.
Breaking news items are no longer available online as it had been in the past.
we get some very limited info about crimes that occur online
They have a portal that gives you access to offense reports, calls and jail blotter information however the narratives are usually skimpy in detail.
The availability of documents depends on what the incident is.
Older records are rarely online
Some information, such as annual reports, jail booking records and crime statistics, is available online. But police reports for specific cases are not.
VSP has a blog where they post their press releases
Court dockets are available online
DPD emails daily Incident and Arrest reports that provides information about suspects and victims that, frankly, the PIO might not release if you asked for it. The jail website also provides information about arrestees, their charges, court schedule, bond, court case #
It's hard to find names, and almost impossible to find officers' names.
Online
No juvenile records.
The documents are readily available to them, but we have to wait for them to be sent to us. Some older records aren't as readily available.
Indiana allows quite a bit of redaction under "investigative" privilege. We used to get brief narratives, but now only date, time, type of call, etc.
Our county jail has records of inmates online but the information it shares only goes so far
On a daily basis, the blotter is sent faxed to me, and then I speak personally to the police chief. The sheriff sends his report by email, and if need be I communicate with him either in person or by email. The current sheriff does not send a report daily, but we get a jail log daily.
Jail booking information and some court records are available online, as are daily watch logs.
Police reports are not posted but will be emailed if requested - unless the investigation is ongoing, and then only some will be
The police do not publish police reports online, only basic info. If a defendant is served with a warrant, I rather go get the criminal complaint. That record will have more information than the PIO can provide.
Some limited information is available on the web. The rest has to be gathered in other ways.
Quick summaries are listed in an online police log. Most are a sentence or two long. Must call or obtain for more info.
Arrests and some police reports available online

there is seldom uniformity. if a case is "straight up," with no questions about police conduct, then records are more accessible than when there are questions about police conduct.
It's a court system under all agencies. Not always updated, but typically is.
You can track crime trends, but it only goes back so far and the vitals of most crimes are usually not included, such as names, addresses, ages, etc.
Accident reports are available from a statewide data base for a fee as are criminal histories.
Yes they have a computer system, but the media is not allowed to have much of that information - only initial police reports, not supplemental ones.
They e-mail me reports or mug shots (after clearing it with the Chief Deputy.)
The department is quite willing to pull up CAD reports, etc. in a timely manner, but it typically requires swinging by the department.
Officers have fast access to information to pass along to me, but I can't access an electronic system with records of their arrests.
We receive daily police reports but they are the typed/edited versions and, they are not always complete. I used to go through each handwritten report every day (often 1-2 hours at a time). You could get real information from those.
Detailed information often is not available.
Inmate rosters and arrest records are online, but contain minimal information. Press releases are texted and emailed. but they only write releases for things that make their office look good. They sporadically use Facebook for safety-related and breaking news situations.
Most police depts. are going digital, but not all. Redactions of key info (names, addresses, etc.) is an overwhelming problem.
Sometimes info is available
each jurisdiction is different
Not all records are accessible.
Names, trial dates and charges are usually available online, but details about the cases are not.
The metro area that I deal in has 41 different jurisdictions, with the two biggest being Arlington and Fort Worth. The resources, the access, the staffing, the outlooks of the different organizations vary.

Question 34: If the (public records) request was fulfilled, did they provide you with the information you asked for? If “partially,” please explain.

It's hit or miss
they rarely give us all we need
some names are redacted
There will be times when the PIO does not reveal some information I requested until I've asked a few times.
Some of it was not public record, in their opinion
Sometimes relevant information is redacted when the investigation is ongoing
So things redacted, per Ohio law.
Records of closed criminal investigations often refer to other records that aren't included
Often they bank on the notion that you're not going to sue, and provide only partially responsive records or compiled (not primary) records.
redaction runs rampant.
Some will be denied based on their interpretation of what is confidential.
If I ask more than one question, seems as though they rarely address more than the first one.
Sometimes documents are redacted to the point they are of no use to a reporter.
they always refuse to give us 911 calls
Some of it was excepted.
It depends on the case and the circumstance.
It wasn't everything I was looking for
redactions

Insisted some information wasn't public because of an "ongoing" investigation when such claim was dubious at best
Often, the do not provide historical records when asked
Redacted
seldom does a law enforcement agency not challenge a request to the AG's office, but there are exceptions
This is always a hit or miss process. Sometimes helpful, sometimes not. Most smaller metro agencies are easier to work with as far as getting quick info.
I've made several requests. the last one involved a request for detailed data in an electronic format. they provided aggregate data in a grainy pdf of a photocopy.
Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It rarely met all of what was being asked.
Redactions, and sometimes denials on grounds of ongoing investigation
often receive redacted copies
We receive redacted documents. Names, phone numbers, addresses are redacted.
Redactions often made of names, addresses, other identifiers
sometimes the PIO gets back with redacted records, sometimes doesn't respond at all hoping I will go away, sometimes responds completely-- I have actually had a PIO tell me he'll give me the records this time "because he wants this information out"
If a detail is not included in the original record
I have had cases where they said they are unable to find the information I want.
Not all detailed information was provided.
Usually the information is heavily redacted, even if the subject of the information is dead and has no more privacy rights.
The sheriff's office claimed not to be able to find an old file for a cold case investigation. Someone eventually found it in an obscure place and turned it over to me. But it was only a partial file, and it became clear that they hadn't actually looked for it in all the places they needed to look.
Most police and law enforcement reports are heavily redacted; they provide them, but key info (names, addresses, etc.) are often redacted for a variety of reasons.
provided what they thought was relevant and not what they wanted to use in case of an appeal of convicted felon but the requested info was shown in a public court
Some was "Still part of an ongoing investigation" some was redacted
Some information was provided, but not to the extent requested.
Some items fall into a gray area of sunshine law; police often do not release information that they deem to be of an "investigative" nature. PA law keeps "investigative" information off the table.

Question 36: Did the PIO or custodian answer questions you had about the public records or the information you were seeking? If “partially,” please explain.

Sometimes the question can't be answered by the officer in charge's access to the records, in which case no effort is made to ask the officers directly.

They usually let the records speak for themselves, or will only explain them on background.

we rarely get answers to all our questions

they cannot explain why they redact so much info.

They do not get very specific about why it is not being provided, sometimes.

Same as last answer

they give us some news but don't answer all questions

the PIO answers some questions, but not others, particularly re redactions
Normally once a release or a request is sent, they will only say the things on the release. So if you had a follow up question to the information obtained, it is rarely answered on the spot.
Not all of the information was included and often matters are classified as "under investigation," but a fuller explanation is not given.
Give only bare minimum, and require questions be super specific. They play games with semantics and police definitions in ways to deny even basic information. It's a game for them to prevent info from getting out.
Difficult to explain
PIO often lacked relevant knowledge or access to information desired
often vague or unaware of the full expectations/requirements of the law
see answer 33
Gave bare minimum with an attitude.

Question 38: Does your state have any laws specifically governing public access to body camera footage, aside from general public records laws? If “partially,” please explain.

These laws are currently being changed.
not sure...our dept. doesn't use them
Subject to open records, however most departments can successfully get AG to refuse release just based on an on-going investigation.

I don't know
I don't know.
Our state law says OK Highway patrol must release dash cam footage but other agencies do their own thing when it comes to releasing dash cam/body cam footage.
Again, it is under "investigative" privilege, though there is currently a bill moving through our legislature that would prohibit public access to such footage.
I'm actually not sure, I have not requested body camera footage
The laws were just passed in 2015 and police departments are now adopting policies to conform to them - camera not widely used yet
We have not had occasion to seek this footage. Body cams not in general use in this area.
Rules are still being worked on.
I don't know state law, but will find out.
I'm not sure at the moment. Our legislature has been trying to restrict access to this and a lot of other "open" sources here in Oklahoma.
Body cameras are new around here and ordinances have not yet caught up.
I don't know.
jurisdictions differ
Body cams are being introduced so I'm not sure how access to footage will be granted and how timely the requests will be granted
They are still being developed.

Question 41: Have you ever requested for body camera footage? If yes, how much did it cost you, if any?

nothing
Police later released it for free to all media after officer was no-billed in the case.
Nothing
None
80
No cost
Not sure
None
0
Free of charge
0
we get it sometimes but not others, depending on the agency and no, we do know pay for it.
None
\$50 per disc
Don't remember.
0
but not through official sources. instead, I get cam video from victims, relatives, etc.
None
Don't know
None
Typical charges for electronic media are around \$7 a disc. The department has the capability to provide temporary access to body cam video through Taser's Evidence.com. However, it has decided against what would seem to be a relatively straightforward and far less time-consuming process.
None
none
Free of charge
0

Question 43: Have you ever requested for body camera footage? If yes, what did you use it for?

To view arrest scene, car chases, aftermath of arrest
It was body cam video of an officer responding to a murder-suicide inside of a church. http://www.kens5.com/story/news/local/2015/11/04/helotes-shooting-our-lady-of-guadalupe-zerefina-castillo-manuel-rodriguez-domestic-violence/75083984/
Airing stories on police shootings
Video and stills for the web and additional details about the crime scene
Reporting, and use in a video we put online
Story
Informed an article
Story about DPD officer disciplined for mistreating a handcuffed suspect.
To accompany the web version of a written story.
we have used body camera footage for stories on officer involved shootings and chases and some car stops.
Investigating what happened and video for the broadcast.
Reporting, posting on website
A story concerning one of our schools.
Context.
Coverage of crime
Air
News story
News story
various stories
A story on the acceptance of body cameras
verification

