



## POLICE-Media Relations

What info can police release to the press? What's off-limits? Here's a sampling of policies in U.S. cities and abroad. No surprise: Most err on the side of terseness.

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What are the police-press rules of engagement?

In some cities, police departments spell out in great detail what information they can and can't release to the media. Most of those same cities have detailed guidelines about press access at breaking-news scenes.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) for example, offers voluminous information in a 48-page handbook, including such details as the breeds in its canine unit. Chicago police have a fairly extensive press-information primer, while New York's is minimal by comparison. Among medium-size cities, the police department in Boise, Idaho, has a thorough media guide. Erie, Colo., police have a notably detailed guide for a small force.

But most police departments favor the New York Police Department's terse model over the LAPD's verbosity—among them, Dallas, Nashville, Oklahoma City and St. Louis County.

**Sgt. Marty Jacobson**, who spent many years as a police public information officer (PIO) in Stuart, Fla., before retiring in 2014, says the broad variations likely indicate a particular department's receptivity to the media. And that, he says, almost always reflects a local police chief's attitude.

"Some chiefs don't see the value (of the media)," Jacobson says. "A lot of administrators simply abhor dealing with you. I think they're wrong about that. I found that working with the media was positive, but I have to tell you that many of my colleagues don't see it that way. I got the PIO job in the first place because no one else wanted to do it."

*Here are links and excerpts from a broad sample of police media guides.*

### [Austin, Texas](#)

The Texas Capitol City's police public information office, created in 1979 and staffed by two sworn personnel and two civilians, says its purpose is "to seek a balance between permitting the free flow of information to the public and the media while protecting both the prosecution's case and the rights of the accused from possible prejudicial publicity...Employees will cooperate fully in meeting the relevant information needs of the public and the news media. Every reasonable effort should be made to obtain requested information, so long as the release of that information conforms to federal and state laws, and follows established Department guidelines."

### [Boise, Idaho](#)

The Boise Police Department, with about 300 officers in a city of 215,000, has a detailed media guide. The 20-page document, written by Lynn Hightower, a former broadcast journalist who has been Boise police PIO since 2003, explains what information is available to journalists and how they can find it. The guide says, "It is the philosophy of the Boise Police Department to respond to media inquiries as quickly, completely and accurately as possible. This media guide is a part of the department's general philosophy to operate in an open, cooperative partnership with the community."

### [Cambridge, Mass.](#)

The brief Cambridge guide says, "Working with the media is a sensitive and important function of the police department. All information released for public disclosure must be correct and distributed in a timely fashion." Like most police departments, Cambridge police prefer to channel information through their PIO: "Any officer having information that should be disseminated to the general community for their assistance in solving crime or series of crime shall present the information to the Public Information Office (which) will bring the material to the news media."

### [Chicago](#)

Chicago police operate from a fairly detailed directive on what can and can't be released to the media. The department says it will "cooperate impartially with the news media in providing information on crime and police-related matters while simultaneously conforming to the protections guaranteed to individuals under the US Constitution." Among other things, the department says it won't stage perp walks. The directive also says that credentialed journalists will be allowed inside cordoned crimes scenes, but those without credentials will be limited to "staging areas." (Attempts by police to

confine journalists to bullpens have become a common complaint among reporters and photographers, including by those working last year in Ferguson, Mo.)

### Dallas

The Dallas police public information office may have the most minimal webpage in law enforcement. It offers its hours of operation (8 to 5, Monday through Friday), a phone number, an email address and the Twitter handles of the seven officers who work there. Beyond that, it includes 12 words total: “The Police Media Relations Office is the departmental liaison with media representatives.”

### Erie, Colo.

This booming town of 20,000 east of Boulder has a small police department but an extensive media relations primer that describes in depth its policies on release of information. “It is the policy of the Erie Police Department to cooperate fully and impartially with authorized news media representatives in their efforts to gather factual, public information pertaining to activities of the department, as long as these activities do not unduly interfere with departmental operation, infringe upon individual rights or violate the law.” The document adds, “When information must be denied to a media representative, the basis for that denial shall be fully and courteously explained.”

### Los Angeles

The LAPD’s Media Relations Section, which includes about a dozen sworn officers, wins the word-count award as the most complete primer in local law enforcement. Its voluminous documents include a brief history of the unit and a summary of its duties. (For example, “Semi-annual meetings between the media and the Chief of Police are coordinated by MRS. The purpose of these meetings is to discuss problems in the spirit of mutual cooperation.”)

The LAPD has a 48-page handbook about police-media relations that includes such details as the breeds of dogs in the K-9 unit (Belgian Malinois, Dutch Shepherd, German Shepherd) and a quirky list of police-term definitions, including “Human Scent: Odor that every human body emits” and “Linebackers: Officers deployed immediately behind the skirmish line, controlling the integrity of the line.”

In places, the handbook takes a philosophical tone:

*Quite often, because of the nature of their duties, police officers are called upon to supply the media with information related to, and sometimes unrelated to, police work. The Los Angeles Police Department is committed to adopting an atmosphere of*

*transparency with the media and the public. The Department views the media as an avenue by which to communicate with and educate the public on matters of importance. To accomplish this, the media must be given as much access as legitimately possible, to assist them in their news-gathering and reporting duties. When asked for information regarding a police matter, officers should decide if they possess sufficient facts and are qualified to respond, and whether the person asking is appropriately credentialed to receive the information. Officers should avoid representing their own opinions as facts.*

The handbook gives clear guidance to officers concerning media access at spot-news scenes, an evergreen issue of conflict between the press and police:

- 1. Do not establish artificial barriers. For example, do not hold the press at bay a block from the crime scene, while simultaneously allowing the general public to wander freely just beyond the crime scene tape.*
- 2. Do not prevent the taking of pictures or interviews of person(s) in public places. News reporters may photograph or report anything or interview anyone they observe when legally present at an emergency scene. This includes officers, victims and witnesses.*
- 3. Do not isolate the media outside the crime/incident scene unless the area has been secured to preserve evidence or their presence jeopardizes police operations.*
- 4. Do not limit access based on safety concerns. The decision to assume the risk of danger remains with the individual news reporter. A safety hazard to the press does not justify restriction, however it is the LAPD's policy to warn the media of potential dangers before allowing access.*

These guidelines likely would satisfy any reasonable reporter, but the authority behind the edicts is questionable. The handbook bears the name of William Bratton, who left the LAPD nearly six years ago.

## Nashville

The Nashville police PIO, led by former broadcast journalist Don Aaron, takes a minimalist approach to information about its operation: “(The) Media Relations Office handles a variety of media inquiries and requests, which total in the thousands each year. The office is responsible for the dissemination of all written media releases issued by the police department, which total several hundred each year...The office also advises officers, when necessary, in interacting with media representatives.”

## New York City

Unlike Los Angeles police, the NYPD doesn't reveal much online about its media-relations philosophy. Its terse description is more like Nashville's than the LAPD's: "It is the policy of this department to keep the community informed on matters of public interest. Most media inquiries are directed to the Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Public Information (DCPI). Because it is not uncommon for local investigations, arrests, operations, etc., to overlap into other agencies, bureaus or jurisdictions, it is essential that ALL media requests be channeled through DCPI. The Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Public Information, is operational 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for consultation and/or response to incidents involving the media."

## Nottinghamshire, England

The media guidelines published by police in this East Midlands county of about 1 million people are viewed as a reasonable template by some in the British press, which has a thorny relationship with law enforcement there. Its major points include these:

- *The media has a legitimate role to play in informing the public...The presence of a photographer or reporter at an incident does not of itself constitute any unlawful obstruction or interference.*
- *Journalists need to collect information about an incident as quickly as possible. Some of this information may seem irrelevant, unimportant or improper to an officer. However, as long as the journalist does not break the law, or interfere with an investigation, or cross a cordon, the police officer should not impede the reporter. Journalists who break the law will be dealt with in the same manner as any other offender.*
- *Journalists have the right to photograph and report events that occur on public property. The police may invite journalists on to private property where an event of public interest has occurred and they have the permission of the owner.*
- *Police officers should not restrict journalists from taking pictures or asking questions of other parties, even though the officer may disagree with the journalist's purpose. It is not a police officer's role to be the arbiter of good taste and decency. It is an editor's role to decide what to use.*
- *Police officers do not have the authority to prevent a person taking a photograph or to confiscate cameras or film, and such conduct could result in criminal, civil or disciplinary action.*

## Oklahoma City

Oklahoma City follows the minimalist police-media relations template: “The Office of Media Relations provides the community with a wide variety of information about the Oklahoma City Police Department. The Open Records Act and department policies/procedures are some of the guidelines followed when releasing information. Information is released mainly through daily discussions with local media. Other ways of disseminating information include news releases, the Citizen Alert Program, this website and social media.”

## St. Louis County

This police agency, whose domain includes Ferguson, Mo., is the second largest in Missouri, with about 1,800 employees. Its media resources page is austere: contact information for the three officers assigned there, as well as for a civilian social media coordinator; an archive of press releases, and an electronic form to sign up for press advisories by email.

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