

**NEW
ERA
OF
PUBLIC
SAFETY**

AN ADVOCACY TOOLKIT FOR FAIR, SAFE,
AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY POLICING

Step 4: Gather Information

After you have identified the problem, built a coalition, and set goals, gather all available information. *Is the department already collecting data that would help make your case? What policies and laws are already in place?*

Policing Data.

Police departments are increasingly making public information about stops, searches, and arrests. So a good place to start is the department's website; search for an annual or quarterly report. Another resource is a local legal organization like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which analyzes and publishes policing data. The Police Data Initiative, which houses data from dozens of police departments, is also a good source of information. If no one in your group has the skills to analyze raw data, consider partnering with researchers at a local university or college. The Stanford Open Policing Project, the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, and the Mapping Police Violence Project are good sources of national data.

Community-Led Research.

Community-led research or participatory action research is another important way to gather information and data. This can include surveying community members, conducting a poll, and gathering community members' quotes and experiences through a story bank. This type of qualitative data and research can complement data gathered from official sources or be used in place of official data that have not been collected or made public. It can also be useful if local officials are swayed more by local data than national data or by stories rather than numbers.

Online resources can help you refine your methodology and conduct research in a way that is accountable to, empowers, and uplifts directly impacted community members. Your research findings may result in a one-pager presented to the city council or a report released to the media or shared at a press conference, protest, or rally.

For information on participatory research, visit the Public Science Project at: <http://publicscienceproject.org/principles-and-values/>

Public Information.

Some information about your police department may already be publicly available. Many departments post their policies (standard operating procedures [SOPs] or patrol guides) on their websites. These data may also be available through an organization that has made a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for them.⁷⁰ In some jurisdictions, data are available for purchase. Start with an online search for [X police department] standard operating procedures/patrol guide/policies.

FOIA Requests.

If the information you need is not publicly available, you may want to file a FOIA request. The federal government and all 50 states have laws mandating that information kept by public agencies and officials be made available on request to members of the public. Some exceptions limit what the government is obligated to provide. Exceptions include information protected by privacy concerns, law enforcement privilege, and deliberative process privilege. If your request for information is denied on any of these bases, you can appeal the decision to the agency and in court.

The Freedom of Information Act requires the full or partial disclosure of information and documents controlled by the government upon request. Individuals or groups can issue a FOIA request for information about policies, data, or the structure of a police department. A FOIA request may ask for information about policies, data, or the structure of your department. Read more about FOIA at <https://www.foia.gov>

Requests for information from your local law enforcement agency must be made in writing but can be sent by email, fax, or letter. Use the form on the next page as a template to create a request.

Sample FOIA Request

TITLE

i.e., "John Doe Arrest Report," "Use of Force Policy," or "2017 Organizational Chart"

AGENCIES

Agency's name

Location

Address

i.e., Police Department, Austin, Texas, or Office of the Governor, Arkansas

To Whom It May Concern:

Pursuant to the *[insert the name and number of your state's law]*, I hereby request the following records:

[Briefly describe the documents you are looking for. The more specific you can be, the better. For instance:

"Any and all Austin, Texas, police department policies and training materials currently in effect governing the use of force and sexual misconduct by police officers employed by the department." or

"Any and all organizational charts or descriptions of the organizational structure of the Austin, Texas, police department, including reporting relationships and the name and rank of commanders for each unit or department." or

"Any and all data or information collected by the department concerning the number of stops, frisks, and arrests of pedestrians in the city of Omaha, Nebraska, over the past five years (2013-2018)."]

The requested documents will be made available to the general public, and this request is not being made for commercial purposes.

In the event that there are fees, I would be grateful if you would inform me of the total charges before fulfilling my request. However, I would also like to request a waiver of all fees in that the disclosure of the requested information is in the public interest and will contribute significantly to the public's understanding of *[describe the issue you are concerned about here]*. I would prefer that the request be filled electronically, by email attachment if available, or CD-ROM if not.

The *[insert the name of your state FOIA law here]* requires a response within *[insert the number of days the agency has to respond to your request, as outlined in your state FOIA law]* business days. If access to the requested records will take longer, please contact me with information about when I might expect copies or the ability to inspect the requested records.

If you deny any or all of this request, please cite each specific exemption you feel justifies the refusal to release the information and notify me of the appeal procedures available to me under the law.

Thank you in advance for your anticipated cooperation in this matter. I look forward to receiving your response to this request within *[insert the number of days the agency has to respond to your request, as outlined in your state FOIA law]*.

Sincerely,

[your name and signature]

VI. Making Change

⁷⁰ See "Freedom of Information Act." United States Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.foia.gov/>.



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