



REPORTER'S FIELD GUIDE

POLICE SHOOTINGS



Reporter's Field Guide: Police Shootings

By Thadeus Greenson

Police shootings represent unique reporting challenges. They can be bound by less restrictive information disclosure laws than an arrest would be in the short term, but have far more transparency requirements over time. This guide is intended to help reporters understand exactly what information they are entitled to when, and offer reporting tips to help gather as much information as possible.

Because serious use of force by police is arguably the gravest exercise of governmental power, journalists serve a vital public interest when they use the transparency laws at their disposal to ensure there is a robust public record of every time an officer discharges a firearm at a person. Doing so allows the public to both scrutinize police actions that could lead to lost life and inform community dialogue on best policies and practices in the future. This guide covers access rights and reporting tips, offers template request letters and tailored model correspondence for negotiating denials of records requests, and covers both fatal and non-fatal shootings.

Cover photo: Officers and medical personnel at the scene of a nonfatal Dec. 30, 2021, police shooting in Eureka.
Photo by Thadeus Greenson, courtesy of the North Coast Journal

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I. Who's in Charge?

Generally, local policy is going to determine the lead agency investigating a police shooting, which in turn determines the primary point of contact for the media. Some counties have multi-agency protocols for police shooting investigations, while others do not, often leaving the agency employing the officer(s) involved in the shooting to lead its own investigation.

Reporting tip

- Know what policies and protocols are in place for investigating police shootings in your area of coverage before one happens. State law requires police departments and sheriff's offices to publish their policies and procedures on their websites. These should include a section titled "Officer-involved Shootings and Deaths," or similar that outlines departmental policy and protocol.
- Remember that multiple agencies, including the district attorney's office, may end up in possession of records relevant to your reporting.

In cases in which police fatally shoot an unarmed person, state law requires the California Department of Justice to step in to investigate.

Reporting tip

- The DOJ has a published "AB 1506 Communications Policy" for such scenarios, which outlines what information can be released immediately at the scene and timelines for subsequent release. Your local agency may have similar "OIS" or "Critical Incident" communications policies.

II. Video and Audio Recordings

Body, dash camera and other video and audio recordings of a "critical incident," including any in which a peace officer discharges a firearm at a person, are public records. Their disclosure generally "may be delayed no longer than 45 calendar days ... if, based on the facts and circumstances depicted in the recording, disclosure would substantially interfere with the investigation, such as endangering the safety of a witness or confidential source." While the law sets this 45-calendar-day benchmark, an agency's obligation is basically the same before that time as it is up to a year after a

shooting, requiring it to explain in writing a specific basis for the determination that release would interfere with the investigation and an estimated date for disclosure, per [Government Code section 7923.625\(a\)\(1\)-\(2\)](#).

Also, while it is common for agencies to release edited, narrated incident videos, the law also requires them to release all recordings, redacted or otherwise edited based only on lawful exemptions, if they are requested. A June 2025 appellate decision ([Sacramento Television Stations Inc v. City of Roseville](#)) held that departments must release enough unedited footage to provide “sufficient context” before and after a shooting, but stopped short of defining what that means.

Reporting tips

- Ask for video footage of the shooting immediately with a formal CPRA request that also seeks documentation of the names of officers involved in the incident and the person/people shot, as well as documentation of any and all officers placed on administrative leave the date of the shooting and any/all recordings of 911 calls related to the shooting. Ask that documents be produced on a rolling basis as they become available.
- [AB 748](#), the legislation that created this right of access to audio or video recordings of “critical incidents,” including police shootings, ensures that the mere fact that a criminal or administrative investigation — by the agency that employs the officer or any outside agency into the conduct of the officer or someone else — remains ongoing cannot by itself be a barrier to accessing these recordings. You may need to push back on denials citing an ongoing investigation. See resource below. (Please also note the CPRA has been renumbered since AB 748 passed. The content of the statute remains the same, but it is now Government Code Section 7923.625, not 6254(f)(4).)
- Up to a year from the date of a shooting, an agency can only delay release of critical incident recordings if it demonstrates release “would substantially interfere” with an ongoing criminal or administrative investigation, such as by endangering the safety of a witness or a confidential source. It is not enough for an agency to claim vaguely that disclosure would interfere with the investigations, they must provide a written response with “a specific basis” for the determination. The agency can only continue to delay release beyond a year if it demonstrates “by clear and convincing evidence” that remains the case, again with a written explanation of “the specific basis for the agency’s determination that the interest

in preventing interference with an active investigation outweighs the public interest in disclosure.”

- The law does not allow the existence of pending criminal charges against a suspect alone to justify ongoing withholding of critical incident recordings.

Reporting resources

- [*FAC police shooting template request letter*](#)
- [*FAC sample language to challenge withholding of police shooting records due to ongoing investigation*](#)

III. On Scene

After a police shooting occurs and the scene has been secured — meaning there is no ongoing threat to officers or the public — police should only make the cordoned off crime scene as large as necessary to protect evidence.

Police cannot legally order witnesses not to speak to the press.

You have a First Amendment right to record and photograph police exercising their official duties in public. Police cannot order you to move because you are recording, but they can order you to move for public safety reasons. (Note: press access laws that guarantee journalists’ right to cross police lines in other scenarios — [protests](#), [wildfires and other disasters](#) — do not apply at crime scenes. If, for example, a police shooting occurred during a protest, do not expect to be able to cross police lines established to protect forensic evidence collection.)

Reporting tip

- Just because you request information at the scene from a PIO or commanding officer does not mean they will treat it as a California Public Records Act request with legal deadlines and obligations. No matter what you asked at the scene, follow up with [the written request](#) linked above.

IV. Getting the Who, What, When, Where

When police make an arrest, they are generally obligated to tell you the full name and occupation of the person arrested, their physical description and date of birth, the time,

date and location of the arrest, the factual circumstances surrounding the arrest and all charges the person is being held on, per [Government Code section 7923.610](#). No such clear obligation exists when an officer shoots someone, though nonfatal police shootings are often followed by an arrest that triggers the above disclosure requirements. And if police arrest other suspects during an incident, the agency would need to release information — including factual circumstances — specific to their arrests.

Reporting tip

- In the hours and even days after a critical incident, it's not uncommon for law enforcement agencies to describe police shootings of civilians in passive, imprecise language. Good journalism, meanwhile, requires the use of active voice and precise language, so endeavor to get as much clarifying information as possible, while being as clear as possible when describing what happened and what information remains unknown.

Agencies are required to disclose the names of officers involved in a shooting, arguably including all on scene and not just those who discharged their firearms. But there is no law mandating names be disclosed at a particular time, only that they must be released pursuant to a California Public Records Act request absent specific threats to the officers' safety. There is also nothing legally preventing an agency from immediately disclosing the names of officers involved in a shooting, and the CPRA requires "prompt" disclosure when possible.

Reporting tips

- Because the law does not prevent disclosure of basic factual information immediately following a police shooting, it is fair and may be useful to your audience to report an agency's decision not to identify officers and to ask for and report a specific reason information is being withheld.
- While the law does not require departments to immediately identify officers who shot someone, it is clear they need to be identified, at a minimum, in response to a records request.

Reporting resource

- [*FAC template pushback letter for officer ID after a police shooting*](#)

There is also no timeframe under which police are required to publicly identify someone shot by law enforcement, though the rules governing the release of records pursuant to the CPRA under [Penal Code section 832.7](#), which require they be provided “at the earliest possible time,” still apply. There is no law requiring that law enforcement attempt to notify next of kin before publicly identifying a person killed by police, and there’s similarly no law prohibiting it.

Reporting tips

- If the person shot is arrested, the law enforcement agency is required to disclose nine specific pieces of information listed in [this state law](#) — including the person’s full name and occupation, charges they were booked on, factual circumstances surrounding the arrest, the time they were booked and by what agency — unless disclosure of a “particular” piece of information would endanger a person involved in the investigation or the successful completion of an investigation. Many city and county jails post daily booking logs online with some of this information. If the person shot is arrested but taken to a hospital for treatment rather than the jail, the arrest should trigger the same disclosure requirements as a typical arrest, with the agency obligated to disclose the arrestee’s name, suspected crimes, time of arrest, arresting agency and where they were taken for treatment.
- Once you have the name of the person shot, call the hospital’s media contact to inquire about their condition. If asked about a specific patient **by name** and the patient has not objected, the hospital can confirm if the person is in its care, and disclose their location in the hospital (i.e. intensive care unit, medical-surgical unit, etc.) and a general description of their condition: for example, “undetermined,” “good,” “fair,” “serious” or “critical,” per the [Code of Federal Regulations Title 45, section 164.510\(a\)](#).
- If the person shot dies, in addition to asking the lead agency in the shooting investigation for their identity, also inquire with the medical examiner or county coroner’s office.

V. Other Avenues for Basic Incident Information

Talk to witnesses and neighbors at the scene. Sometimes, a return trip to the scene days after the shooting will find neighbors more ready and willing to talk to a reporter.

Reporting tip

- Remember these can be traumatic events for witnesses, neighbors and the broader community. It's hard to know how a witness may react to a reporter's request for an interview. You may encounter someone eager to talk or someone traumatized or fearful of speaking to the press. Approach these conversations with empathy but also conviction that you are performing an important service by seeking information to keep communities informed.

Attempt to contact any victims of reported crimes associated with the shooting and underlying call for service. In cases in which a shooting occurs amid an incident that also involves an alleged crime committed against a person, the agency generally must release to reporters the current address of the victim, except for certain crimes, and the arrestee unless that would endanger the safety of a person involved in an investigation or successful completion of the investigation itself, per [Government Code section 7923.620](#).

Reporting tip

- Because the address of the victim and arrestee is only releasable through a provision allowing limited access for "scholarly, journalistic, political or governmental purposes," an agency may require a reporter requesting these addresses to declare under penalty of perjury they are requesting the information for journalistic purposes, per the above referenced [code section](#). If needed, ask the agency how best to meet that requirement. And when it comes to reaching out to victims, approach with sensitivity, empathy and conviction that you are acting in the public interest.

If the shooting followed a call for service or itself generated such calls, the computer aided dispatch (CAD) call logs for the incident and related recordings/transcripts of 911 calls should be public records and disclosable. (These can contain information about the initial call that brought police to the shooting scene, as well as updates from police and witnesses at the scene.)

Reporting tip

- Many agencies have CAD call logs available in public-facing form — whether online or printed out in a binder at the front desk — but you can file a CPRA request for them if that's not the case. You'll likely only be able to get the 911 call recordings/transcripts via CPRA.

Reporting resource

- [*FAC police shooting template request letter*](#)

Just as it is important to know what happened during an incident that led to a police shooting, it's also important to know what should have happened according to departmental policy, which is the standard an officer's actions will be judged against during an internal review. In addition to the Use of Force and Firearms policies, other departmental policies — like those governing domestic violence incidents, foot pursuits, or vehicle pursuits — can shed light on what preceded a shooting and whether officers' actions followed departmental expectations.

Reporting tip

- [Penal Code section 13650](#) requires all police agencies in California to post their policies and procedures manuals online for public inspection. In addition to comparing officers' actions against policy in a given incident, it can also be informative to compare one department's policies against another's to help inform a story. For example, policies governing vehicle pursuits or the discharge of a firearm at/from a moving vehicle can vary widely by department.

VI. Sources of Contextual Information

Once you know the names of the officers who were at the scene of a shooting, you can file a CPRA request with their present and known past employing agencies seeking documents related to prior shootings and sustained findings of certain types of misconduct.

Reporting resources

- Find sample request letters [here](#) (SB 1421 and SB 16 version), and a public database with compiled records from throughout the state [here](#).
- You can also search the officer names in [this public database](#) of POST decertification board actions to see if their certification has at any point been suspended or revoked.

Once you know the name of the person shot by police, you can search local court records, including criminal, civil and family law to help get a fuller picture of their life. Rules on accessing local court records vary, but some allow preliminary online case searches, while others require physically going to the court to enter the name into a public access kiosk.

Reporting tips

- In cases in which the person shot by police survives, you can check past court records to see if they have past felony convictions and, if so, whether files for those cases include a pre-sentencing probation report. These reports often provide troves of biographical information but are sealed 60 days after sentencing only to be unsealed if the person is charged with a new offense, per [Penal Code section 1203.05](#). If the person shot is charged with a crime stemming from the current incident, any past pre-sentencing probation reports would become public, likely providing a valuable source of information about the person's life and background, including familial, residential, educational, criminal, substance use and mental health histories.
- Check for related social media accounts, which can also be used to find friends, family and co-workers.
- Following shootings that generate community concern, it can also be informative to file a CPRA request seeking communications about the incident to and from members of a city council or board of supervisors, or other officials.

VII. Search Warrants

You can also check for any search warrants filed as a part of the investigation, which typically become public after they are executed and returned or 10 days after their

execution, per [Penal Code section 1534\(a\)](#). Avenues for accessing search warrants vary by each Superior Court, but they can generally be searched at the courthouse by using either the address where the warrant was served, the name of the target of the investigation (in this case, likely the decedent in the shooting) or the day on which it was served.

Search warrant packages include an affidavit and a return document. Affidavits in support of a warrant will have a narrative an officer provides under oath explaining why police believe the search is justified, which can include information and context about the shooting. The warrant package will also include an inventory of areas searched and items seized.

Reporting tip

- Search warrant packages are a court record, so the process for accessing them is different from submitting a California Public Records Act request. Journalists are most successful if they learn the operating procedures of their local superior courthouse. Even so, it is common for journalists to face difficulty accessing warrants, either because of logistical challenges or because the warrant package has been sealed by court order. Polite persistence can pay off in navigating the court process.

VIII. Investigation Documents

[Penal Code section 832.7](#) provides that records pertaining to investigations into police shootings are public, including all materials compiled for review by the district attorney or anyone charged with determining whether the officer was acting consistent with policy. The law provides disclosure of these records can be delayed for certain time periods for certain reasons:

- An agency may withhold records for up to 60 days during an active investigation or until the district attorney determines whether to file criminal charges related to a shooting, whichever occurs sooner, if the agency provides in writing the specific basis for its determination that delaying disclosure “clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure.”
- Starting 60 days after the shooting, delays in disclosure for potential interference with criminal investigations or proceedings are only allowed in some circumstances. If an agency withholds records for such reasons, it shall provide

in writing at 180-day intervals the specific basis for its determination that “disclosure could reasonably be expected to interfere with a criminal enforcement proceeding.”

- An agency is allowed to withhold records during an administrative investigation for up to 180 days after a shooting or until the investigation is concluded, whichever occurs sooner.
- An agency may withhold records for the entire time that any criminal charges related to the shooting are pending.

Reporting tips

- Set a calendar alert for 30 days from the date of the shooting to remind you to submit a CPRA request seeking all records related to the criminal and administrative investigations of the shooting. And submit similar requests to any agencies that may be conducting their own investigation into or review of the shooting, including but not limited to the police agency, the district attorney’s office, the attorney general’s office, the coroner’s office and any independent police oversight agency, auditor or other body.

Reporting resource

- [FAC 832.7 shooting template request letter](#)

Reporting tip

- Consider when secrecy is the story! Prolonged delay in disclosure can itself become the story in some instances. Even if the delay seems justified, consider writing a story about it with the agency’s explanation of why it’s necessary and the applicable law. If the delay does not seem justified, consider possible next steps, including consulting newsroom leadership, legal counsel (FAC’s [free legal hotline](#) is open to all) or an editorial about the agency’s lack of transparency.

Agencies must disclose records related to a police shooting as soon as the basis for withholding is resolved or the investigation is no longer active, and **no later than 18 months** from the date of the incident, unless criminal charges related to the incident are pending, in which case disclosure may be delayed until the charges are resolved, even if the case takes more than 18 months.

IX. Findings of Officer Misconduct

When an internal or outside investigation is done, you are entitled to all the categories of records referenced in the “Investigative Documents Section” of this guide, regardless of whether the officer was found to have acted within policy and law. If the agency determines an officer violated policy and/or imposes discipline (up to and including termination), or if a prosecutor files criminal charges, additional categories of police administrative and court documents may become available.

X. Additional Resources

FAC [Police Transparency Handbook](#)

FAC CPRA request letter [templates](#) for police shooting and misconduct records

The Reporters Committee for a Free Press [Open Government Guide for California](#)

FAC [Legal Hotline](#)

XI. Credits and Contacts

This guide was authored in August 2025 by Thadeus Greenson, press education specialist at the First Amendment Coalition, with contributions by Ginny LaRoe, FAC advocacy director, and Paloma Esquivel, FAC press education specialist.

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