

Journalist's Resource

Research on today's news topics

CRIMINAL JUSTICE, NEWS MEDIA, REPORTING, TIP SHEETS

26 ways to find information on people: Tips for journalists writing about crime on deadline

Tags: [crime](#), [facebook](#), [local reporting](#), [training](#)



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So you're on deadline with breaking news about a crime committed in your community but officials are releasing only basic details: a few facts about the crime and the name and birth date of a person alleged to be involved. Your audience – and your editor – are demanding to know as much about this individual as possible, as quickly as possible. What do you do? How do you report on someone when you have so little information?

The staff at Journalist's Resource has compiled a list of steps that we, ourselves, have used to track down large amounts of information on deadline. While this list may come in handy when covering crime, our strategies also can be used for gathering information on individuals in many other scenarios.

It's worth pointing out that before starting any fact-finding mission, journalists should be familiar with the public-record laws in their states. They need to know what records are available and which ones are accessible by the public. (A free, [state-by-state guide](#) to public records is posted on the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press website.)

Here's how we find information about a person connected to a crime on deadline:

On the ground

- Go to the crime scene. Make notes about what you see and hear. Knock on doors in the

neighborhood. Talk to people walking by. Ask everyone you can find what they have seen and heard and what they know about the incident and anyone involved.

- Chat with authorities at the scene. If it's a major crime scene, law enforcement officers will remain at the property for a period of time. Some will be assigned to keep the media and others away so detectives can do their work. Some officers may be willing to share information that isn't directly linked to the investigation.
- If you eventually get a street address for the person you're researching, go to that location and talk to anyone who is there. Talk to neighbors, too.
- Go to the places in these neighborhoods where community members gather. Coffee shops and hair salons are excellent places to find people sharing stories and information.
- If you can identify former or current employers, visit these places of work and talk to people there. In fact, try to talk to people in any place this person is known to frequent.
- If you are able to identify one or more of the schools this person attended, call the campus administrator or visit the school. Some schools post contact information for teachers and staff on their websites.
- If the person you're researching is being held at a detention center or jail, go there. Talk to the men and women entering and leaving — you might find someone who is going to visit this person or has just seen him or her.

Government records, data

- Do a criminal background check on the person – if you are able. In at least some states, law enforcement agencies allow the public to request a search of their databases to see if someone has been charged with any crime. Oftentimes, there is a fee for the search. In some cases, all you need is a person's name to do a criminal background check. But some agencies require more information such as a date of birth or partial social security number.
- Search court records. Local courts often put some basic information online about criminal and civil cases, including bankruptcy and divorce. You'll probably have to go to the courthouse, however, to get details.
- Ask local law enforcement officials how often they have received complaints about this person or complaints related to the crime scene. Depending on public-record laws and your relationship with authorities, they may provide a report or share anecdotal information.
- Look at property records, which could offer information about the person you're researching – or his or her landlord. Property records can contain details such as who owns a property, its value and whether taxes are owed on it.

Your news organization

- Search your newsroom's archive. You'll want to know what your news organization already has reported about this person. This might provide a basis for your coverage and

generate leads.

- Search LexisNexis, a paid service available in many newsrooms, to see what has been published about this person in other parts of the state and nation.
- Do a national records search using a paid service such as LexisNexis Accurant, with which your newsroom may have an account. An Accurant report offers a variety of information about a person, including corporate affiliations, possible family members, current and previous residential addresses, motor vehicle registries and professional licenses.
- As a part of your coverage, encourage your readers and audience members to contact you with information they have. Offer them multiple ways to reach you.
- Read the comments that readers and audience members leave on your news organization's website or Facebook page. Sometimes, people leave tips and useful details in their comments.

Social media

- Search the Facebook and Twitter pages of this individual. Facebook pages can be particularly helpful as people often share a great deal of information about themselves there, including birth dates, schools they have attended and current and former employers. Social media platforms also will make it easy to identify some of the friends, family members and acquaintances of the individual you are researching. Try reaching out to this person's Facebook "friends" and Twitter followers to ask for interviews.
- If you know where this person went to school, look for the school's Facebook page or a Facebook page used by alumni. This might help you reach other people who know or knew this person.
- Find out what people are saying on social media about this person or the incident. This could lead you to potential sources and additional information. Monitor the conversation throughout the day as new people will join in and new details could emerge.
- Look at who your competitors are reaching out to on social media. Read those public messages and conversations.

Other internet resources

- Do a general internet search for this person's name and any addresses that will be included in your coverage. This could generate additional details and leads.
- The website Classmates.com can help you find former classmates.
- If you have a photo of the person you're researching, use a reverse image search tool such as TinEye to see whether that photo is being used online. That could lead you to websites and additional information and leads.
- Read what the competition is reporting. They might have details you don't. Also, read comments left on your competitors' websites and Facebook pages.

More things to try

- Reach out to the experts — for example, a leading criminal-justice scholar or a researcher at a major university. Experts may not be able to speak about the specific person or crime you're covering. But they can talk about similar situations as well as related trends and research. All of this can add valuable context to your piece.
- Try to determine whether there have been local efforts to stop this type of crime in this area. If so, find the people involved and interview them. Check with the mayor, a principal at a nearby school, the local police chief and the head of the local Neighborhood Watch program.

We hope you find this list useful. As you gather information, be clear about sources and when a fact has not been independently confirmed. It is a good idea to discuss with your editor whether and how to report on details that you haven't been able to confirm.

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