

States Restrict Info from Public Information Requests

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In February, Arkansas lawmakers marked the 50-year anniversary of the Freedom of Information Act with a resolution calling it “a shining example of open government.” Then they approved new exemptions to the law in what critics called an unprecedented attack on the public’s right to know, [the Associated Press reports](https://apnews.com/f85d54cc952d4dc58ed0eff7eadb3bbd). When they were finished, universities could keep secret information on their police forces, including their size and the names and salaries of officers. Public schools could shield facts related to security, including the identities of teachers carrying concealed weapons and emergency response plans. State Capitol police could withhold anything they believed could be “detrimental to public safety” if made public.

Legislators across the U.S. debated dozens of bills during this year’s legislative sessions that would close or limit public access to a wide range of government records and meetings. Most proposals did not become law, but freedom-of-information advocates were struck by the number of bills they believed would harm the public interest, and they are bracing for more fights next year. Nebraska lawmakers debated whether to keep secret the identity of the suppliers of lethal-injection drugs used in executions. In some cases, the bills hit resistance only after reporters caught on and began writing about them. In Iowa, the House passed a bill to shield the audio of many 911 calls by declaring them confidential “medical records” after the AP used the open-records law to expose a series of gun-related accidents involving minors in one rural county. The plan died in the Senate after it was detailed in news reports, and media and civil rights groups raised objections.
