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Journalists' Reflections on Using Home Addresses in Reporting

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Abstract

This survey of 63 investigative reporting journalists highlights the various ways they use home addresses in public service reporting. Most use home addresses for fact checking and verifying sources. As well, 54% said they never, and 43% said they rarely, publish or broadcast those details. This preliminary study's results provide important context in the current debate over how much personally identifiable information is released in government documents and data through public record laws. As legislatures and courts consider restrictions on the release of home addresses to protect people from doxing, harassment, and other harms, these findings indicate a need for caution and the inclusion of journalists in the discussion, based on the public value of home addresses in journalistic reporting.

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Introduction

Home addresses serve as a tool in basic news reporting practices. Publicly available addresses allow reporters to find sources, verify basic facts and keep public officials honest. As lawmakers engage in debates in various states about whether home addresses should be disclosed through public records, this survey seeks to expand the conversation to account for the many important ways home addresses are used by journalists. As one survey respondent in this study, a general assignment reporter in Pennsylvania, noted: “‘Where’ is a key part of the five Ws of basic reporting.”

Journalists reading this report likely will not be surprised by the details included in these results: The findings summarize common journalistic best practices. The intent of this survey, however, was to provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse for those unacquainted with the processes of journalists: those who might see no value added by having home addresses remain publicly disclosable, and those who may be currently wondering what harm of secrecy could come from closing off access to those facts. As the details in the following pages highlight, the harm could be very real. Journalists’ access to home addresses is critical to performing the job in a robust and credible way. This small sample highlights a range of public service journalism that has made an impact on communities. But because of journalists’ careful use of the information – many noted they rarely disclose the home addresses used in their reporting – the public is not always aware of the use of home addresses to tell important stories in the public interest.

Home addresses historically have been considered basic directory information (Byrne, 2010; Harper, 2006) and traditionally have been open records, even published in phone books along with names and home phone numbers. But public attitudes—and state open records laws—regarding access to home addresses have changed amid high profile stalking cases, concerns about identity theft, and the evolution of computing to allow for easy cross referencing and publication of the personally identifying information (Balderas, 2015). In recent years, amid increasing political polarization, home addresses have been used as a tool to threaten and harass those with alternate viewpoints through publication of addresses on the internet (Bowles, 2017), and to enact violent attacks against public officials (Yamat & Bryan, 2023; Eby, 2023). Nearly all states in the United States have adopted some form of restriction to home addresses, and in recent years, many have expanded the categories of protection. Those protected often include public safety officers, judges, and victims (Gil, Smith, & Badr, 2022). New proposals are being introduced each year (Lieb, 2023). In addition to various exemptions written into state open records laws, most states have created an Address Confidentiality Program for victims of stalking and domestic violence, which allows participants to use a replacement address on public documents (Maloney, 2020).

Despite these pressing concerns, journalists routinely rely on personally identifying information to help find and verify sources. Verification is among the list of 10 essential principles of journalism detailed by Kovach and Rosenstiel in *The Elements of Journalism* (2021). While their analysis of the principle dives deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of objectivity and truth, Kovach and Rosenstiel also summarize verification checklists gathered from interviews and surveys with journalists, including reaching out to multiple stakeholders and checking names. Open records advocates also point to other concerns: namely that home addresses can be accessed in other ways, so restricting access can leave people with a false sense of security (Cuillier, 2022).

Method

Hoping to discover more on-the-ground examples of when journalists use home addresses in their reporting, I conducted a survey to gather information, contacting a sample of journalists from the Investigative Reporters and Editors member directory. A total of 1,441 surveys were sent out, with 63 responses, for a response rate of about 4%. The names from the member directory were selected using every other page in the alphabetical listing. Students and members without a professional or freelance affiliation were omitted from the survey, to ensure it was sent to those who are actively reporting in the field. The survey was only sent to IRE members listed as living in the United States, as this research is specifically tied to state open records laws. The survey was emailed between May 22, 2023, and June 10, 2023. The following questions were included:

- On average, how often do you use home addresses in your reporting?
- On average, how often do you publish/broadcast home addresses in your stories?
- What are some scenarios that prompt the use of home addresses in your reporting?
Select all that apply.
- What do you think is the best approach for public agencies dealing with home address release?
- Please provide an example of when you have used public records and home address information to conduct your reporting.
- Is there anything else you'd like to include regarding this topic?
- Demographic questions, including age, gender, beat, news outlet type, and state.

The respondents ranged in age from 20 to 68, with 12 people in their 20s, 15 in their 30s, 10 in their 40s, 11 in their 50s, and 9 in their 60s. The most common answers for primary beat were “politics/government” with 12 responses, and “general assignment” with 10 responses. The next most common beats were courts/crime, education, and health/science, with five responses each. Responses came from 26 different states and Puerto Rico, with California having the most (seven people). For primary news outlet, responses were: Newspaper – 23; Television station – 14; Online outlet – 15; Radio station – 4; Magazine – 3; and the remaining overlapping multiple categories or freelance.

The questions were kept open-ended to elicit more examples and storytelling, though the multiple-choice questions can be used to summarize these responses. With such a small sample of targeted journalists likely to engage in investigative techniques, I do not recommend extrapolating the multiple-choice answers to make broader assumptions.

Initially, I wanted to survey a broader cross section of journalists to understand how average reporters use home addresses in their work. But for this initial round of research, I decided to go with the more refined sample of journalists who have self-identified as using investigative methods, as my goal was to find rich examples of home addresses being used. Investigative reporters and editors seem more likely to engage in the type of reporting that would require home addresses. The survey introduction explained this purpose, so respondents self-selected to participate based on their use of home addresses in reporting. Future research on the topic can include surveys of more journalists with less prompting.

Results

Of the 63 people who responded, about half (49.2%) said they regularly use home addresses in their reporting. Meanwhile 31.7% answered “occasionally,” 14.3% answered “rarely,” and 4.8% answered “never” to the same question. The journalists surveyed were less likely to publish or broadcast the home addresses: 54% said they never, and 43% said they rarely make the addresses public. One survey respondent, a political reporter in Maryland, said she uses exact home address information to report on politicians and candidates but rarely publishes the information beyond describing a general neighborhood. She wrote: “I often weigh the SPJ Code of Ethics principle to ‘minimize harm’ when making these decisions: Would I be exposing the candidate/official to potential stalking/harassment/harm by publishing the address? Is the exact address crucial to the story? I know that if people are determined to find out an official’s address, they will figure it out, but it’s not my job to do the work for them.”

The most common reasons selected to use home addresses in reporting were “cross reference facts with other documents,” with 88.7% of respondents; “fact check identities,” with 85.5% of respondents; and “locate sources for in-person contact,” with 83.9% of respondents. Less common answers included “confirm residency for election or job-related reporting,” with 64.5% of respondents and “include home address information in stories about crime or disasters,” with 21% of respondents. Other reasons typed by individual survey respondents include:

- To report on assets held by public officials
- To find other victims to interview
- To assess who is receiving post-disaster services after a natural disaster
- Spatial analysis with parcel data
- To check if an at-large board was geographically diverse
- Backgrounding people suspected of defrauding the public
- Zoning, property disputes, and disaster stories.

Specific examples broke down into three general categories: Verifying, finding sources, and writing location-based stories. Below are excerpts from open-ended responses to the question of how journalists used home addresses in their reporting, grouped by category.

Verification

Journalists surveyed reported high rates of using home addresses to verify facts for a story (88.7%). One survey respondent noted: “This is a key means to ensure accurate reporting,” and others said there were too many examples to list them all. In several cases it served the basic democratic function of verifying candidates for public office. “I have done fact checking on a school board candidate that was not living in a district she was representing,” said a reporter in Colorado. “Reporting then included multiple long visits to watch the house that this person was registered as living in, talking to neighbors.” A politics reporter in Texas noted: “Multiple times, my publication has found that people do not live at the addresses they list on their campaign filings, bringing their eligibility for the position into question.” Others explained officials may be renting out properties listed as their main residence, or may move after getting elected in a district. Additional fact verification examples included:

- Verify a state lawmaker’s social media report that his home had been vandalized, using public police reports cross referenced with the lawmaker’s publicly available address.
- Confirm who owns a property.
- Fact-check a source’s personal story, including past criminal involvement, by correlating it with several data points within public records.
- Look up and describe a crime or accident scene.
- Uncover a person’s track record of arrests across three U.S. states and internationally.
- Track campaign finance contributions coming from a single home address, to identify “bundling” of donations from one company or family.
- Determine residency for local, state and federal officials with residency requirements.
- Identify additional properties owned by public officials that should be included in financial disclosure forms.

Several journalists (85.5%) also noted they use home addresses to confirm identities before publishing information about people. The examples include backgrounding of sources to determine credibility or fact check their histories, narrowing down people with common names, and providing several means of confirmation before publication. In one example, an investigative reporter in Florida wanted to confirm a suspected voyeur was the same man who had allegedly pleaded guilty to attempted first degree murder in the 1990s. Similar names were listed on both arrest documents, but with a middle initial in one case, and a full middle name in another. “They both had the same date of birth, but to convince our lawyer, and ourselves, we found they both had the same address,” he wrote. “That last detail might not have been the clincher we needed if addresses were withheld.” A Florida investigative reporter noted using voter records to determine the home address of people speaking during public comments, to add neighborhood context without publishing the precise address, and to double check the name spelling. After a shooting, an investigative reporter in Utah used home addresses to verify a victim’s name before publishing. “The victim had a common first and last name, and there were 29 people with the same name on the background checks in the area,” she wrote. Public officials also often have common names, and one reporter noted she was able to confirm that a person accused of a crime was, in fact, a local public official with a common name by using a home address to connect the two identities.

Backgrounding of candidates and those dealing with local governments is important work of journalists, especially considering the recent scandal of George Santos, who was elected as U.S. Representative in New York despite lying about his qualifications, business dealings, and wealth. The North Shore Leader, a small local newspaper in Santos’ district, had published stories calling into question his background before Election Day, including details determined through home address disclosures (Ellison, 2022) While the Leader’s reporting didn’t stop voters from electing Santos to Congress, some survey respondents noted their background checks had positive local impacts. For example, a health and science reporter in Oregon wrote: “Once I used records and home address information to background a mysterious apparent con man who tried to obtain an option on high-value county land which he could have resold for a number of potentially destructive purposes. Our reporting helped alert the county that they had issued a letter of intent to ink a deal with a man who, despite portraying himself as a sophisticated, well-connected entrepreneur, was in fact a former flower delivery driver with a trail of unpaid debts and who’d been accused of forgery and theft.” A health reporter in Texas was able to use home addresses to confirm facts and construct a historical timeline of a doctor accused of deadly malpractice.

Finding people and places

Journalists use publicly available home addresses to find people to interview and to show up in person to news events. About 84% said they locate sources through home address information, and several included examples of how the details helped them show up to a crime scene for reporting, as well. “We use home address information almost every day,” a general assignment reporter in California said. “Not necessarily to be broadcast on air, but we do searches to find victims, suspects, and witnesses of crimes. Or people of interest for any story. Then we knock on their door. It’s how you find people to talk to.”

Several mentioned that they use home addresses to serve as an additional means to try to contact hard-to-reach sources. “I found the home address of a former small town sheriff I wanted to interview—he was an older man and didn't seem to have any online presence,” a feature reporter in Maryland wrote. “He wasn't home when I came by, but I left a note and he called me later.” A courts and crime reporter in Florida said he mailed written questions to a person accused of wrongdoing after that person was unable to be reached in other ways. A government reporter in California noted that in-person visits help ensure the source received the request for comment. “Email addresses can go unused and phone numbers may be assigned to different people. So we stopped by to ask for comment in person, just to make sure we'd given them a chance to share their side of the story,” he wrote.

Telling location-based stories

In addition to using home addresses to fact check and find people, some reporters surveyed said they use them for stories about location and properties. In one case, a reporter in Colorado used address information combined with other data to look for geographical trends using mapping software. Disaster coverage was noted by more than one person, including a reporter in Puerto Rico who used home addresses to try to look for victims after Hurricane Maria. Government officials notoriously undercounted and downplayed the storm’s impact (Florido, 2019), so reaching the victims was a crucial component of thorough reporting on the storm. Some examples of location-based stories included:

- A health reporter in Maryland was part of a team that analyzed whether the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was selling flood-prone houses. The example highlights the patchwork of state laws regarding home address release (Jingnan et. al, 2021). “In order to do this, I needed to get in touch with people living in homes that HUD had sold,” she wrote. “In some states it was relatively straightforward to find Real Property records, but in others it was virtually impossible.”
- An education reporter in Colorado analyzed an at-large school district to see if the members represented a diverse set of communities (Robles, 2017). “Turns out, no. All were residents of a few neighborhoods,” she wrote.
- The politics reporter in Texas, mentioned earlier, used public addresses to visit properties sold by the city to verify if promised developments came to fruition (Calacal & Wolfe, 2021). “In the course of visiting those properties, I found that they had, in fact, not been developed,” she wrote. “Those addresses and their owner’s name being public was important to the investigation.”

Journalists’ thoughts and recommendations

When asked what might be the best approach to public release of home addresses, the journalists surveyed were split, with several filling in their own response instead of selecting one of the provided options. The journalists’ responses showed a concern for minimizing harm when reporting, with one respondent even noting that she had been the victim of stalking and is enrolled in her state’s address confidentiality program. But there was no clear majority of opinion on how to handle home address release on public documents. Respondents could select from six hypothetical options for how to deal with home address release (see Table 1).

Table 1. How to deal with home addresses

| Responses to question: What do you believe is the best approach for public agencies dealing with home address release? | |
|---|-------|
| Allow for home address release, and use other means to handle misuse | 38.1% |
| Allow release of most home addresses, but allow vulnerable populations to be exempt from release | 15.9% |
| Allow release of home addresses on a case-by-case basis, where judge or other official weighs the public’s interest against the individual’s privacy interest | 12.7% |
| Allow individuals request their addresses be exempt from government documents | 6.3% |
| Close off access to all addresses on public documents | 1.6% |
| I’m not sure | 14.3% |

Seven people selected “other” and filled in their own comments, highlighting the range of opinions on the topic, and the journalists’ consideration of the need for privacy balanced with support for open records access, in particular as it deals with public officials (see Table 2).

Table 2. Open-ended answers to best approaches

| Fill-in answers to question: What do you believe is the best approach for public agencies dealing with home address release? |
|--|
| I'm torn between the first two options. If the second option existed, I think it should allow everyday people to redact their information if they have a current, credible threat against them. But I don't think it should be used by politicians and powerful people. Many of them already have or could afford security services. |
| Combination: Use other means to prevent misuse, take steps to remove addresses from online documents and address bulk release of addresses, allow an avenue for people to take their addresses out of public records if they can document the need for doing so. |

| |
|--|
| If requests to be exempt were easy for everyone to navigate, I would select that. But the reality is that options like this are rarely available to the people who are most vulnerable. |
| Seems like there maybe should be a distinction based on who and what document. We should have more access to information about elected officials and candidates, less so for appointed public officials, and maybe there's a third tier of more protection for witnesses, or victims of crime. |
| Use voter registration records as the means for release; keep them public |
| We can usually find any home address very easily, it all depends on what role an agency believes it plays in protecting/not protecting that information |
| It depends on the reason. If a crime takes place, most agencies will give me a block address. |

Conclusion

Journalists regularly use home addresses in their investigations, and report doing so with consideration for personal privacy, as evidenced by the high rates of those who say they never or rarely publish the addresses. The examples shared in this survey showcase the importance of being able to use home addresses in reporting; from verifying identities to confirming facts, home addresses serve as an important tool for quality journalism. While this sample is small and specialized, the responses highlight the need to include journalists in the process of considering any law changes. These responses show their understanding of the needs for personal privacy—in particular because journalists are often subject to online harassment as part of their jobs—and their careful consideration to what information gets published/broadcast, a daily balancing act. The responses also explore the many ways home addresses have been used to hold public officials accountable and verify information in reports. These experiences are a necessary part of the conversation on potential law changes.

The debate about home address disclosure is complicated. The concerns about home address release extend well beyond journalistic use of the records; anyone can publish an address online as a means to harass or threaten, and the nature of social media allows that information to have a much larger reach today. But closing off public records has a distinct negative impact on journalists and their work. And it doesn't necessarily protect those who are vulnerable to harassment, as home addresses are accessible through other means. Even if everyone could agree on home address protections, the question of who gets those protections is still a sticking point. While recent law changes look to exempt those in power positions (judges, public safety officers, prosecutors), as they are likely targets of harassment from a disgruntled member of the public, those positions of power are the very roles in need of a watchdog. Meanwhile, often left out of the conversation is the average person, who is less likely to be harassed, but also less likely to be the subject of journalistic investigations.

These considerations focus on the public, and those who request the information. Further exploration is needed to gather opinions from records custodians, as well. While tiered levels of privacy, or opt-in protections may seem to solve some of the complications for the public and journalists, they may cause more trouble for records-holders, which could lead to less access through a different means.

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