

**COLLIER  
PRIZE**  
for STATE GOVERNMENT  
ACCOUNTABILITY

# 2025 UF COLLIER PRIZE: STATE OF ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM

Access Denied: Barriers to Information in  
Accountability Journalism

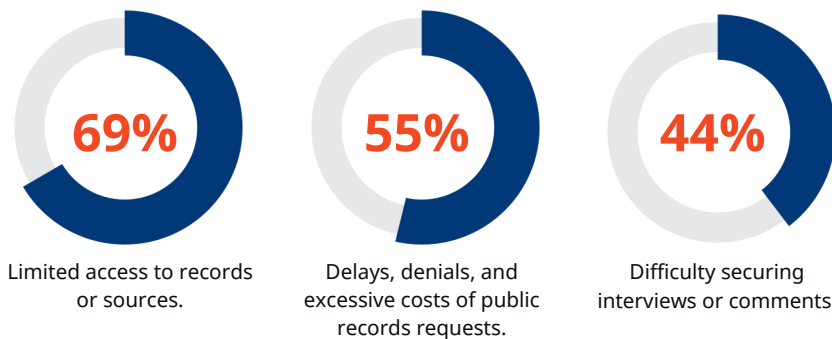
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# SUMMARY

For many journalists pursuing investigative work, identifying wrongdoing is only the beginning. The real barrier is getting the records and access needed to document it.

In a national survey of investigative journalists who routinely report on government accountability, 69% identified limited access to records or sources as the greatest challenge in holding government officials accountable. More than half reported frequent delays, denials, or excessive costs when filing public records requests, and 44% described difficulty securing interviews or official comment.

## Greatest challenges in accountability reporting:



The Collier Prize for State Government Accountability exists to spotlight this kind of work and the effort it takes to do it well. The prize recognizes reporting that uncovers wrongdoing, informs the public, and demands answers from those in charge. It also shows what's at stake when journalists can't access the information they need.

Nathan S. Collier, the philanthropist who endowed the Collier Prize, said his motivation for funding the award was to encourage more investigative reporting and incentivize news organizations to invest in that work.

Award-winning investigations are not immune to obstruction. **The Associated Press's Prison to Plate investigation, winner of the 2025 Collier Prize for State Government Accountability**, encountered resistance at every turn while reporting on prison labor. The reporters filed public records requests in every state. Most were denied or ignored.

They did what many reporters must do: adapt. Their work led to national reforms and corporate fallout. But it also showed how often critical information remains out of reach, even for experienced journalists with time, resources, and institutional backing.

“All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for the good to stand silently by,” Collier said. “The need to stand up and loudly speak truth to power, again and again, is greater now than at any time in the past century.”

# THE STATE OF ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM

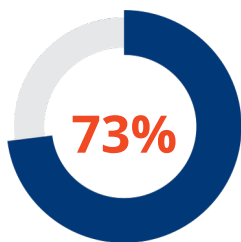
At a time when trust in government and the media is deeply strained, journalists are one of the last lines of defense between the public and unchecked power. Without them, much of what happens behind closed doors would stay there.

To better understand the current landscape, we reached out to hundreds of investigative journalists focused on government accountability across the country in March 2025. Most of the 51 respondents work at large state or regional news organizations, many with dedicated investigative teams. They include reporters, editors, and newsroom leaders who routinely investigate public institutions and request records and interviews from government officials. Though not scientific, the responses echo patterns seen in other national surveys of journalists.

The findings reveal a profession under pressure. Journalists face mounting obstacles when trying to obtain public records, secure interviews with officials, and navigate a media environment that increasingly lacks the resources for investigative work.

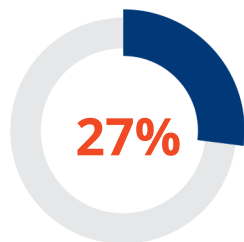
As newsroom budgets shrink and hostility toward journalists grows, these challenges threaten accountability reporting, and the survey's findings reveal just how much reporters have to overcome to share the truth:

**Financial challenges are a major constraint.**

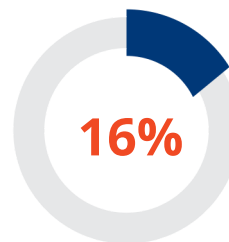


Tight budgets and limited resources make it harder to pursue accountability work.

**Political and public pressure influence editorial decisions.**

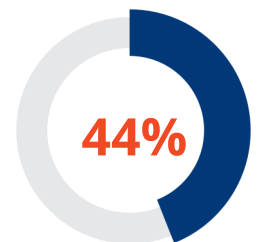


Political pressure creates hesitation around certain stories.



Growing hostility toward journalists discourages accountability reporting.

**Still, many stay committed.**



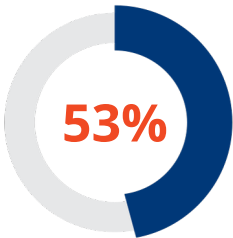
Newsroom continues to prioritize accountability work, even with fewer resources and more risk.

The political pressure and growing hostility facing U.S. journalists echo global trends. A [2024 survey](#) by the Center for News, Technology and Innovation found that 50% of journalists experienced direct government overreach in the past year, and more than half said their governments seek to have [too much control](#) over journalism.

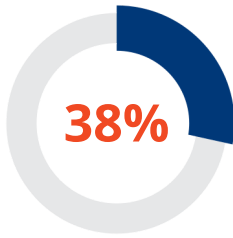
Both surveys make clear that while political and legal pressures aren't new, they're having a deeper impact on what journalists pursue and the risks they face in doing it.

# COMMITMENT TO GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

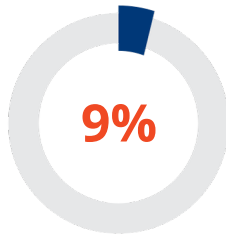
While many news organizations say they value accountability reporting, the level of commitment varies. In the survey, respondents said:



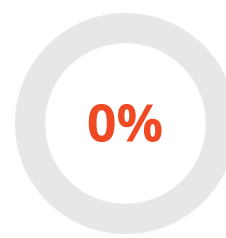
Government accountability is a core focus of their newsrooms' work.



Organization somewhat prioritizes accountability, but it often takes a back seat to other priorities.



Investigative work isn't prioritized enough.



Newsroom places almost no emphasis on accountability.

Pursuing an investigation is no small task. With tight budgets and competing demands, choosing what to investigate isn't a light decision. So what drives reporters to take on the stories they do?

The survey asked journalists to rank the most important factors behind those decisions. (Based on percentages of respondents who ranked each factor as #1)



Societal or political impact



Editorial interest or leadership priorities



Potential for audience engagement



Competitive advantage over other outlets

The results show that public interest still drives most investigative work, but newsroom priorities and the push to reach audiences also factor into what gets pursued.

# PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM

While most journalists identified limited access as their greatest challenge, they face more than just records denials and unreturned calls. Many also cited **public indifference (58%), disinformation and spin (49%), and threats or intimidation (22%) as barriers to holding those in power accountable.**

## CASE IN POINT: PRISON TO PLATE

The Associated Press's Prison to Plate project shows just how steep these barriers can be, even when journalists are pursuing information that should be publicly available. Reporters Margie Mason and Robin McDowell filed records requests in all 50 states for information on prison agriculture and state contracts. Most corrections departments refused to release the information.

So they found other ways. McDowell relocated to New Orleans, waited outside prison gates, and followed cattle shipments across state lines. The team tracked supply chains, followed inmate transfer vans, and linked prison-raised goods to major U.S. corporations.

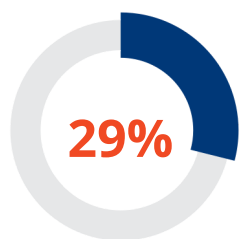
Their investigation prompted corporate and legal reforms and brought national attention to a hidden labor system. After publication, companies like Trader Joe's, McDonald's, and Cargill cut ties with prison farms or third-party suppliers using prison labor. A federal judge also ordered new protections for incarcerated workers at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, including mandatory water breaks, access to shade, and sunscreen. But the time, travel, and persistence it took to get basic information show how far journalists have to go when public records aren't readily made public.

The team noted: "That's where the reporters got their first big surprise: The beef was being sold to major companies including Burger King and Walmart."

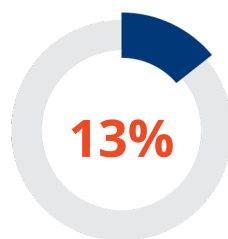
# ACCESS TO RECORDS AND INTERVIEWS

Only 20% of journalists in the survey described access to public records for investigative reporting as easy or somewhat easy. The majority, 56%, reported frequent delays, denials, or excessive costs. Access to key individuals wasn't better: fewer than one in five said it was easy to secure interviews or official comment.

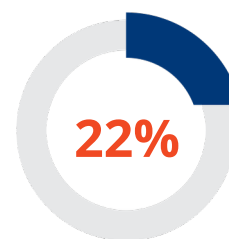
**Together, nearly two-thirds of respondents had experienced or directly witnessed this kind of exclusion.**



Said they had been excluded from briefings or media briefings multiple times by an administration or political leader.



Said it had happened at least once.



Said they knew a colleague who had been shut out.

At the University of Florida's Brechner Freedom of Information Project, director Dave Cuillier recently noted that the United States continues to fall behind other countries in government transparency.

Similar slippage has taken place at the state and local level. A [2017 Knight Foundation study](#) found that journalists ranked delays as the most common barrier to accessing public records. Nearly 75% rated FOIA response delays as very or extremely problematic. Journalists also reported frequent issues with excessive redactions, ignored requests, and high fees.

“Its federal Freedom of Information Act, often known as FOIA, ranks [78th in strength](#) out of 140 nations, and continuously drops as new countries adopt better laws,” he wrote in a [recent op-ed](#). “On average, according to our research, if you asked for a public record in America 10 years ago, you would get it about [half the time](#). Now, it’s down to about a third of the time, and just 12% at the federal level.”

## CASE IN POINT: DEALING THE DEAD

When institutions operate in the dark, journalists are often the only source of public accountability. NBC News's [Dealing the Dead investigation](#), second-place winner of this year's Collier Prize, shows what it takes to uncover the truth when records are incomplete and oversight is missing.

The team set out to understand how a Texas state-run medical school handled unclaimed bodies. What they received was incomplete, inconsistent, and far from transparent. Instead, they gathered thousands of government records, used serial numbers to track remains from county morgues to for-profit companies, and assembled datasets with tens of thousands of fields.

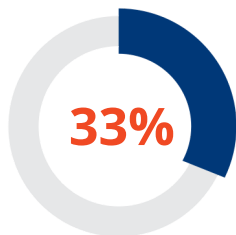
Several families learned what happened to their loved ones only because NBC News reached out. Many discovered the truth from a public list the newsroom published. Their investigation pulled a hidden industry into public view — one that, until then, had operated with little oversight and no scrutiny.

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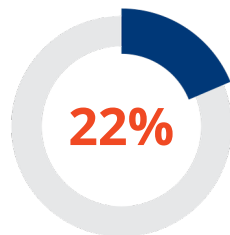
# THE CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The shifting media landscape is influencing how investigative journalism is delivered and whether it gets prioritized at all.

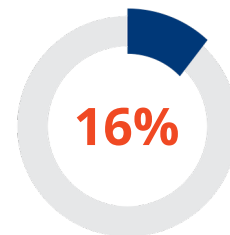
In the survey, many respondents said the current environment favors speed, visibility, and reactive coverage over in-depth reporting. They pointed to a mix of legal risk, changing formats, and constant churn of news as forces pulling attention away from accountability journalism.



Accountability journalism is struggling to reach broader audiences and maintain its impact in the digital age.



The rise of new formats like podcasts and social media is shifting focus away from traditional watchdog work.



Threat of legal action as a reason some outlets are more cautious about pursuing investigations.

Still, journalists are doing what they've always done: finding ways to report the facts as best they can be ascertained. Nearly one-third of respondents (29%) said traditional accountability journalism is a priority, and it is evolving to fit new formats.

For decades, journalists have encountered delayed records or denied interviews. But new barriers, such as political pressure, legal risk, shrinking resources, and growing hostility, make it more challenging to do the work that holds power to account. The Collier Prize honors not just the reporting, but the persistence it takes to make it possible.

For more reporting recognized by the Collier Prize and to follow ongoing work in state accountability journalism, visit the [Collier Prize site](#).

Subscribe to the Collier Prize newsletter for trends in covering state issues and updates on major state government accountability stories.

