13.5: Types of Public Records

As we’ve already discussed, institutions generate information for a wide variety of purposes, and these types of public records generally fall into some identifiable categories.

**Vital statistics**

Governments at all levels generate statistics to administer government programs, allocate government funding, and communicate with the public. For example, the federal census of population is one of the most well-known examples of government statistics, but there are thousands of other sources of government-generated statistics on almost any topic imaginable. Cities, counties and states generate statistics that reflect births, deaths, property ownership, tax payments, communicable diseases being reported, voter registration rolls, military service, and many other aspects of life in those communities.

**Evaluation reports**

The federal Government Accountability Office and individual state auditors’ offices do countless investigations on the efficiency and effectiveness of government programs. They issue reports that would be otherwise prohibitively expensive for news organizations and political parties or candidates to undertake. These reports are usually designed to be “neutral” in their approach, seeking to simply provide accurate oversight and evaluation of sometimes very expensive government activities.

**Laws and regulations**

As we’ve mentioned, individuals and organizations cannot comply with laws and regulations if they don’t know what those statutes say. The process of legislating and rule-making is generally open to public scrutiny and the final or end result of the process is the publication of the laws and regulations that have been written, passed by the legislative
branch and signed into law by the executive branch or enacted by the regulatory agency. Records about compliance with said laws and regulations are also public. So, for instance, the records collected by the Pollution Control Agency about a company’s compliance (or non-compliance) with regulations about chemical discharges into the local rivers and lakes are a matter of public record.

**Court proceedings**

One of the reasons that the U.S. legal system is generally respected at home and abroad is that courts conduct their business under public scrutiny. If an individual or an institution is brought before a judge, with very few exceptions, that court appearance and any subsequent civil or criminal charges are a matter of public record. Unless specifically sealed by a judge, the names of all witnesses, descriptions of all evidence and transcripts of all proceedings are part of the public documentation of court activities.

**Criminal justice records**

Again, the local, state and federal agencies responsible for policing society do their work under the public’s watchful eye. Arrest records are public – individuals do not disappear into the jail or prison system in the middle of the night with no record of why or where they were taken. Jail logs must be made accessible to the public by local and county officials. Logs of calls for police service are available as well. If a squad car is dispatched to a particular address because of a call for help, that is a matter of public record. When certain types of convicted criminals are released back into the community (sex offenders, for instance), there are public records about their living arrangements and the type of supervision they are under.

**Political campaign finance records**

While there have been several significant Supreme Court rulings in the last several years that have damaged the transparency of public record information about where campaign funds originate, cities/counties, states and the federal government still gather information about political donations to candidates for public office and make those records available to the public. The Federal Elections Commission, for instance, generates enormous databases of campaign contribution information that can be searched in many different ways.

**Institutional financial information**

For-profit and non-profit institutions in the private sector and all public-sector institutions generate information about their financial activities. Again, the U.S. system of commerce is considered a model for the world because of the transparency of these institutions’ financial doings. Government agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service or the Securities and Exchange Commission and independent agencies such as the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation oversee the financial records of thousands of institutions and organizations and in most cases, these are public records.

**Licenses**

One of the ways that governments generate revenue is by issuing licenses. Almost every kind of enterprise or profession requires a license. The list of licenses required in the state of Minnesota gives you a sense of how wide ranging they are: [http://mn.gov/elicense/](http://mn.gov/elicense/)