

Know Your Documents: Be aware of the paper resources

In the circuit court. Use this database to look up criminal histories.

At the state attorney's office. Use this information for greater detail about criminal histories and cases people have been involved in. Heinzmann said: "Once somebody's charged, the police department will always give you a summary of that. But you always want to check on that with the state attorney's version. And, because they do that, that creates sort of a historical archive of stuff... You need good relationships with [employees there] to get that sort of information on deadline."

At the district attorney's office. You can find details and narrative descriptions of crimes and cases here.

Public records – don't underestimate them. "We consider, when it comes to public records, that we may know how to get them better than the average reader, but we're members of the public, too, and we're getting records that people either don't know how to get or don't have time to get," said L. Kelly, crime & courts team leader at the Wichita Eagle.

Look for trends. Mine the court system. The Miami Herald's Sergio Bustos said: "I think we need to focus more on crime as an issue – try to do stories about trends in crime, try to do stories that get beyond the police blotter. Trying to get beyond the blood and guts. Trying to get stories about crime and its impact on people and the way they live."