
Finding People and Businesses

Tips to Locate a Hard-to-Find Person

Patrons frequently need to find people and businesses, for instance to serve them with legal papers. If you cannot find a person, it may be possible to serve them by publishing the notice in the newspaper. Before you can do this, you need to prove to the judge that you have made a thorough, diligent search for the person.

Here are some resources and strategies to help you locate people and businesses, or at least make a thorough search, both in the Law Library and on the Internet.

Introduction

It is very important to keep careful records of every search you make, and the results of that search, when looking for a person or a business. This is good advice for any type of research, but it is crucial if you are trying to find someone so you can serve them with legal papers. You will use these records to prove that you have made a diligent search for the person, so the judge can authorize service by publication. Keep copies of your letters and responses, and keep a diary of your contacts.

Suggested Steps

1. Finding People

Here are some steps you can take to search for individuals.

1. Try personal service at the last known home and work addresses, using the Sheriff or process server. Ask for documentation of the process server's attempts to locate the party.
2. Search the telephone directory for the city where party was last known to live, and attempt contact at any listings that could possibly be the person to be served. Call telephone information (411). Try online phone books like [whitepages.com](https://www.whitepages.com/) (<https://www.whitepages.com/>) and [Zabasearch](https://www.zabasearch.com/) (<https://www.zabasearch.com/>). If you have a phone number but no address, try the reverse telephone lookup on these sites.
3. Contact relatives and friends who might know the party's whereabouts. Keep records of all these contacts, such as a diary detailing telephone calls and copies of letters you send, etc.
4. Go to the last known home and work address of the person yourself, and ask neighbors or co-workers if they know where to reach the person.
5. Send a letter to the person at their last known addresses. Be sure to label the envelope "Return in 5 days if undeliverable." Send the letters registered and keep returned envelopes to show failure.
6. Check the County Recorder's and County Tax Assessor's indexes for the location where the party was last known to live or own real property. [Melissadata](https://www.melissa.com/v2/lookups/) (<https://www.melissa.com/v2/lookups/>).com has a variety of search options. Signing up for a free account is required to use this service and some searches may require additional fees.

7. Search for the defendant using “people finder” sites on the Internet. Try more than one; results are different. Suggested sites are listed below under “Websites and Online Databases.”
8. Search for their profile on social media sites (Facebook, Instagram), dating sites, or other sites that fit their interests, such as music or art sites. The paid site Spokeo.com (<http://Spokeo.com>) can search many of these sites at once.
9. Contact trade unions or professional associations to which the person may belong. If they are a member of a licensed occupation, find the licensing agency for their occupation at [California Office of the Small Business Advocate](https://calosba.ca.gov/permits-licenses-regulation/professional-licensure-guide/) (<https://calosba.ca.gov/permits-licenses-regulation/professional-licensure-guide/>).
10. Contact the US Military for information about a service member’s whereabouts. Personnel locator information is listed at [USA.gov: Locate Military Members](https://www.usa.gov/military-personnel-and-installations). (<https://www.usa.gov/military-personnel-and-installations>)
11. Check the local jail inmate list, and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation inmate locator service. To locate an incarcerated person, visit the following websites:
12. California: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation: [California Incarcerated Records and Information Search \(CIRIS\)](https://apps.cdcr.ca.gov/ciris/) (<https://apps.cdcr.ca.gov/ciris/>) (916-445-6713)
13. Federal: [Federal Bureau of Prisons: Inmate Locator](https://www.bop.gov/inmateloc/index.jsp) (<https://www.bop.gov/inmateloc/index.jsp>).
14. For resources on locating prisoners in other states, see [Lifewire: How to Find Prisoner Info and Mugshots](https://www.lifewire.com/how-to-find-prison-inmate-3481866) (<https://www.lifewire.com/how-to-find-prison-inmate-3481866>).
15. If the person was ever on probation, contact the probation department in the city where that person was placed on probation.
16. If the person may be in detention for immigration issues, check ICE detentions at [Online Detainee Locator System](https://locator.ice.gov/odls/#/index) (<https://locator.ice.gov/odls/#/index>).
17. Child support cases only: If you receive welfare benefits, contact the district attorney’s office to seek help in locating the person.
18. Automobile accidents only: your attorney can request address information from the DMV.
19. Hire a private investigator.

2. Finding Businesses

Here are some steps you can take to search for businesses and their agents for service of process.

1. Check [yellowpages.com](https://www.yellowpages.com) (<https://www.yellowpages.com>) or other free online directories. Some suggested sites are listed below under “Websites and Online Databases.” Call telephone information (411).
2. If the business is a corporation (Inc. or Corp.), limited liability company (LLC), or limited partnership (LP), and does business in California, it should have a listing at the [California Secretary of State's Online Business Services website](https://bizfileonline.sos.ca.gov/) (<https://bizfileonline.sos.ca.gov/>). This listing will contain the entity’s address of record and the name and address of its designated agent for service of process. Find other states’ Secretary of State at [e-secretaryofstate.com/](https://www.e-secretaryofstate.com/) (<https://www.e-secretaryofstate.com/>).
3. You may be able to get information on any type of business from the city or county clerk where it is located. Ask about “FBN” (fictitious business name) or “DBA” (doing business as) listings, or business licenses. Sometimes this information is available on the city or county website.
4. Search business directories, industry, or trade associations, and other business resources. Like many public libraries, the Sacramento Public Library offers free access to excellent “Business & Finance” databases at the library or from anywhere with your SPL library card ([Sacramento Public Library: Online Resources Categorized](https://www.saclibrary.org/Education/Online-Learning/Online-Resources-Categorized#Research%20Tools) (<https://www.saclibrary.org/Education/Online-Learning/Online-Resources-Categorized#Research%20Tools>)). “Reference Solutions formerly Reference USA” is particularly helpful for location and contact information.

5. If the business itself has a website, search it for contact information for its headquarters, officers, or owners. You may find this under “contact us,” “about us,” “staff directory,” or a site map. If this is not helpful, try using the “Whois” service to see who owns the website. Visit [ICANN Lookup: Registration Data Lookup Tool](https://www.internic.net/whois.html) (<https://www.internic.net/whois.html>) to search by typing in the website address (URL) for contact and address information.
6. Publicly held companies (companies that sell stock to the public) must file reports and disclosures with the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC). These filings can have a information including contacts, reports on significant litigation, and more. You can search this information at the SEC’s EDGAR (Electronic Data Gathering, Analysis and Retrieval) site, [Securities and Exchange Commission: EDGAR](https://www.sec.gov/edgar.shtml) (<https://www.sec.gov/edgar.shtml>) .
7. If the company has federally-registered trademarks or patents, contacts should be available in the [U.S. Patent and Trademark Office’s database](https://www.uspto.gov) (<https://www.uspto.gov>) . Trademarks can also be registered in individual states, but most do not offer online searches.

Library Resources

The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Private Investigating KF 2042. D48 B76 (Self Help)

Chapters 4-8 discuss “skip tracing,” or finding people who have dropped out of sight, including the use of public records, courthouse records, and for-pay databases. Chapter 22, “The Diligent Search: Adoption and Estates,” discusses requirements for service by publication, problems with the requirements, and possible approaches to fulfilling them. While the book is aimed at private investigators, non-PIs can also benefit.

The Cybersleuth’s Guide to the Internet: Conducting Effective and Free Investigative & Legal Research on the Web KF 242 .A1 L481

Revised in 2018, this book covers more than just people-finding, but Chapter 7 focuses on “Free Investigative Research Resources: To Locate and Background People,” and chapters 8 and 9 cover finding experts and finding legal professionals.

Find Info Like a Pro: Mining the Internet’s Publicly Available Resources for Investigative Research KF 242 .A1 L4785

Includes chapters on finding people, finding phone numbers and addresses, using online communities and social networking site for research, and more. The book may be slightly dated, but most of the resources discussed are still helpful. Available CD includes clickable links to all sites contained in the book.

Find Info Like a Pro: Mining the Internet’s Public Records for Investigative Research KF 242 .A1 L48

Addresses public records, including licenses, criminal and civil case records, liens and assets, and using SEC records. Many useful websites (free, free-with-registration, and fee-based) are detailed and instructions on how to use them are provided. The book may be slightly dated, but most of the resources discussed are still helpful. Available CD includes clickable links to all sites contained in the book.

Websites and Online Databases

Tip: Check your local public library's website. Many offer cardholders remote access to subscription person and business databases. For instance, the Sacramento Public Library offerings include [A to Z Databases: business and personal profiles](http://0-www.atozdatabases.com.www.saclibrarycatalog.org/search) (<http://0-www.atozdatabases.com.www.saclibrarycatalog.org/search>), which lets you search by name or phone number, and also has a "Corporate Family Tree and Linkage" feature to determine parent and subsidiary companies.

1. Telephone Directories and "People Search" Sites

These sites let you look up names, addresses, and phone numbers. If the person is listed, the information is provided on the results screen, without required payment. Most also include reverse directories, which let you search by phone number. Generally these sites offer limited information for free (landline phone number, address, age range, possible relatives). They then offer to sell you "full reports" which offer cell phone numbers, prior residences and phone numbers, names of relatives or neighbors, news articles, social media profiles, and the like. They often provide inconsistent results; try more than one; you may get some information for free. Also try nicknames, maiden names, alternate spellings, and other variations.

Here are a few to start with:

[TruePeopleSearch](https://www.truepeoplesearch.com) (<https://www.truepeoplesearch.com>)

Detailed free information makes this a great place to start. Includes full phone numbers and addresses, but may not have the most current listings. May also identify relatives and associates, businesses, and public record information about their residence.

[Whitepages.com](https://www.whitepages.com) (<https://www.whitepages.com>)

Phone listings (landlines) for people and businesses, including reverse phone number search, neighbor search, and other tools. Some tools require payment.

[Yellowpages.com for Business](http://www.yellowpages.com) (<http://www.yellowpages.com>)

This site, which gets its information from a pay site (Intellius), also provides phone and address listings. It is not associated with Whitepages.com and can provide different or additional information. Premium: Intelius.

[Zabasearch](http://www.zabasearch.com) (<http://www.zabasearch.com>)

This site offers fairly minimal information for free: Name and email required to access free information. Premium: Intelius.

[Spokeo](https://www.spokeo.com) (<https://www.spokeo.com>)

Free searches will turn up current and prior residence locations, partial phone numbers, and general information about birth date, relatives, and more. For a modest fee, Spokeo provides a one-stop place to search 70+ social websites, including blogging, dating, music and video, location review sites like Yelp, and professional community sites. Useful features include the ability to search by username or email address as well as name, phone number, and physical address.

2. Public Records

These resources gather links to free public records databases, such as real property ownership, licensing agencies, and court and jail records. Some also offer paid links to pay services:

Search Systems: Public Records (<https://publicrecords.searchsystems.net/>)

Free Public Records Directory (<https://publicrecords.onlinesearches.com/>)

BRB Publications: BRB's Free Public Records Resources (<https://www.brbpub.com/free-public-records>)

Black Book Online (<https://www.blackbookonline.info>)

Does the person have a state license for their job? Try searching the agency website for license listing. The Department of Consumer Affairs lists many of the applicable databases at [DCA License Search](https://search.dca.ca.gov/). (<https://search.dca.ca.gov/>)

Do you think the person might be incarcerated?

- Local jails:
 - [Sacramento County Jail Inmate Information](https://www.sacsheriff.com/InmateInformation/) (<https://www.sacsheriff.com/InmateInformation/>)
 - Contact the county sheriff where you believe they might be jailed
- California:
 - [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation \(State Prisoners\)](http://inmatelocator.cdcr.ca.gov/) (<http://inmatelocator.cdcr.ca.gov/>)
- Federal:
 - [Immigration] [Online Detainee Locator System \(ICE\)](https://locator.ice.gov/odls/#/index) (<https://locator.ice.gov/odls/#/index>)
 - [Criminal] Federal Bureau of Prisons Inmate Locator
- Other States:
 - [Prisoner Locator Tools from Other States](https://godort.libguides.com/prisonerdb) (<https://godort.libguides.com/prisonerdb>)

Genealogy Resources

Genealogy sites collect and publish public records to help people search for their ancestors. Some of these have excellent resources for living people, as well. One particularly useful (and completely free) site is [FamilyTreeNow](https://www.familytreenow.com/) (<https://www.familytreenow.com/>). Search by name, then narrow to “Living Persons.” (“Death Records” can be helpful too, to determine if your person has passed away.) Click on all results that look like your person; they often have different information.

3. Social Sites

Any number of social networking sites can be useful in locating a missing person. If you are looking for a person with a strong interest in something, try specialty sites such as Café Mom, Dogster, DeviantArt, and the like.

Here are three social sites that may be particularly helpful:

Adoption Search & Reunion (<https://adoption.com/reunion>)

Registry for birth parents and adoptees wishing to find each other, resources and information on issues facing people searching for birth families or biological children, and forums for help and advice.

[Classmates.com – Find High School Friends, Plan Reunions](https://www.classmates.com/) (<https://www.classmates.com/>)

Includes elementary schools and colleges as well as high schools. You must register to use the website, and some features, like viewing people's locations, reading bulletin board notes, and reviewing yearbooks, require a subscription.

[Facebook](https://www.facebook.com) (<https://www.facebook.com>)

Hundreds of millions of people are listed on Facebook. Many share location information, friend lists, and other information that can help locate them.

4. Business and Personal Databases

Some of these are subscription databases, but may offer limited free resources or free trials. Your local public library may have remote access to these or similar resources.

[A to Z Databases: business and personal profiles](http://0-www.atozdatabases.com.www.saclibrarycatalog.org/search) (<http://0-www.atozdatabases.com.www.saclibrarycatalog.org/search>) (free with Sacramento Public Library card) is a good resource for finding both personal and company information. Search for a person by name or phone number. You can use the “Corporate Family Tree and Linkage” feature to determine parent and subsidiary companies.

[Coordinated Legal Technologies](https://www.coordinatedlegal.com/index.html) (<https://www.coordinatedlegal.com/index.html>)

This site gathers web sites offering governmental data and other reference information. Particularly useful for locating companies are the California (and nationwide) county online databases, fictitious business name listings, and the Professional Licensing Lookups page, which offers navigation links to occupational and professional licensing and regulation lookups at various states across the country.

[D&B Hoovers](https://www.dnb.com/products/dnb-hoovers.html) (<https://www.dnb.com/products/dnb-hoovers.html>)

Information on large companies, including top management, summary of business, and competitors. Basic information is free, but details require a subscription or purchase.

[Manta](https://www.manta.com/business-directory) (<https://www.manta.com/business-directory>)

This is a good resource for finding information on local businesses. Smaller companies and stores are listed here, along with top contacts, news, and reports (may require payment). Search under the tab “Find a Business.”

For More Research: Online Guides

[Corporate Research Project: Dirt Diggers Digest Guide to Strategic Corporate Research](https://corp-research.org/dddresearchguide)

(<https://corp-research.org/dddresearchguide>) Information on how to find corporate information; how to research corporate relationships such as parent corporations, officers, and customers; and how to investigate corporate actions, including litigation, lobbying, and executive compensation.

[Cyndi's List: Finding People](https://www.cyndislist.com/finding-people/) (<https://www.cyndislist.com/finding-people/>)

Lists many resources for finding people online. Cyndi's List is primarily a genealogy site, but this page lists

resources for finding living people.

Lifewire: 8 Free Ways to Find Someone Online (<http://www.lifewire.com/find-anyone-online-3482687>)

Regularly updated resources for searching for people using the internet.