What is the law that addresses an official or other person who falsifies official legal documents?

The primary laws that address falsifying official legal documents (or causing them to be falsified) depend on the jurisdiction and whether the act occurs at the federal, state, or local level. Here are the most commonly applicable statutes in the United States (and similar laws exist in most countries):

United States Federal Law

Crime	Statute	Key Elements	Maximum Penalty
Forgery of official U.S. documents (e.g., passports, immigration papers, federal court documents, seals, etc.)	18 U.S.C. § 494–499, § 505	Making, altering, or knowingly using forged federal documents or seals	Up to 5–10 years
False entries in federal records (e.g., falsifying court records, federal agency documents)	18 U.S.C. § 1001 (False Statements) + § 1519 (Destruction/Altering/Falsification of Records in Federal Investigations)	Knowingly falsifying or concealing material facts in any record or document within federal jurisdiction	Up to 5 years (§ 1001); up to 20 years (§ 1519)
Forgery of public records generally	18 U.S.C. § 494–498	Forging public records, certificates, or other official writings	Up to 10 years
Falsifying court documents	18 U.S.C. § 1506 (Altering/Falsifying records of court proceedings)	Altering or falsifying federal court records	Up to 5 years
Obstruction of justice via document falsification	18 U.S.C. § 1512(c)	Altering, destroying, or mutilating a record/document with intent to impair its use in an official proceeding	Up to 20 years

State-Level Laws (examples – every state has similar statutes)

State	Primary Statute	Common Name	Typical Penalty
California	Penal Code § 115	Filing or offering false/forged instruments	Up to 3 years state prison (felony)
New York	Penal Law § 170.10–170.25	Forgery in the 1st/2nd/3rd degree (public records = higher degree)	Up to 7 years (1st degree)
Texas	Penal Code § 37.10	Tampering with governmental record	State jail felony up to 3rd-degree felony (intent to defraud/harm = higher)
Florida	Fla. Stat. § 839.13	Falsifying public records (by public officer or employee)	1st-degree misdemeanor to 3rd-degree felony
Federal analogue used in many states	"Official misconduct" or "Tampering with public records" statutes	Varies by state	Usually felony

Specific to Public Officials or Employees

When the person falsifying the document is a **public official or employee**, most jurisdictions treat it more severely:

- Federal: 18 U.S.C. § 1519 (Sarbanes-Oxley record-tampering statute) and § 1001 are frequently used against officials.
- Many states have dedicated "official misconduct" or "falsifying public records by a public servant" statutes (e.g., New York Penal Law § 195.00 – Official Misconduct; California Penal Code § 118.1 – False report by peace officer; Texas Penal Code § 39.03 – Official Oppression).

International Examples

- United Kingdom → Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981 + common-law misconduct in public office (up to life imprisonment in extreme cases).
- Canada → Criminal Code § 366–368 (forgery of public documents) and § 122 (breach of trust by public official).

In short: In the United States, the most commonly charged federal statutes are **18 U.S.C. §§ 494–499 (forgery)** and **§ 1001/§ 1519 (false statements/altering records)**, while virtually every state has a felony statute titled something like "forgery of public records," "tampering with governmental records," or "offering false instruments for filing" (e.g., California PC 115). When committed by a public official, additional "official misconduct" charges almost always apply.