

FIRST QUARTER 2017



# Investigating BEHIND BARS

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Our hope is to help organize the efforts currently underway by journalists and concerned citizens. IRE and NICAR will host a central directory on our website, displaying details on rescued data and where it's kept. Our hope is to prevent duplicate efforts and provide transparency.

Learn more about our efforts and get involved at [bit.ly/iredata](http://bit.ly/iredata)

## IRE FOREVER

Want to help ensure that IRE has a solid foundation for the future?

Some members are now making IRE a part of their long-term financial planning.

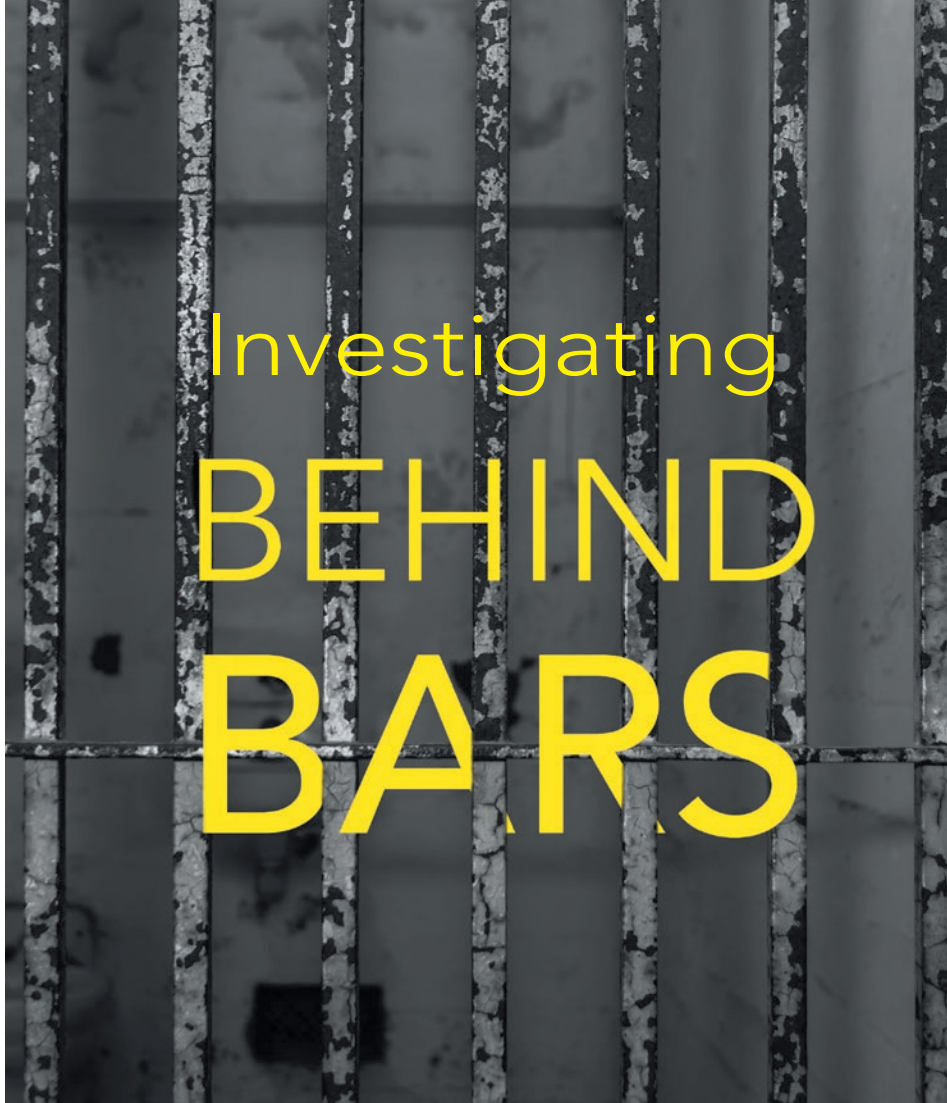
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- Include IRE in your will
- Make IRE a beneficiary of a life insurance policy
- Set up a stock transfer

To make IRE part of your personal legacy, contact your financial adviser. For other information on donating to IRE, please contact our financial officer Heather Feldmann Henry, at 573-884-7902 or via email [heather@ire.org](mailto:heather@ire.org).

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# Inspired by generosity



BY DOUG HADDIX

In my first several months as IRE executive director, I have been humbled by generosity — of our members, donors, sponsors and foundation partners. Your generosity takes many forms: money, time, advice and support. Generosity fuels IRE's ongoing vitality and relevance.

Like other journalism organizations, IRE saw a significant increase in donations following the election of President Donald Trump and his administration's heated, threatening rhetoric against journalists. Financial gifts to IRE jumped by more than 50 percent in the final two months of 2016, compared to the same period the previous year.

One gift of \$7,500 came with a gratifying letter, which read in part: "Your work is more important now than ever. Equipping journalists with the skills to better investigate the world today is absolutely critical. In other words, keep doin' what you're doin'."

Unrestricted gifts enable IRE to remain nimble in responding to changing needs in newsrooms. You may donate to IRE at any time through our secure online system: [bit.ly/donateIRE](http://bit.ly/donateIRE) (case sensitive). Or, from your smartphone, you can text the keyword 4IRE to a special phone number: 41444. Our donation site accepts unrestricted gifts, but also allows you to donate to a specific fund or program.

For instance, IRE created the David Donald Fund for Data Journalism after the death of one of our former training directors. David's wife, Joyce, asked that donations in his memory be directed to IRE. To date, more than 50 donors have contributed more than \$6,226 to the fund. Once it reaches our endowed level of \$20,000, the David Donald Fund will provide a scholarship each year to a journalism professor to attend an intensive weeklong IRE data boot camp. If you'd like to support that fund, simply type "David Donald" on the online form when you donate.

Another new fund is the Napoli Management Group scholarship. The group, one of the largest news talent representation firms in the country, is led by Mendes Napoli. The scholarship is designed to help aspiring watchdog journalists in their first TV job attend the national IRE Conference. We expect to award the first scholarship for the 2018 IRE Conference in Orlando.

Another way that members and supporters help ensure our long-term survival is by remembering IRE in their estate plans. The most recent example is a \$250,000 bequest to IRE from Rick Gevers and his wife, Karen Burns, of Indianapolis. Rick is a former TV news director who runs a representation agency for broadcast clients across the country. Upon their deaths, the Rick Gevers-Karen Burns Fund will pay for annual IRE training seminars at historically black colleges and universities, ethnic media organizations or news organizations aimed at minority audiences.

As IRE members, you also benefit from the financial support of our conference sponsors and foundation partners. Registration costs remain a bargain because of their ongoing generosity. Our two national conferences this year in Jacksonville and Phoenix have garnered sponsorships and other financial support from media companies, foundations, journalism groups and technology companies. Sponsors and supporters of the CAR Conference are listed online at [bit.ly/iresponsor](http://bit.ly/iresponsor). As planning continues for the national IRE Conference in Phoenix, sponsors and supporters will be listed online at <http://ire.org/conferences/ire2017/>.

Beyond our national conferences, other IRE programs receive generous underwriting from foundations. Examples include:

- Excellence and Ethics in Journalism Foundation: The Oklahoma-based foundation recently awarded IRE another \$100,000 grant to sponsor 10 Watchdog Workshops across the country. The program brings high-caliber IRE training to markets in all parts of the country, particularly underserved regions outside of major metro areas.
- Ford Foundation: A \$100,000 general operating grant plays a pivotal role in ensuring stability in IRE staffing and other resources across all of our programs.
- Knight Foundation: A \$1.4 million grant has provided for the operation of DocumentCloud since June 2014. In addition, the foundation awarded IRE a \$75,000 grant to support our two 2017 conferences, including fellowships for journalists of color who are members of the Ida B. Wells Society.

Beyond financial generosity, IRE members and supporters give abundantly of their time and expertise. Speakers at our national conferences, Watchdog Workshops and other training events receive no training fees. Our dedicated 13-member board receives no payment; in fact, board members donate financially to IRE and cover their own travel costs for IRE meetings. Rank-and-file members respond quickly to questions posted on our listservs. And hundreds of you serve as mentors to younger journalists as a way to pay forward what you have learned through IRE.

As an IRE member for more than 20 years, I have experienced much of this generosity firsthand. Now, as executive director, I have a whole new perspective. From the 35,000-foot view, the IRE landscape is a wonder to behold.

*Doug Haddix is executive director of IRE and NICAR. You may reach him at [doug@ire.org](mailto:doug@ire.org), 573-882-1984 or @DougHaddix on Twitter.*

## Training director Jaimi Dowdell bids farewell to IRE

IRE's longest-serving trainer, Jaimi Dowdell, left her position at the end of January to complete her Spotlight Investigative Journalism Fellowship and pursue other career opportunities.

Since 2008, Dowdell has trained thousands of journalists in watchdog reporting and data analysis.

Dowdell and freelance journalist Kelly Carr received the prestigious Spotlight fellowship last year to pursue an in-depth investigative story that will be published in *The Boston Globe*. Before joining IRE, Dowdell worked as computer-assisted reporting editor at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. She earned a master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri.

## IRE members named winners, finalists for Goldsmith, Polk and Selden Ring awards

The Shorenstein Center named nine IRE members from five news organizations as finalists for the 2017 Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting ([bit.ly/2kD4MCT](http://bit.ly/2kD4MCT)) and one IRE member as the winner of this year's academic Goldsmith Book Prize ([bit.ly/2kna1JG](http://bit.ly/2kna1JG)). The winners of the 2017 Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting were announced on March 2 at the Kennedy School.

Several IRE members were honored with a George Polk Award for Journalism, one of the most prestigious prizes for enterprise and investigative journalism in the world ([bit.ly/IREPolkWinners](http://bit.ly/IREPolkWinners)).

Congratulations to Ali Winston (*East Bay Express*), Craig Harris (*Arizona Republic*), Joseph Shapiro (NPR), Christie Thompson (*The Marshall Project*), Brian M. Rosenthal (*Houston Chronicle*), Robert Lewis (WNYC), A.J. Lagoe and Steve Eckert (KARE-11).

Many IRE members also worked on the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists' massive "Panama Papers" investigation, which received the Financial Reporting award.

Brian Rosenthal of the *Houston Chronicle* won the 2017 Selden Ring Award for Investigative Reporting ([bit.ly/SeldenRing2017](http://bit.ly/SeldenRing2017)). The USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism recognized Rosenthal for his seven-part series, "Denied," which uncovered a systematic denial of special education services for tens of thousands of children with disabilities in the state of Texas.

Several IRE members also were finalists for the

annual prize, which honors a work of investigative journalism that enacts tangible change.

## 2016 Philip Meyer Award winners announced

IRE is proud to announce the 2016 Philip Meyer Award winners. A sophisticated data investigation that revealed doctors who had sexually abused their patients is the first-place winner of the 2016 Philip Meyer Journalism Awards. Other top winners include an innovative project tracking the spread of wildfires in the West and a data-driven investigation that exposed match-fixing in professional tennis.

First place is awarded to "Doctors & Sex Abuse," by Jeff Ernsthause, Shawn McIntosh, Danny Robbins, Carrie Teegardin, Ariel Hart, Richard Watkins, Ryon Horne, Lois Norder, Johnny Edwards, and Alan Judd of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

The newspaper took data analysis for a story to new levels of sophistication. The goal was to root out instances in which doctors had abused patients and gone unpunished, but the task was more than daunting. The team built 50 scrapers to pull in more than 100,000 documents. They then used machine learning to analyze those documents, searching for keywords that alluded to cases of sexual misconduct. They backed up their findings with other sophisticated data analysis and shoe-leather reporting. The investigation found that doctors in every state had abused patients, and even when caught, still went unpunished.

Second place is awarded to "How Fire Feeds," by Eric Sagara, Scott Pham, Sinduja Rangarajan and Julia Smith of *Reveal* from *The Center for Investigative Reporting*.

The team used satellite imagery and eight other government data sets to examine three large wildfires in creative, groundbreaking ways. An interactive, visually appealing online presentation guided readers through the analysis, enabling them to explore how fire and topography intersect to create deadly blazes. More than 170,000 acres burned during the fires, leaving the areas vulnerable to flooding and erosion. The project provided a cautionary tale of potential wildfire outbreaks that may pose ongoing risk for years to come.

Third place is awarded to "The Tennis Racket," by Heidi Blake and John Templon of *BuzzFeed News*, and Simon Cox of the *BBC*.

In a first-of-its-kind analysis by a media outlet, *BuzzFeed News* and the *BBC* used a million

simulations of a series of tennis matches to discover suspicious patterns in shifting betting odds and players who lost matches they statistically shouldn't have. What emerged was a pattern of match fixing among a small group of professional tennis players. During the reporting, a whistleblower shared with *BuzzFeed* the results of a professional tennis internal investigation that found similar patterns, but the sport shelved the investigation and did nothing. As a result of the investigation, professional tennis stars have called for greater transparency in corruption investigations surrounding the sport, and several government entities have conducted hearings.

The Philip Meyer Award recognizes the best uses of social science methods in journalism. The awards were presented on March 4 in Jacksonville, Florida at the 2017 Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference.

Read the entire press release here: [bit.ly/2kl9e8r](http://bit.ly/2kl9e8r).

## Consider running for the IRE Board of Directors, Contest Committee

Starting April 17, IRE will begin accepting applications for candidates for the IRE Board of Directors. This year, six of the board's 13 seats are up for election.

The initial filing period for candidates is April 17 - May 21. All candidates filing by this time will appear on the initial ballot when voting begins on June 1.

Electronic online voting will be open both before and during the IRE Conference this summer. Those coming to the conference will have a chance to hear from the candidates, and we encourage all those attending the conference to wait to vote until after hearing the candidates speak. Information about each candidate will also be posted online.

As in the past, candidates may join the election after the initial filing period. However, voting will have already begun, which could diminish a late-filing candidate's chances of being elected.

You'll also be voting for two members of IRE's Contest Committee, which judges the IRE Awards. Those interested in judging will apply using the same procedure as IRE Board candidates, and will be selected on the same ballot. Contest Committee candidates' information will also be available on the IRE website, but they will not make speeches at the conference.

Learn more about candidacy and IRE's voting system here: [bit.ly/2017IREBoard](http://bit.ly/2017IREBoard).

# REMEMBERING DAVID DONALD

A pioneer of data journalism

Erin McKinstry  
IRE & NICAR

Elena Egawhary was terrified. She stood before a classroom of journalists, most older and more experienced, at the Centre for Investigative Journalism summer school in 2008. Her task was to teach them the basics of data journalism. Her hands shook, and she felt nauseated. She had written a script to follow, so she wouldn't forget her words.

Egawhary stumbled through the class with a trembling voice. At the end of the class, she felt deflated, sure that she wouldn't be able to teach the next group.

But the smiling face at the back of the room didn't let her give up. David Donald, who'd been observing some of Egawhary's first attempts at teaching, enveloped her in a hug and told her to relax. She just needed to be herself.

David had been the first person to draw Egawhary to data journalism. The summer before, when Egawhary was fresh out of graduate school, he had patiently walked her class through the basics. She remembered how his wry sense of humor and his infectious passion for data journalism inspired and engaged her and her classmates. A year later, he taught her to find her own voice as a teacher.

And she did. Her next class went smoothly. With David's guidance, Egawhary came to love teaching.

David's friends, mentees and colleagues brim with stories like Egawhary's. "He always gave you the advice that was the best advice for you," said Brant Houston, former executive director of IRE and a journalism professor at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana.

David passed away on Dec. 10, 2016, at the age of 64, after a yearlong battle with cancer. He was a life-changing teacher, an award-winning reporter and a careful mentor. A pioneer for data journalism, David helped spread the practice across Europe. From his time as training director for IRE to his work as data editor at the Center for Public Integrity, David, in his quiet and humble way, touched the lives of an entire community.

"He was rare, he was exceptionally rare," Egawhary said. "He was so humble. I never felt that he was celebrated as he should have been when he was here."

## A teacher from the very beginning

David was born in Cincinnati, Ohio on June 5, 1952. He received his bachelor's degree in English from Miami University in Ohio in 1974 and his master's degree in English from Cleveland State University in 1980. His thesis was a book of original poems. He worked as a high school English teacher for three years and as an outdoor gear salesman for 10. "Even as a salesperson, he was a teacher," his wife, Joyce Donald, said.

He met Joyce in 1981 on a blind date after returning from a climb on Mount Rainier. A year later, they were married and in 1987 their



David Donald in his office at American University, where he served as data journalist in residence and data editor at the Investigative Reporting Workshop.

son, Ryan, was born. "He was a devoted father and a wonderful family man," Joyce said. "Family was paramount."

It wasn't until his late 30s that David embarked on the journalism career that changed the lives of so many. "He said he wanted to get back to his words," Joyce said.

David, his wife and his then 5-year-old son left Ohio, and David began working as an education reporter at the Savannah Morning News, where he worked for 11 years and eventually became research and projects editor. In 1997, he received his master's in journalism from Kent State University.

In 2004, David began working as training director at IRE.

"It was so clear that he was a terrific teacher," said Houston, who hired David to work at IRE. "I joked that if he could teach high schoolers, then he could definitely teach journalists."

David began traveling the country and the world teaching journalists the basics of computer-assisted reporting. Aron Pilhofer, who teaches journalism at Temple University, co-taught with David for years, mostly at CIJ conferences in London. "He would teach a lesson for the 10,000th time and it was like he was discovering the material all over again with everyone in the class, and that's infectious," Pilhofer said.

David's demeanor as a teacher could be boiled down to one word: patient.

## Rock-solid data analysis

After leaving IRE in 2008, David went to work as data editor at the Center for Public Integrity, one of the country's largest nonprofit investigative news organizations. There he collaborated on several

Photo courtesy of Lesia Oleynycky



Left: David and Joyce Donald on the trail to Yosemite National Park's Mirror Lake in 2014. The photo was taken prior to the 2014 IRE Conference in San Francisco. Right: David and Joyce Donald (center) on their anniversary in 2004. The couple was in London for the Centre for Investigative Journalism's summer school program. Also pictured is Jim Getz, Jennifer LaFleur, Aron Pilhofer, Jeff Porter and Liz Swanson (hidden behind David).

award-winning investigations, including one into Medicare payment irregularities that won two Philip Meyer Awards, and a Peabody Award-winning series about campus sexual assault.

David's list of journalism accolades is long: In addition to the Philip Meyer Awards and the Peabody, he earned a Tom Renner Award, an IRE Award, a James K. Batten Award, a Dart Award and a Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award.

"He helped us produce rock-solid data analysis that nobody questioned, even though it was entirely original," said Kristen Lombardi, a senior reporter at CPI who collaborated with David on the campus sexual assault series. Without David's diligence, expertise and willingness to collaborate, she said the series would not have had the impact or the success it achieved.

"He loved really big, really hard data analysis projects," said Jennifer LaFleur, a senior data editor at Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting. "The stuff they did with Medicare at CPI, most people don't have the capacity to dig into that kind of stuff."

Methodical and patient, David worked side-by-side with some of the country's best investigative reporters to break life-changing data stories. "He was a phenomenal example of how to behave as a journalist," said Maggie Mulvihill, a journalism professor at Boston University.

Mulvihill first met David while taking his Excel class at an IRE training. She attributes her focus on data journalism to David. "He cared deeply about his stories, and it was always about the work and not about his own self blandishment."

In 2014, David left CPI and returned to teaching at American University's Investigative Reporting Workshop. There he taught, mentored and worked as data journalist in residence. Liz Essley Whyte was one of his students. She barely knew him, but when she asked him for career advice, he didn't just offer her a few words of wisdom.

"He came to where I worked and sat down with me," Essley Whyte said. "He offered really clear advice and a willingness to mentor." Essley Whyte is now a reporter at the Center for Public Integrity.

Chuck Lewis, founder of the Center for Public Integrity and current executive editor of the Investigative Reporting Workshop, hired David at American.

David and Lewis would go out for dinner and, over glasses of wine, talk about everything from the Cleveland Indians to the meaning of life to poetry and literature. Lewis would scribble notes on the placemat while they worked through big, ambitious ideas about the future of journalism.

"So many parts of his brain were in full gear, but his demeanor was laid back and friendly and warm," Lewis said. "When people are that cerebral and thoughtful, they are not that personal. In my view, he was brilliant. He was also warm and sensitive. That's really rare."

*Erin McKinstry is a graduate student studying investigative reporting at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She works as a graduate assistant at IRE, contributing to the website and podcast. Erin is also a reporter for KBIA, the local NPR station in Columbia, Missouri.*

## CONTRIBUTE TO THE DAVID DONALD FUND

The David Donald Fund for Data Journalism will send journalism professors to an IRE data boot camp or the national Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference. Donate at [bit.ly/DonateIRE](http://bit.ly/DonateIRE) and note "David Donald Fund" as the specific fund.

# PUERTO RICO'S CORPORATE WELFARE

When seed giants profit  
from a bankrupt island

Eliván Martínez Mercado  
Centro de Periodismo Investigativo

**P**uerto Rico has become a corporate welfare paradise.

Over the past 10 fiscal years, the bankrupt U.S. territory gave away more than \$526 million to a total of 11 multinational producers of transgenic and hybrid seeds, according to an investigation by the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI).

In February 2016, CPI started investigating Puerto Rico's agricultural biotechnology sector's cost of operations. On the bankrupt island, few knew about the corporate welfare that benefited these corporations, which included preferential tax rates, tax exemptions, industrial incentives and wage subsidies (the latter is money collected directly from Puerto Rican taxpayers).

It all happened during a decade of fiscal crisis, when Puerto Rico couldn't pay \$69 billion to bondholders, a default that prompted the U.S. Congress to impose a fiscal oversight board, with total control of public finances.

On the other hand, it was important to revise the fiscal cost of those benefits in the context of food security. Puerto Rico produces only 15 percent of the food it consumes, according to the local government, and the agricultural biotechnology companies don't use those advantages to help solve local food challenges, but rather to conduct experiments developing the next generation of genetically modified corn and soy seeds. These seeds are then sold in global markets by their headquarter companies, such as Monsanto in Missouri, AgReliant Genetics in Indiana and Syngenta in Switzerland. RiceTec and 3rd Millennium Genetics also received incentives, but to develop hybrid seeds. The latter produces feed for the Puerto Rican cattle industry.

## No public records

The main challenge we faced during the investigation was the lack of a single reliable inventory of all incentives granted to the seed industry. This is characteristic of the current crisis in Puerto Rico: a lack of information for fiscal planning. There's a poor digital



View of a farm rented by Monsanto from the Puerto Rico public Land Authority in Juana Díaz.

communication system among agencies as well. The local Department of Treasury, for example, didn't have direct access to information on the incentives granted by the Administration for the Development of Agricultural Enterprises (ADEA). We had to individually request information from several agencies, then add up the total amount of incentives granted.

Puerto Rico lacks a comprehensive open records law like the Freedom of Information Act, so it took several weeks and many requests to get information on preferential tax rates given to this business sector from the Department of Treasury.

In the end, it took us about five months to find out that the Department of Treasury was registering more than \$477 million in preferential rates and agriculture tax exemptions. The Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company granted \$4.2 million in industrial incentives and the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources gave away nearly 240 million gallons of water to Monsanto Caribe and Pioneer Hi-Bred. The executive director of the Puerto Rico Agricultural Biotechnology Industry Association, which represents seven seed

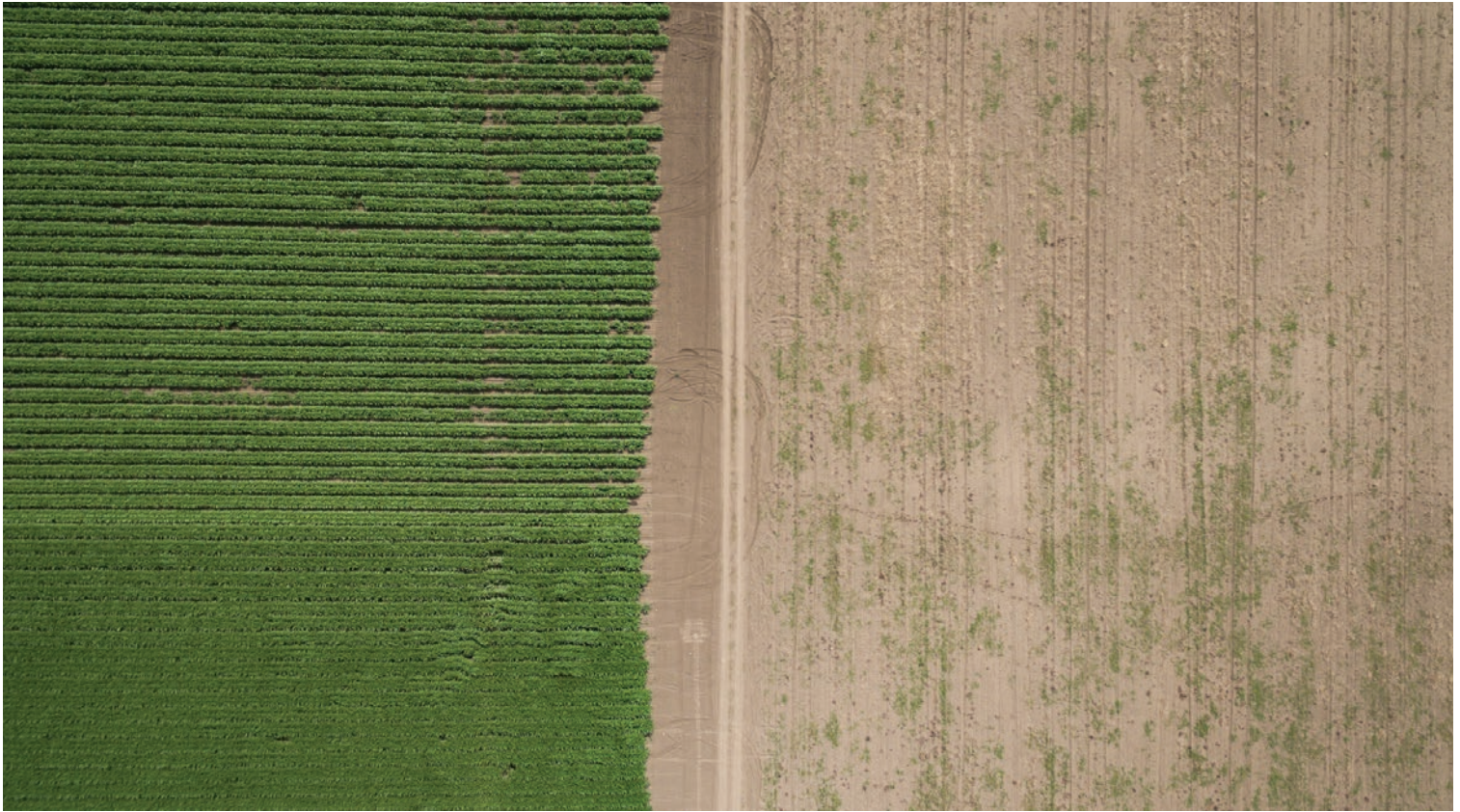
corporations, said in an interview with CPI that they deserved these benefits because they create more than 3,300 jobs. But those jobs are paid for in part by public funds granted by the ADEA, which gave \$37.2 million in agricultural wage subsidies to seed corporations over the past 10 fiscal years.

## Monsanto's many names

One source for the investigation was the public registry of corporations at the local State Department. We reviewed the archives and found a document stating that Monsanto Puerto Rico, one of the seed giant's subsidiaries on the island, was no longer an official corporation because it had failed to submit its financial statements to the agency.

Nevertheless, Monsanto Puerto Rico was receiving wage subsidies from the ADEA, according to documents provided by the agency. In fact, the company was using different names, such as Monsanto Caribe, during transactions with the government. We found this information by looking for public contracts with the seed industry at the Office of the Comptroller of Puerto Rico. One document showed that the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company granted





According to information provided by the Puerto Rico Department of Treasury, multinational seed corporations received approximately \$477.5 million in preferential tax rates.

Monsanto Caribe \$800,000 in industrial infrastructure incentives in 2012 for building facilities in the southern town of Juana Díaz. A year later, the agency amended the fund disbursement contract and transferred these incentives to Monsanto Puerto Rico.

We had trouble getting the corporation's point of view since it declined our interview requests. Monsanto Puerto Rico's community affairs manager told us that our only contact would come through the Puerto Rico Agricultural Biotechnology Industry Association, which represents the interests of seven companies that receive incentives.

At the Office of the Comptroller, we looked for rental contracts between the Puerto Rico Land Authority, depository of public lands, and Monsanto. We found out that the agency had rented 768 acres in Juana Díaz to Monsanto Caribe LLC. The Puerto Rican Constitution prohibits agricultural landholding of more than 500 acres.

So how come it can rent more than 500 acres? An opinion from the former secretary of justice states that the seed industry can circumvent the constitution because biotechnology could not be considered an agricultural activity. The purpose of the 500-acre rule was to prevent big corporations from taking over the land. Nevertheless, despite the legal opinion, the ADEA considers seed companies to be farmers, so they qualify for



Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Bred and nine other multinationals producing transgenic and hybrid seeds benefited from more than \$526 million in public funds from Puerto Rico over the past 10 fiscal years.

agriculture incentives. This double-standard allows biotechnology corporations to embrace a wide range of benefits that otherwise would not be available to them.

A fundamental question to answer during the investigation was, what did biotech companies really do in Puerto Rico during those 10 years of financial crisis and corporate welfare? For journalists researching genetically modified organism (GMO) experimentation in the U.S. and U.S. territories, a source is the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which regulates the importation, movement and release of certain genetically engineered organisms. That's how we knew that the sector conducted more than 1,694 experiments to

develop genetically modified corn and soybean seeds, mainly to survive after the application of herbicides. In Puerto Rico, however, the main agricultural products are cattle and plantain, not corn or soy.

Both English and Spanish versions of the story ([bit.ly/PuertoRicoSeed](http://bit.ly/PuertoRicoSeed)) had a considerable reach of 197,900 people on CPI's Facebook page and 9,000 people on the main website. More than 33 print and digital publications in Puerto Rico, the U.S. and around the world republished the story. In March, we published another story on the subsidies: [bit.ly/PuertoRicoUpdate](http://bit.ly/PuertoRicoUpdate). The Center invested a lot of time and resources creating interactives, drone visuals of crop areas, maps of the seed companies, and video promotions. All of the pieces put together had a real impact and provoked an important public discussion.

*Eliván Martínez Mercado started in journalism in 2001 as an intern at El Nuevo Herald in Miami. He then moved to Puerto Rico to work as a reporter for El Nuevo Día. He completed his master's in journalism at the Escuela de Periodismo UAM/El País in Spain in 2006. He currently contributes to the Center for Investigative Journalism in Puerto Rico. In 2012, he received a grant from The Fund for Investigative Journalism in Washington, D.C., to uncover a corruption scheme in San Juan that involved the destruction of natural areas.*

# FOLLOWING THE MONEY

From Brooklyn, New York to the  
Jewish settlers of Hebron, Israel

Uri Blau

The Palestinian city of Hebron, population 215,000, is a microcosm of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Nineteen miles south of Jerusalem, Israel's capital, some 1,000 Jewish settlers live in well-guarded enclave communities. They are armed and protected by Israel Defense Forces.

The center of Hebron resembles the set of an urban war movie: barriers and concrete blocks everywhere, lookouts on rooftops and armed soldiers at every intersection shouting at unwelcome visitors. They guard once-bustling streets that today are almost deserted. Palestinians are hardly present in the Jewish sections of town. Their movements are restricted and their shops are shuttered.

I have been visiting Hebron as a journalist for 20 years. If anything, the situation on the ground seems to have gotten worse since I first boarded the bus from Jerusalem to the city. Back then, double-shielded windows installed on the bus made it heavy and slow, but at least the windows protected passengers from random stone attacks from Palestinians on the side of the road. As the driver slowly took the sharp curves into town, I had a chance to speak with soldiers serving in Hebron to better understand their activities. Upon arriving in the city and walking its streets, I realized that the soldiers I'd spoken with were not the only ones responsible for sustaining this settlement. The Jewish population in Hebron, I learned, is also prospering thanks to millions of tax-exempt dollars collected in the United States and poured into the city through the "Hebron Fund," a nonprofit based thousands of miles away in Brooklyn.

## The settlement movement

West Bank settlements built on land occupied by Israel from Jordan during the war in 1967 are a core issue of dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. As an investigative journalist, first with the Jerusalem weekly *Kol Ha'ir* and then for international outlets and the liberal *Haaretz* daily newspaper, I've focused on covering and researching Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Israeli military activity around them.



Beit Orot, a new Jewish settlement and neighborhood on the northern ridge on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem. The Beit Orot yeshiva was financed by a Miami-based businessman and his wife.

Israel and its taxpayers are the primary funders of the massive settlement movement, which consists of more than 400,000 people (not including more than 350,000 living in East Jerusalem). However, during my reporting, I would often find that Israeli-based nonprofits raised money for the benefit of the settlers. Traces of such support were easily located while visiting settlements. I'd see them in the form of a thankful plaque mounted on a kindergarten wall, on brochures distributed in synagogues, on a note in a local store, or on the community Internet page. Funds are used for all sorts of purposes, from supporting schools, synagogues or medical centers to purchasing security vests and training guard dogs. When I dug deeper, trying to understand who was donating to such organizations, I learned that big sums came from places like New York, Texas and California. The money sent to the settlers of Hebron, I learned, represents a microcosm of a much wider phenomenon shaping and changing the landscape of many Israeli settlements.

I spoke with several tax and nonprofit experts to learn how the process works: Under U.S. law, a private citizen cannot claim tax benefits for donations made to organizations outside of the United States. However, American charitable groups, known as 501(c)(3) organizations after the section of the Internal Revenue Code that regulates them, are exempt from paying taxes and can

transfer funds for religious, educational and similar purposes, both within and outside the country. Donors who declare such donations to U.S. tax authorities can reduce the amount of income tax they pay proportionate to their contribution.

Concerning Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the implications of this information are significant. It means the U.S. government and American taxpayers are indirectly subsidizing activities that were strongly opposed by the U.S. administrations up until recent elections. American presidents have repeatedly defined the settlements as an "obstacle to peace," yet hundreds of millions of dollars flow from the United States' backyard to support this very "obstacle."

Over the years, I raised this issue in my reporting time and again, but without any regularity. While I understood it was essential to have solid data on the support these settlements get from private citizens, I lacked the time and resources to conduct that research. And while information on financing the Israeli right was scattered, recent years have shown increased political attacks on the support that Israeli liberal and human rights organizations get from abroad. Members of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, promoted laws that would disable or harm such aid, much to the dismay of the international community. I was dazzled by the lack of information — and discussion — on the topic, and in 2015 I took on the mission of systematically exploring and analyzing this issue.

## How to conduct the investigation

My idea was fairly simple and consisted of a few stages:

1. Identify and pay records fees for files of Israeli-based nonprofits operating across the Green Line — the demarcation line between Israeli armies and its neighbors that, although dropped in 1967, still has political significance.

2. Identify and extract the data on the nonprofit groups' donors over the past five years. In Israel, nonprofits are required by law to provide the public and the Ministry of

Justice with information about any donation that exceeds 20,000 shekels (Israeli currency), or just over \$5,000.

3. Compare that information with forms that American nonprofits are required to make public. This way, I could potentially identify more grantees across the Green Line.

4. Conduct ground reporting in Jewish settlements and on U.S. soil to connect the dots between the beneficiaries and benefactors on both sides of the ocean.

To conduct such an enormous investigation, I needed time and financial support. I approached the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting with a grant request, telling the group I'd systematically examine files of key American nonprofits that funnel money to Israel. In my proposal, I mentioned some of my previous investigations. With a commitment from Haaretz to publish the findings, the Pulitzer Center generously agreed to support me.

I started working on the project in May 2015. First, I found dozens of Israeli-based nonprofits that primarily operated across the Green Line. I did this while traveling across the West Bank, with the help of sources, public records and the previous knowledge I acquired during years of reporting. I did a preliminary examination of the organizations' records using the website Guidestar, a database promoting transparency and accessibility to the conduct of nonprofits. I then paid for the files of the relevant organizations from Israel's Ministry of Justice. The information in such files is not structured in a way that allows computers to recognize characters or extract data automatically, so I read page after page and extracted relevant data into two kinds of documents. I put financial data (about beneficiaries, benefactors, salaries, etc.) into Excel. Other information, such as leads and ideas I gathered from my reporting, sources and nonprofits records, went into a Word document. I later used that document to decide which stories to pursue.

With data extracted from the Israeli files, I then identified 50 American organizations that forwarded money to Jewish settlements. To understand their full spectrum of support, I examined their 990 forms, which are publicly available on Guidestar, ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer and other sites that contain old 990s. Another useful resource, mainly for textual search across 990s, was CitizenAudit. Depending on the nonprofit and the state of its registration, I managed to collect additional records from some Secretary of State departments.

Data collection and ground reporting took about six months to conduct. I traced, for example, dollars that originated in New York City and ended up in the pockets of families of Jews who were convicted of committing violent crimes against Palestinians or helping



A deserted street with shuttered shops in the Palestinian city of Hebron. Some areas of the city are off-limits to Palestinians.

build illegal outposts in Gush Etzion, a cluster of Jewish settlements located in the West Bank, south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. That information was gathered from financial reports of one Israeli nonprofit. While that organization says it focuses on legal aid to "Israeli soldiers and civilians in distress," its reports suggested it also provides financial assistance to individuals who I later identified as family members of felons.

After diving deep into thousands of records, I found that millions of dollars arrived at settlements from mysterious tax-haven companies and that many of the Israeli-based nonprofits are not as transparent as required by Israeli law.

After inserting all the data into Excel, I finally came up with a concrete figure on the support that settlements were getting from the United States. Between 2009 and 2013, the revenues of these organizations exceeded \$280 million — or over one billion shekels. The combined expenses of the organizations amounted to more than \$267 million, some \$224 million of which were labeled as grants. Most of the money went to the occupied territories through Israeli nonprofit groups. With that data, I also learned the revenue of these organizations had increased virtually every year, with corresponding increases in the funds transferred to Israel.

The investigation was published as a series of articles starting in December 2015.

From the very beginning of this reporting, I was thinking about how to communicate my findings. I thought a lot about how to give the reader an engaging and interesting

experience and how to use social media to reach as wide an audience as possible. In order to do so, I filmed as I reported. I purchased a GoPro camera and mounted it on my car while driving through settlements. I used this footage to produce short, shareable clips later distributed via Twitter and Facebook. That way, people in New York, for example, could get a sense of what the streets of Hebron look like. To achieve a similar effect, I shared live recordings with Periscope during some of my visits to settlements. I used a DSLR camera to capture footage that I used for other clips, as well as a "Meet the Journalist" video produced by the Pulitzer Center. In this video, I explained the various stages of the investigation and its findings. I also took photos on my phone while reporting. These reporting methods helped me share the story — and reach different audiences — via Instagram and Tumblr.

When Haaretz published my findings, it led to immediate follow-ups by publications across the globe, including the Jordan Times and the Washington Post, where I also published an op-ed about the investigation. It prompted action by organizations opposing the settlement movement and by civilians who decided to take legal actions against the U.S. Treasury.

*Uri Blau is an Israeli investigative journalist with over 15 years experience writing about corruption and transparency issues. He is a member at the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and in 2014 was a fellow at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard. He writes for Haaretz and other outlets and is currently based in Washington, D.C.*

# COMPETITOR TO COLLABORATOR

Four newsrooms team up to background 60+ candidates running for Detroit School Board

M.L. Erick  
Fox 2 Detroit

**D**etroiters faced a daunting task last year: Just a few months after the state spent \$617 million bailing out the failing Detroit Public School system, voters would have to choose seven people to serve on a reconstituted school board from a pool of more than 60 candidates.

With no primary election to winnow the field, there was virtually no chance voters could make informed decisions. So Fox 2 Detroit, the Detroit Free Press, Bridge Magazine and WDET Detroit Public Radio teamed up to tell voters the kinds of things they deserve to know — the kinds of things candidates leave off their campaign literature.

Reporters faced the same problem as voters: too many candidates and not enough time. So, I proposed a collaboration with our erstwhile competitors. Each partner would bring some expertise to the consortium, but the greatest advantage would be combining forces to tackle a task that would have challenged a single newsroom even in the era before cutbacks thinned reporting ranks.

For two months, reporters ran the candidates through nearly two dozen checks, scrutinizing local, state and federal court records; property records; voting participation records and even a sex offender registry. They asked candidates to respond to a brief questionnaire listing their qualifications and priorities, requested photos and offered to post the candidates' resumes online. And they invited the candidates to share any problems in their own backgrounds that they thought the public should know. No candidate offered even a single shortcoming.

Nevertheless, the reporters uncovered many.

We found that more than half of the candidates had filed for bankruptcy, had a foreclosure or an eviction, or had lost a lawsuit over unpaid bills. One candidate, who was working as a teacher's aide in a K-8 school, had been arrested for soliciting a prostitute. Twice.

Our reporting also uncovered significant problems with eight of the 10 members of the old school board running for the new school board. Even though some of them had served for many years, we were the first to reveal that many of them had lengthy histories of financial and legal

## Detroit School Board Candidate Database

A team of reporters from the Free Press, Fox 2 News, Bridge magazine and WDET-FM (101.9) spent months performing background checks on the candidates for the board of education for the Detroit Public Schools Community District. Candidates were invited to submit their resumes and answer questions about their qualifications and goals for the school district. The reporters also investigated public records, running each candidate through background checks covering at least a dozen areas, ranging from courts to property records to campaign finance records to voting records.

The candidates were invited to respond to the team's findings.

Their policy positions, their problems and their responses were compiled in a database. You can find out what the candidates want you to know — and what the reporters found — by using the following search.

Search for candidates by name, or sort based on our findings in the categories below.

The screenshot shows a web interface for searching candidates. At the top is a text input field labeled 'Name'. Below it are four filter sections, each with a title and three radio button options: 'Yes', 'No', and 'Any'. The filters are: 'Bankruptcy', 'Forfeiture/foreclosure/judgments', 'Debt/eviction', and 'Questionnaire responses'. A blue 'Search' button is positioned at the bottom center of the form.

Reporters from the Free Press, Fox 2 News, Bridge magazine and WDET-FM teamed up to build an interactive database with information on candidates running for the board of the new Detroit Public Schools Community District.

problems. Among the revelations was that one former board member's only income was \$42 a month in child support and that her lawyer once disclosed that she had suffered a serious head injury in 2004 that "triggers periodic memory loss, other cognitive problems and a significant learning disability." When I asked the former board's president if this concerned him, he said: "I've been on the board for now 15 years, and from all of the people that I've served with, she's able to meet that same bench point."

We also learned that former board member Reverend David Murray — a perennial top vote-getter who legally changed his name to add "Reverend" — had big troubles. We revealed that Murray's social work license had once been suspended for four years and, later, six of his foster children were removed from his care for neglect. Even if they wanted to, three of those children couldn't vote for him. They are doing time for carjacking. (Murray denied neglecting the children and did not return messages seeking comment on the suspension of his social worker license.)

Finally, our review of the candidates' filing documents showed that three of the 63 candidates used the same address. When

questioned, one of the candidates — long-time school board member Lamar Lemmons — acknowledged that only two of the candidates really lived there. He said the third candidate, his sister-in-law, was homeless.

"This is her official residence," Lemmons told me. "But she physically stays someplace else."

We shared the findings of our unprecedented effort on air, online, on the front page, and in a searchable database. Our colleagues who monitor web traffic said it did well — even better than expected. I wasn't sure how widely disseminated our findings were until I heard callers to a talk radio program that wasn't affiliated with our partnership cite specific candidates and their problems and encourage other listeners to check out our database.

While it's hard to measure the impact of our stories, only a few candidates with a blemish on their record were elected to the new school board, and none of the most troubled candidates won. Lemmons was the only former board member to win a seat. His wife Georgia — the only candidate with the designation "teacher" next to her name on the ballot — also was elected.

But measured another way, the endeavor was

an unqualified success.

“Vetting so many candidates was a mammoth task,” said Ritu Sehgal, director of business and politics at the Free Press. “We felt partnering with other media organizations was the best way to research every candidate’s background.”

“Bridge had nothing to lose and a lot of clicks to gain with this project,” said Chastity Pratt, a reporter for Bridge Magazine. “Our readers love databases and we were able to give them one that we could never have created on our own.”

“At the same time, every opportunity to get our name out to a wider audience — i.e. the Free Press, Fox 2 and Detroit Public Radio audiences — is a boon for us,” she added. “Like everyone else, we are working to improve our penetration in Detroit and this project helped to do that.”

A key to the project’s success was the indisputable importance of the task at hand, as well as recognizing that no single news organization could handle it on their own.

“The new school board is considered crucial to the future of education in Detroit — we felt it was a public service to help voters narrow down their choices by examining all the candidates,” Sehgal said. “The partnership allowed us to get the job done faster.”

It also helped that almost everyone involved in the project knew each other, listened to each other, and respected and trusted each other.

These encouraging elements were reinforced at the first meeting, which ended with a fairly equal division of labor. Fox 2, which routinely investigates candidates, provided the template. Bridge Magazine, thanks to Pratt’s extensive history covering Detroit Public Schools, provided expertise and cogent commentary. Detroit Public Radio provided Sascha Raiyn, one of the brightest young reporters in town. And the Free Press, with the largest newsroom in Michigan, provided the most firepower and technical savvy — including building the interactive database each partner posted on their website.

Other key agenda items covered at the initial meeting included understanding each partner’s production issues and publication schedules; discussing, modifying, and ultimately adopting a proven methodology; and setting realistic deadlines (with a little flexibility factored in).

Even though we left that meeting with a pretty good idea of what we were doing and how to do it, the partners kept in constant contact and met regularly to compare notes and refine the process. I served as the team’s quarterback, monitoring progress, sharing concerns among the partners, conducting straw polls, updating the bosses on our progress, ordering the pizza and salad and providing Milk Duds. Together, we refined the process and modified some of our early decisions, such as limiting our research to the past 10 years and trying to establish a benchmark for which financial and legal problems were significant enough to share with the public.



Just a few months after the state of Michigan spent \$617 million bailing out the failing Detroit Public School system, voters had to choose seven people to serve on a reconstituted school board from a pool of more than 60 candidates.



Journalists from the Free Press, Fox 2 News, Bridge Magazine and WDET-FM meet to discuss their investigation into candidates running for Detroit School Board. Meetings generally included a discussion of obstacles the team had encountered and progress updates.

“I think the most important decision we made was to include every petty little thing we could verify,” Raiyn said. “We talked a lot about what should be excluded and why. Ultimately, the only thing we nixed were traffic tickets. It means the database includes things none of us would argue suggests a candidate has bad character or habits, but — more importantly — that we weren’t using our own value judgments to decide what readers, listeners and viewers should or want to know.”

At times, the constant cross-current of emails, texts and phone calls could be overwhelming. Our meetings generally began with discussions of obstacles we had encountered and updates on our progress. Despite the ground rules we established early on, we routinely found that the partners were using slightly different methodologies. Sometimes we tweaked our process, causing some partners to revisit tasks they thought they had completed. Other times, we teamed up to ensure that everyone was doing everything the same way. Rather than feeling like we had too many cooks, the partners seemed to appreciate having an extra set of eyes to look over their work. In some cases, partners who did not have access to subscription services like Lexis Nexis, PACER or local land records, borrowed another’s desk or a password. In almost every case, each newsroom gained new expertise and skills.

Crucially, we each had access to our master spreadsheet via Google Sheets, allowing everyone to learn about all the candidates as we proceeded. That helped identify potential stories. It also allowed us to include information we learned

about other partners’ candidates, with the proviso that if you added any info, you had to add your initials so we knew where it came from.

As in all reporting efforts — and especially special projects — our greatest enemy was time. The Nov. 8 election date provided a hard deadline — especially because we had to give each candidate a chance to respond to our findings, and we had to publish those findings far enough from the opening of the polls to be fair to the candidates.

We asked the candidates to respond to our email with an email. We also gave them an artificially early deadline and, after a short grace period, contacted everyone who did not respond. We contacted some candidates multiple times. To be as fair as possible, even if a candidate didn’t respond until days before publication, we included whatever information they sent us. We also agreed to publish their responses just as we received them — including misspellings, fractured grammar and punctuation mistakes — because they were running for an education post. Ultimately, more than half of the candidates responded with at least some of the information we requested.

While we are all proud of our effort, we still wish we had more time to dive deeper into some of the court and campaign finance records. Deadline issues — ranging from our respective deadlines to campaign finance reporting deadlines — left some of us feeling like our exhausting effort fell short of exhaustive.

“I do hate that we weren’t able to do a deep dive into campaign finances,” Raiyn said. “It was something we had our eye on from the start, but the data was released late in the campaign and too close to our deadline. Even though only a few candidates actually got donations, having that information would have helped clarify that our focus wasn’t on exposing ‘poor people problems,’ but on being comprehensive.”

Our project not only drew attention to one of the most important elections in recent Detroit history, but it also provided a one-stop shop for voters. Our searchable database ([bit.ly/DetroitCollaboration](http://bit.ly/DetroitCollaboration)) allowed users to look up candidates by name and by category. It also provided balance, because in addition to the “Bankruptcy” and “Debt/eviction” filters, users could easily see who answered our questionnaire and review those candidates’ qualifications and priorities.

*M.L. Elrick is a Pulitzer Prize, Emmy Award and IRE Medal winner who focuses on holding public officials accountable as the investigative reporter at Fox 2 (WJBK TV) in Detroit. He is a former investigative reporter at the Detroit Free Press and Local 4 (WDIV TV) in Detroit. He also worked at the Daily Southtown and Concord Monitor.*

# DIGGING UP DECEPTION

A tip about artificial turf sparks an investigation into faulty fields

Christopher Baxter  
NJ Advance Media

The first time I pitched my colleague Matthew Stanmyre a story about failing, artificial turf sports fields, I could see his eyes glaze over a bit. He humored me and suggested we take a look at a few fields in New Jersey, but his expression betrayed him. “Fake grass. How boring.”

We soon learned, however, that those little blades of grass on fields in nearly every corner of the U.S. were big business, a \$1.2-billion-plus industry that thrived on tax dollars.

And we learned the leading company, FieldTurf, had deceived the public for years and sold its high-end turf, known as Duraspine, to towns and schools across the country though the product was falling apart and falling short of its own marketing claims.

From the start of our investigation, “The 100-Yard Deception,” the challenge was clear: how to guide readers through thousands of words about the technical world of fake grass and make that experience memorable and impactful enough to cause outrage and change.

Our reporting began in June with a tip about failing fields in states across the country. To be honest, I didn’t give it much thought and set it aside. But a few days later, I returned to the message, began to read about the fields and took the idea to Matt.

In the following days, we researched federal court records on past cases involving FieldTurf. We found out transcripts of testimony from one important 2011 case, in which FieldTurf sued the supplier of Duraspine, were set to be released in a few months. Knowing no other reporters had read them, we called the court and requested advance copies.

Inside the hundreds of pages of testimony, we realized there might be a much bigger story at play: What did FieldTurf officials know about the problems with their turf, and when did they know it?

After six months of reporting, that picture became much clearer.

For years, taxpayers had been sold a dream — the same, stunning artificial sports field used by the pros, right in their



Once lush and standing up, fibers on many Duraspine fields now look like these at Highland Park High School in New Jersey. In some areas, fibers have sheared off.

neighborhood park or high school football stadium. Though it cost more than any other turf — at \$300,000 to \$500,000 a pop, sales contracts show — they were promised it would far outlast anything else, owing to its revolutionary durability.

That was the sales pitch made thousands of times over, in communities in nearly every state. From 2005 to 2012, when the Duraspine line of turf was discontinued, company records show FieldTurf sold 1,428 fields in the U.S. for an estimated \$570 million.

Most of that was taxpayer money. And though FieldTurf’s marketing promised customers the turf would last 10 or more years, many of the fields were failing long before they should have.

Over seven years, the investigation found, the company and its executives earned ballooning profits off a product that, according to extensive internal correspondence, was falling apart and would not live up to marketing and advertising claims.

Records show executives repeatedly raised alarm inside the company, and yet FieldTurf kept customers in the dark about the problems, deceived some into thinking the deterioration was normal, tried to cover up their internal discussions and slow-footed complaints.

In addition, the company never changed its marketing and advertising campaign for the turf.

For their part, officials for FieldTurf — now a division of French flooring maker Tarkett, a publicly traded company — rejected accusations that they misled or defrauded customers as “completely false” and emphasized that the problem does not compromise player safety.

Company officials said that the problem has not affected the “significant majority” of Duraspine fields and that failures came primarily in places like California and Texas, where intense ultraviolet radiation from sunlight caused the product to weaken and break down after only a few years of use.

And FieldTurf officials said there was an

“important difference” between normal wear and tear and a defect, pointing out that all turf fields would eventually break down over time as a result of ultraviolet radiation, just like anything else made of plastic, such as outdoor furniture.

The frequency of use and the quality of maintenance both play an important role, they said.

To maximize credibility and transparency in an era of declining trust in media, we relied only on primary source documents to build the investigation and did not include any information attributed to anonymous sources. As part of that effort, we filed 40 public records requests using freedom of information laws in New Jersey and several other states; reviewed more than 5,000 pages of insider company records, emails, court filings and testimony; and interviewed dozens of coaches, officials and current and former FieldTurf employees.

In addition, we worked for months to persuade reluctant sources to overcome a fear of retaliation by FieldTurf — which has a history of legal action against its critics — and provide internal records exposing the company’s actions. After months of phone calls and hundreds of miles of travel, many cooperated and provided documents central to the investigation’s findings.

While our commitment to primary source documents posed a significant obstacle in the reporting, it contributed to the strong response after publication. Taxpayers now potentially stand to recoup millions of dollars from seven lawsuits filed in New Jersey, California and Minnesota as a result of the story. Five of those lawsuits are seeking class-action certification.

Three days after publication, the public school system in Newark, New Jersey filed a statewide class-action lawsuit against FieldTurf, alleging it violated the state Consumer Fraud Act by concealing knowledge of the turf’s problems and by failing to change marketing and advertising claims. The school system had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in FieldTurf’s Duraspine product.

At the same time, the New Jersey School Boards Association announced it would help local districts coordinate legal action. About a week later, the borough of Carteret filed a national class-action lawsuit, seeking relief for all affected customers in the U.S.

Sources told NJ Advance Media that authorities in New Jersey and New York were reviewing FieldTurf’s business practices, and the New Jersey attorney general has called the allegations “deeply troubling.” State legislative leaders condemned FieldTurf’s actions, and a Senate panel questioned FieldTurf CEO Eric Dalieri for more than 90 minutes during a hearing in January.

The spokeswoman for the panel’s



These deteriorated Duraspine fibers show how they crack vertically along the center “spine” and eventually split into hair-like strands in a process called fibrillation.

chairwoman said after the hearing that she intended to write the state Attorney General’s Office requesting an investigation. In addition, U.S. Sens. Cory Booker and Robert Menendez have written the Federal Trade Commission requesting a national probe, but FieldTurf has said the FTC does not plan to pursue the matter.

Much of the reaction from readers centered around the investigation’s unique presentation. Using the readymag.com software, a team of reporters, photographers, videographers, animation artists and web specialists built the most engaging and immersive reader experience in our history (<http://fieldturf.nj.com>). We published a prologue video four days before publication to build buzz and audience for the story and then published parts one, two and three on the following Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. By Monday, we were already publishing reaction from interested groups and state lawmakers.

The online presentation seamlessly blended audio and visual elements — including still photography and videos — as well as GIFs, animations and static graphics to complement and enhance (and not simply repeat) the text of the investigation. The presentation included our most extensive use yet of drone footage, captured by our FAA-certified pilots. The technology proved to be an invaluable asset in capturing the conditions of local fields. With that footage, Matt and I used historical aerial still imagery from Google Earth to trace field deterioration over time.

The presentation also included a comments forum to discuss the findings, a state-by-state lookup tool for readers to find affected fields near them and an email sign-up tool that resulted in a database of nearly 600 people — from casual readers to government investigators — wanting to be alerted of follow-up stories.

While Matt and I conducted all of the reporting for this investigation, we partnered with our sister publications, the Associated Press and NPR’s Only a Game — a syndicated,

narrative sports radio show produced by WBUR in Boston — to ensure our locally produced investigation reached a national audience and caused nationwide action. And the story spread far and wide.

We coordinated closely with the AP weeks before publication and prepared a separate, truncated version to be sent out nationally and to targeted state wires. A similar version was prepared for the other 11 regional news organizations in 10 states that make up the Advance Publications family, and those stories went live simultaneously with the AP release.

In addition, we worked for months before publication with Only a Game, which produced an 18-minute, narrative radio segment tracing the evolution of the investigation and its findings. That segment aired on more than 260 affiliate NPR stations across the country the weekend after publication, capping a week of sustained national audience and attention.

All of that was paired with an extensive, seven-day social strategy — including quote cards, social videos, animations and a Facebook Live event — across multiple platforms. Matt and I also conducted several post-publication interviews with other news outlets and kept tabs as localized follow-ups to our work popped up across the country, from Georgia to California.

While there had been a handful of mostly local stories about the failure of FieldTurf fields nationwide, none challenged the company’s narrative that it had been ignorant of the problem until customers began complaining in large numbers in late 2009 and 2010. As our investigation found, that position had been reflected for years in letters to customers and statements from the company, including many to the media as part of local stories about failing fields.

Those statements routinely mischaracterized the extent of the problem and how many fields had been affected. “The 100-Yard Deception” turned this narrative on its head, showing the company and its executives had known for years about the problems with the turf but continued to push their high-priced product to taxpayers across the U.S.

These kinds of stories — looking at obscure areas where huge amounts of public money flow — prove over and over again to be fruitful areas of investigation. Waste, fraud and abuse cut across political fault lines, and our readers respond in force when we fulfill one of our most basic missions, which is to be a watchdog for the already overburdened taxpayer.

As one reader put it, “Small towns like ours need ‘watch dogs’ like you.”

*Christopher Baxter is an investigative reporter and editor for NJ Advance Media.*

# A LEGACY OF LEAD

Exposing toxic lead levels in National Guard armories across the country

Rob Davis  
The Oregonian

After an Oregon National Guard armory in suburban Portland suddenly closed because of lead contamination in early 2015, our reporter there did what good watchdogs do: She asked for the inspection report justifying the closure.

When that document landed, details popped off the pages.

Dangerous levels of lead dust blanketed a shelf holding children's toys and a floor where infants crawled. Lead from what should have been a well-maintained indoor shooting range had engulfed the armory, a building used by citizen soldiers and the community alike.

Inspectors had told the Guard to keep the public out. Our reporting quickly revealed that the warning had been temporarily ignored. Officials had allowed children — those most susceptible to lead's irreversible, brain-damaging effects — to attend community events for weeks.

The Oregon Guard struggled to give us clear answers about why the testing had happened, when it received the results, and why its leaders had delayed action. Just as troubling was the fact that similar testing was underway in armories across the state, and military leaders seemed none too eager to receive the results. They weren't taking any precautions, despite what had already been found.

We wrote an initial story to warn the public, then quickly decided to dig deeper. We wanted to know whether this was an isolated occurrence or part of a nationwide pattern.

I began the quest knowing that our editor, Mark Katches, would want me to answer these key questions:

- Would we expose a hidden problem?
- Could we quantify the problem?
- Could we humanize the problem?
- Would we hold people accountable?
- Would people care?

My initial research showed it was hidden. No one had looked at the deteriorating state of the National Guard's armories.

We could quantify it. The Guard had more than 1,000 armories nationwide — and all of them were supposed to be frequently inspected for lead hazards.

Humanity? Check. People in big cities

and small towns relied on the buildings as community gathering places. Armories are part of the fabric of America. Elementary school children hold sleepovers on their floors.

We knew we could use public records to determine which Oregon military leaders had known about the problem. That took care of accountability.

With each passing day of reporting, I could not believe what I was discovering.

I cared — I trusted our readers would, too.

So, after spending a couple of weeks doing preliminary reporting, I pitched our editors, sending them a memo outlining what I knew about the problem, the possible national scope and what my reporting plan was.

Go for it, they said.

## Tracking down inspection reports

I started my quest to get inspection reports from every armory in the country by firing off a FOIA to the National Guard Bureau, the central agency that had conducted them. The bureau said that, due to FOIA backlogs, it would release the reports — in a year. (Nearly two years later, it still hasn't sent a single page.)

We didn't want to wait. So, I began the laborious process of filing records requests with every National Guard unit in the country. Because each unit answers to a governor and the president, I had to send requests to both the state Guard (using state public records laws) and to the federal officials in each state (using the Freedom of Information Act).

The records began trickling in within two months. They confirmed what we suspected: This wasn't just an Oregon problem.

Across the country, inspectors had found lead dust at alarming levels in armory gyms, drill halls, conference rooms, hallways, stairwells, kitchens, pantries, offices, bathrooms and a day care center.

The neurotoxin had contaminated coffee makers, ice makers, refrigerators, dishes, soldiers' uniforms, children's toys, medical supplies, water bottles, carpets, soda machines, bookshelves, fans, furniture, heaters, basketball backboards and a boxing bag.

Even a deli meat slicer.

The lead dust came from each armory's indoor shooting range. Lead in every bullet's

explosive primer, which ignites gunpowder, vaporized with each strike of the hammer. More lead flaked off as slugs careened down the barrel and hit their target. The neurotoxin spread throughout the buildings by foot and through the air.

In all, inspections showed lead had been discovered in 424 armories across the country in the past four years, 90 percent of the buildings inspected. In nearly 200 armories, lead spread beyond the indoor firing range.

The records revealed that Guard officials had ignored repeated warnings from their safety teams across the country. Every two years, inspectors would survey an armory, flag dangerous lead levels, then frequently return to find that nothing had been fixed.

One inspector told me he wouldn't take his own child to an armory.

Yet across the country, thousands of kids were frequenting the buildings for Cub Scout meetings, baptisms and baby showers. In Oregon, we found that military leaders knew the buildings were dirty but kept them open, preserving millions of dollars in rental income.

## Stonewalled by the National Guard

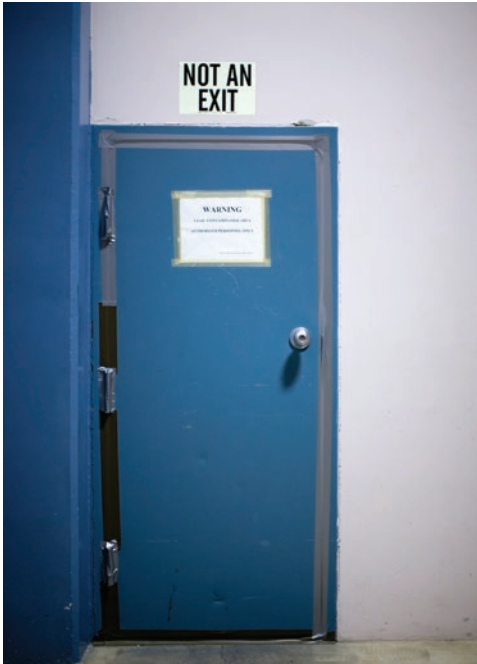
The failure to act was systemic. The Pentagon's top watchdog had alerted the Guard in a 1998 audit that lead was spreading into areas used by children in armories throughout the country. Soldiers and families were unnecessarily exposed, the audit warned. When I reached the auditor who wrote the report, she couldn't believe the problem still hadn't been fixed.

As the records piled up during my 18-month investigation, which we called "Toxic Armories," the National Guard wouldn't answer questions. For more than six months, they told me their response was in the works. Hang tight, their public affairs staff said three months before our story published, answers are in the "final review stage."

I still haven't received them.

Yet behind the scenes, interviews and documents revealed that a flurry of activity was unfolding in anticipation of my investigation. The Guard alerted state units to my queries and sent out talking points. Before we published a single word, the Guard ordered lead testing in





Left: Duct tape was used to seal the old firing range inside the National Guard armory in Coos Bay, Oregon. The National Guard halted community events in toxic armories across the country after an investigation by The Oregonian/OregonLive revealed that lead from indoor firing ranges contaminated hundreds of the buildings. Right: The former armory in Helena, Montana was converted into office space. State workers in the building were evacuated in 2013 after inspectors discovered lead dust in the ventilation system.

more than 1,000 armories nationwide.

Far from being concerned that the Guard was moving to fix the problem before publication, I began filing requests for the results of those inspections, too.

Some states tried to get ahead of us. I gave Michigan National Guard leaders a deadline to respond to questions shortly after soldiers there were activated to distribute water in Flint. The Michigan Guard responded by sending a news release to media outlets across the state announcing that it had closed its armories to the public and offered blood testing to hundreds of soldiers. The announcement landed a few hours before the deadline I'd set.

Armories in six other states would eventually shut their doors to clean up lead hazards before we published our series in December 2016.

### Localizing the problem

I wanted to understand how the problem had gotten so bad in our own backyard, so I drilled down on Oregon's armories and their oversight. I had to petition Oregon's attorney general to force the release of emails of the official responsible for armory maintenance. The state military department, upon being ordered to produce the records, told me it would cost a puzzling \$16,000. I argued that down to \$1,300 and paid it, received the records, then got handed another bill for \$3,400 for the unexpected amount of time it took a lawyer to redact the documents.

We refused to pay.

One email between two top state military officials discussing my request showed why Guard leaders had been so reluctant to give me

the documents. "We will definitely be open to criticism," one official had written. "It appears that for at least 10 months we did nothing."

I sent almost a dozen records requests to the Oregon National Guard, yielding records that showed military officials deciding to cover up how long they'd known about the problem. They'd kept minutes at the meeting where they agreed not to tell the public everything they knew. Refrain from using the word "contaminated," one military leader urged his colleagues.

While I waited for records to arrive, I familiarized myself with lead sampling methods and offered free lead testing to the owners of old Oregon armories. Two accepted. I carefully vetted my methodology with industrial hygienists and lead risk assessors, sampled for lead throughout the buildings and sent the tests off to an accredited lab.

The new owners had thought the armories, now community event centers, were clean. They weren't. "I figured we'd find trace amounts down there," the manager of one building told me, "but not heavy lead contamination."

Many workers in armories had no idea about the hazards they faced. But I found state employees in an old Montana armory who had been under medical monitoring while they worked in the toxic building. They couldn't explain why their blood lead levels crept higher and higher the longer they worked in the building. After a decade in the armory, testing showed the ventilation system was filled with lead-laced dust bunnies the size of tangerines. The workers willingly shared their stories of unexplained illnesses, adding the humanity we'd sought.

### Immediate impact

More than 15 journalists at The Oregonian/OregonLive rallied around the "Toxic Armories" project, which netted more than 100,000 page views along with video explainers that earned more than 200,000 Facebook and YouTube views.

As I researched and pulled documents together, I knew readers' first question would be: What about my local armory? Our data team and I invested hundreds of hours building a database to answer that, geocoding every armory in the country, manually entering their test results and building an interactive online map that we populated with hundreds of inspection reports.

When the investigation published, we used DocumentCloud to share more than 16,000 pages of records, urging reporters to download them to tell their own stories. Journalists in 12 states did.

The impact was immediate. Oregon's governor called the state's handling of armories "absolutely unacceptable." Oregon's bipartisan Congressional delegation called for oversight hearings.

Four days after publication, the National Guard, which still will not respond to my phone calls or emails, ordered every contaminated armory in the country to be closed to the public. And the Guard agreed to pay — potentially tens of millions of dollars — for them to be cleaned up.

*Rob Davis reports about the environment on the watchdog team at The Oregonian in Portland. The Maryland native previously worked at the innovative nonprofit Voice of San Diego. His reporting on National Guard armories won a 2016 Scripps Howard Award.*

# Lessons from Electionland, a social newsgathering experiment

Electionland was likely one of the largest social newsgathering operations ever performed over the course of one day. More than 600 students and experienced journalists brought together all the best thinking, practice, and tools related to this new field to monitor and verify social content around indicators of voter suppression on Election Day.

ProPublica, Google News Lab, Univision, WNYC, the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, USA TODAY Network and First Draft News worked together to verify social posts with supporting information from datasets and boots-on-the-ground reporting. With 1,000 people watching the vote on Election Day, we were confident that if millions of people voted illegally, we would have seen it.

My role, and that of First Draft, was to lead the journalists, known as “Feeders,” who would be doing the newsgathering. I sat in the CUNY hub in New York and coordinated an operation that involved 650 students in 14 journalism schools across the country. Essentially, I was the assignment editor — but for one day and with a lot of journalists working on a single story.

It has never been more important for journalists and newsrooms to think about how they go about authenticating information from digital, third-party sources. It's easy to get caught up in the moment during a breaking news event or when you find something potentially explosive, but that is exactly the time to stop, think and fall back on a process that works for you and your organization.

Right now, there is no single tool for monitoring or verifying social media that can work as quickly, accurately and thoroughly as a set of human eyes belonging to a journalist with editorial instincts.

For a project like this, where we needed to identify any incident that prevented people from casting their votes, we needed to see everything we possibly could. We needed to see it free of an algorithm that promoted posts due to reasons like popularity, shares or momentum. We also needed to do it systematically, catching as much as possible — as it happened — and in a way that allowed us to check back if we had any suspicion that we had missed something.

Ultimately, we did this by performing thousands of manual searches, using carefully worked out keywords and Boolean searches.

To do this, we split up certain “signals” that ProPublica had identified as possible indicators of voter fraud or suppression. These included: long lines, voter intimidation, issues with machines, requests for identification, polling place location

changes and the issuing of provisional ballots. We then built long lists of all the words people might use if they were experiencing these problems and posting to social media. The next stage was to create Boolean search strings with all of these words for each social network, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

We also employed tools that use algorithms to find content that our manual work might have missed.

Algorithmic tools such as Krzana and Datamir allowed journalists to enter keywords and then wait for the technology to bring up related posts. We also used tools like Acusense, which uses artificial intelligence to find content based on what is actually in a photo or video by analyzing it, rather than searching keywords in captions or file names.

For the manual search strings, we used Facebook Signal to help find Instagram posts by location and Facebook posts that related to voting issues. Tweetdeck was where we set up multiple columns of different search strings and used geofencing to return results relevant to the areas that an individual was supposed to be monitoring.

By creating these search strings and using the tools in this systematic way, we created a monitoring system that everyone worked in. This standardization was essential because you can't do a dry run for Election Day. Any tweaks to this system needed to be rolled out quickly. In New York, we had stand-up meetings every two hours to communicate the latest changes and check in with partners who might be struggling to keep up because of an increase in reports. These meetings also helped us identify anyone who had additional capacity to chip in on different parts of the process.

What allowed us to turn social newsgathering into actionable data? Check, a platform to help journalists collaborate on verification, allowed every “Feeder” to log every report and its verification status, and pass that information to a team of “Catchers” for analysis, double-checking and, eventually, sharing with reporters. Check also worked directly with our enormous Slack team to create alerts that could be picked up by all parties.

Generally, open communication channels between different desks and staff are incredibly important when it comes to working with social newsgathering. The more eyes that see a piece of content, the more chances you have of identifying whether you have seen it somewhere else.

We also standardized the verification process so that if any of the more than 600 journalists working on this project claimed that something had been

authenticated, everyone would know what that meant.

Separating what a source says from the content they are sharing is a key part of any verification process. This means that you never just rely on the source's word as it relates to what he or she witnessed and perhaps captured. It isn't about a lack of honesty or misinformation — the truth is that we sometimes misunderstand what we see and jump to conclusions.

Here's what that standardized verification looked like for Electionland:

**Type of issue:** A quick categorization of the type of issue that was discovered.

**Originality:** We needed to know that this was the original post and not a scrape or someone re-sharing information.

**Location:** If the post wasn't tagged with a confirmable location, then other searches had to be performed to place the incident.

**Date/time:** Feeders converted everything into Eastern Time before submitting. This was important because social platforms date content using different criteria.

**Contact info:** If a Feeder had communicated with a source, we needed it noted for any follow-ups.

Using these processes for newsgathering and verification, we were able to provide reporters across the country with verified, actionable information for them to report out very quickly. We were also able to say with a strong degree of certainty that there were no widespread issues of voter suppression or fraud.

Many lessons were learned that day and are already being applied to new and exciting projects, but for me, the key takeaways relate to the issue of trust. Trust the processes and standards that you build beforehand and stick to them even when everything else around you is going crazy. Finally, trust your team. With a project this big, you can't be everywhere at all times. You have to trust the people you work with and ask that they trust you, too.

*Fergus Bell is a journalist and news consultant. He is an experienced editor and leading expert in digital newsgathering and the verification of user-generated content. In 2015 he founded Dig Deeper Media, where he advises broadcasters and publishers on social and digital newsgathering, newsroom innovation and workflows.*



Fergus Bell  
Dig Deeper Media

On the IRE website: Fergus Bell walks through the key steps in the verification process.

# Failed care

How a single death sparked a yearlong investigation into regional jails and inmate medical care in Virginia

Gary Harki • The Virginian-Pilot

In August 2015, Jamycheal Mitchell died in a Hampton Roads Regional Jail cell with feces on the walls and urine on the floor. The mentally ill 24-year-old had been arrested in April for stealing \$5 worth of snacks from a convenience store he mistakenly thought was owned by his father. He went into the jail mentally ill but physically healthy. He left in a body bag.

Mitchell's family claimed he lost about 40 pounds during his stay in the regional jail. His official cause of death was heart problems and weight loss. Mitchell was ruled mentally incompetent to stand trial and ordered by a judge to a state mental hospital to have his competency restored. There, Mitchell would have been treated for his mental illness, something the jail was ill-equipped to do.

But the order wouldn't do him any good. It was first lost in the mail and then tossed in a forgotten drawer by a hospital clerk until after his death.

What happened sparked outrage but no immediate rush for change. It would take a closer examination by The Virginian-Pilot and other reporters of the services and systems that led to his confinement — and another seemingly preventable death a year later — for change to come.

## The systems that failed

Mitchell's death did not result from the actions of any one person. From the beginning, it was apparent that many people could have stepped in and didn't.

Telling that story meant understanding how several state systems worked: the jail where he died, the court system that ordered him to be treated, and the state mental health system that was supposed to care for him. The actions — or inactions — of the people in those systems, we found, ultimately led to Mitchell's death.

The Hampton Roads Regional Jail houses inmates from five cities in the southeastern corner of Virginia: Norfolk, Portsmouth, Chesapeake, Hampton and Newport News. It was designed to take the sickest inmates from jails in those localities. If someone in Norfolk's local jail had terminal cancer, it was a good bet that they would end up in the regional jail. No other jail in the state served that purpose.

Many of the region's mentally ill ended up incarcerated there. A few phone calls to local mental health advocates and state officials made one thing abundantly clear — there simply weren't enough community services for the mentally ill. That meant more and more people in need of help simply weren't getting it.



Jamycheal Mitchell, a mentally ill man who wasted away in a cell at Hampton Roads Regional Jail in August 2015 after being locked up for taking about \$5 worth of snacks from a convenience store.

From the time of Mitchell's death in August 2015 through the spring of 2016, I wrote about the interconnected systems and kept up with a stream of reports from state agencies on his death. During that time, I was getting a lot of calls, emails and letters from inmates in the jail and their relatives. Some asked me about the conditions in the jail and others offered bits of information, much of it difficult, if not impossible, to verify.

Still, I kept their names, phone numbers and details about their situations. I wasn't sure when, but I thought it might come in handy.

Jail officials didn't release much information about what had happened in Mitchell's case, and only a cursory death investigation

was initially conducted by the local police department. There was little oversight of the jail, something that the state legislature would need to correct. While reports from Virginia's Department of Behavioral Health and Development Services and the Office of the State Inspector General were released, the jail itself did not release an internal report about what happened. The superintendent was not required to release such information to the media. A board governed the jail, but it met only a handful of times each year. Aside from the sheriffs of the five cities that fed into it, most of its members had no experience running a correctional facility.



The cell at Hampton Roads Regional Jail where 24-year-old Jamycheal Mitchell was found dead in August 2015. He had been charged with petty theft and was awaiting trial. Another inmate now has the cell.

### Going beyond a single death

After researching state code and conducting a number of interviews, it became clear that no entity in state government had the power to investigate the regional jail's staff. Police could investigate whether a crime had been committed, but no state official had the authority to determine whether or not the jail was run properly.

To find out how the jail operated, I needed information from another source. I knew that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had pulled its inmates out of the jail in 2014. Board members and officials in the regional jail had said the reason was that ICE had decided to house those inmates in its facility in another part of the state. I started digging deeper.

The Pilot had written about Sandra Kenley, a 52-year-old ICE inmate who died in the jail back in 2005. I researched her death and also sent Freedom of Information Act requests to the jail and ICE. It turned out Kenley's death had been one of a number of deaths nationwide that sparked reforms in how ICE held inmates. I found congressional testimony about Kenley's death and the changes it sparked.

Using a list of ICE detention facilities I found on the department's website, I was able to analyze the data and show that even after its reforms, ICE still



Henry Clay Stewart Jr. died in the Hampton Roads Regional Jail in early August 2016 after filing a number of emergency grievances asking for medical help. His last grievance was filed just two days before he died.

Virginia. "The Hampton Roads Regional Jail and the insufficient medical services there, those are the common links in the chain. This story tells us this has been going on not two weeks, not a year, but since 2007 or before."

Before I could finish the ICE story, another man died under questionable circumstances inside the jail. Henry Clay Stewart Jr., 60, was locked up for

used about 82 percent of the 77 facilities it had for long-term detention — but not the Hampton Roads Regional Jail. ICE officials admitted on the record that they hadn't pulled out just to relocate inmates.

"There's a chain that links all of these deaths together," said the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of

a probation violation. His repeated requests for medical help were denied, according to a man incarcerated there at the time and a jail document provided by Stewart's family. Almost a year after Mitchell's death, Stewart died in the same jail.

When I got a call from Stewart's sister one night, I put the ICE story on hold and quickly set up an interview with her the next morning. She had a copy of a grievance form her brother had filled out.

"I have blacked out two times in less than 24 hours," Stewart wrote on the Aug. 4 form. "I keep asking to go to the emergency room. ... I can't hold water down or food."

Two days after filling out the form, he was dead. Because of my previous reporting, Stewart's sister said she knew to call me. Her account, accounts of other inmates in jail with Stewart, and the grievance form helped me pull together a narrative of how he died.

The day after the story was published, Gov. Terry McAuliffe called for reform, and the Virginia attorney general asked the U.S. Justice Department to investigate the Hampton Roads Regional Jail, which it agreed to do in December. Within a month, the jail's superintendent and assistant superintendent had resigned or retired.

What made the story possible was consistently reading and listening to stories from people in the



# Solitary — for two

How reporters at The Marshall Project and NPR uncovered a common, but hidden, prison practice

Christie Thompson • The Marshall Project

It started with an off-hand comment. During a conversation about solitary confinement in Illinois state prisons, a prisoner rights attorney qualified that when he talked about “solitary,” that included the hundreds that were double-celled: locked down with another person for up to 24 hours a day.

That image stuck in my head long after the interview. It seemed like the only thing worse than being held in complete isolation was being trapped in a small cell with a possibly dangerous stranger. And for all the coverage I had done of solitary confinement in prisons across the country, I had never read *that* story. Where did this kind of prison punishment fit within the national conversation on “solitary” confinement?

Our interviews with some of the top psychologists and researchers who focused on solitary confinement confirmed that “double-celling” was widespread, undercovered, and in many ways more damaging than total isolation.

I turned to Nexis News and Google, looking for local news stories of one cellmate killing the other in “solitary.” The many euphemisms of keeping people in a cell for 24 hours a day — restrictive housing, administrative segregation, special housing, etc. — made this research particularly challenging. And prison homicides are rarely front-page news. But a little digging unearthed numerous cases across the country.

## A string of deaths in Illinois

I created a spreadsheet of each killing I found in the clips with details like the names of both cellmates, the date, the state and prison where it happened, what details I knew of the case already, and whether the alleged perpetrator had been charged, convicted or sentenced. (Many of these cases had not resulted in charges years after the alleged deaths. There wasn’t much pressure to prosecute, given that the defendant was already in prison and the cases garnered little media and public attention.) Laying it out, I realized that there were four deaths that occurred within less than



A double-solitary cell at Menard Correctional Center in Illinois.

two years in the same state prison in Illinois — Menard Correctional Center. And unlike cases in many other states, these killings had been fully adjudicated, which meant all of the records and evidence were public.

We partnered with Joe Shapiro, an investigative reporter for NPR, whom I had previously worked with while reporting on solitary confinement. We submitted a FOIA request to the Randolph County State’s Attorney’s Office for the prosecutor’s full case file for each death. The most recent case was a goldmine of information: prison disciplinary histories, incident reports, depositions of officers, videotaped confessions, crime scene photos and diagrams. Those images drove home how cramped these cells were in a way that no written description could.

The documents for all four cases told a disturbing story of a prison that ignored inmates’ warnings and

regularly housed dangerous inmates together in cells smaller than a parking space. In the case of David Sesson, one of the main characters in our story, prison records show that he had tried to strangle one cellmate with a television cord. He was tired of sharing a cell, he told prison officials, and he threatened to hurt his next cellmate. Eleven days later he moved to a new cell, and within just a few hours, he strangled and killed his new cellmate.

Sesson ultimately pled guilty to the murder and received 40 years in prison, on top of his life sentence.

Through letters, we reached out to other inmates at Menard and in prisons across the country to understand what life was like inside these cells. The Uptown People’s Law Center, a small legal nonprofit based in Chicago, was invaluable in finding current and former inmates. Many spoke of intense paranoia and unexplainable rage. Some said it was so

Photo courtesy of the Illinois State Police

cramped they could barely move.

We received approval from two of the men convicted of killing their cellmates to come to Illinois, interview them in person and record it for our NPR segment. After months of letters back and forth, much of which was us jumping through hoops created by prison personnel, the Illinois Department of Corrections denied our interview outright and said they could not tell us why. We tried to appeal all the way to the head of the department, and enlisted our top editors' help, but the answer remained the same. Ultimately, we had to rely on letters with the two men and Sesson's videotaped confession that we obtained through FOIA. We still traveled to Menard and met with an official from the corrections officers' union, the prosecutor and the defense attorney tasked with representing these men.

Then it was time to find the families of the men who had been killed (NPR's research librarian Barbara Van Woerkom was invaluable in tracking down contact information). Two of the victims' families lived minutes away from each other on the South Side of Chicago. At that point, we knew far more about their brothers' deaths than they did — prison officials and prosecutors had not conveyed many details of what had happened. They were both trying, emotional interviews that highlighted the true toll of Illinois' policies.

As Debra Simmons, the sister of David Sesson's victim, Bernard Simmons, put it, "they turned the key, and my brother walked to his own execution."

### Severe punishment in Pennsylvania

As we reported out what had happened in this state prison in Illinois, we wanted to understand how double-celling was used in the federal system. Research and local news clips brought us to the "Special Management Unit" at the Lewisburg penitentiary in Pennsylvania, a high security federal prison that is almost entirely double-celled solitary confinement. We found the Lewisburg Prison Project, a two-person prisoner rights nonprofit. Like the Uptown People's Law Center, this local organization knew the prison's entire ecosystem. They were able to connect us with current and former prisoners, family members, and sometimes even current and former staff. Meeting with them and their board of directors was our first step.

What they told us — claims that were supported by dozens of prisoner interviews, lawsuits, two government audits and staff — shocked us and our editors. When an inmate tries to refuse a cell assignment in the SMU, out of fear for their safety, they are locked in hard restraints for hours, days and sometimes even weeks until they relent and take whatever cellmate they are given. In some situations, inmates reported being "four-pointed" — splayed out and immobilized on a concrete block with each limb bolted down. One inmate, a man named Sebastian Richardson, had been restrained for 28 days in such conditions. Details of his experience were documented in a federal lawsuit that is still winding its way through the courts.

We turned to PACER to understand how widespread these complaints were. We found



Inside a double cell in the Special Management Unit at Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary. Two inmates share this space for nearly 24 hours a day.

dozens of prisoner lawsuits, most of them prose, describing an almost identical policy: refuse a cellmate, end up in restraints applied so tightly they caused scarring. Inmates testifying in a trial involving a murder in the SMU made the same claim in court, as did dozens more men in two separate government audits of the prison. From one public defender, we obtained video of these restraints being applied. We met with the man at the center of the videos, who had recently been released from federal prison. He still had scars on his wrists and stomach from where the chains had been cinched.

We filed FOIA requests for any documents related to the deaths of Jimmy Barker and Gerardo Arche-Felix, two SMU inmates who had been killed by their cellmates the previous year. Those documents showed that both men were classified by Lewisburg officials as having no mental health issues before they were double-celled, despite a documented history of mental illness and psychosis.

We also sought out current and former prison employees. LinkedIn and Facebook were useful here: You can simply type "USP Lewisburg" into Facebook and dozens of names pop up. Most weren't interested in talking. But the few that were confirmed what we had been told. Lewisburg was a dangerous place filled with dangerous men, they said. If inmates refused orders, officers often used restraints until they complied.

After months of waiting and negotiations, we also obtained two years of incident reports from the SMU and assault data. We found that the rate of assault at Lewisburg was six times higher than at federal prisons overall. And the incident reports helped us understand what living at Lewisburg was like for inmates — a place where you could be beaten, stabbed or even killed by the man sleeping in the bunk below.

### Impact

Our stories made waves in individual cases as

well as on an institutional level. Due in large part to our reporting on the murders at Menard, a federal lawsuit was filed against the prison on behalf of Debra Simmons, whose brother Bernard Simmons was murdered. The case is ongoing. Our questions about the death of Gerardo Arche-Felix jumpstarted the district attorney's investigation into his case.

Our investigation into Lewisburg prompted 37 human and civil rights groups — including the ACLU, Human Rights Watch, the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the Southern Poverty Law Center — to call on then-U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch to investigate torture at Lewisburg. (The Department of Justice said they were reviewing the letter, and had not responded by the time Lynch left office). Several of those groups have continued to push for more accountability at Lewisburg under the Trump administration.

Prisons remain some of the most opaque of public institutions and our reporting required persistence, patience and time. When prison officials blocked our access to basic information, we filed nearly two dozen freedom of information requests and got thousands of pages of documents, court exhibits and data. When officials denied our requests to visit individual prisoners, we corresponded with inmates by mail and tracked down family members and more than two dozen ex-inmates.

These stories were the first major reporting effort that, on a national level, exposed the seemingly contradictory practice of putting two inmates in one solitary confinement cell — and surprised readers and listeners by giving them a hard-to-get peek inside the tightly closed walls of state and federal prisons.

*Christie Thompson is a staff writer for The Marshall Project, where she covers immigration, prison conditions and mental health. Her work has been published by NPR, ProPublica, The Atlantic, The Nation and VICE.*

# Going undercover

10 lessons from Mother Jones' covert investigation into private prisons

Sarah Hutchins • IRE & NICAR

In the summer of 2016, Mother Jones dedicated almost an entire issue of the bimonthly magazine to a single story: an undercover investigation of Winn Correctional Center, a private prison in Louisiana run by the Corrections Corporation of America. Reporter Shane Bauer spent four months working at Winn as a guard, collecting observations in a notebook during the day and recording video diaries at night. His reporting exposed a world of escalating violence and helped shine a light on the surprisingly thin line between prisoner and jailer.

IRE reached out to Bauer and Mother Jones Editor-in-Chief Clara Jeffery to find out what they learned from the experience.



Shane Bauer

## From the reporter: Shane Bauer

### 1. Do your homework.

Bauer is intimately familiar with prisons. He's reported extensively on the corrections system for Mother Jones. He's also been a prisoner himself. In 2009, Bauer and two others were arrested while crossing the Iranian border on a hiking trip. Bauer spent two years in an Iranian prison before his release in 2011. By the time

he went undercover at Winn, Bauer felt like he had a good grounding in the world of prisons.

But that's not always the case. For another undercover assignment, Bauer immersed himself with a border militia. He was less familiar with that environment, he said, so he spent time beforehand meeting with groups in California that could help him get a feel for what he'd be walking into. "I wanted to kind of familiarize myself with that world, just the language of it, to actually have some skills that were relevant for that project," he said. "Knowing how to handle a gun, for example."

### 2. Never lie.

When Bauer first pitched the idea of trying to get a job in a prison, the answer was pretty straightforward: Go for it — just don't lie.

The first step was to fill out a job application through the Corrections Corporation of America. He listed all of his real information, including the Foundation for National Progress, the publisher of Mother Jones, as his current employer.

It was a shot in the dark.

But Bauer got the job. No one ever asked him about his work in journalism. "I said who I was on the application," he said. "If the company didn't pay attention to that, that's their fault."

Once inside the prison, Bauer tried to spend more time listening than talking. Guards were encouraged not to reveal too much about themselves to inmates, which helped him maintain his cover. When asked what brought him to the low-paying job in Louisiana, he would respond with vague statements like, "You never know where life's going to take you."

"I think for the most part, I was myself," he said, "but kind of a more reserved version."

### 3. Stay on top of your notes.

Bauer took notes when he was on duty at Winn, but an essential part of the reporting process happened after his shifts and on

his days off. He'd pore over his notes, fleshing out dialogue, scenes and details from earlier that day. On a months-long reporting project, diligent recordkeeping is essential, he said.

"That stuff just really easily runs together and becomes a mountain of material to wade through," Bauer said.

He would also sit in front of a video camera each night and talk through his day. The idea was born out of a desire to have audio for a potential radio piece, but it ultimately became a useful reporting tool for the print story, too.

"Looking back on the videos, there were times that it was kind of hard to watch them," he said. The work wore on him. He would watch them and think, "Wow, I didn't realize this was showing on my face as much as it was."

### 4. Prepare everyone involved in the project for the risks.

Immersion journalism, especially the kind that involves the threat of physical danger, can take a toll on more than just the reporter. While Bauer was prepared for the risks he'd be facing and the situations he might find himself in, he said he wished he had been more conscientious of the risks his colleagues might face.

James West, another Mother Jones journalist, went to Louisiana twice to shoot video for Bauer's investigation. On his second visit, West was arrested for trespassing while trying to film the outside of Winn late one night. It was enough to end the project. With West in jail, Bauer packed up his things and checked into a hotel. He never went back to Winn; he called and resigned a few days later.

Bauer and his editors had talked about what might happen if he got arrested. But the thought of a colleague getting caught hadn't been a major concern.

"That possibility didn't cross my mind," Bauer said. The more time passed, the more he felt confident in Winn and his surroundings. "It becomes harder the more immersed you get to



kind of see the risks from fresh eyes.”

### 5. Don't neglect your mental health.

Undercover reporting can be isolating, Bauer said. During his time as a guard, he was living in rural Louisiana. “I couldn't fully be myself with anyone, with any person.”

“The stress of that particular job was very high. Psychologically, that project was really trying for me.”

If you're considering going undercover, make sure to have a good support system in place. Stay in touch with friends and family. Consider talking to a therapist, even if it's just over the phone.

“None of it is going to deal with all of it,” he said. “But combining the stress of being undercover and the constant fear of getting caught with an actually dangerous situation and isolation, that's a lot.”



Mother Jones Editor-in-Chief Clara Jeffery

## From the editor: Clara Jeffery

### 1. Get the right reporter.

When the stakes are this high, it's important to assemble a team you can trust. If anyone could tackle an undercover prison investigation, Jeffery said she knew it would be Bauer.

“He comes from a background that it felt like he would be able to convincingly not kind of mess up and talk in a way that would be too weird, too out of place,” Jeffery said. “We knew that he doesn't scare easy and that he's good at keeping his cool under pressure, because he's had to.”

Bauer also had the right combination of skills and life experiences to be able to blend in at the prison. He was careful, diligent and compassionate. He was a good listener, someone people naturally wanted to talk to. All of these qualities made him the right reporter for the job.

### 2. Prepare to be stonewalled.

Mother Jones never expected to have a friendly exchange with the Corrections Corporation of America, but Jeffery was

somewhat surprised by how little the company cooperated in the final reporting stages. Mother Jones wanted to be fair to the company and include their point of view in the story, but the lack of detailed communication made that difficult.

“At a certain point they just stopped engaging with the fact-checking process,” she said.

The magazine used secondary research culled from other human sources, lawsuits and documents from the State Bureau of Prisons to augment their on-the-ground reporting.

### 3. Look for moments of humanity.

For Bauer and Jeffery, one of the most powerful themes to come out of the piece was the shared experiences of prisoners and guards.

“Obviously there were antagonisms between prisoners and guards, and you see that throughout the piece. But on each side you would have these moments where they really understood (each other),” Jeffery said. “I found that really humanizing to the whole situation.”

When Bauer applied for the guard job, they quickly recognized that the low pay (just \$9 an hour) and high potential for violence would be a narrative thread to tug at. What does that combination look like for real people? Shane pulled at that theme during his time inside, and those experiences became an essential part of the story.

### 4. Don't underestimate the power of narrative.

“I think what this story showed us is how compelling and detailed narrative, despite being 35,000 words long, can really engage an audience and crack open a subject area that people usually tune out from,” Jeffery said.

The feedback was overwhelming. Jeffery said more than 2 million people read the story. The magazine heard from celebrities, people working in the prison industry, corrections officers and other journalists.

“It was a real commitment to sit down and read 35,000 words,” Jeffery said. “And we'd see, weeks later, people saying, all right, I finally had the chance to read this and it's just as amazing as I've heard.”

### 5. Show your work.

In addition to Bauer's narrative, Jeffery penned an editor's note outlining why the magazine felt it was necessary to go undercover. “I think that was really important, not only to be sure of it ourselves, but to tell readers why,” she said.

After the initial stories ran, Mother Jones published a series of articles explaining the investigation's shocking price tag: at least \$350,000.

“I think it's important to make the case that



Mother Jones devoted almost all of the July/August 2016 issue to Shane Bauer's undercover investigation of Winn Correctional Center, a private prison in Winnfield, Louisiana.



Go behind the story with Shane Bauer on the IRE Radio Podcast episode “Profiting from Prisoners.” Listen: [bit.ly/2iWfU0y](https://bit.ly/2iWfU0y).

what we do is important, that it is in some cases dangerous, that it's certainly time-consuming and anxiety-producing, and right now we're doing this in an incredibly hostile environment from the top of the government. And I think we really have to lay it out there for readers, what it takes to do it.”

And it worked. In the wake of the investigation (and the presidential election), Jeffery said Mother Jones received “seriously healthy” financial support from readers. They also started a sustaining donor program that will allow the magazine to have a more stable pool of money. “And that really allows any institution to plan for what they need to do and to be ambitious without fear that it's going to bankrupt the company.”

*Sarah Hutchins is the managing editor of The IRE Journal and IRE & NICAR's editorial director. She is responsible for the organization's podcast, website, social media accounts and audio platforms. Sarah came to IRE from The Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, Virginia, where she worked as a reporter covering public safety and education.*

# Bias behind bars

Quantifying racial inequities in  
New York's 54 prisons

Michael Winerip, Michael Schwartz and Robert Gebeloff • The New York Times

In 2014, we did Rikers Island. We spent the year investigating abuses at the infamous New York City jail, where brutality by guards was commonplace and it was not unusual for a 16-year-old to be locked away for months in solitary awaiting trial. The articles had almost an immediate impact, spurring the city's new mayor to launch genuine reforms.

In 2015, we planned to do the state prisons, but that turned out to be more daunting than we'd ever imagined. How do you investigate a corrections system in a state as big as New York, that is made up of 54 prisons, spread over 54,000 square miles, from New York City in the south, to Buffalo in the west, to Plattsburg by the Canadian border, housing 50,000 inmates and employing 20,000 corrections officers?

We thought the answer was to investigate one suspicious death at a time. Samuel Harrell, a black, mentally ill inmate at the state's Fishkill Correctional Facility died after a brutal encounter with more than a dozen corrections officers. State officials claimed he'd overdosed on synthetic marijuana, but a copy of the autopsy we obtained showed no drugs in his system and classified the death as a homicide.

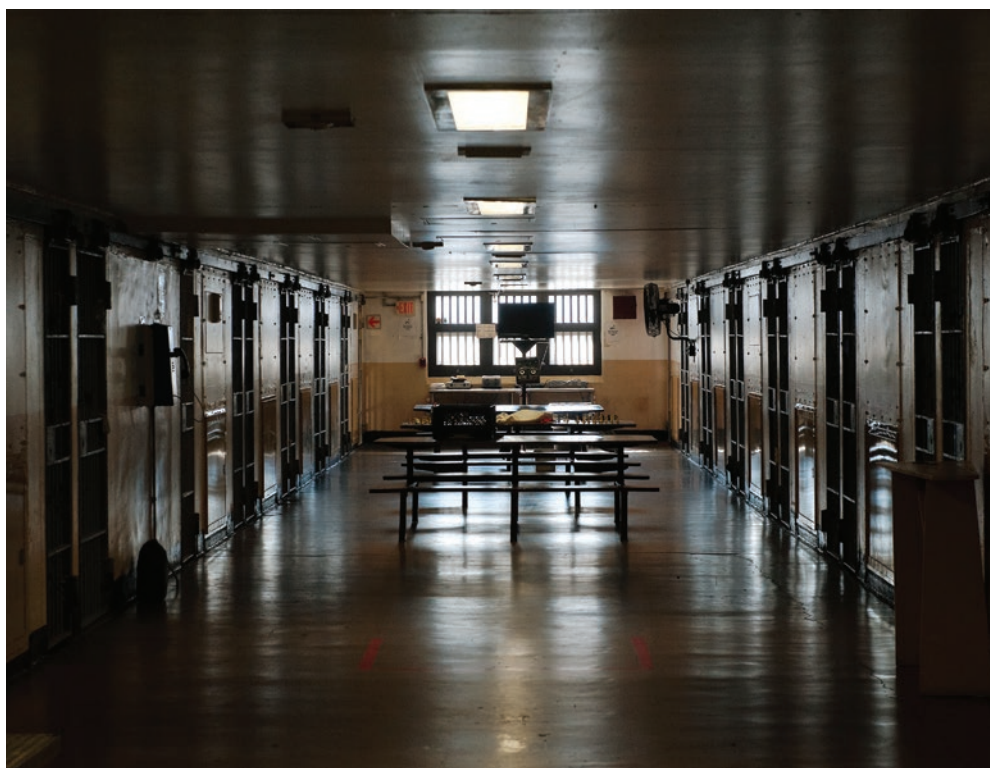
We wrote 5,000 words and posted a chilling 45-minute security video we'd obtained through the courts, showing Leonard Strickland, another black, mentally ill inmate, being dragged to his death by white officers at Clinton Correctional Facility.

And we partnered with The Marshall Project, publishing an account of the brutal beating at Attica Correctional Facility of yet another black inmate by white officers who, the day after the story appeared, each pleaded guilty to a single misdemeanor charge of misconduct.

Three penitentiaries — the pattern of violence and racism seemed clear to us.

But not to the governor's people.

State officials dismissed the stories as isolated incidents. They repeatedly misled us and, in one instance, made several phone calls,



A cellblock at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison in Ossining, New York, less than an hour by train from Midtown Manhattan.

pressuring us not to print a story. Once, in a brief statement at a press conference, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat with a progressive reputation, addressed the issue, saying officers needed to be physical with inmates to "get a certain amount of respect in the job; otherwise, they get hurt."

Plainly, nothing would change unless we could somehow demonstrate that what we documented in three places applied statewide.

That wound up taking most of 2016.

But by the time we'd finished, we had developed a method of quantifying racial inequities at every prison in New York. We had built databases that enabled us to analyze

nearly 60,000 disciplinary cases and calculate that black inmates were 30 percent more likely to get a disciplinary ticket than whites and 65 percent more likely to be sent to solitary. And we were able to show that at Clinton, where the inmate had been dragged to his death and only one of a thousand guards is African-American, blacks were four times more likely to be sent to solitary and spent an average of 125 days there versus 90 for whites.

This time, the state's response shocked us. On the same December day we published our second story, the governor's office called, saying Gov. Cuomo would have a statement for us within the hour.

## PAROLE RELEASE RATE AT FIRST ELIGIBILITY

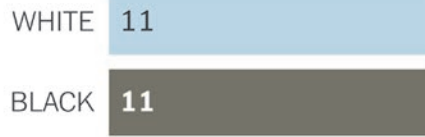
New York State Board of Parole decisions, initial hearings, May 2013 to May 2016

### Overall parole release rate by race



### For those convicted of violent crimes

Murder, rape, first and second degree assault and robbery etc.



### For those convicted of property crimes

Burglary, grand larceny, stolen property, etc.



Inmates in New York state become eligible for parole after completing their minimum sentences. A review of decisions in these initial hearings shows that while the board rarely sets violent offenders of any race free, it releases nonviolent offenders who are white more often than those who are black. This graphic from The New York Times shows data from the New York State Board of Parole.

### The value of data

If ever there was an example of the importance of data-driven reporting, our state prison series is it.

Few institutions are as closed to reporters. Only once in two years were we permitted to visit a cellblock, and then we were accompanied by nearly a dozen state officials.

Even when we could speak to inmates, their movement within a prison is so restricted, it's hard to sort out what they know firsthand and what are rumors passed along the cellblocks.

Developing a sophisticated database was critical: to identify statewide trends, pinpoint problematic prisons, and focus our interviews with inmates.

Some data — including the prison where an inmate was housed, his crime, sentence and race — was available online. Most was supplied by corrections officials — at times grudgingly. In one case, even with the intervention of our attorneys, we were turned down. Overall, it was nearly a year before we had what we needed.

In New York, the prison disciplinary process is awash in minutiae. Inmates can be given a disciplinary ticket for violating any of 120 regulations, ranging from disobeying an order to assaulting an officer. Punishments can be as minor as a week's loss of mail privileges or as severe as years in solitary.

As best we could tell from interviewing national experts, there had never been a substantial study of prison discipline by race. New York corrections officials acknowledged they did not monitor discipline by race.

Ultimately, we were able to piece together



Attica Correctional Facility, where only 1 percent of officers are black. During an integration effort in the 1970s and '80s, black officers from the Buffalo area were transferred to the prison, which is in the overwhelmingly white Wyoming County, and faced harassment.

the data we needed in several steps. We first obtained a database that contained a roster of current and past inmates extending back for decades, which included information about their crimes, but also date of birth, gender and race.

When the state later agreed to give us a database of disciplinary incidents, it included all the details about the infraction and punishment, but nothing about the inmate except an ID number. Still, that ID allowed us to merge the demographic variables from the first database.

To manage the gigabytes of data and documents, we created an internal website in the Ruby programming language that tracked all the metrics and allowed the three of us to collaborate in reading and taking notes on documents.

It was striking how much of the anecdotal was measurable.

For infractions in which a guard's word or opinion is the crucial element, like disobeying an order, blacks were likely to be disciplined far more often.

At Attica, 34 out of every 100 black inmates

were charged with disobeying orders, compared with 13 out of 100 whites. At Elmira, it was 43 of 100 blacks versus 18 of 100 whites.

But when the infraction had to be proven by evidence, such as confiscated drugs, the racial balance evened out.

For much of 2016, we traveled the state, looking to connect the data with life on the cellblocks.

Inmates said it was the remote maximum security prisons upstate, where the workforce was almost entirely white, that they feared most: Clinton, Attica, Great Meadow, Elmira. From day one, they said, guards reminded them whose house it was, calling them porch monkeys, spear chuckers and worse, threatening to “beat the black off them.”

At these prisons, black inmates were twice as likely to be disciplined as whites.

But Sing Sing — located near New York City and the only men’s prison in the state where a majority of the officers are black — was different, the inmates said. If they had to do time in a maximum security prison, Sing Sing was the place. “It’s coveted,” said Ibrahim Gyang, a convicted murderer who was being held in solitary at Elmira when we spoke with him.

Indeed, our data showed no significant disciplinary disparity at Sing Sing, where blacks make up 57 percent of the population and got 58 percent of tickets.

### Getting access to inmates

Time is essential for writing about prisons. If reporters were given ready access, we likely would have finished our inmate interviews in weeks. Instead, they stretched out for much of a year.

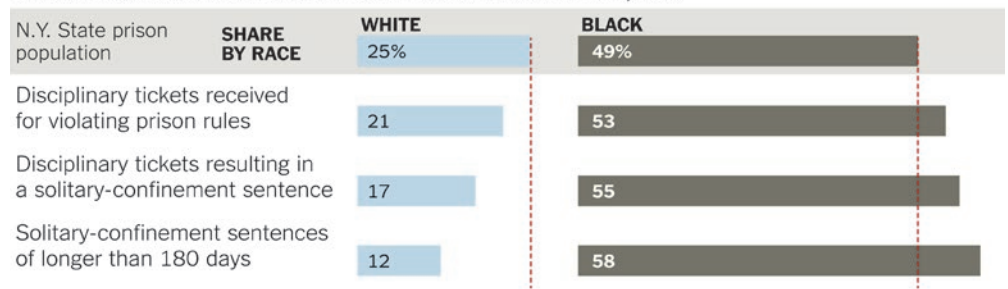
Our requests were often denied and when we did get a yes, there were so many restrictions it was hardly worth the effort. They gave us security clearance to bring notebooks, pens, digital recorders and video equipment, but they also stationed a guard and corrections official in the room, making inmates fearful of talking openly.

That’s when we decided to try going in as visitors, the way family and friends do. It enabled us to interview inmates with no one minding us. The problem was, like all visitors, we weren’t permitted to bring in paper or pens.

We tried writing inmates to set up visits, but often got no response. Officers can screen the mail, making it hard to know if inmates received the letters.

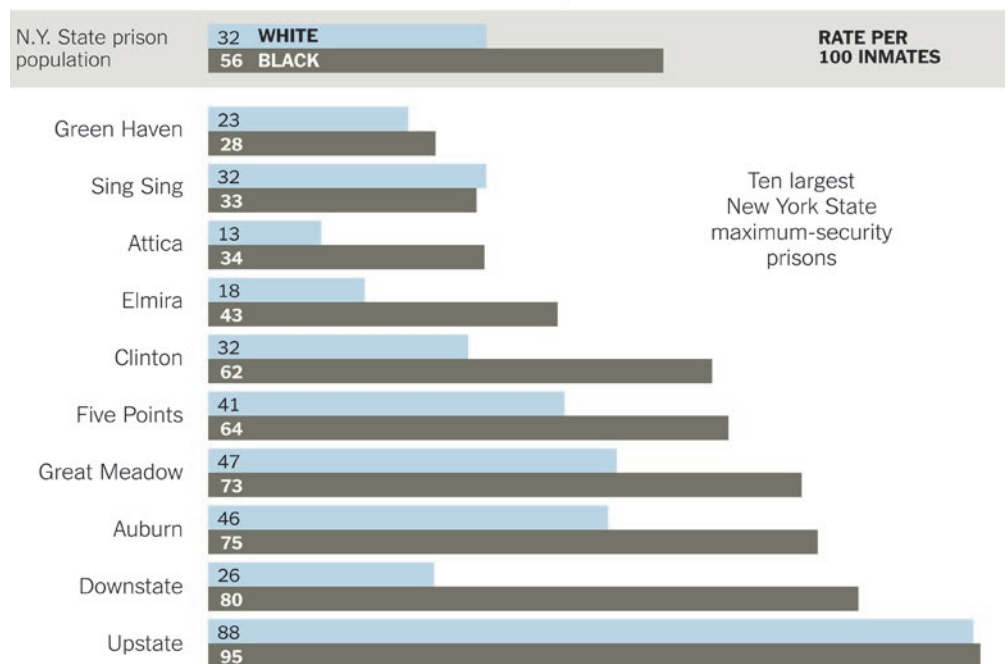
So we took weeklong trips, driving hundreds of miles a day, eventually visiting 10 prisons. Though the inmates didn’t know who was requesting to see them, all but once they came to the visiting room. We promised anonymity, fearing we could put them at risk of retribution by guards. Still, all were willing to be quoted by name. Some had not seen a visitor in more than a decade and couldn’t believe anyone

### INMATE POPULATION AND SHARE OF DISCIPLINARY PUNISHMENTS, 2015



Disobeying orders is the most common violation inmates are punished for in the state prison system. It also is one of the most subjective — officers do not need to produce physical evidence to give an inmate a disciplinary ticket. In prisons throughout the state, blacks are punished for disobeying orders disproportionately to their numbers. A rare exception is Sing Sing, one of the few prisons where black guards are in the majority.

### INMATES CHARGED WITH “DISOBEYING ORDERS” VIOLATION, 2015



In New York state prisons, black inmates were disciplined at a higher rate for violating prison rules, and they were punished more harshly than whites. This graphic from The New York Times shows 2015 data from the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.

cares.

We would do the interview, rush out to the car and write down everything we could remember. (Some quotes are easier than others. At Green Haven Correctional, Markus Barber described white favoritism as “the complexion for the connection.”)

In a few prisons, paper and pencils are provided for keeping score in card games. We’d play gin rummy, but instead of the score, we’d write down their quotes.

Prison employees on the other hand, would rarely speak to us, let alone on the record. Some feared for their lives. We interviewed a social worker at Rikers who described an incident when she had refused to cover up a beating. Days later, the guards suddenly disappeared, and she was locked in alone with 50 inmates. We

thought prison Imams, who minister primarily to black inmates, might be good sources, but most wouldn’t even get on the phone with us.

The first year we were pretty much at war with the Cuomo administration, which was a serious obstacle when we sought data. Unlike Florida, where there are meaningful open records laws, New York’s freedom of information law is pretty much a farce. State officials are notorious for stalling until a reporter’s deadline has passed. It took over a year to get a response to a request to the State Commission on Corrections for reports on inmate deaths — which are public records. Even then, we got a fraction of what we asked for and much of it was redacted.

### Race and parole

Investigative reporting is contentious, so



An inmate at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, in Ossining, New York. The New York Times analyzed thousands of parole decisions from the past few years and found that black prisoners in the state were at a marked disadvantage.

fairness is essential. When we saw positive initiatives, we reported those, too. We wrote stories that gave the Cuomo administration credit for rebuilding the internal affairs unit, taking on the guards' union and reducing solitary.

This built trust, leading to several off-the-record meetings with top state officials. And while those sessions were sometimes heated, we came to better understand each other. Officials began expediting our document requests, even guiding us on how to frame our freedom of information letters.

Racial disparities in discipline had a multiplying effect: Worse prison records, in turn, hurt the chances for parole — which became the second story.

By mining data, we were able to show that white inmates serving two to four years for a single count of third-degree burglary were released after an average of 803 days, while blacks served 883 days.

While nearly three quarters of the prison population is black and Hispanic men, the parole board has only one black man and no Hispanic men. The whole parole process was so chaotic, one board member said at times he didn't know which inmate he was interviewing.

In a few prisons, paper and pencils are provided for keeping score in card games. We'd play gin rummy, but instead of the score, we'd write down their quotes.

The day the second piece came out, we tried to stitch together a follow-up, hoping to keep the story alive. Midday we called the governor's office for comment, expecting nothing. By 5 p.m., when it was looking like we wouldn't have enough, we got a call from the governor's spokeswoman, who this time was quite friendly.

Their statement said that Gov. Cuomo found the stories "disturbing." He pledged to nominate five additional people to the parole board, several of them minorities.

He also directed the state inspector general to launch an immediate investigation to determine whether there is a pattern of racial bias throughout the state system — 54 prisons, 50,000 inmates, 20,000 corrections officers.

*Michael Winerip was with The New York Times for more than 30 years, the last three working as an investigative reporter covering brutality and racial issues at the New York City jail and New York state prisons. In 2001, he led a team of reporters who won a Pulitzer for a yearlong series, "How Race Is Lived in America." In addition to winning the Polk award, he was a Pulitzer finalist twice. Recently, he took a buyout from The Times.*

*Michael Schwartz is a reporter with The New York Times. Since 2014, he has been a member of the metro desk's investigative team, reporting about brutality and corruption in the New York State prison system and at Rikers Island in New York City. He has covered the New York City Police Department for the metro desk, and from 2006 to 2012, he was a correspondent with the Times Moscow bureau. In 2015, he and Mr. Winerip shared the Polk award, and in 2016, they were finalists for the Pulitzer.*

*Robert Gebeloff is a New York Times reporter specializing in stories involving data analysis. He won a Polk award and was a Pulitzer finalist in 2016 for a series quantifying the use of arbitration clauses in consumer and employment disputes.*

# Holding the powerful — and private — accountable

Using the power of public records to shine a  
light on America's private prison industry

Beryl Lipton • MuckRock

**W**hy do we put people in prison? America might have plenty of experience with the practice, but we're not very good at clarifying the purpose of these institutions. The answer is likely part punishment, part skills training, part warehouse, and part profit.

That last explanation, that prisons might be dollar-driven, is an uncomfortable one. It suggests some incentive to turn incarceration into a lucrative endeavor, which can seem contrary to its other purposes. Proponents of private prisons argue these many reasons can exist simultaneously — and without conflict — all while coming with a lower price tag and getting better results than the government's facilities.

Though they only comprised about 8 percent of the nation's 1.5 million state and federal inmates in 2015, the industry has more than 100 facilities operating under contract with local, state, and federal governments. They account for over half of the incarcerated immigrant population, and over 20 percent of the state prison population in places like Oklahoma and Mississippi. Their operations are worth over \$3 billion a year and the two largest companies, CoreCivic (previously the Corrections Corporation of America) and GEO Group, are publicly traded. Their biggest customer is also their biggest competitor: the federal government. And yet a standard accountability tool — the Freedom of Information Act — doesn't apply to them. The place of private prisons in our criminal justice system is well-established and well-protected. It's just not well-understood.

The Private Prison Project was born at MuckRock as a means of understanding all that we can about this industry and how it operates. A news organization that is also a service, MuckRock helps individuals file and track their own public records requests, while also covering the struggles they face throughout the

The place of private prisons  
in our criminal justice system  
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requesting process and highlighting the stories that come from these records.

At MuckRock, we believe individuals should be able to learn about the work that's performed in their name and shouldn't be afraid to ask questions if they don't understand or want to learn more. We believe government secrecy and stonewalling deserve a public shellacking, and that the companies and contractors enlisted by the government should be subject to similar treatment. We have laws in every state that protect citizens' rights to information. We wanted to apply those laws to learn more about how private prisons are operating locally and nationally.

Is it audacious to repeatedly demand disclosure from an entity that insists it's exempt? We were going to find out.

## Why private prisons?

Over the three years I've been covering private prisons — writing dozens of articles and filing thousands of public records requests — I've learned a lot about their history and use.

For as long as private prisons have existed, there have been people arguing for their practical place in our criminal justice system. Some of the earliest proponents were part of an early Reagan-era effort to disrupt government sprawl and redistribute its responsibilities to the private sector. But corporate owners aren't the only ones looking favorably on private prisons. Support often comes from the small

towns where private prisons are an economic driver, prison administrators struggling with overcrowding at public facilities, and the unemployed who might find low-paying but steady work in corrections, to name a few.

Still, the idea that someone could turn a profit on the incarceration of another has made private detention a particular enemy of activists, immigrants, authors, and laypeople. The industry's ability to spend millions on lobbying has drawn more criticism than its public counterpart. The fact that these institutions may also withhold records using the same privacy rights as corporations has made them a target for skeptics. The data that does exist — in the form of media fact-checking and U.S. Government Accountability reports — doesn't do much to defend them, suggesting instead that they might not be making good on promises of efficiency.

Previous attempts to pass laws challenging this lack of transparency have failed, although a new Private Prison Information Act is making its way through Congress this year, introduced by Maryland Sen. Ben Cardin. And while former Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates in August called for an end to the use of private prisons for federal inmates, the Trump administration has already reversed course on that declaration.

Proponents of private prisons claim that the facilities are better than their public counterparts: faster to build, cheaper to staff, and more efficient to run. But these claims are relatively unsubstantiated. Though the turnaround time on construction of private facilities may be significantly less than government-managed projects, the investment creates a drive to fill beds.

On numerous occasions, understaffing in privately run prisons has been evident and dangerous. And attempts to quantify the success of these for-profit institutions — measured in dollars saved — have found that they may not be saving money at all. Arizona, for instance,

did away with required cost review comparisons for private prisons. Consequences for their indiscretions have ultimately amounted to ineffectual fines. All of this illustrates why it's essential that the media cover and inspect their materials.

We can argue that for-profit prisons have no place in our criminal justice system, but the reality is that they already play a significant role. Unfortunately, the task of covering a prison can be quite difficult, and private prisons in particular can be tight-lipped about their problems. Not all records that a private prison operator creates are open for release, even if equivalent records held by public operators would be available under federal law. This includes things like staffing reports and billing numbers. Private prisons can hide behind a federal exemption called "trade secrets," or "b4" in FOIA-speak, which protects details that companies could argue would jeopardize their position in the market. What an interesting nest of conflicts.

### The birth of the project

Private prisons combine the nation's most vulnerable populations, our country's capitalist agenda, and the public's right to know. That was right up MuckRock's alley.

It was important to begin our inquiry without too many assumptions. Sure, private prisons like to keep to themselves, but is it because they're keeping human beings confined in poorly-lit dungeons (some would say yes) or because there are legitimate protections to which they (and so many other corporate entities) are entitled?

A series of records requests would allow us to ask a lot of questions from a lot of places at once. We imagined creating a framework around which others could gather, a community growing around records and challenging the areas, companies and policies of private prisons that we were told were outside the realm of inquiry. After all, their business comes from FOIA-able agencies; they must have some information on how their contractor is running things.

For years, public records have been used hyper-locally to stoke opposition, and we wanted to begin to build a collection of materials that could help flesh out the situation, create a repository of relevant documents and cultivate an interested community. All of this would ensure that any stories that come from our project would have a permanent home.

We started with grievances. Inmate grievances are one of the areas where I find the process the most alarming. Just as in many public prisons, grievances are usually handled internally at first. In the case of private prisons, this means that they're dealt with by the company — theoretically, the same company interested in keeping its critics quiet. Of course, there are going to be people who complain unreasonably,



but the fact that we can't see what they complain about is problematic. Requests for grievance logs tend to be more successful than those for, say, every grievance that has been filed, which may have voluminous results all kept in individual inmate files.

We also began collecting contracts. These agreements between contractor and boss are some of the most straightforward materials you're entitled to under FOIA. Often, you can extend the request to include the initial "Request for Proposal" (or equivalent call for bids), the responses provided by the winner and the losers, and any amendments or exhibits that may be connected. We requested agreements between many private facilities and the government at the town, county, state, and federal levels. This sometimes turned up Intergovernmental Services Agreements (which operate similarly to contracts, but between government agencies), water and sewage agreements, and emergency services contracts. Sometimes it turned up nothing at all.

In addition to contracts, there are a few other areas where materials pertinent to private prisons are usually open for disclosure: Occupational Safety and Health Administration investigations, town meeting minutes, emergency calls for service, incident reports from local police departments and audits.

There are even more areas where materials probably won't be released. Staffing reports, for instance, may be available through an audit or inspection request. But request just these items, and you could easily be denied for security or trade reasons. Similarly, internal memos or directives, which would typically be fair game in public prisons, aren't subject to disclosure. Even invoices, which are releasable, have been subject to redactions that obscure how much

private prisons are paid per inmate per day.

### How to help

We're still working on expanding our scope, narrowing our requests, and organizing our returns. We're also after some help.

The Private Prison Information Act will be moving into Congress this year, an opportunity to crack open the vault of materials that private prisons may keep confidential and insist that these materials are of importance to the public.

When we began this project three years ago, private prisons were unknown to a lot of people.

Since then, they've received more steady coverage and a bump in awareness. But we want more. Ultimately, like nearly all issues, the story of private prisons is a local one, and that's where we want to see more focus.

We want to see more talking, more awareness, more questions and concerns, more facts backing up their continued use. To this end, everyone can contribute by letting us know what they want to us to dig into and by digging in themselves. If you hear of a potential private prison coming to your area, write about it. Find an angle at home and report it. Let us know what you're finding. If you file a prison-related request, ping us at [info@muckrock.com](mailto:info@muckrock.com). We can help or add your materials to our collection. Ask questions. Report on your records rejections. And give 'em hell.

*Beryl C.D. Lipton is senior reporter at MuckRock, where her work focuses on FOIA, public records laws, and the ways they can be used to advance the narratives around criminal justice, privatization, surveillance, and other matters that move or mar a productive democracy.*

# IRE Resources

The IRE Resource Center is a major research library containing more than 26,000 investigative stories — across all platforms — and thousands of tipsheets available at [ire.org/resource-center](http://ire.org/resource-center) or by contacting the Resource Center directly, 573-882-3364 or [rescntr@ire.org](mailto:rescntr@ire.org).

## STORIES

### No. 27786: "Solitary Lives: An Investigation into the secret world of solitary confinement" — The Charlotte Observer

In prison cells across North Carolina, government officials are meting out punishment that human rights experts say amounts to torture. For more than 13 years, the state kept inmate Jason Swain in solitary confinement — a punishment that research shows often causes and exacerbates mental illness. Swain, who suffers from bipolar depression, repeatedly swallowed razors and ripped open his surgical incisions. The Observer found he was one of seven North Carolina inmates who had spent more than a decade in solitary. (2016)

### No. 27769: "Rape Victim Jailed: Jenny's Story" — KPRC-TV (Houston, Texas)

A mentally ill rape victim who had a breakdown on the witness stand while testifying against her attacker was thrown in jail by the Harris County District Attorney's Office for nearly a month. Prosecutors worried she would not return weeks later to complete her testimony. Reporters exposed a series of mistakes by jail staff that further victimized the woman. The outrage and fallout from the reporting quickly became the central campaign issue in the race for Harris County District Attorney. State senators on both sides of the aisle filed new legislation for the 2017 session to mandate legal representation for witnesses held on bond for their testimony, a statewide solution to the problem the reporters exposed. (2016)

### No. 27717: "Bias on the Bench." — Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Florida legislators have struggled for 30 years to create an equitable justice system. But a Herald-Tribune investigation, involving an unprecedented analysis of tens of millions of electronic records, shows that black defendants are punished more severely than white defendants who commit the same crimes and have similar criminal backgrounds. Judges in Florida offer black defendants fewer chances to avoid jail or scrub away felonies. Instead, they give them more time behind bars — sometimes double the sentences of white defendants. No news organization, university or government agency has ever done such a comprehensive investigation of sentences handed down by individual judges on a statewide scale. (2016)

### No. 27716: "Locked up for Being Poor in South Carolina Jails" — WSPA (Spartanburg, South Carolina)

An analysis of bond data from multiple sources shows poor defendants who struggle to pay a cash bond spend more time in jail before trial and are more likely to be convicted of a crime or plead guilty than those who have the means to post bond. (2016)

## TIPSHEETS

### No. 4900: "The Digital FOIA: Or How to Make Big Data Big Easy."

This presentation examines the use of public records to obtain databases from government agencies. Think big: get access to

every criminal case in your county, every prisoner in your state, and every injured federal employee. (2016)

### No. 4822: "Failures of Enforcement."

Veteran NPR reporter Howard Berkes gives simple yet effective advice and tips on how to thoughtfully report on law enforcement. (2016)

## EXTRA! EXTRA!

### "Prisons plagued for years by chronic understaffing."

— The News Journal

Chronic staffing shortages, an over-reliance on overtime shifts, overcrowded facilities and funding shortfalls have contributed to violence and uprisings in the Delaware state prison system. In February, prisoners at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Facility held staffers and other inmates hostage in a protest demanding better treatment, education and rehabilitation programs. Lt. Steven Floyd, a father of two, was killed during the uprising. The head of Delaware's correctional officer's union predicted last year that the National Guard would have to be brought in if more staffers were not hired. (2017)

Read the full investigation here: [delonline.us/2mf3LRy](http://delonline.us/2mf3LRy)

### "Private prisoner transportation companies operate with almost no oversight." — The Marshall Project

Every year, tens of thousands of fugitives and suspects — many of whom have not been convicted of a crime — are entrusted to a handful of small, private companies that specialize in state and local extraditions. Twenty-six states and countless local law enforcement agencies use private extradition companies to fetch people who are taken into custody on arrest warrants. A Marshall Project review of thousands of court documents, federal records and local news accounts and interviews with more than 50 current and former guards and executives found a pattern of abuse and neglect, including 16 deaths, in this virtually unregulated industry. (2016)

Read the full investigation here: [bit.ly/2n5UI9g](http://bit.ly/2n5UI9g)

## IRE AUDIO

### "Profiting from Prisoners." — IRE Radio Podcast

Prisons have long posed a challenge for investigative journalists. And when you're trying to report on a private prison — one owned by a company, not the government — the situation becomes even more challenging. We talked to three reporters who managed to pull back the curtain on the for-profit prison system. Shane Bauer describes his risky decision to go undercover as a prison guard on assignment for Mother Jones. Then Marshall Project reporters Eli Hager and Alysia Santo take us through their less extreme but equally powerful investigation into the dangerous and deadly world of prisoner transportation companies. (2016)

Listen here: [bit.ly/2iWfU0y](http://bit.ly/2iWfU0y)



# Back to basics in 2017



Eva Parks  
NBC 5/ KXAS-TV

When I was asked to write this column, I wasn't exactly sure what "wisdom" I had to offer. I joined NBC 5 Investigates nearly five years ago and still consider myself the new kid on the block. But as I contemplated what to write about, one thing stuck out: It's an interesting time to be a journalist.

All eyes are on us, and it feels like the respect for our industry is dwindling. I'm seeing all these posts on social media blasting us, calling us dishonest and liars and, quite frankly, it's depressing. Now, I'm not going to get all political because that's certainly not my style, but if the past few months are any indication of what the world thinks of "the media," we better buckle up because it's going to be an interesting road ahead.

But instead of worrying about what people think about us, it's time for us to get back to basics.

I don't know about you, but I'm proud of what I do. I wake up each day thanking the big guy upstairs for the opportunity not only to be a journalist, but an investigative journalist. And with everything happening right now, I'm going to do what I do best: my job.

For some of you, I may be preaching to the choir. You might be thinking, "Who is this lady?" and why is she writing about stuff I already know. But before you publish your reports and before you go live on TV, I want to stress the importance of some of my go-to reporting basics: backgrounding your sources, filing open records requests, being transparent and holding the powerful accountable.

These basics will bulletproof your reporting time after time.

## Background your sources

Anytime we get a tip from a viewer or a source, we'll spend a lot of time backgrounding the person in question before we'll put him in a report. You don't want the main or supporting subjects to become a sideshow in your report because you didn't check their background.

Now, this may seem like a given, but

I can't tell you how often we'll run a background check on someone and discover something in their past that could question the integrity of our report.

Another way we background sources is by using open records. Do they have documentation proving their tip? Can you obtain the supporting documents yourself through an open records request?

Run their names through Lexis Nexis. Do they have a criminal record? Have they recently filed for bankruptcy? No matter how perfect that person is for your report, you need the full picture so you're not caught off guard.

## File open records requests

If you're not filing records requests on a daily or weekly basis, you should be.

Records are what we live for, and they will make your reports better. Plus, when you get in the habit of filing records requests on a weekly basis, you'll always have a story in your back pocket.

Before we go to air, we spend a lot of time poring over the records. After that, we'll go back to the source agency with our questions. You can never make assumptions about what you see.

When an agency denies your request, please fight the good fight for open government. In Texas, a state agency wanting to deny your request must first seek a ruling from the attorney general's office. When an agency does this, you need to file a brief in support of releasing the information. If you don't, you run the risk they'll issue an opinion that not only affects you, but also other journalists across the state.

## Be transparent

Journalists demand transparency from agencies and the government. Why should we not be willing to do the same with our work?

Nearly every report we publish online that includes a graph, map or chart includes a detailed explanation about how we obtained the records to make it. I always leave my contact information below the disclaimer in case a viewer has follow-up questions. This

has also proven successful for getting new tips. People see you're serious and feel more comfortable reaching out to you.

When we have a big story, we'll go a step further and create a separate FAQs page explaining in great detail how we did the investigation. Sometimes we'll even include a portion of the records, graphs and charts that back up each report. Creating a FAQs page outlines all of your work and shows the viewer exactly how you got there. You can see an example of this in our recent series of reports ([bit.ly/BusDocuments](http://bit.ly/BusDocuments)) that uncovered serious safety lapses and misuse of taxpayer money inside Dallas County Schools, the agency that runs the school buses in 12 local communities.

## Hold the powerful accountable

When we formed our team five years ago, we decided this would be our mantra: holding those in power accountable.

When we cover issues involving taxpayer-funded agencies, we firmly believe that taxpayers, readers and viewers should be able to hear directly from the decision-makers. In phone calls and emails to officials, we clearly lay out the issues in our report and push to go on the record with the person in charge, especially when the report involves a serious issue of public safety or public trust.

It should be noted that holding the powerful accountable doesn't happen overnight. It can sometimes take weeks and even months. But be persistent with your requests and reporting. You never know what you'll uncover.

*Eva Parks is the producer for the award-winning investigative team at NBC 5/ KXAS-TV in Dallas. While there, she's helped uncover mistreatment of wounded soldiers at the Army's Warrior Transition Units, institute change in police policy and expose security and safety concerns at schools in North Texas. Eva's career began with NBC News covering Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. From there she was a field producer for a national network and worked in other local newsrooms along the East Coast. Eva has been nationally recognized with multiple journalism awards.*

# Attacks on the First Amendment a golden opportunity



David Cuillier  
University of Arizona School of Journalism

Newton's third law of motion posits that two colliding objects results in a force of equal magnitude on both objects, in opposite directions. One force may speed up, and one may slow down.

In the collision between the Trump administration and the press, journalists are speeding up.

Since Donald Trump has entered office, he has bombarded the press with a barrage of attacks — disparaging names, favoritism to sympathetic partisan bloggers, and increased efforts to control the message and lock down government information.

Over the past several months, I surveyed and interviewed hundreds of journalists and freedom of information experts on behalf of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to get a sense of the state of FOI today and what can be done to improve it. The findings, released March 12 for Sunshine Week, were alarming, although not surprising:

- About half said access to government information at all levels has gotten worse over the past four years.
- A third said public record request denials are on the rise.
- Nine out of 10 said it will get worse during the next four years because of President Trump.

"I think it's going to be a backyard brawl," Ted Bridis, investigations editor for The Associated Press in Washington, D.C., told me.

History shows that such threats can actually lead to advances in freedom of information.

Whether covering the White House, a state legislature or city hall, every journalist can push back against excessive secrecy and message management.

## Public records clampdown

**Action:** Already we are seeing agency gamesmanship to curtail the release of public records. In early February, the FBI announced it would accept FOIA requests only by mail or fax, not by email. The FBI eventually rescinded the policy, but more of these shenanigans are likely, including defunding of FOIA offices, longer delays, increased denials, excessive redactions, and contrived technological barriers.

**Reaction:** Journalism groups should band together to create an FOI 9-1-1 "Amber Alert" system to respond cohesively and quickly to threats. Push for attorney fee provisions in every state public record law to incentivize lawyers to sue for records. Introduce strong enforcement penalties in the law, and reduce or eliminate search/redaction fees. Litigating groups, such as the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and the new Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, will make bad examples of recalcitrant agencies. Training should be ramped up to hone journalists' skills, and partnerships with the tech industry could create more effective digital tools, building on MuckRock and FOIA Machine.

## Sealing the leaks

**Action:** A flood of leaks from within the White House has caused Trump to go on a sealing spree. This extends the Obama administration's strategy of controlling information by prosecuting leakers, and it will likely get worse and spread to state and local governments.

**Reaction:** Establish safe methods for accepting leaks, such as those set up by BuzzFeed, The New York Times, and other news organizations. Educate sources on how to communicate through encryption tools, like SecureDrop — free software provided by the Freedom of the Press Foundation (<https://securedrop.org/>). Protect sources carefully and use precautions outlined in IRE tipsheets.

## Managing the message

**Action:** Upon entering office, Trump ordered executive agencies to halt the release of information to the public — including press releases, blog posts and social media communications — until it had been vetted. Favorable partisan journalists are called upon at press conferences. Message management has become prevalent throughout all levels of government, often funneling all public communications and journalist interviews through a public information officer.

**Reaction:** Focus on what the government does, not what it says it does, recommends David Cay Johnston, a Pulitzer-Prize winning

journalist who recently created DCReport.org to focus on the Trump administration. This requires journalists to dig beyond the press releases, talk to agency line workers and former employees, and embrace data analysis skills. Refuse to play by outrageous PIO rules, such as submitting questions ahead of time or having a PIO sit in during interviews. Stand together with other news organizations in solidarity and don't allow officials to play journalists off one another.

## Swaying public opinion

**Action:** Trump and his advisers have led a public campaign against the press, labeling it as the "opposition party" and tweeting insults at the "failing" New York Times and "fake news" CNN. Some news organizations are experimenting with responses, such as calling out Trump administration claims as outright falsities or lies. Gallup polling indicates that Americans are split on the media's treatment of Trump, with three-quarters of Republicans saying journalists are too tough on him.

**Reaction:** Journalism organizations should combine resources to create an FOI ad campaign, expand Sunshine Week to a yearlong effort, and editorialize strongly without appearing defensive, shrill or whiny. Journalists should stay cool and professional, not teased into public tantrums. No longer can the press assume that the public understands what it does and why. Media literacy is critical today, more than ever. Build on the online training launched by the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University.

This isn't the first time a president has taken on the First Amendment, and it won't be the last. With focused determination, the press can demonstrate that journalism is critical to a functioning democracy and is more important than ever.

*David Cuillier is director of the University of Arizona School of Journalism in Tucson, Arizona, and a member of the Freedom of Information Committee for the Society of Professional Journalists. He is the co-author, with Charles Davis, of "The Art of Access: Strategies for Acquiring Public Records."*

# First Amendment presidential milestones

Here are just some of the key moments in history when presidents curtailed press freedom and journalists responded to better the First Amendment.

**John Adams** pushed for the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. The four laws made it harder for immigrants to become citizens, allowed the president to imprison and deport non-citizens and French “terrorists” deemed dangerous or hostile, and criminalized criticisms of the government. The law led to the conviction of at least 10 people who printed “false, scandalous and malicious writing,” mostly Republican printers and journalists. Reaction: James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and journalists pushed back with a very public campaign that led to Adams’ defeat in 1800 and the repeal of three of the four laws.

**Abraham Lincoln**, during the Civil War, imprisoned critical journalists without trial, shut down at least 21 newspapers, prevented at least 100 newspapers from being mailed, and censored news transmitted via the telegraph. Reaction: Journalists fought back harder during the ensuing five decades, leading to the golden age of muckraking.

**Harry S. Truman** imposed strict secrecy measures following World War II through the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946, and by actively ferreting out government leakers in his “loyalty” program. Reaction: Newspaper editors cried foul and worked for a decade with California Congressman John Moss to eventually amend the APA in 1966 during Lyndon Johnson’s term. That amendment is now called FOIA.

**Lyndon B. Johnson** grudgingly signed the APA amendment (FOIA) into law on July 4, 1966. He signed the water-downed bill with no ceremony and only after “kicking and screaming,” according to his press secretary at the time, Bill Moyers. Reaction: Journalists worked for a decade to fix flaws in the law, leading to the 1974 amendments that made significant improvements.

**Richard Nixon** tried to stop publication of the leaked Pentagon Papers in 1971. Reaction: The government lost in court, leading to one of the most important press freedom cases in U.S. history. Further, the corruption exposed by journalists in the Watergate scandal in 1974 led to increased enrollment in journalism programs and bolstered state sunshine laws.

**George W. Bush**, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, removed information from government websites, such as the National Inventory of Dams, and pushed for the PATRIOT Act and increased FOIA record denials on national security grounds. Reaction: A surge of open-government coalitions formed throughout the country and philanthropic funders pumped money into efforts to improve FOI.

**Barack Obama**, despite a promise his first day of office to be the most transparent president, by many measures was the most secretive in modern times. Reaction: About 50 journalism groups banded together in 2014 and 2015 to decry his secrecy tactics, and growing concerns led to the passage of the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, finally enshrining into law the presumption of openness.

**INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS & EDITORS, INC.** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting within the field of journalism. IRE was formed in 1975 with the intent of creating a networking tool and a forum in which journalists from across the country could raise questions and exchange ideas. IRE provides educational services to reporters, editors and others interested in investigative reporting and works to maintain high professional standards.

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**IRE RESOURCE CENTER** — A rich reserve of print and broadcast stories, tipsheets and guides to help you start and complete the best work of your career. This unique library is the starting point of any piece you’re working on.

Contact: Lauren Grandestaff, lauren@ire.org, 573-882-3364

**IRE AND NICAR DATABASE LIBRARY** — Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. The library has copies of many government databases and makes them available to news organizations at or below actual cost. Analysis services are available, as is help in deciphering records you obtain yourself.

Contact: Charles Minshew, charles@ire.org. To order data, call 573-884-7711.

**ON-THE-ROAD TRAINING** — As a top promoter of journalism education, IRE offers loads of training opportunities throughout the year. Possibilities range from national conference and regional workshops to weeklong boot camps and on-site newsroom training. Costs are on a sliding scale and fellowships are available to many of the events.

Contact: Megan Luther, megan@ire.org, 605-996-3967.

**DOCUMENTCLOUD** — A platform to organize, research, annotate and publish the documents you gather while reporting. Collaborate on documents across your newsroom, extract entities from text, and use powerful visualization and search tools. Visit [www.documentcloud.org](http://www.documentcloud.org).

Contact: Lauren Grandestaff, support@documentcloud.org, 202-505-1010

**NICAR-LEARN**: NICAR-Learn is an on-demand video gallery designed for journalists to learn and share computer-assisted reporting techniques. Videos are taught by IRE trainers as well as leading data journalists, allowing you to pick and choose the programs and skills you want to learn. NICAR-Learn also includes Uplink, our computer-assisted reporting blog.

Contact: Sarah Hutchins, learn@ire.org, 573-882-8969

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**THE IRE JOURNAL** — Published four times a year. Contains journalist profiles, how-to stories, reviews, investigative ideas and backgrounding tips.

Contact: Sarah Hutchins, sarah@ire.org, 573-882-8969.

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