Backgrounding
New tools to boost your research into people and companies

Investigating Abuse
Two data-driven stories shed light on abuse behind closed doors

Fact-Checking
A step-by-step guide to make your work bulletproof

The Investigative Reporters & Editors Journal

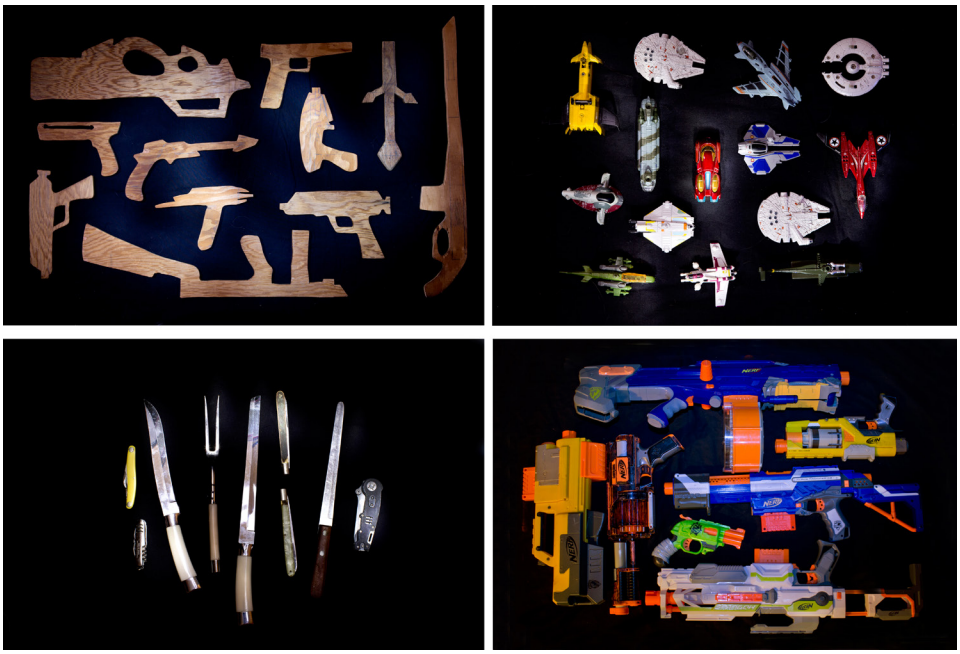
FOURTH QUARTER 2018

COVERING GUNS

CRIME • PUBLIC HEALTH • MASS SHOOTINGS

IRE Journal

FOURTH QUARTER 2018



Collected items of a teen deemed a potential threat to his school.

BETH NAKAMURA/ THE OREGONIAN/ OREGONLIVE

After a turbulent year, united we rise

Doug Haddix
Executive Director of IRE and NICAR

doug@ire.org, 573-882-1984 or on Twitter @DougHaddix

It's been a turbulent year for the "enemies of the people."

The president keeps ramping up his rhetoric against journalists and his cynical marketing campaign against truth. State and local officials feel more emboldened to attack the news media and withhold public information. Most news companies keep cutting jobs.

Then came Annapolis. The horrific mass shooting in June killed five Capital Gazette Communications employees and injured two others. After the initial shock, journalists began wondering how they could help. An attack on one journalist, after all, is an attack on all journalists.

In cooperation with the newspaper's owner, The Baltimore Sun Media Group, IRE put out a call for help. In less than 24 hours, nearly 400 journalists answered.

Reading the responses was humbling and inspirational:

- "I'm being laid off Aug. 12, and would love to be of service for that week."
- "If you could use people to cover high school football games once they start, or any nighttime sporting events, I would be honored to do that if that would in any way meet your needs."
- "I'm a special projects producer at a local television station. I can conduct interviews, write, help find stories, whatever you need. I can also sit and answer the phone, listen to scanner traffic, whatever you need."
- "I can come help organize filing cabinets if that's what's necessary — I'm young and here to help."

Journalists across America raised their hands to help. They came from newspapers, TV stations, major networks, magazines, nonprofit news centers and other news organizations.

Professors stepped forward, as did college journalism students, freelancers, retirees and unemployed journalists.

"We were joined by old colleagues and new friends, helping out both in our temporary Annapolis newsroom and at The Baltimore Sun as they loaned us staff members to get through the summer," said Capital Gazette Communications editor Rick Hutzell. "We owe a debt of gratitude bigger than we'll ever be able to repay. All I can say is thank you to everyone who helped out, and all those who offered. It meant more than you'll ever know to everyone here."

I always marvel at how hard journalists work. They persevere amid shouts and insults and threats to themselves and their newsrooms.

As the year comes to a close, I thank you for your hard work, dedication and passion — all in service of delivering truth to the people. ◆

Contact IRE
info@ire.org
573-882-2042

MASTHEAD VOL. 41 | NO. 4

MANAGING EDITOR
Sarah Hutchins

ART DIRECTOR
Larry Buchanan

CONTRIBUTING LEGAL EDITOR
Sam Terilli

EDITORIAL ASSOCIATES
Alexis Allison, Nancy Coleman, Claire Mitzel

The IRE Journal (ISSN0164-7016) is published four times a year (Feb., May, Aug., Nov.) by Investigative Reporters & Editors, Missouri School of Journalism, 141 Neff Annex, Columbia, MO 65211-0001. Periodicals postage paid at Columbia, MO and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The IRE Journal, Missouri School of Journalism, 141 Neff Annex, Columbia, MO 65211-0001.

U.S. subscriptions are $70 for individuals, $85 for libraries and $125 for institutions/businesses. International subscriptions are $90 for individuals and $150 for all others. Contact: 573-882-2042. Email: amy@ire.org.

ASK IRE

Q: What is a data diary, and why should I use one?

A: Get in the habit of writing a data diary on every project, even smaller ones.

A data diary is a document that details where and when you got the data you're working with, the steps you took to clean or reformat it, and specific analysis steps, including your Excel process, code snippets or SQL queries. Also use it to write down any interesting results, questions or story ideas that come up during your analysis, so you can remember them later.

You can see an example of a data diary at bit.ly/IREdatadiary, thanks to member Christian McDonald of the Austin American-Statesman.

If you're a programmer, tools such as coding notebooks make this easier, but you can also use a text file or Google Doc — whatever you are comfortable with in your workflow.

A data diary is useful for several reasons:

Organization: Data projects often have many moving parts, and your diary will help you stay on track. It will also mark your place. If you set aside a project for a few days, or even just for lunch, you'll remember where you were and what you've done.

Replication: Before you publish, you'll want to show your work to someone else. The diary will be their guide to making sure your methodology, queries and steps were all sound.

Transparency: You do not want your data analysis to be a black box for your audience. The diary can help you write, in plain terms, an explanation of where you got the data, the assumptions you made, analysis steps and important caveats.

Denise Malan,
Senior Training Director

IRE NEWS

Members' donations lead to new fellowship for journalists of color

A new yearlong fellowship seeks to increase the range of backgrounds, experiences and interests within the field of investigative journalism, where diverse perspectives are critically important.

The IRE Journalist of Color Investigative Reporting Fellowship is made possible thanks to generous donations from IRE members Mike Gruss, Meghan Hoyer, Megan Luther and Mike Tahani.

"We're grateful to several IRE members who are passionate about making a tangible difference in the professional development of journalists of color," IRE Executive Director Doug Haddix said. "Their investment will enable a talented journalist to receive a full slate of IRE and NICAR training. At the end of the year, the fellow will be better positioned to produce even better journalism with high impact."

The first fellow will begin in January 2019.
Learn more at bit.ly/reportingfellowship.

10 newsrooms receive free Total Newsroom Training

Ten newsrooms have been chosen to receive custom watchdog training through IRE's Total Newsroom Training program.

TNT provides two days of intensive, in-house training for small and medium-sized newsrooms dedicated to watchdog journalism. This is the sixth year IRE has offered the free program, which is supported through a grant.

The following newsrooms were chosen from more than 40 applications: **Boise Public Radio** (Boise, Idaho); **The Daily Item** (Sunbury, Pennsylvania); **WREG News Channel 3** (Memphis, Tennessee); **Mississippi Today** (Ridgeland, Mississippi); **KKTV 11 News** (Colorado Springs, Colorado); **The News Journal / delawareonline.com** (Wilmington, Delaware); **KTLM Telemundo 40** (McAllen, Texas); **KXAN** (Austin, Texas); **NPR Utah/KUER** (Salt Lake City, Utah); **The Fayetteville Observer** (Fayetteville, North Carolina).
Learn more at bit.ly/tnt-2018.

CORRECTION

The Second Quarter 2018 article "The Art and Science of Uncertainty" mischaracterized comments by Mark Schleifstein of The Times-Picayune. A corrected version has been uploaded to the IRE website.

 By **Claire Mitzel**, *IRE & NICAR*

Does your reporting toolkit need an update? We've rounded up a dozen resources for researching people and companies.

Backgrounding

PEOPLE

+1 from Lauren Grandestaff, *IRE Resource Center Director*

"An email-finding tool is great for the early stages of an investigation when you're trying to link pieces of information together and make contact with sources."

LittleSis
littlesis.org

Free

This grassroots website is like Wikipedia meets LinkedIn. Add, view or edit profiles of public figures and see whom people are connected to through relationships and organizations. View their biography, positions held and campaign contributions made or received.

Hunter
hunter.io

100 free searches/month; more with paid subscription

Find and verify professional email addresses for sources. Use the "Email Finder" tool to search by full name and email domain. Or, try the "Email Verifier" if you know an email address and want to check if it's active and valid.

Whois
whois.net

Free

Plug in a website address — it works best on businesses or corporations — and the site will provide the domain administrator's name, email, address and phone number, if available. It will also tell you when the domain was created and when it expires. You can reverse search on **viewdns.info** if you want to look up all the websites owned by a certain person or connected to an email address.

COMPANIES

OpenCorporates
opencorporates.com

Free

Pulling data from public sources, such as state and federal agency websites, OpenCorporates lets you search both companies and people around the world to yield background information. The results include basic contact information, names of corporate leaders and recent state and federal business filings, like registration reports.

USAspending
usaspending.gov

Free

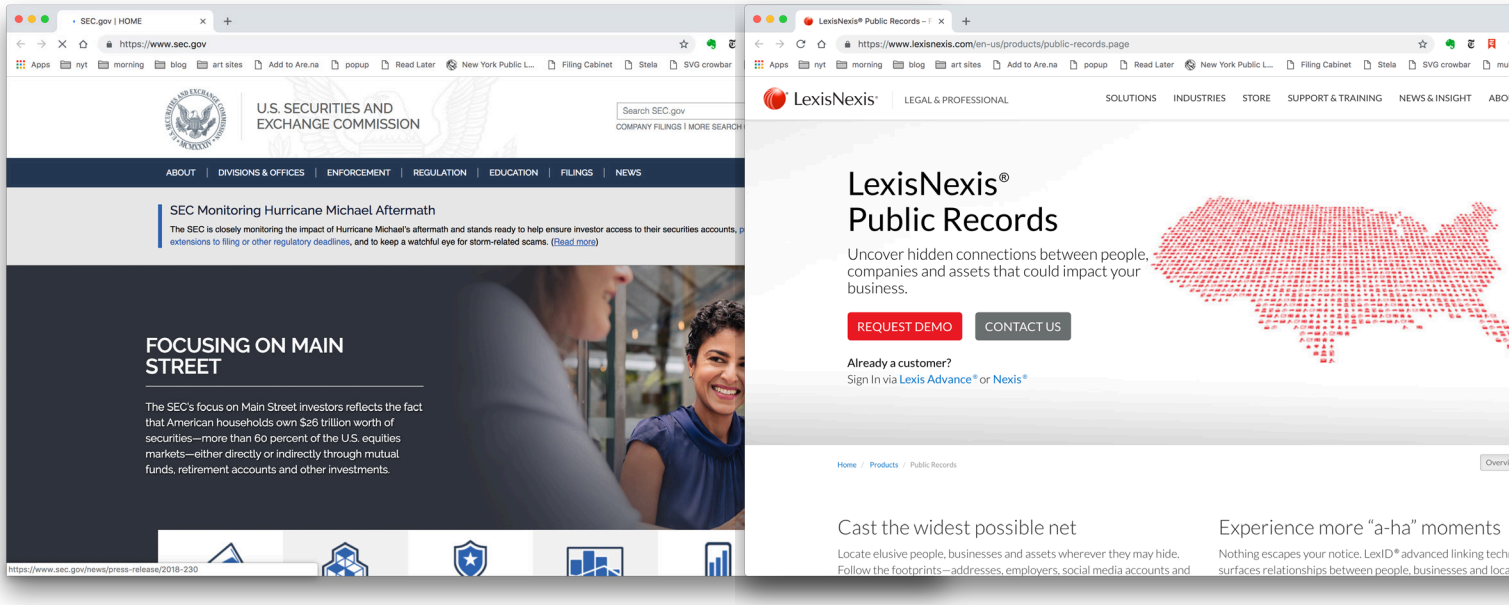
Find out how much the federal government is spending and to whom it's awarding contracts. You can narrow the search using filters such as fiscal year, award amount, keyword, recipient and congressional district. Use the site's "Spending Explorer" to visualize where the money's going. View recipient, state, federal account and agency profiles to get an idea of how much is spent or received by an entity and for which goods or services.

The Wayback Machine
web.archive.org

Free

Pop in a website URL to see snapshots of how it's changed over months or even years. Don't know the exact site you're looking for? You can search by keyword and the operator "site:" to narrow the field. Once you find the page, use the time-stamped snapshots to explore old content, including linked pages and sites.

IRE members share their favorite backgrounding tools and examples



Becky Yerak, *The Wall Street Journal*

SEC.gov is primarily known as the site where public companies file documents, but its **"full-text search"** feature can be a useful tool for backgrounding private businesses or even looking for mentions of, say, "Beyoncé" or "Donald Trump." It's hard to find the full-text search function from the home page, so save this quick link: *bit.ly/sec-full-text*.

Check local court websites and **pacer.gov**. One useful PACER tool is **"nature-of-suit" coding**. I once had to check whether Barack Obama ever filed a trademark infringement lawsuit against anyone. By searching "Obama" with nature-of-suit code 840, the search yielded a manageable number of trademark case results and gave me what I needed promptly. Or, if you want to find personal-injury cases against a particular airline, consider plugging in the airline's name and code 360 for "other personal injury."

Jack Gillum, *ProPublica*

My principal backgrounding tool is **LexisNexis**, since it accesses a ton of history about a person: their addresses, phone numbers, known relatives and neighbors, and sometimes even email addresses. Pairing that information with **LinkedIn** — which has offered free services to journalists — gives me several routes to do reporting, especially to make calls to people who know the subject or used to work with him or her.

Records kept by federal agencies can also provide clues beyond their original uses. For instance, raw Federal Election Commission data contain years' worth of former addresses and employers of donors, and that has let me fill out a person's employment and residential history.

DATA DIVE By **Alexis Allison**, *IRE & NICAR*

Investigating abuse

From archaic laws allowing child brides to low conviction rates for people charged with assaulting elders, **abuse behind closed doors is a crucial issue for watchdog journalists**. We asked two reporters to deconstruct their data stories so you can peel back the curtain in your own community — and maybe save some lives.

Beginner Level **Lauren Sausser**, *The Post and Courier*

When Lauren Sausser saw thousands of child brides listed in a spreadsheet of state marriage data, she knew she had a story. The data pinpointed how a tangle of contradictory state laws affected girls as young as 12 years old — and even allowed adult rapists to marry child victims with parental consent.

Tools

Excel

Link

bit.ly/childbridesSC

It was May 2018, and Delaware had just become the first state to ban marriages under 18. A colleague emailed Sausser, asking her to check out South Carolina's marriage laws. When she did, the health reporter noticed an intriguing discrepancy. Although a state law passed in 2000 forbids the marriage of minors under 16, a legal loophole from 1962 allows a pregnant girl to marry — regardless of her age — with parental approval. The legal age of consent in South Carolina is 16, meaning many of these marriages also meet the criteria for child rape.

Handwritten ledgers of marriage licenses. ANDREW WHITAKER/THE POST AND COURIER

Sausser sent an informal request to the state's health department asking for 18 years' worth of marriage data — with an emphasis on the brides and grooms' ages. After haggling over document formats (the department first sent her PDFs), Sausser received two Excel spreadsheets with data from 1997 to 2014. The records were free, but lacked some key details. The first spreadsheet had only 106 rows, and it didn't include names of the bride or groom. However, it gave her a starting point: the ages of the couples and the years they wed. The second spreadsheet included geographic information — specifically, the county in which an underage marriage took place.

Simple addition in Excel allowed her to find out how many underage marriages occurred over an 18-year period. After realizing there were far fewer underage grooms than brides, she removed the marriages with young grooms and focused on the brides. Using the second spreadsheet, she again used Excel to determine which county sanctioned the most marriages of girls under 16, since that's where the laws get fuzzy. Cherokee County had the most, with 195.

Next, she knew she needed names. The state wouldn't give her any — those are recorded by county, they told her. So, Sausser and a photographer spent a morning at the Cherokee County probate office, jotting down notes from handwritten marriage ledgers. Once she had names, she searched Facebook, eventually connecting with women who were married as children and ready to share their stories. ◆

Advanced Level **Asher Woodbury**, *independent journalist*

It took one year, months of coding and a $2,000 records request, but a team of student journalists found that fewer than half of people charged with elder abuse, a felony in Rhode Island, have been convicted of that crime since 2000. And with only 13 percent of those charged serving jail time for elder-abuse offenses, the system leaves some of society's most vulnerable members unprotected from further harm.

ILLUSTRATION BY TOM MURPHY/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

Asher Woodbury had just graduated from Brown with a degree in computer science — along with a few journalism courses on his transcript — and was looking for a job when his former journalism professor, Tracy Breton, reached out to him. She'd partnered with the Community Tribune, a small, nonprofit news organization trying to fill gaps in local reporting by enlisting student journalists to tackle tough stories. Breton had an idea — to investigate conviction rates in the state's elder abuse cases — and she wanted Woodbury to handle the data. Her current journalism students would take care of the reporting.

The professor had already requested what Woodbury calls a "data dump" from the Rhode Island Judiciary. Her requests included data on defendants charged with assaulting victims ages 60 or older, as well as corresponding case numbers, defendant pleas and sentencing information. The process was arduous — it took months for the reporters to get completed, updated data. They finally did, at a $2,000 price tag, and even then, the data weren't as specific as they'd hoped.

Woodbury and a fellow coder, Kyle Foreman, imported the three resulting Excel spreadsheets — one for charge-level data, one for defendant-level data and one for sentencing information — into Python and used a package called "pandas" to query the information. They started by grouping corresponding charges by case number, filtering out cases without elder abuse charges and joining the three tables together. The reporters then sifted through hundreds of paper case files to cross-reference the data, and Woodbury conducted regular spot checks to make sure his calculations were accurate. He noticed some cases were listed twice — once related to the district court and once related to the superior court — so he removed the duplicates.

Nearly 10 months after his professor first approached him, he was able to calculate the number of elder abuse cases, conviction rates and average jail time. This was followed by more spot-checks and corroboration by student journalists. Finally, Foreman reviewed his work.

To make the whole process smoother, Woodbury used IPython Notebook (now called Jupyter Notebook) to write his code and GitHub to access his work remotely. By May 2018, he finished his data analysis and passed his findings along to his colleagues. The investigation culminated in a nine-part series that ran in the Providence Journal from late August into early September. ◆

Tools

Python, IPython Notebook, Google Sheets, GitHub

Link

bit.ly/ElderAbuseRI

 By **Nancy Coleman**, *IRE & NICAR*

Fact-checking

Longer projects — especially those involving documents, data and interviews — can often be the most daunting stories to fact-check. When Jayme Fraser, a reporter at Oregon's Malheur Enterprise and a member of ProPublica's Local Reporting Network, was investigating a state board's decision to release the criminally insane from state custody, she put her fact-checking process to work. We reached out to Fraser to learn about her fact-checking system and how other reporters can bulletproof their own work.

Highlight every fact, quote or detail in one color, and do the same in a different color for names, titles or technical terms. These are the elements that need to be fact-checked. For this story, Fraser used green for facts and orange for names. "I usually start with the names and technical terms, just because they're easy and I feel like I'm getting something done," she said.

Circle in red the specific contextual words that could easily cause errors — "likely," "first" and "most," for example, are all flagged here. "Those kinds of words always get me in trouble," Fraser said.

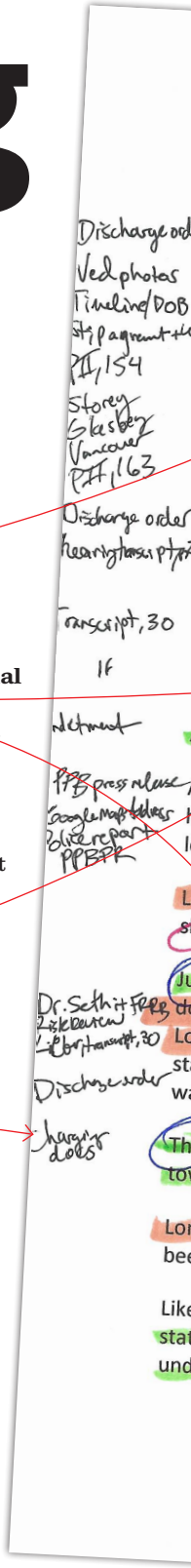
Mark errors in a different color, and write any changes or questions in one of the margins. Fraser used a blue pen to circle errors that prompted further questions or needed to be fixed. Using a separate color in a space away from other markings — Fraser's changes are on the right — helps ensure important changes don't get lost in the shuffle.

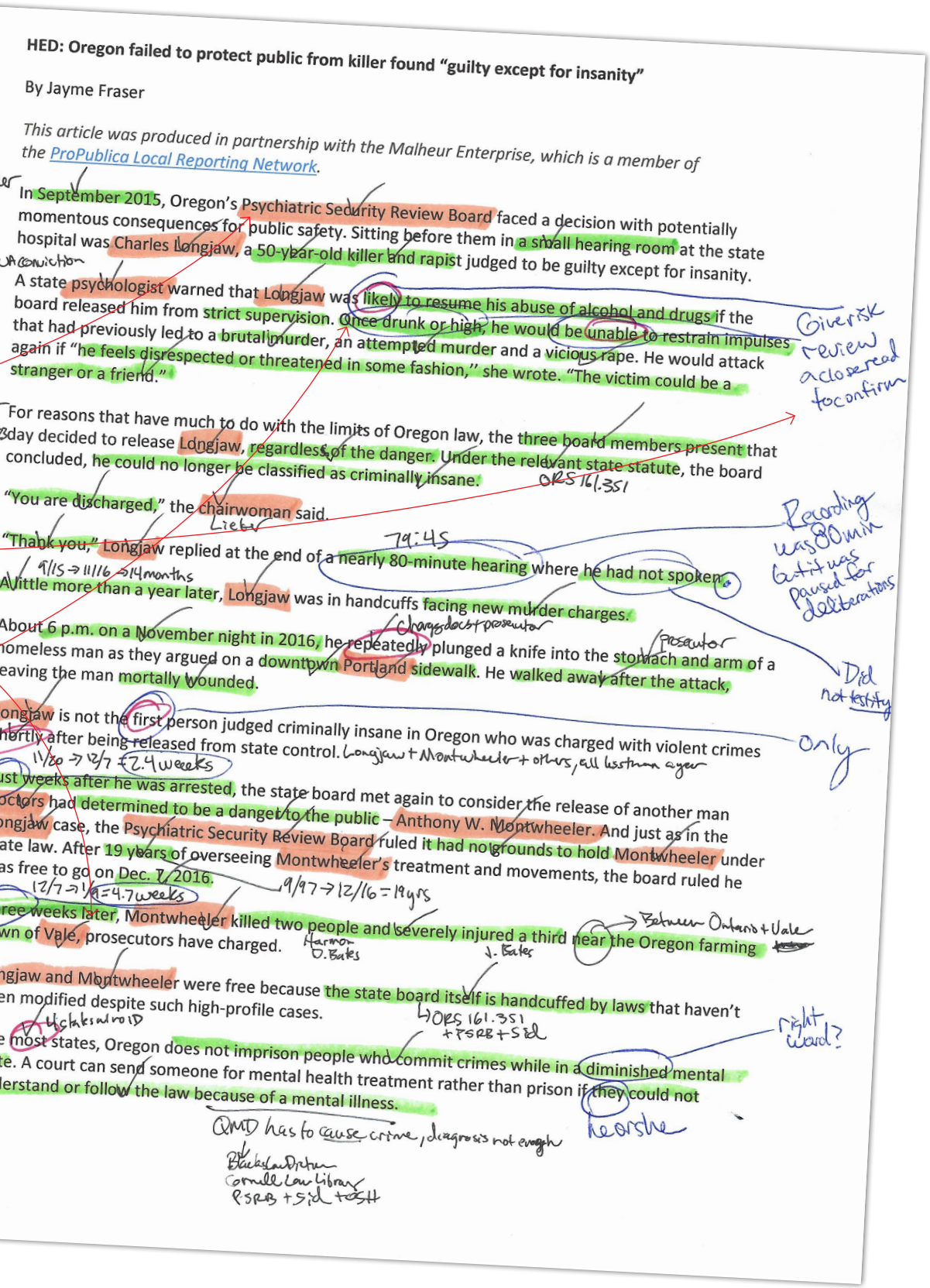
Write down the sources that support every highlighted fact. Fraser said these notes, shown here in the left margin, are helpful when an editor has questions about a specific part of the story. "I can reference that note in the column and flip to that exact page in an interview or that exact page in a document," she said.

Keep a map on hand if you're mentioning a geographic place or area. Mixing up the east and west sides of town, for example, is a quick way to lose trust and annoy locals. Even though Fraser has spent some time in Portland, where much of her story was set, she still double-checked any references to locations there: "I don't know the city like the back of my hand."

Short on time? Fraser said it's important to plan for fact-checking in advance. "I certainly don't pull out the highlighters for daily stories." But a few extra minutes can make all the difference. Her daily deadline checklist includes names, numbers, quotes, places and contextual keywords. "I think we can all afford to spend five more minutes checking the basics of our stories," Fraser said.

Watch out for potential sourcing problems in documents, especially if several cite similar information. Five documents that all agree on a certain point but reference back to a single source should count as one source, not five. Ask yourself why these documents might support each other. "Are they in agreement because they independently reached the same conclusion?" Fraser said. "Or am I seeing an echo of fact that makes it seem like there's more evidence than there is?" This review can help reporters spot places where another source could strengthen the facts.





HED: Oregon failed to protect public from killer found "guilty except for insanity"

By Jayme Fraser

This article was produced in partnership with the Malheur Enterprise, which is a member of the ProPublica Local Reporting Network.

In September 2015, Oregon's Psychiatric Security Review Board faced a decision with potentially momentous consequences for public safety. Sitting before them in a small hearing room at the state hospital was Charles Longjaw, a 50-year-old killer and rapist judged to be guilty except for insanity.

A state psychologist warned that Longjaw was likely to resume his abuse of alcohol and drugs if the board released him from strict supervision. Once drunk or high, he would be unable to restrain impulses that had previously led to a brutal murder, an attempted murder and a vicious rape. He would attack again if "he feels disrespected or threatened in some fashion," she wrote. "The victim could be a stranger or a friend."

For reasons that have much to do with the limits of Oregon law, the three board members present that day decided to release Longjaw, regardless of the danger. Under the relevant state statute, the board concluded, he could no longer be classified as criminally insane.

"You are discharged," the chairwoman said.

"Thank you," Longjaw replied at the end of a nearly 80-minute hearing where he had not spoken.

A little more than a year later, Longjaw was in handcuffs facing new murder charges.

About 6 p.m. on a November night in 2016, he repeatedly plunged a knife into the stomach and arm of a homeless man as they argued on a downtown Portland sidewalk. He walked away after the attack, leaving the man mortally wounded.

Longjaw is not the first person judged criminally insane in Oregon who was charged with violent crimes shortly after being released from state control.

Just weeks after he was arrested, the state board met again to consider the release of another man doctors had determined to be a danger to the public – Anthony W. Montwheeler. And just as in the Longjaw case, the Psychiatric Security Review Board ruled it had no grounds to hold Montwheeler under state law. After 19 years of overseeing Montwheeler's treatment and movements, the board ruled he was free to go on Dec. 7, 2016.

Three weeks later, Montwheeler killed two people and severely injured a third near the Oregon farming town of Vale, prosecutors have charged.

Longjaw and Montwheeler were free because the state board itself is handcuffed by laws that haven't been modified despite such high-profile cases.

In most states, Oregon does not imprison people who commit crimes while in a diminished mental state. A court can send someone for mental health treatment rather than prison if they could not understand or follow the law because of a mental illness.

Fact-checking tips

Fraser compiled an online list of fact-checking tricks from other reporters. Here are some of the highlights:

Jason Grotto of ProPublica Illinois numbered every fact in one 4,000-word article, and then used a spreadsheet to track the sources for all 291 facts in the story. He then went back and checked the whole story again.

Kate Martin at Carolina Public Press also uses an array of color-coded highlights, but she specifically flags any dollar amounts in a separate color. She marks facts and quotes in yellow, numbers or dates in blue and monetary figures in green.

Matina Stevis-Gridneff at The Wall Street Journal proofreads backward, starting from the bottom of the story. "The lack of continuity makes it less likely to skip sentences and helps focus better on exactly what you're reading instead of anticipating the next graf," she wrote on Twitter.

Mick Sweetman, a reporter at Ryerson University in Toronto, developed an accuracy checklist that breaks the fact-checking process into stages: "While reporting," "While writing," "During final checks before submitting" and "When finished." The list also includes checking which pronouns sources prefer.

Under Occupation

Annexation forced journalists in Crimea to relocate, but it didn't stop them from holding the powerful accountable.

By **Sarah Hutchins**, IRE & NICAR

At the 2018 IRE Conference in Orlando, we sat down with Valentyna Samar of Ukraine's Center for Investigative Reporting to talk about the state of watchdog journalism following the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

Samar spoke through a translator, Svitlana Zholobaylo. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

IRE: Could you start by telling us a little bit about your organization and the reporting you do?

Before the annexation of Crimea, our press center — which was located in Crimea — started the agency for investigative reporting, and we did a lot of investigations in Crimea. As of March 2014, our organization had a network of six media centers there. We did a lot of investigations, and we did trainings for local journalists.

Later in 2014, our newsroom was the first nongovernment organization seized by (Russian President Vladimir) Putin's "little green men" (Russian special forces). We couldn't continue our activities and had to think about relocating. Still, we continued to do investigations, and we also did programming for a national investigative TV show called Slidstvo.info.

In August 2014, our newsroom was seized and all the equipment was confiscated. The TV company that was broadcasting our program also was destroyed, and we had to move out of Crimea. Now we're located in Kyiv and called the Center for Investigative Reporting. We have a website where we publish our investigations into corruption in Ukraine and war crimes in Crimea.

Based on our investigations, a bunch of criminal cases have been opened into violations of freedom of the press and other freedoms, and the kidnapping of people and journalists. We also monitor the violation of sanctions imposed by the European Union and the U.S. government on Russia. And we also monitor the violation of sanctions by Ukrainian companies, especially companies owned by Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs or friends of the Ukrainian president and Western companies.

IRE: Can you describe the media climate in Crimea and what it's like for journalists trying to investigate?

From the first hours of the occupation of Crimea by Russians, their goal was to push out free media and journalists who tried to do good journalism in Crimea. So, they were kicking them out, destroying equipment and trying to do anything possible not to have independent journalists in Crimea in order to avoid true news about the occupation.

They also seized all the transmitters used by TV and radio stations, and the frequencies were given to Russian TV companies. Now, the media that's left in Crimea are loyal to the occupational government or they're owned by the Russian oligarchs.

Ten or more newsrooms had to evacuate or relocate from Crimea to other cities in Ukraine to be able to keep working independently. We used to have a few reporters in Crimea after we relocated our newsroom, but it was impossible to work openly. They had to work undercover because, even right now, there are criminal cases

open and they are constantly being called by the FSB (Russia's Federal Security Service) and asked about their activities.

After the annexation, the Criminal Code of Russia was amended that says that if you don't acknowledge annexation of Crimea and you keep saying that it's Ukrainian territory, you can be sent to prison for up to five years. As you can imagine, independent journalists and some other newsrooms can easily be accused of this and face the five years in prison. And the editors of these newsrooms are on the list of terrorists and extremists compiled by Russia.

The websites of these independent newsrooms from Crimea are blocked by Russian regulators. People in Crimea and in Russia cannot get to their websites unless they know how to use VPN.

But we keep working, especially with data and documents, to disclose the wrongdoings and violations in Crimea. Of course, we never disclose our sources to protect them.

Since there are no independent journalists who can work in Crimea, there are several civil activists who will livestream court hearings, rallies and protests in Crimea. We get information from them. Sadly, they get arrested from time to time, but new civil activists take their place.

IRE: Can you talk about some of the stories or investigations you're most proud of, or that you think had the biggest impact?

I'm very proud that even after annexation we kept doing our job in Crimea and we kept broadcasting live programs uncovering what was happening. I'm very proud of my team because they remained professional, they kept doing good journalism and nobody betrayed us.

I'm very proud of the investigations that uncovered violations of sanctions, especially where Ukrainian businesses were involved, businesses owned by Ukrainian oligarchs and friends of the president.

When we talk about getting these territories back, we cannot use any military force to do that and neither can our allies. So, what can we do? We can use diplomatic opportunities. We can use economic pressure, sanctions, anything that can prevent Russia from continuing to do what they're doing in Crimea.

These sanctions make it impossible to invest in Crimea. You cannot do business in Crimea. You cannot import any new technologies or any raw materials for any business in Crimea. Traditional companies stopped doing business there. For the younger generations living in Crimea, it's like a dream come true to eat at McDonald's.

So, the Ukrainian government is pushing Western governments to expand the sanctions, to put more and more pressure on Putin to leave Ukraine. But at the same time, Ukrainian oligarchs are lobbying for laws or legislative documents to allow them to keep doing business in Crimea. So, the president's friends, Ukrainian oligarchs, they try to invent schemes to avoid the sanctions and keep doing business in Crimea.

That's why we try to disclose such corrupt schemes. We try to show that there are violations of sanctions and that Putin has to be under sanctions.

IRE: How can journalists in the U.S. do a better job of covering Crimea or supporting you and your team in your efforts?

IRE is a networking opportunity, and we had several meetings with reporters from leading U.S. media organizations who were interested in some of the topics we cover. So, we hope for some collaboration.

But in talking about Crimea, we shouldn't forget also about the people who live there, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars, who are in very bad condition right now. There are a lot of violations of their freedoms and a lot of cases in the International Criminal Court.

The international community keeps forgetting what Crimea actually is. Crimea became the big military base, which disrupted the military and political balance in the Black Sea region. We have to pay more attention to what is happening there, not only to people, but also with militarization on land and at sea.

IRE: With all of this happening, what brought you to IRE this year? Why did you think it was important to come to Orlando?

We are part of the IREX media exchange program, which brought us here. We spent several days in New York prior to coming to the IRE Conference, visiting different newsrooms and talking to people about Crimea, Ukraine and what we do. And, of course, this invitation to IRE helped us talk to even more people and spread the word about Crimea and Ukraine.

It's very important to share this information with the world and remind people what is happening in that part of the country, and especially how American taxpayers' money is spent, because IREX is supported by the U.S. government.

So, we had a chance to see some great journalists and talk to them and see once again that good journalism is important. ◆

Sarah Hutchins is IRE & NICAR's editorial director and managing editor of The IRE Journal.

Distributed Data

Texas newsrooms join forces to purchase state voter data

By **Matt Dempsey**, Houston Chronicle

Back in August, I could see the midterm elections barreling toward the Houston Chronicle newsroom. We had a number of stories we wanted to tell before Election Day, but the data we needed came with a hefty price tag.

In Texas, the voter registration database is covered by the election code, not the public records law. In order to get it, you need a signed and notarized affidavit saying you won't use the data for commercial purposes. Oh, and it costs about $1,300. I tried to haggle my way out of the fee, but the Secretary of State's office wasn't having it.

As I updated my editor Steve Riley on the situation, a thought popped into my head: Other news organizations might want this data, too. What if we split the cost?

That idea ultimately turned into a collaboration that allowed us to purchase the Texas voter database and ensure newsrooms across the state had access to vital information leading up to Election Day.

Here are four lessons I learned along the way.

Lesson One: Start with the people you know

My first call was to the Texas Tribune. Starting with them made sense: We've collaborated before, they're in Texas, and I knew they would be interested in the data. I ended up working with Ryan Murphy, the Tribune's deputy data visuals editor, and we agreed that as long as we could get the price per partner to around $200 or less, other newsrooms would also be interested.

I didn't think we should dictate up front which stories the partners should tell or collaborate on. Ryan went over the details with his bosses to make sure they saw things the same way. With the Tribune tentatively on board, I started making calls and extending the pitch to others.

Lesson Two: Cast a wide net

I've always worked in newspapers, so my initial list of partners focused on print. But if I only relied on them, I wouldn't be pulling from a big enough group to hit my price target. The only solution was to think bigger. I expanded the ask to TV stations, public radio newsrooms and online outlets. The new list grew to a spreadsheet with more than 40 newsrooms.

After just a few hours making phone calls, there was interest from every TV station in Houston, the Houston NPR affiliate, Houston's Univision station and the San Antonio Express-News.

Next, I hyped what we were cooking up with a cryptic tweet. I didn't reveal the specific data set, in case the state saw and tried and squash the plan before we even filed the request. The social media push worked. I got a few messages from other newsrooms that wanted to know what we were getting and whether they could join. That's how we added Texas Monthly magazine and ProPublica's Electionland project to the request.

Lesson Three: Keep it simple

Less than a week after my initial call with Ryan Murphy, I sent an email to the newsrooms that had responded with interest in the collaboration.

I started getting questions about the details: How long would it take to get the data? Why get it now instead of after the election? Can we get voting history data, too? Are we allowed to publish it online? Does Texas law even allow multiple people to submit a single request and share the data set?

Because I had done some initial research into getting the data for our newsroom, I knew the answers to most of these questions:

The state was required to provide the data within 15 days of getting our request.

If we got the data now, we could tell stories about the electorate before the election happened.

Historical voting data was available, but it

Prairie View A&M University students register to vote on the last day for registration in Texas.

MATT DEMPSEY/ THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE

would double the cost.

The last two questions were tough. We were allowed to post the data online, but should we? After the public outcry over the Trump administration's election commission and its request for voter registration data, I decided it wasn't worth the risk of public blowback. I convinced our partners not to publish the data set, at least not right away.

To navigate the last question, the one about Texas law, I brought in lawyers from our parent company, Hearst. A lawyer from the Secretary of State's office told me there was nothing in the law that prohibited sharing the data set with others. Our lawyers said having everyone sign a contract agreeing to the same rules and conditions would complicate things, so on their advice, I asked every partner to email me a scanned and notarized affidavit. I included them in a single request made on behalf of the group.

Twenty newsrooms sent in their affidavits by the deadline. I'd reached out to 47 newsrooms across the state and a few national outlets. I consider a 43 percent participation rate a rousing success.

Lesson Four: Follow through is important

It took about a week to get the data, and officials didn't balk at the number of partners. The Secretary of State's office had concerns about data security, so the biggest challenge was figuring out a delivery method. They eventually put the data in a shared Google Drive folder.

Because we assembled a large group of partners, we were able to purchase the historical data — roughly $3,600 total — and still keep newsroom costs low. The total per partner came to $184. Newsrooms sent checks to the Chronicle and, once they were received, I made the data available for download.

If a smaller newsroom needs help working with the data, they can come to me or Stanford's Big Local News project run by Cheryl Phillips. I started this, so I'm committed to making sure that everyone has what they need.

Some newsrooms might only use the voter registration data as a backgrounding resource or tool to find people. Others might look at the demographics of newly registered voters. There are a lot of potential stories.

I'm already looking for other opportunities for future collaborations. I hope this project shows newsrooms across the country that, if we work together, we can help improve our resources and reporting. ◆

Matt Dempsey is the data editor at the Houston Chronicle and a member of the IRE Board of Directors. He has worked on projects involving wildfires, state pensions and the chemical industry. His passion for public records frequently leads to disclosure of data from all levels of government.

In an aging America, no one is tracking the deadly combination of dementia and gun ownership

Unlocking dementia and guns

By **Melissa Bailey** and **JoNel Aleccia**, Kaiser Health News

The spark for this story came from a colleague whose siblings were wrestling with a question: How should they talk to their father — who suffers from dementia — about giving up his guns?

Dee Hill examines one of the guns that belonged to her husband, Darrell Hill. On May 16, 2015, he accidentally shot his wife with one of his weapons, critically injuring her.

JASON LELCHUK/ PBS NEWSHOUR

It turned out families facing this question across the country receive little guidance, and no one tracks how often this risky scenario ends in harm.

In the U.S., where gun violence kills 96 people each day, there has been vigorous debate about how to stop the carnage, including ways to prevent people with mental illness from acquiring and owning firearms.

But an unacknowledged and potentially far bigger problem is what to do about the vast cache of firearms in the homes of aging Americans with dementia. Our four-month investigation, "Unlocked and Loaded: Families Confront Dementia and Guns" (*bit.ly/dementia-guns*), produced in partnership with PBS NewsHour, shed light on an aspect of guns and public health that no one talks about.

Pulling together multiple sources — news reports, police and court records, hospital discharge data and death records — we uncovered more than 100 cases since 2012 in which people with dementia used guns to kill or injure themselves or others. That's far from a definitive number, since data on gun violence in general, and in this case especially, are so scarce. But it gave us a sizable basis of cases to look through and describe.

We found that shooters often acted during bouts of confusion, paranoia, delusion or aggression — common symptoms of dementia. They killed the people closest to them — their caretaker, spouse or children.

The Data

To find individual cases, we filed records requests with state vital statistics departments, asking for their death records. We learned that most state death records are not easy to get. Many states rerouted us to a company called VitalChek, which sells death certificates at upward of $30 apiece. Other states would release death records — but without the cause of death, which by law is kept private until 50 years after someone dies.

We ended up compiling death records with names and causes of death from seven states (Connecticut, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio and Washington), plus some county medical examiners' offices in Florida and Texas.

These records aren't always easy to read. For the causes of death, most states use ICD-10 codes: The code for "intentional self-harm by handgun discharge" is X72, and dementia can appear as F03, G30.9, or many other variations. A free website (*bit.ly/GuideICD10*) and PDF download from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (*bit.ly/cdc-codes*) helped decipher the codes.

Using SQL, we built a database of death records and used the cryptic ICD-10 codes to identify people who died from self-inflicted gunshot wounds and also had dementia listed as a contributing factor. These death records bear a caveat: They're not a solid basis to calculate prevalence. ProPublica and other groups have revealed that elder abuse cases may be overlooked and recorded as death by natural causes. But we found them useful for finding individual cases.

Two states, California and Florida, also ran queries for us on their hospital discharge data, counting people with dementia who died at a hospital after a self-inflicted gunshot wound (this method omits the larger number of people who shoot themselves and die at the scene). Overall, these numbers vastly undercount the prevalence of suicides involving guns and dementia, since we did not have data from most states.

For homicides, we relied on a Nexis search of news clips, then used police and court records to identify the shooter if he or she was not named. To find family members of the victims and perpetrators, we used obituaries, public records searches and social media.

The Interviews

We spoke to many families who suffered harm but didn't want to talk publicly. Some told us they didn't want to be criticized for not taking guns away.

"I hope your intent is not to 'bash' us for our beliefs and actions with guns," wrote Vergie "Verg" Scroughams, 63, of Rexburg, Idaho. In a visit to her home, she later showed us how she hid a loaded gun from her husband, who devel-

Delmar Scroughams holds a gun from his collection in 2018. After he developed dementia in 2009, his wife, Verg, locked up the gun cabinet for their protection. HEIDI DE MARCO/KHN

Scroughams and his wife, Vergie "Verg" Scroughams, of Rexburg, Idaho, in 2018.

HEIDI DE MARCO/KHN

oped dementia after a stroke in 2009.

We also identified four other families who were willing to discuss their harrowing experiences with dementia and guns. These were sensitive stories: In each case, a family member had been shot by their husband or father. Families, including some with young children, were still coping with trauma, guilt and loss.

Along with our TV partner, PBS NewsHour, we traveled across the U.S. to talk to these families on camera. They opened up to us about their struggles to let their gun-owning relatives maintain independence, even at the expense of their own safety.

Outside Data Analysis

While their stories were compelling, prevalence data was still hard to nail down, in part because two decades of political pressure from gun lobbies has stifled public health research about the effects of gun violence. But we found a Washington state epidemiologist who agreed to crunch some numbers for us to give the story more quantitative heft.

The data analysis conducted for KHN found that, in Washington state alone, an estimated 15,000 people 65 and older report worsening confusion and memory loss — and keep their guns unlocked and loaded at home. The source was the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey. Every state conducts some version of the survey, but Washington is the only state that has used it to track both cognitive impairment and firearm storage. The data aren't perfect, since people who already have dementia may not answer these telephone surveys. But CDC researchers argue these survey questions about worsening confusion and memory loss, an early symptom of dementia, can serve as a predictor for who might develop dementia in the future.

We also rounded up some research that points to a larger problem: In a nation where 45 percent of people 65 or older live in homes with guns, nearly one in 10 in that age group has dementia. Another study estimates that by 2050, between roughly 8 million and 12 million Americans with dementia could live in homes with guns.

Other research and interviews revealed that many doctors don't screen dementia patients for firearm access. The same physicians who recommend taking away car keys often don't ask about guns. In an accompanying article, we outlined the legal and practical steps that fami-

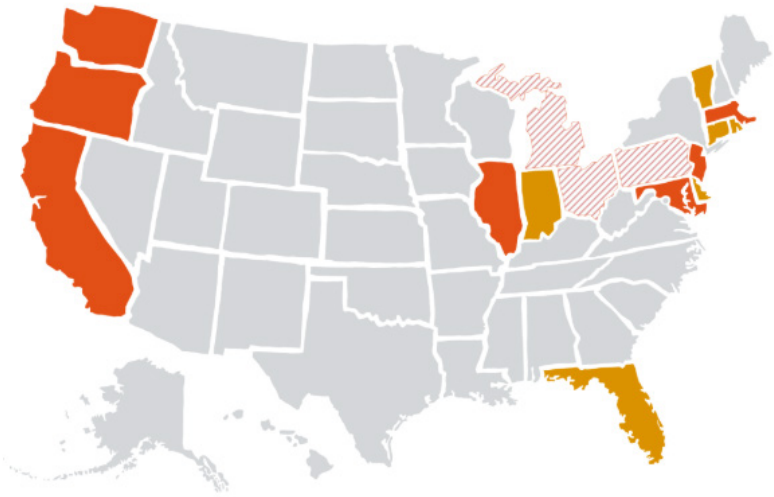
Melissa Bailey and JoNel Aleccia are reporters on Kaiser Health News' enterprise and investigative team, both focusing on aging and end-of-life issues. Their joint investigation into neglect of hospice patients was a finalist for the NIHCM Foundation's 2017 Annual Health Care Print Journalism Award.

Scroughams holds an old photograph of himself posing with his guns. HEIDI DE MARCO/KHN

"Red Flag" Gun Laws

Eleven states have passed "red flag" gun laws, which let law enforcement, and sometimes other state officials, seek a court order to temporarily seize guns from someone who exhibits dangerous behavior. In five of those states, family or household members can also initiate these gun-seizure requests.

- Family or household members, law enforcement or state officials
- Law enforcement or state officials
- Bills pending



LYDIA ZURAW/KAISER HEALTH NEWS

SOURCE: STATE LEGISLATURES

lies caring for someone with dementia can take to handle guns (*bit.ly/DementiaGuidance*).

Since the story ran in June on PBS NewsHour and KHN.org, it has been republished by dozens of news outlets including CNN, NBC, HuffPost and U.S. News & World Report. One neurologist tweeted: "Wow, this KHN news article was a blindspot for me & I'm sure other neurologists. Screening for guns in the home is not routine for #dementia patients."

Dr. Emmy Betz, a leading researcher on dementia and guns, told us she and colleagues plan to use the video to help patients and caregivers decide how to handle firearms at home.

The largest impact — and one that's hard to measure — has been the awareness generated by raising this issue in a high-profile way.

As Vergie Scroughams left an Idaho convenience store with a KHN reporter and photographer, the woman behind the counter asked why she was suddenly "so famous." When Scroughams explained that she agreed to share her experience for a story about the dilemma of dementia and guns, the woman echoed a phrase we heard over and over: "My goodness," she said. "I'd never even thought of that." ◆

The youngest victims

Health care data reveal more than 3,000 Florida kids killed or injured by guns from 2010 to 2015

By **Kathleen McGrory**, Tampa Bay Times

Luis Pimentel holds a photo of his boys, from left, Kevin, 12, Trevor, 16, Brady, 6, and Austin Robles, 18. Kevin opened fire on Trevor and Brady while they prepared dinner in 2015. Trevor survived. Brady died. Kevin killed himself. TAMPA BAY TIMES

Between 2010 and 2015, a child in Florida was shot, on average, every 17 hours.

That grim statistic was a key finding of our series, "In Harm's Way." The stories, which ran in the Tampa Bay Times in February 2017, used health care data to show how guns were hurting children in Florida (*bit.ly/FloridaChildren*).

I started researching the topic in early 2016 after reading several stories about shootings involving kids. I wondered if the stories represented a trend, and decided to use data to find out.

I pitched the idea to my editors at the Times. I also pitched the idea to the Center for Health Journalism at USC Annenberg, which supported the project through its 2016 National Fellowship. The program provides training, mentoring and grant money to reporters across the country.

Times data reporter Connie Humburg and I started by requesting the most recent hospital discharge data from the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration. The statewide database does not contain patient names, but it does provide patient-level data on age, gender, race and ZIP code, as well as information on diagnoses, procedures, outcomes and billing.

We limited our analysis to patients under 18 who had gone to the emergency room or been admitted to the hospital with a firearm-related injury. To find those patients, we searched all of the records containing external cause-of-injury codes. E-codes, as they are often called, are published by the World Health Organization as part of a medical classification system known as the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems. The most recent list includes hundreds of codes related to firearms, including handgun assault, hunting rifle accident and machine gun malfunction.

We decided to exclude injuries from airsoft and BB guns, which are powered differently than handguns and rifles.

We knew our methodology would exclude a group of children: those who were fatally shot, but never made it to the hospital. To account for those kids, we reached out to each medical examiner's office in Florida and asked for records on children

who died over that same time period. We received basic biographical information — name, gender, date of birth, date of death — as well as the cause and manner of death, and built a spreadsheet.

Between the two data sets, we found 3,168 children in Florida injured or killed by guns between 2010 and 2015.

We used Microsoft Access and Excel to group them by county, ZIP code and circumstance to determine how and where firearms were endangering kids. Then, we looked for trends by age, gender, race, type of weapon, intent, location and whether the child died.

Putting the data in context

Perhaps the biggest takeaway was the growing number of Florida kids being hurt and killed by firearms. From 2010 to 2015, the number of children killed in gun-related incidents had risen nearly 20 percent. Injuries from guns had jumped 26 percent from 2014 to 2015 alone. A national expert characterized the increase as "very rapid."

Several academics suggested the increase was because of a surge in the number of guns in Florida. We were able to show that background checks, which are required to buy firearms from licensed gun dealers, had grown statewide over that time frame, as had the number of concealed weapon permit holders.

The data enabled us to get even more granular. The hospital discharge data categorized most of the cases as accidents, assaults or self-injury. Among kids, there had been roughly as many unintentional shootings as assaults. But the number of accidents was rising far faster.

We could also calculate cost. Our analysis found that from 2010 to 2015, hospitals across the state billed more than $100 million for pediatric gun injuries. More than $75 million of that had been billed to Medicaid or Florida KidCare, a publicly subsidized payer.

In addition, we used data available online from the Florida Department of Health to explore how firearm injuries compared to other causes of death for children in the state. We learned more children died of firearm injuries than of cardiovascular, infectious or respiratory diseases. And we learned the number of firearm-related deaths among children 17 and under was roughly the same as the number of drownings.

We took our findings to the Florida Department of Health. In response, the department ran its own analysis. It omitted three injury codes we chose to include but would not explain why. The department also declined to provide data from 2015, citing changes to the classification system. We ran the analysis using only the state's codes and found 100 more injured kids. After much discussion, we chose to go with our methodology, which we had developed based on similar work by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and by reviewing each code by hand.

I also asked the health department why it was not addressing child firearm injuries. Florida had campaigns aimed at reducing child drownings and motor-vehicle deaths, but nothing about

Kathleen McGrory is a member of the Tampa Bay Times investigations team. She was recently a finalist for the Livingston Award for an investigation into a fatal accident at a Florida power plant. Before joining the Times in 2015, Kathleen covered education and government for the Miami Herald.

Patricia Davis, mother of Ikeim Boswell, holds the urn with her son's ashes in her Tampa home. Ikeim was 16 on March 14, 2015, when he was fatally shot.

JOHN PENDYGRAFT / TAMPA BAY TIMES

firearm violence. A spokeswoman said the agency's injury-prevention section selects its priorities based partly on CDC grant requirements. Since 1996, Congressional Republicans have pressured the agency not to fund gun research and safety measures.

Beyond the numbers

Of course, the numbers and policy didn't tell the whole story. We wanted to connect with families who had experienced gunshot injuries and deaths. To find them, we read through hundreds of newspaper clips, reached out to hospitals with specialized pediatric trauma units and sat in on support groups for mothers of murdered children.

A handful of families shared their stories. Times photojournalist John Pendygraft and I interviewed them over several months. In some cases, we returned to their homes over and over. Jessica Piascik cried while recounting how her 2-year-old daughter had stumbled upon a handgun in their home north of St. Petersburg and accidentally shot herself. The girl survived, but their lives all changed that day. "Mackenzie has the physical scars," Jessica said. "I have the emotional scars." Regina Talabert, of Miami, took us to the cemetery where her 17-year-old daughter Noricia was buried. She wept over her grave.

We sought additional records to help round out their recollections: 911 calls, police reports, court transcripts, TV news clips, medical records. Often, the documents provided small but telling details that helped us build powerful narratives.

The series didn't change any laws, but it helped propel important conversations across the state. We heard from parents, physicians and public health advocates. A local after-school program said it was inspired to develop a gun-safety program. Another nonprofit shared the series with its volunteers. We were invited to discuss the series with several groups, including the Doctors for America National Leadership Conference and the League of Women Voters.

The February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland has spurred a national conversation about guns and the laws that govern them. There's a compelling reason to look at the issue through the lens of health. For one, it can be a way to get past the political rhetoric. What's more, physicians across the country say policymakers should address gun violence as a public-health crisis.

The data is plentiful. The CDC publishes high-level statistics about gun injuries going back decades. Individual states maintain cause-of-death statistics that can help you understand how firearm injuries compare to other causes of death. And most states have hospital discharge databases like the one we used in our series that can help you take a detailed look at fatal and nonfatal firearm injuries. In addition, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar has indicated he may open the doors for federal research on gun injuries and violence, meaning more studies may soon be available. ◆

OPINION

THE MASS SHOOTER AND THE MEDIA

Journalists can play a part in reducing the violence and "mass shooting contagion"

By **Katherine Reed**, Missouri School of Journalism

It's the kind of story certain to attract an investigative reporter: A powerful industry is dumping a product onto the market that scientific research has shown negatively affects public health.

In this example, the industry is journalism. The product: wall-to-wall, no-holds-barred coverage of mass shootings.

Tomorrow's perpetrator of a mass shooting may very well be thinking about the celebrity he will gain by killing. He may be aware that the more people he kills, the greater the attention he will achieve — at least for a few news cycles.

That's the chilling conclusion of researchers who examined the words of killers and determined it is "essentially indisputable" that media coverage is part of the problem. Adam Lankford, an associate criminology professor at the University of Alabama, analyzed the writings and statements of mass killers around the world and found 24 between 1966–2015 who explicitly mentioned seeking fame and media attention as a motive. Lankford also found that those who "clearly sought fame killed and wounded more than twice as many victims as other rampage shooters did."

Last October, Lankford and nearly 150 researchers and law enforcement officials signed an open letter to the media asking news organizations to stop naming the killers in mass shooting stories, except when the suspect's name and photograph are necessary for getting the public to help find him (*bit.ly/openmedialetter*).

Some journalism educators and journalists, including Anderson Cooper, were already on board, persuaded by the arguments of the "No Notoriety" campaign. I've previously written about this subject (*bit.ly/reedarticle*), and in June I moderated an IRE Conference panel on it with Lankford and two Florida journalists. The response was mixed and sometimes defensive.

Younger journalists approached me after the session saying they wished they'd known sooner about the research. They asked me why news organizations haven't been quick to change their practices when there's evidence that what they're doing is dangerous.

Here's what I've concluded: When covering breaking news, we're most likely to succumb to the (untested) idea that readers have an insatiable thirst for every detail. We're curious to know why people commit horrific acts. In reporting on this, we repeatedly spread the killer's name. Often, we splash both his name and image on a homepage or social media.

The result? A legend is born.

Meanwhile, the body count of mass shootings continues to rise. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the frequency of these events quadrupled. An FBI analysis found an "increasing trend" in such incidents between 2000 and 2015, according to Lankford and Eric Madfis, an associate professor of criminal justice at the University of Washington Tacoma.

Preventing "mass shooting contagion"

Here are the four simple guidelines researchers say newsrooms can follow:

1. Don't name the perpetrator.
2. Don't use photos or likenesses of the perpetrator.
3. Stop using the names, photos or likenesses of past perpetrators.

4. Report everything else about these crimes in as much detail as desired.

It's not as hard as it sounds. As a test, pull up a story about a mass shooting. Copy and paste it into a Word file, and substitute the words "the killer" for the person's name. Add an editor's note as we do when withholding information as dictated by an editorial policy (for example, in giving sexual assault survivors anonymity). It might sound something like this: "It is the newsroom's policy to withhold the names of people who commit mass shootings because fame-seeking is a major motivation for the people who commit these crimes."

Now re-read the entire story. No real detail has been lost — just a name, a search term.

Reporters, editors, producers and anchors should also know what the research says and ask themselves these questions:

1. What is the purpose of my reporting?

2. Does the importance of this information outweigh the risks that the story might inspire a fame-seeker?

3. What other stories might I tell that focus on survivors, first responders, the community or systemic failures?

One of the most important stories that came out of the coverage of the Parkland mass shooting focused on the red flags that were missed about a young man in trouble. The stories didn't glamorize or sensationalize his life but reflected the importance of looking at systemic failures. Another story focused on Broward Sheriff's Office deputies who didn't enter the school when the shootings began. In each instance, though, when we apply investigative techniques to mass shootings, we should strive to minimize mentions of the killer's name and use of his images.

I'm also a big fan of a story the Tampa Bay Times did on a Pulse shooting survivor's painful recovery and self-discovery. It's practically a tick-tock of survival that brings home the intensity of the physical and emotional challenges of living through and beyond a mass shooting, and we see far too few stories like it.

We should also be aware of the power of framing and word choice. The use of the word "shooter" for a person who kills people with a gun sends the wrong message. It has the ring of a video game world and euphemizes death and destruction. It turns humans into targets or two-dimensional figures when "killer" or "suspect" are much more suggestive of a crime perpetrated on human beings.

"When we apply investigative techniques to mass shootings, we should strive to minimize mentions of the killer's name and use of his images."

Katherine Reed, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, got her start as a police reporter. In the 1990s, she was a victim's advocate and a consultant for the National Victim's Center. She has done work with the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma at Columbia University and the Disaster and Community Crisis Center at MU.

An inconvenient truth

These ideas are not widely accepted, and I've had my share of pushback.

I've been advised by veteran journalists that we must name the killers (I agree: but only once). That we can't start withholding information that the public wants (You mean, like the names of rape survivors? Juvenile suspects? The contents of a homemade meth lab?). That I just don't understand because I'm an academic (I'm also the public safety editor for a daily newspaper).

And then there was this retort from an editor at a major U.S. daily who has covered two of the worst mass shootings in U.S. history: "We must resist the Voldemort Effect," the editor said, explaining that journalists must not give in to fear of "he who must not be named."

The problem is that this kind of reportage gets ratings and clicks — what Tom Teves, father of Alex Teves, who was murdered in the Aurora, Colorado, theater shooting, calls journalism's "inconvenient truth." That's the fear I've seen in the eyes of the veteran journalists I've talked to about the research and what part we might play in reducing the violence. They fear the competition — that if they withhold information, they'll get scooped.

No one wants to be the first to test that theory and see how the public responds to a different approach to covering mass shootings. And yet news organizations have changed the way they cover suicides and bomb threats out of an abundance of caution about nurturing copycats.

In her keynote at the Online News Association's annual conference, danah boyd talked about media manipulation, amplification and the need for "strategic silence." The technology and social media scholar discussed the very real problem of bad actors manipulating journalists to achieve a long-term result.

Journalists are indeed being manipulated by fame-seeking killers. Sure, murderers want all kinds of coverage, and they'll get some of it no matter what. But they are explicit about their desire to get major media coverage. They want your cooperation. Don't give it to them. ◆

THE ASSESSMENT

By **Bethany Barnes**, The Oregonian

Sanders walks to Parkrose High one spring morning.

BETH NAKAMURA
THE OREGONIAN/
OREGONLIVE

Officials thought their son could be the next school shooter, so the family opened their doors — and their records — to a reporter.

I was alone in my corner of The Oregonian newsroom when I noticed a message on my desk phone and pressed play. "I have a confidential Parkland tip about Portland," a male voice said in the voicemail. It had been just two weeks since the February 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, that left 17 dead.

I felt a wave of dread. Had someone called in plans for a school shooting and I'd let it go to voicemail? I punched the man's number into my phone and prayed he would pick up. He did.

He said he wanted to know if I would be interested in "the other side of Parkland."

I thought, immediately, No.

There was no "other side" to a school shooting. I wanted to hang up on the man, who I assumed was a conspiracy theorist. But I didn't. Instead, I tried to listen more carefully. As it turned out, he sounded odd because he was terrified.

He said his son's school was worried his 16-year-old, Sanders, could be the next school shooter. The family was in the middle of a school threat assessment, a decades-long practice that has picked up steam across the nation after Parkland. Threat assessment models vary widely, but the basic concept is for schools to establish teams to identify and respond to students who may pose a risk. Administrators, usually with the help of law enforcement or mental health experts, use detailed checklists and interviews to determine how much of a risk a student poses and then take steps to minimize risk. The federal government recently made grants available to incentivize schools to set up threat assessment systems.

In Sanders' case, the school determined he had to be randomly searched and under discreet supervision while there.

The family wasn't sure why exactly Sanders had come under scrutiny. It was clear, however, that a significant red flag had been the teen's big, black trench coat. This was especially painful, the father explained, because his son was on the autism spectrum and found the weight of the coat soothing. Sanders, he said, felt singled out and criminalized for merely being different.

I kept in touch with Mark, the dad. A little over a week later, I told him I thought his family's experience was an important story. Still, I wanted the family to meet me and think about it before they decided to open up their lives. We made plans for me to come over, and he warned me to not expect much conversation from his son, whose disorder made social interactions a challenge.

I knocked on the door of the family's home and a teen boy answered.

"Hi," I said. "I'm here to see Mark."

"He's not here," the boy said.

To my horror, I realized the dad must be running late. Only Sanders was home, and I had no idea what his parents had told him about me or what I was allowed to tell him. All I knew about this boy was that he had autism and people thought he might shoot up his school.

"Oh," I said. "I was supposed to talk to him."

"Talk to him about what?" the boy asked.

"Uh..." I stalled. "Work stuff?"

The boy squinted at me.

"Are you the reporter?"

"Yes!" I said with a wave of relief, and he let me inside.

Sanders sat on the couch and, staring at the floor, launched into a speech about how I should know he had trouble reading emotional cues.

Then he looked up and asked, "What do you want to know?"

"What have your parents told you about me?" I asked.

"That you are a reporter and you want to know about the whole…" he trailed off. "I don't know what to call it. The debacle at school."

He paused and looked at my feet.

"You're wearing cowboy boots."

"I am," I said.

"I love cowboy boots!" he said with a smile. "Hold on," he told me, retreating into a back room of the house. A few minutes later, he returned and sat back down.

"I decided to put on my cowboy boots, too," he said.

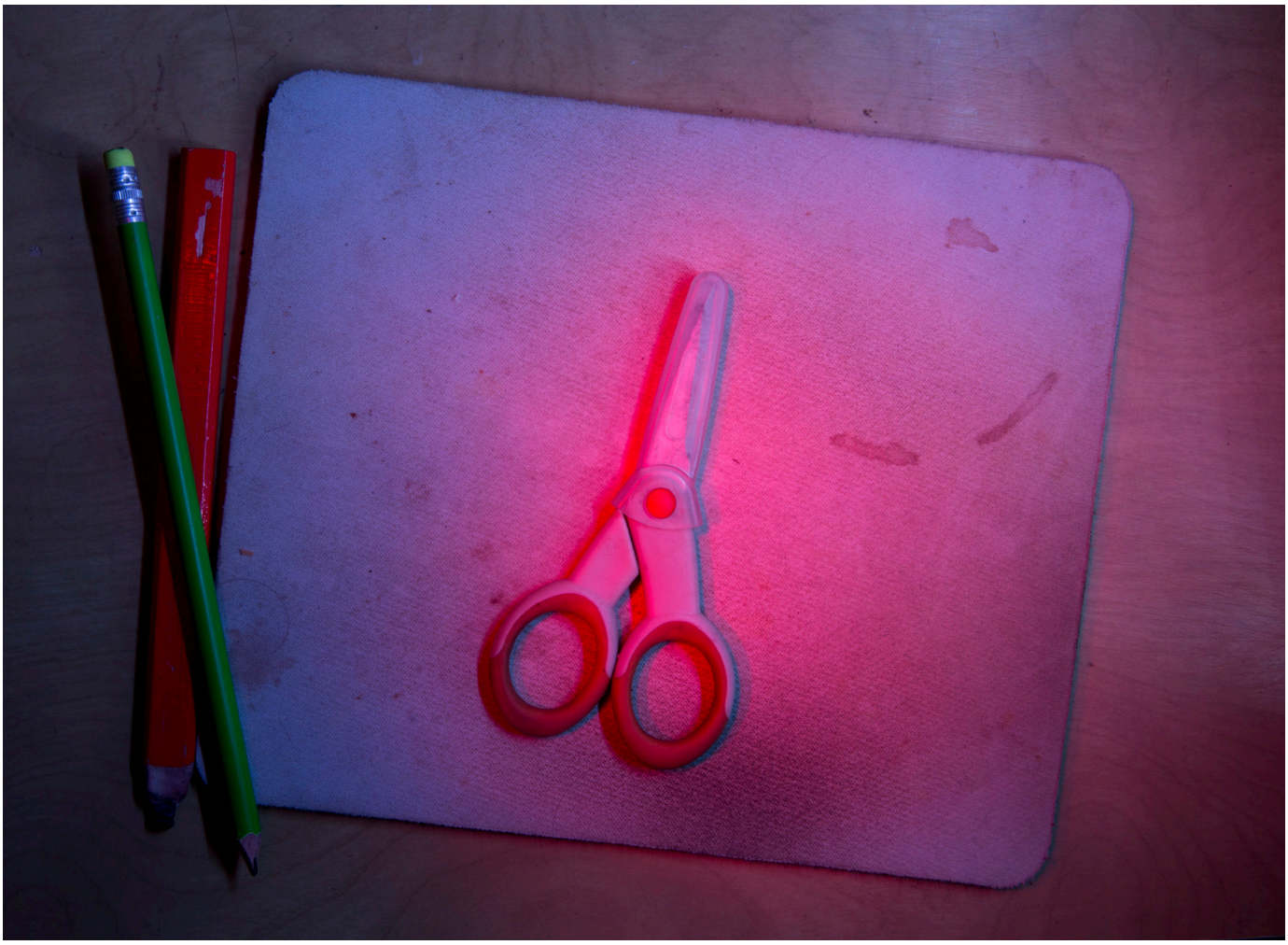
The smallest things can help you connect with a source. For the next several months, I was a fly on the wall of this teen's life, culminating in the June publication of "Targeted: A Family and the Quest to Stop the Next School Shooter."

That first night, I hung out at the family's home for four hours. Mostly, I listened. I let them get comfortable with me. I told the family I needed them to trust me and to be open.

Access was critical. They shared their emails with school officials, their son's records and documentation they kept of meetings, all of which provided needed insights on the threat assessment process. I quizzed them about their schedule and tried to time reporting trips with key moments. If the dad was going to meet with the school, I'd come over right as he got home so I could see him deliver the update to his family.

I also hung around for hours at a time so they'd forget about me and I'd have as unvarnished a view as possible. I rode with Sanders and his dad to the teen's psychologist, even though the office was an hour away and I wouldn't be allowed to sit in on the session. It was worth it just to observe how they interacted in the car.

I made many attempts to get school officials to share their insights. The family gave written permission for them to speak frankly and share all



The scissors Sanders brought to school that raised concerns.

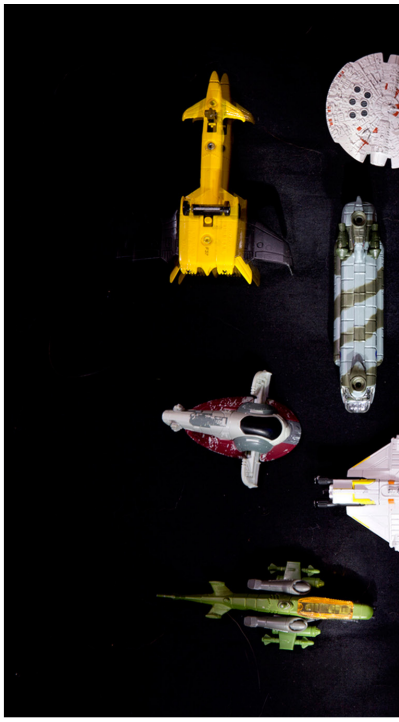
BETH NAKAMURA | THE OREGONIAN/ OREGONLIVE

information about their son. Still, leaders refused to talk about Sanders' case.

"We stand firm in our commitment to the privacy of our students, staff and families," a school official wrote in an email. "Schools and districts have the difficult challenge of weighing the rights and needs of the individual student against the rights and needs of the school as a whole."

Ultimately, I learned most about school officials' points of view from the emails they sent the family, a records request for the school's threat assessment handbook and documentation the family kept on their meetings with officials.

Through my reporting, I was able to show in narrative detail how the assessment process harmed Sanders. "They've effectively created a dropout," his father said. After the story ran, the teen left the district for an alternative school



that serves many delinquent youths, even though he has never been arrested and has a clean discipline record. At his new school, every child is searched, which Sanders said he is fine with because the process is equal.

My investigation also found the school district's assessment didn't involve a thorough examination of the concerns that brought Sanders under scrutiny in the first place. A police report the family obtained showed the school became suspicious of Sanders after a librarian overheard a student saying another teen made him uncomfortable because he went by the nickname "Shooter." The assumption was that the nicknamed student was Sanders, but had school officials talked to the student overheard in the library, they would have learned a different story. I tracked that student down and interviewed him. He was horrified. He didn't think Sanders was a threat and thought highly of him. He said the name "Shooter" was a mean label from kids who stereotyped him for his coat.

By allowing a reporter into their lives, Sanders and his parents were able to give insight on a perspective you never hear: what it's like to come under suspicion as a potential school shooter.

Even though these stories go unreported, they are not as rare as you might assume. In the Portland metro area alone, more than 300 students went through threat assessments last school year. Across the nation, schools are under pressure to act, and threat assessments are seen as a promising solution. Research on the efficacy of the assessments, however, is thin.

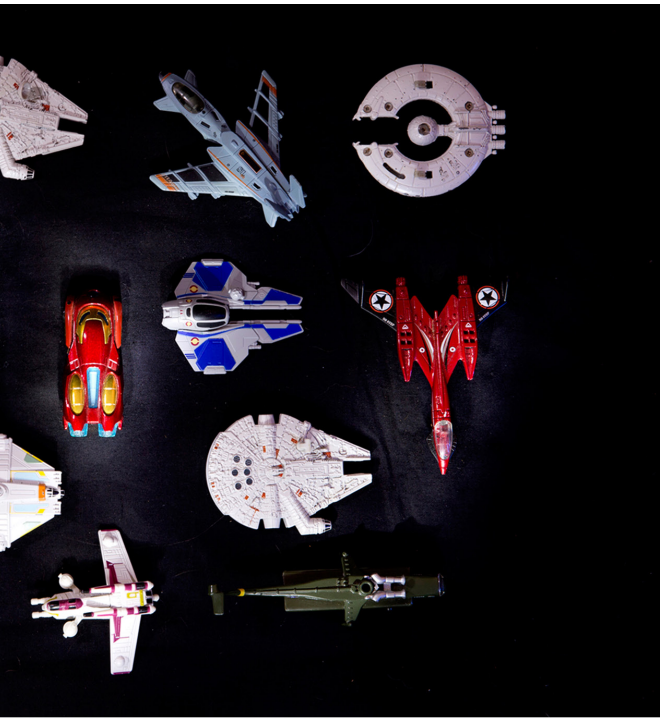
Journalists should analyze what types of people are on threat assessment teams. Do they have a law enforcement focus? Or a mental health focus? Request blank interview and assessment forms, as well as training manuals. Ask where the model came from, who does the training and what makes that person credible. How often does training happen and who goes through it?

What merits a threat assessment can be highly subjective and vary widely. I found many assessments happen at the elementary level. Remember: Just because a handbook says stereotypes shouldn't be used doesn't mean stereotypes don't drive decisions. The assessment method Sanders' school used rejects stereotyping, but in a meeting with Sanders' parents, the superintendent brought up the trench coat. "If you drew a picture of a terrorist kid, that's what they are wearing," the superintendent said, according to records the family kept of the meeting.

Proponents of threat assessments often emphasize that teachers and students feel safer with assessments, but feeling safe and being safe are different. If a school district says the assessment is a way to support an at-risk child, make them tell you in concrete terms what that support looks like.

Sanders' family was shocked to learn through the police report that officials felt the assessment process would give Sanders "support." School officials' adherence to a method they felt promoted safety caused them to alienate the student they said they were trying to help. ◆

Bethany Barnes is a reporter at The Oregonian. In 2018, the Education Writers Association named her the best education beat reporter in the country. She is a Livingston finalist and winner of the Joseph L. Brechner Freedom of Information Award, a national award for reporting that highlights the need for government transparency.



Some of Sanders' various collections. From left: silhouettes of weapons he made out of wood; toy space ships; an assortment of knives from his room; his toy Nerf guns.

BETH NAKAMURA | THE OREGONIAN/ OREGONLIVE

A journalist's guide to covering guns

The Gun Glossary

By **Nick Penzenstadler**, USA TODAY Network, and **Alexis Allison**, IRE & NICAR

Reporting on guns is like covering any other beat: The only way to do it right is to become an expert. But when news breaks, there's little time to research the technical details and important nuances that inform our work. Understanding gun terminology and policies in your state can help you ask the right questions and add context to your reporting.

Keep this glossary on hand as a reference the next time your reporting involves guns.

Pistol: In mass shooting data collected by The Washington Post, handguns like this one show up more than any other weapon. Used by the Virginia Tech gunman.

Stock

Safety: A mechanism to prevent the trigger from being pulled and firing a round.

Magazine: A mechanism to hold cartridges or shells that will, once the trigger is pulled, feed into the chamber. Large-capacity magazines generally hold more than 10 rounds (standard size varies depending on your jurisdiction). Enables gunmen to shoot more rounds without reloading. Magazines are often confused with "clips," but they're not the same. **Clips** were used in old-school military rifles — they're strips of metal that hold a set of cartridges together.

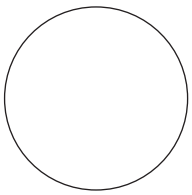
Bump stock (not shown): Device that harnesses the recoil of a semi-automatic firearm to fire several shots in succession, mimicking automatic fire. The Department of Justice has proposed reclassifying them as machine guns to make them illegal. The Las Vegas gunman used bump stocks.

Pistol grip: A handle shaped like the butt of a pistol.

Drop-in auto sear (not shown): A device that can be installed on an AR-style rifle to convert a semi-automatic into fully automatic. Declared machine guns by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in 1981 and illegal for civilians to own.

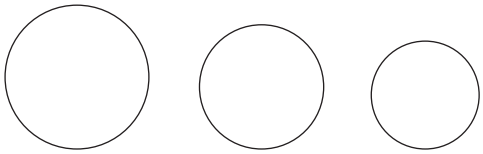
Silencer (not shown): A device attached to the muzzle of a firearm to make it quieter, but not silent. Many view this as slang for suppressor,and use them interchangeably. (**Suppressor** could also reference "flash suppressors," which are not the same as silencers and aim to reduce muzzle flash, not noise.)

Typically, the bigger the bullet, the more severe the wound.



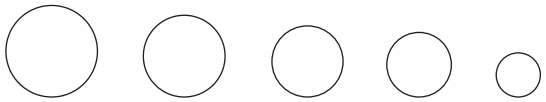
U.S. Quarter
(actual size)

Gauge: A term of measurement used to identify most shotgun bores, or the interior of a barrel through which the bullet travels. As gauge increases, the bullet size gets smaller.



12 gauge | 16 gauge | 28 gauge

Caliber: The size of the cartridge shot from a rifle or handgun. Either in fractions of an inch (.30 cal) or millimeters (9mm). As caliber increases, the bullet gets bigger.



.45 cal. | .40 cal. | 9 mm | .32 cal. | .22 cal.

The Law of the Land:

A state-by-state reference

Guns laws are nuanced and peppered with exemptions and exceptions. You can grab the specifics from your state legislature. But if you're not looking to get lost in the details, use this guide to check where your state stands.

AR-15-style rifle: The industry prefers "modern sporting rifle." This rifle is a customizable, civilian version of the military's M16; the two look alike, but they're internally different. An AR-15 rifle is **semi-automatic**, which means the trigger must be pulled to fire each round. The M16 is **fully automatic**, which means you can hold the trigger for rapid fire. (Note: AR stands for ArmaLite, the company that developed it in the 1950s, not "assault rifle" or "automatic rifle.") When writing about these rifles, it's important to avoid saying they're "high-powered" or "high-capacity." They do, however, fire "high-velocity" rounds.

GUN SAFETY

1
BACKGROUND CHECKS FOR PRIVATE SELLERS: Background checks are required for guns sold through licensed firearms dealers, and they largely use the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System. **Universal background checks** would expand the legal requirement to most other sales, including gun shows. Private sales do not require background checks in most cases. "**Gun-show loophole**" is a political term referring to the sale of firearms by private sellers, often at gun shows, that do not require federal background checks.

2
EXTREME RISK PROTECTION ORDERS Allows (or will allow, effective in the next year) family, household members or law enforcement to petition a court to temporarily seize firearms or ban possession for people deemed to be a risk to themselves or others.

	GUN SAFETY			GUNS IN PUBLIC		
		1	2		3	4
Alabama					X	X
Alaska						X
Arizona						X
Arkansas					X	
California		X	X		X	
Colorado		X			X	
Connecticut		X	X		X	
Delaware		X	X		X	
District of Columbia		X			X	
Florida			X		X	X
Georgia					X	X
Hawaii		X			X	
Idaho						X
Illinois		X	X		X	
Indiana			X		X	X
Iowa		X			X	X
Kansas						X
Kentucky					X	X
Louisiana					X	X
Maine						
Maryland		X	X		X	
Massachusetts		X	X		X	
Michigan		X			X	X
Minnesota					X	
Mississippi						X
Missouri						X
Montana					X	X
Nebraska		X			X	
Nevada		X			X	X
New Hampshire						X
New Jersey		X	X		X	
New Mexico					X	
New York		X			X	
North Carolina		X			X	X
North Dakota						X
Ohio					X	X
Oklahoma					X	X
Oregon		X	X		X	
Pennsylvania		X			X	X
Rhode Island		X	X		X	
South Carolina					X	X
South Dakota					X	X
Tennessee					X	X
Texas					X	X
Utah					X	X
Vermont		X	X			
Virginia					X	
Washington		X	X		X	
West Virginia						X
Wisconsin					X	X
Wyoming						X

SOURCES: NRA-ILA, EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY, GIFFORDS LAW CENTER TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE, NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF STATE LEGISLATURES

GUNS IN PUBLIC

3
CONCEALED CARRY PERMIT REQUIRED Some states that require a CCW permit grant the issuing authority wide discretion to deny a permit to an applicant if, for example, the authority believes the applicant lacks good character or a good reason for carrying a weapon in public. Other states provide the issuing authority only a limited amount of discretion, or none at all. Check your state's laws to see which one applies.

4
STAND YOUR GROUND These laws give people the right to defend themselves or others against threats using lethal force, regardless of whether retreating from the situation is possible.

Oft-misunderstood terms

Assault rifle
Intermediate-caliber rifles, many with "select-fire" capability — meaning they can fire in semi-automatic, "burst fire" or fully automatic modes. Ex. AK-47s and M16s.

Automatic weapon
A firearm that chambers, fires and ejects cartridges continually as long as the trigger is pulled. They are generally illegal to sell or possess without special licenses. Ex. machine guns.

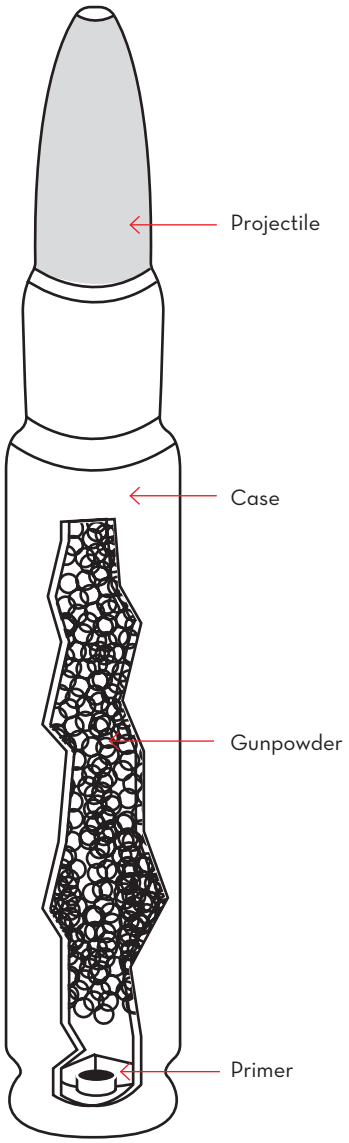
Assault weapon
The Assault Weapons Ban prohibited military-style rifles that fit multiple criteria, including rifles with detachable magazines and a pistol grip or folding stock. The 10-year federal ban expired in 2004, transferring power to the states to ban or not ban these weapons. Note: The definition changes across political party lines.

Bullet
A projectile, usually a piece of metal. The term is not interchangeable with "cartridge" or "round."

Make vs. Model
"Make" is the manufacturer of the gun. "Model" is the specific line of guns. Ex: For "Ruger SR1911," the make is Ruger and the model is SR1911.

Semiautomatic weapon
A firearm in which each pull of the trigger results in a complete firing cycle from discharge to reloading the chamber. Legal to own.

Cartridge
The single round of ammunition, consisting of the case, primer, powder and projectile (usually a bullet). When a person pulls the trigger, the bullet and the cartridge separate; the bullet is ejected and the cartridge remains.



Policies of interest

Gun industry immunity
In 2005, the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act granted broad immunity from federal and state civil actions to gun manufacturers and dealers, each of whom should have a federal firearms license (FFL). For example, gun sellers aren't liable for harm caused by buyers who "criminally or unlawfully" misuse the guns.

Negligent discharge
Carelessness that leads to the unintentional firing of a gun. Depending on state law, the gun owner could face misdemeanor or felony charges.

Straw purchase
When a person prohibited from buying a firearm — say, someone who can't pass a background check — uses another person to purchase one on their behalf.

Concealed carry reciprocity
A current federal proposal would create reciprocity for concealed carry permit-holders so a license in one state would allow carry privileges in all states that require permits. Many states already acknowledge permits issued in other states.

Tech trends to watch

Smart gun
This "owner-recognition" technology could one day allow only authorized users to fire a weapon by detecting a fingerprint. It's still in development stages.

3D-printed guns, ghost guns
Firearm parts made using a 3D printer from plans created on a computer. The firearms are theoretically untraceable because they don't have serial numbers and could be created by anyone with access to a computer and 3D printer.

Nick Penzenstadler is an investigative reporter at USA TODAY where he works on national investigations. His team specializes in data analysis and project management for collaborations across the 109 community newsrooms within Gannett.

Alexis Allison is a graduate student studying data journalism at the Missouri School of Journalism. She works as an editorial assistant at IRE.

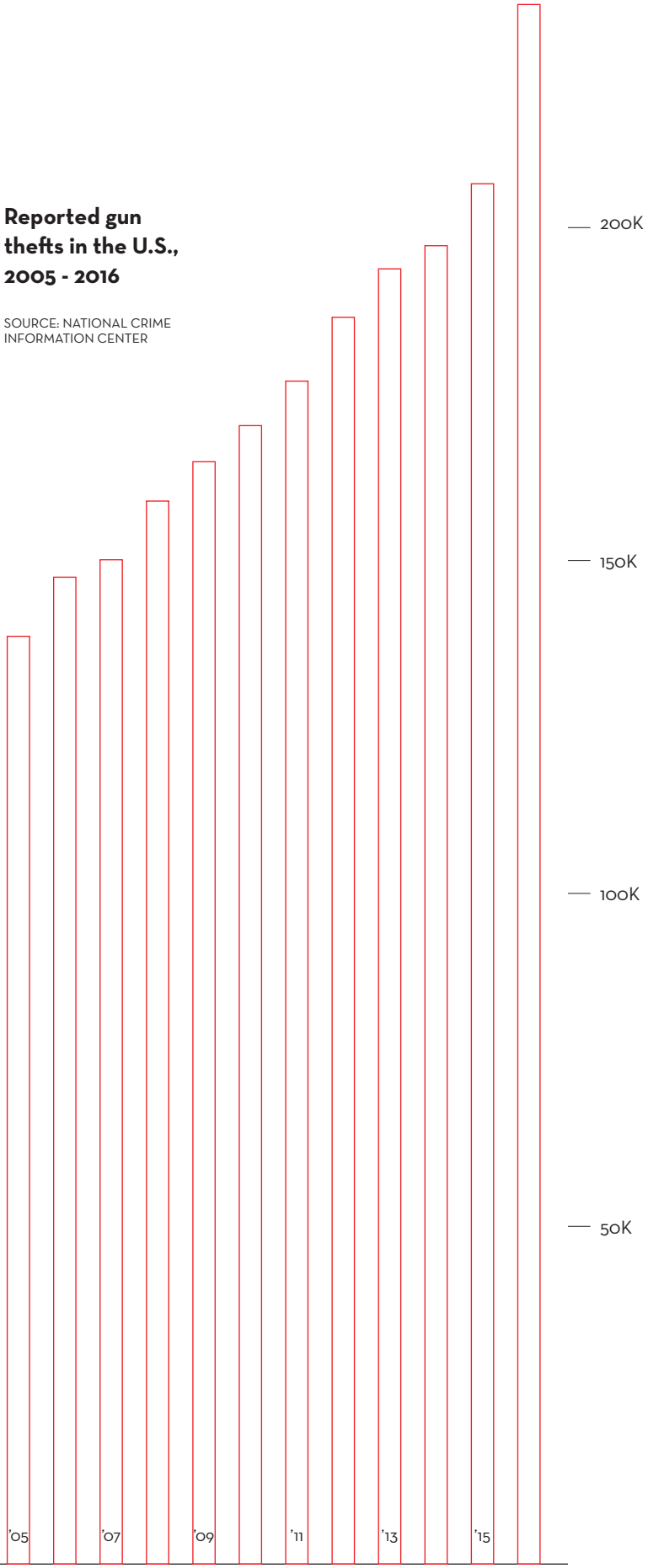
Steal, Shoot, Sell

A sweeping look at gun theft — and how you can investigate in your own community

By **Brian Freskos**, The Trace

Reported gun thefts in the U.S., 2005 - 2016

SOURCE: NATIONAL CRIME INFORMATION CENTER



In the fall of 2016, The Trace obtained an advanced copy of a survey of U.S. gun owners conducted by Harvard and Northeastern universities. One of the most astonishing findings was that, every year, more than 300,000 firearms are stolen from American gun owners. My editors and I wanted to find out why so many guns were stolen, and what happened to them after they disappeared.

A short time later, I called Stephen Stock of NBC Bay Area. He had been working with other NBC reporters in California to examine the issue of gun theft, and the team had already linked thousands of stolen guns to crimes in the state. The Trace wanted to build on NBC's reporting, so we partnered and embarked on what would become a yearlong data-collection effort involving dozens of reporters, producers and editors across the nation.

The project, which we called "Missing Pieces,"

resulted in a database of records from more than 1,000 law enforcement agencies in 36 states. Using those documents, we were able to link stolen guns to tens of thousands of crimes. The investigation was one of the most sweeping examinations of gun theft to date, but we still only scratched the surface. That leaves ample opportunity for journalists to learn from our experiences and apply our approach to reporting on stolen guns in their own communities.

Gathering gun data

Working with more than a dozen NBC stations in major markets across the country, we sent public records requests to the nation's largest police departments, sheriff's offices and state law enforcement agencies. The requests asked for the make, serial number and other identifying information for guns reported stolen in each agency's jurisdiction, as well as for firearms recovered or seized by officers. We also requested the case numbers and offenses associated with each gun, among other records.

Many agencies turned over the data in a spreadsheet-compatible format. Others provided PDFs or mailed us hard copies. In a few instances, departments that provided PDFs or paper records were capable of supplying the records as a spreadsheet, and we were able to coax digital versions out of them by pointing to sections of the public records law that required them to give it to us in that format. Some departments, however, relied on outdated computer systems and were unable to make our jobs easier. We spent a lot of time converting PDFs into spreadsheets, then checking the conversions for accuracy. (While there are PDF conversion programs you can buy, one free service I found useful is pdftoexcel.com). Records that were too shoddy to be converted by computer programs had to be manually entered, prompting us to hire freelancers to assist.

Occasionally, we had to cajole departments into forking over information. Several departments tried to withhold serial numbers — information that was crucial for connecting guns to crimes — citing privacy exemptions or statutes that shielded the release of sensitive law enforcement material. We successfully overturned some of these denials by arguing that privacy exemptions were meant to protect information associated with people, not property. Serial numbers, we argued, were clearly not sensitive because they were often listed in state and federal court records. We ended up having to take the Chicago Police Department to court, a lawsuit we eventually settled after the department supplied most of the records we needed.

We spent an untold number of hours cleaning the data, standardizing the makes and removing values that were incorrectly entered as serial numbers. There are often several different markings on a gun, and we found that police sometimes confused model or patent numbers with serial numbers. This was especially problematic for Smith & Wesson SD40 VEs and Hi-Point CF-380s. We spotted other incorrect serial numbers by looking for guns that appeared to have been reported stolen or recovered multiple times or in several locations.

Once we had all the data in a master spreadsheet, we used a Python script to tease out stolen and recovered guns with matching serial numbers and makes. It was important to match both because serial numbers are only unique to the manufacturer. For example, under the law, Smith & Wesson and Glock could both produce a gun with the serial number ABC123. The makes are required to distinguish between them. If we didn't have the make for a particular gun, we were often able to confirm the match using the model.

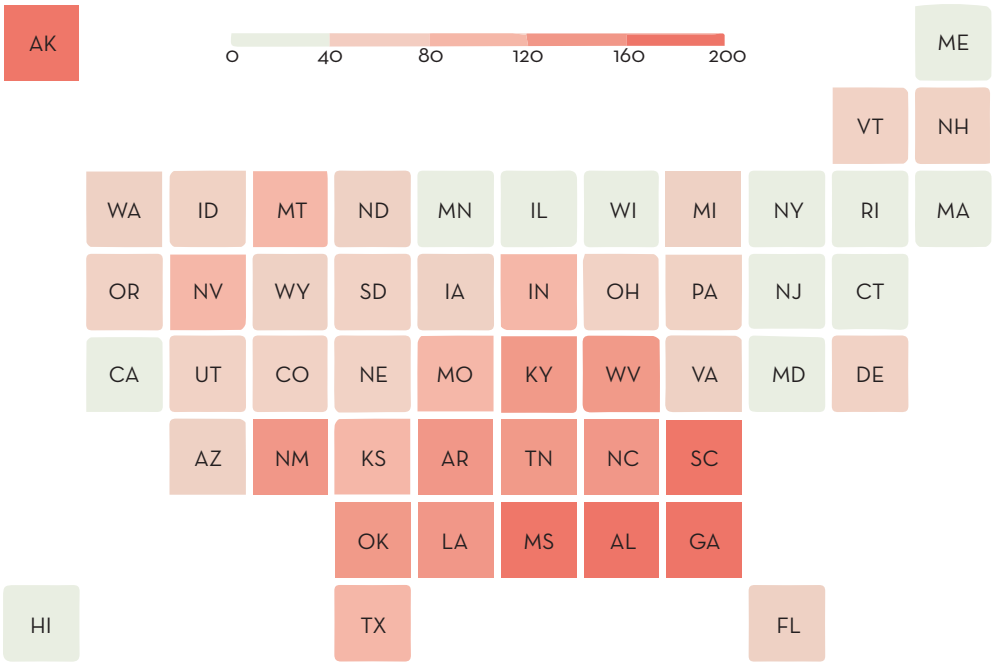
Once we identified guns that had been stolen and found, we used offense data to isolate the ones recovered in connection with violent crimes. Using case numbers, we requested police reports associated with both the theft and recovery of the weapon. The reports allowed us to learn about the circumstances of the theft and recovery, to gather anecdotes for use in our stories and to identify potential human sources — victims and their family members, gun owners, etc. — for interviews.

The 'how' and 'why'

The partnership between NBC and The Trace allowed both organizations to combine resources and draw on each other's expertise. But working with such a big group spread out from New York to Florida to California presented organizational challenges. We overcame these by sharing all of our records using Dropbox, working together to schedule significant interviews and sharing transcripts. Lynn Walsh, then the executive investigative producer at NBC 7 San Diego, helped coordinate the coverage and led weekly conference calls with updates on everybody's progress.

In the end we found that most stolen firearms

Brian Freskos is a reporter at The Trace focusing on gun trafficking. He has worked with local and national media partners to track stolen guns and spotlight the nexus between gun theft and violent crime.



Reported gun thefts per 100,000 residents, 2016

SOURCE: NATIONAL CRIME INFORMATION CENTER

were taken from everyday gun owners, often after they left their weapons unsecured. Thieves took guns from closets and coffee tables. They crawled into unlocked cars and snatched guns from glove boxes and consoles. Some grabbed the weapon right out of the owner's hand.

We identified more than 23,000 stolen guns that had been recovered by police — often after being used in another crime, including more than 1,500 carjackings and kidnappings, armed robberies, sexual assaults, murders and other violent acts. Hundreds of stolen guns crossed state lines, with many moving along well-known trafficking corridors. One such corridor is the Iron Pipeline, which stretches up Interstate 95 on the East Coast. Traffickers who steal or buy stolen guns on the street in southern states — where gun laws tend to be looser — commonly ferry them up to the northeast — where gun laws tend to be tougher — and resell them at a huge markup.

We also requested and obtained previously unreported statistics from the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), an FBI database used to track stolen property. The numbers showed that more than 238,000 guns were reported stolen in the U.S. in 2016, a 73 percent increase from 2005. All told, nearly 2 million guns had been stolen over the previous decade.

But our reporting found that those figures were almost surely an undercount. The problem with pinning down a true count of gun thefts in the U.S. is that in most states, gun owners do not have to report the theft of their weapons to police, and even when they do, they often don't know the serial numbers on their firearms. A serial number is required when entering the report into NCIC.

Moreover, we found that, despite the threat posed by stolen firearms, few states require guns to be stored under lock and key. In fact, many states have passed laws that could make the problem worse by encouraging behaviors that increase the risk of theft, such as carrying guns in public or storing firearms in cars.

Once our reporting was complete, The Trace took the lead on writing a national story, while the NBC stations produced segments geared toward their respective markets. We also partnered with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Wichita Eagle, each of which published versions of the national story.

The project prompted calls for legislation aimed at encouraging or making it easier for firearm owners to report gun theft. It also inspired editorials and academic research. And, since publication, we have received numerous inquiries from other reporters interested in using our data to explore gun theft and other issues related to firearms.

We posted links to all of the "Missing Pieces" stories and TV segments at thetrace.org/missing-pieces. You can also find the data we used, a version of the public records request we filed and a reporting guide that delves deeper into topics touched on here. ◆

Digging for data

Digital tools for finding records to request

Finding federal government databases just got a lot easier.

New digital tools are empowering reporters and citizens to identify data that might be worth requesting under the Freedom of Information Act or state public record laws. Here are some tools, old and new, to check out.

By **David Cuillier**, *University of Arizona School of Journalism*

Google Dataset Search

In September, Google launched a tool called Dataset Search (*bit.ly/g-datasetsearch*), which helps users find databases posted online by governments, universities, news media and others. Database owners include metadata tags in their webpages, such as date last updated, authors, a description of fields and a link for downloading, which Google picks up and displays.

A search for "train accidents," for example, yielded 23 results, including key Federal Railroad Administration data and datasets from Australia and Wales.

Natasha Noy, a research scientist at Google AI, told me in an email that, upon its launch, Google Dataset Search had a few thousand internet domains, including NASA, NOAA and Socrata, providing metadata and links to millions of datasets.

Another trick is to use Advanced Google Search for a particular government agency's domain and search by file type, such as .xls or .csv. Google Public Data Explorer and Google Fusion Tables are other tools that help analyze and visualize datasets found online or uploaded.

Enterprise Data Inventories

Five years ago, President Barack Obama issued an executive order requiring agencies to post and maintain a description of their databases, called Enterprise Data Inventories. These agency lists can be downloaded as JSON files, which can be converted to Excel using free online JSON-to-CSV converters. The file fields include title, description, date, keywords, whether the database is public or restricted, a link to documentation and contact information.

Search data.gov for "Enterprise Data Inventories" to find dozens of agency inventories. Find a database that looks intriguing? Just email the contact person listed in the inventory and submit a FOIA request for the latest copy.

Data miners

Max Galka compiled thousands of federal agencies' FOIA logs and made them keyword-searchable, leading to FOIA Mapper. Anyone can search his free website for documents and data that others have already requested.

MuckRock has a similar search function for the 55,000 federal and state/local data requests submitted through its site since 2010. People can also look at records acquired and the actual request letters and correspondence with agencies. A similar, European version of MuckRock, called Alaveteli (*alaveteli.org*), provides the records and request letters from more than 300,000 requests submitted throughout the world.

BRB Publications (*brbpublications.com*), geared toward serving private investigators and the pre-employment screening industry, has pulled together links to records held by 28,000 federal, state and local government agencies. It provides a free keyword search with links to the agency data or webpage. The company's newsletters are full of tips on acquiring records, as well as the latest news in data closures.

Dozens of databases can also be acquired from IRE's NICAR Database Library. Just skimming the list and looking at the samples will spur ideas.

Of course, one of the best digital resources for finding the existence of government data is, well, the government agency itself. Federal agencies provide "reading rooms" to proactively post documents and data, as well as any records requested at least three times. Data.gov is a handy search engine for federal data, and foiaonline.gov serves as a new portal for requesting records, although it's still relatively new and a bit buggy.

Find and mine

Now, with all those tools in hand, it's time to search and acquire.

Find an hour every week that you set aside as your "FOI First" time. Search through the database tools above, find one that might yield a good story and fire off a public records request. Do this every week and, after a year, 52 datasets will be coming your way. If you get decent stories out of just half of them, you'll have 26 awesome projects to wow your boss, help your community and make the world better. ◆

David Cuillier, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the University of Arizona School of Journalism in Tucson, Arizona, and co-author, with Charles Davis, of "The Art of Access: Strategies for Acquiring Public Records" (second edition due out July 2019).

COLLECTED WISDOM

Small station, big stories

Watchdog reporting can be a priority in newsrooms of all sizes

By **Anne Paape**, *WKBT News 8*

Anne Paape is the news director/ station manager at WKBT TV. She leads a team of local journalists whose work has earned the station multiple awards, including an Edward R. Murrow award and multiple regional Emmys.

We don't have enough people to do investigative reporting."

"It's too time consuming on top of everything else we have to do every day."

"Our staff doesn't have the specialized training they need to do investigative reporting well."

Those of us working in small-market newsrooms sometimes have to challenge ourselves to think big.

Here in La Crosse, Wisconsin, we pride ourselves on being scrappy and always finding a way to prioritize local storytelling. We genuinely value our relationship with our audience. When station research showed viewers wanted us to look deeper into community issues, we knew we needed to challenge ourselves to take our journalism to another level.

So, we did.

Three years ago, despite all the challenges mentioned above, we launched News 8 Investigates. Since then, our reporting has resulted in a major policy change at a local homeless shelter. We also examined response times for our fire department and found residents in one area of the city had reason to be concerned. More recently, we've been working on a report highlighting new data showing La Crosse needs to make changes so city streets are safer for pedestrians.

We're always working to make our storytelling more reflective of what's happening in our community. And we're always looking for ways to put watchdog journalism to work for our viewers.

Here are three lessons we've learned (sometimes the hard way).

Make investigative reporting part of your daily newsroom culture

Investigative isn't someone's beat; it's everyone's focus. From day one, reporters know they are always welcome to pitch ideas. We work with them to map out key questions and discuss where to start looking for answers. A key resource has been IRE's "Watchdog Storyboarding Worksheet" (*bit.ly/IREstoryboard*).

Typically, reporters working on an investigative piece spend one day doing interviews, one day writing and one day editing. For folks who routinely do day-turns, three days of guaranteed time to focus on an investigation are a welcome treat. In addition to creating meaningful content for viewers, our young reporting staff gets the opportunity to build their journalism skill set. It's a win-win.

We work to keep the watchdog mentality front and center in our newsroom by talking about pending FOIA requests during weekly news meetings. We even celebrate FOIA fulfillments. If you ever visit WKBT, ask to see — and be prepared to hear — the world's loudest FOIA cowbell. Trust me, it's memorable.

Determine from the start what investigative reporting means for your market

Good investigative journalism is not one-size-fits-all. La Crosse viewers have no appetite for "gotcha" reporting. It just wouldn't play well here. We intentionally stay true to our reputation for being community problem-solvers, not community agitators. Adjust your tone to reflect your market, and make sure your team stays on message.

Apply for IRE's Total Newsroom Training

This was an absolute game-changer for our news team. Our IRE trainer spent two days teaching us a long list of specific investigative techniques, covering everything from basic FOIA skills to quick-hit investigations and how to incorporate a watchdog mentality into our everyday work.

This was unquestionably the most intensive training any of us have ever had the privilege of participating in. The cost? FREE. The results? PRICELESS.

When IRE accepts applications for the next round of Total Newsroom Training sessions, do yourself, your newsroom and your viewers a favor and do everything in your power to get a slot. Details are available on the IRE website (*bit.ly/ire-tnt*). ◆

Investigative Reporters and Editors
141 Neff Annex
Missouri School of Journalism
Columbia, MO 65211