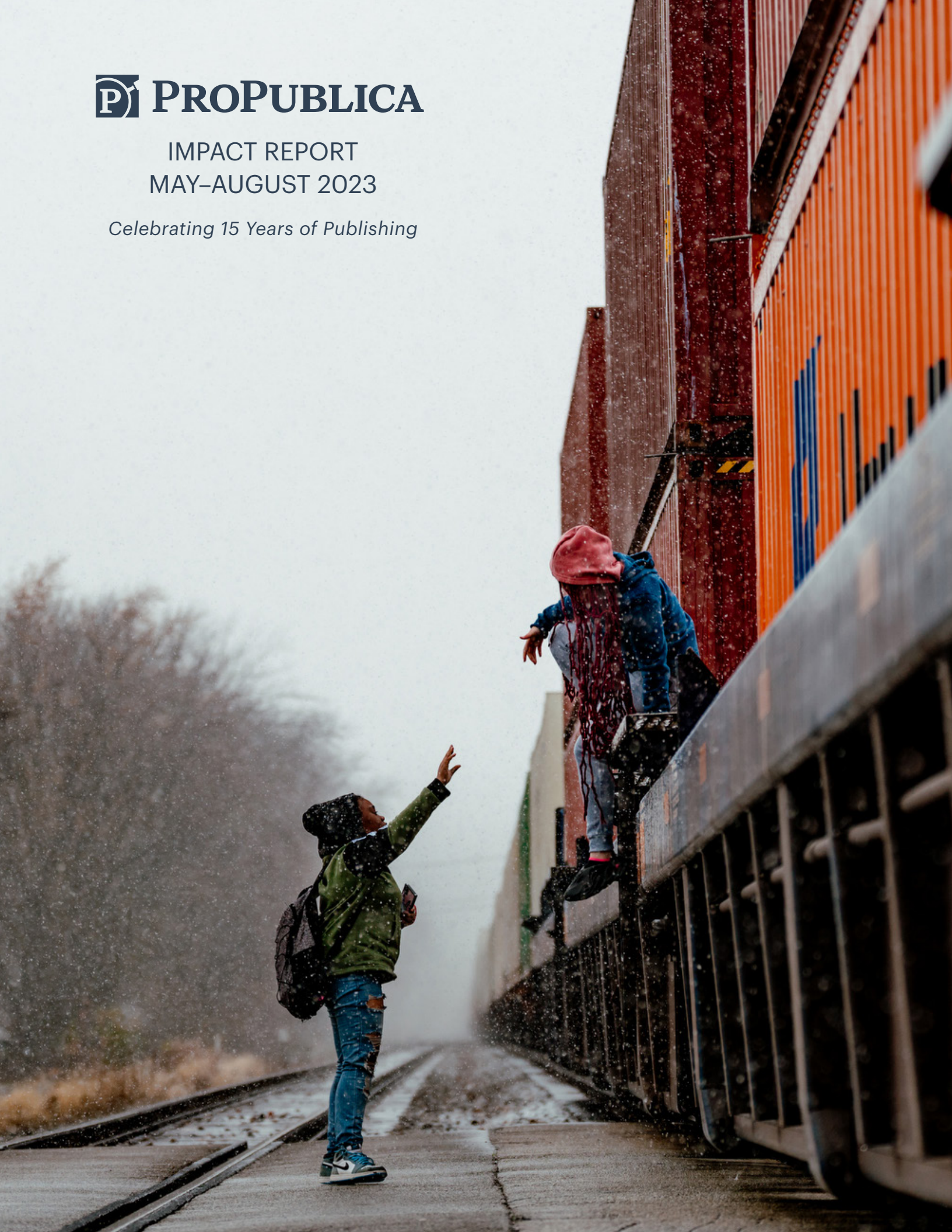


PROPUBLICA

IMPACT REPORT
MAY-AUGUST 2023

Celebrating 15 Years of Publishing



Our Mission

ProPublica exposes abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by governments, businesses and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing.

Who We Are

We are an independent, nonprofit news organization that produces investigative journalism with moral force. Our journalists dig deep into important issues, shining a light on abuses of power and betrayals of public trust. Our reporting has contributed to the passage of new laws; reversals of harmful policies and practices; and accountability for leaders at local, state and national levels.

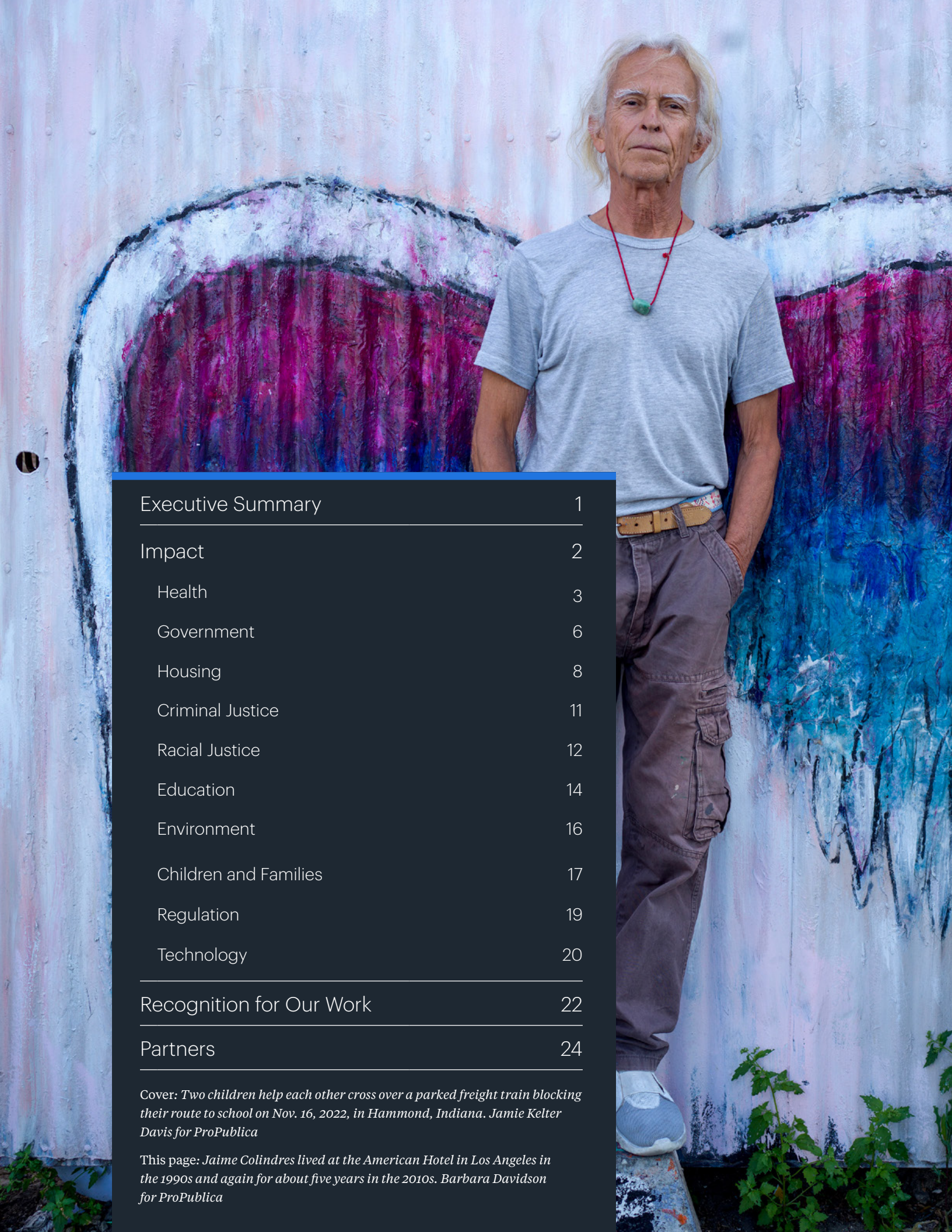
ProPublica was founded in 2008 to address a broad decline in investigative reporting amid the collapse of the business model that had supported American journalism for more than a century. Today, with a team of nearly 150 dedicated journalists — based in New York and working from state and regional offices in the Midwest, South, Southwest, Northwest and Texas — ProPublica’s staff is the largest in American journalism that’s devoted solely to investigative reporting.

How We Work

As a nonprofit, ProPublica’s work is powered primarily through donations. The vast bulk of the money we spend goes directly into world-class, award-winning journalism. We are committed to uncovering the truth, no matter how long it takes or how much it costs, and we practice transparent financial reporting so donors know how their dollars are spent.

ProPublica regularly collaborates with other news organizations to report and publish our journalism, extending the reach of each story and maximizing impact.

Our Local Reporting Network gives local newsrooms, which have been particularly hard hit by the decline in local journalism, the opportunity to tackle big, yearlong investigative stories that are crucial to their communities. Selected reporters work in and report to their home newsrooms while receiving extensive support and guidance from ProPublica.



Executive Summary 1

Impact 2

Health 3

Government 6

Housing 8

Criminal Justice 11

Racial Justice 12

Education 14

Environment 16

Children and Families 17

Regulation 19

Technology 20

Recognition for Our Work 22

Partners 24

Cover: Two children help each other cross over a parked freight train blocking their route to school on Nov. 16, 2022, in Hammond, Indiana. Jamie Kelter Davis for ProPublica

This page: Jaime Colindres lived at the American Hotel in Los Angeles in the 1990s and again for about five years in the 2010s. Barbara Davidson for ProPublica

Keeping Track of Real-World Change

The ripple effect of our journalism can be instantaneous — or it can take years. In September, the Internal Revenue Service announced that it would reform its tax audit practices, five years after we [began investigating](#) the agency’s disproportionate focus on [the working poor](#), specifically Black taxpayers, while scrutiny of the rich plummeted. The IRS focused on low-income families who claimed the earned income tax credit, which is one of the country’s largest anti-poverty programs. This year, our work was cited by a group of researchers who published a study that found a large racial disparity in audits. Now, the IRS [has pledged](#) that it will conduct far fewer EITC audits and select its audits in a more equitable way in order to reduce racial disparities.

Meanwhile, in July we published an [investigation with Capital & Main](#), a nonprofit newsroom in California, about the illegal conversion of residential hotels in Los Angeles. The day after the story was published, the city’s Housing Department said it would immediately investigate whether some residential hotels, which are required by city law to be reserved for low-cost housing, were instead renting rooms to tourists. Within weeks, the agency sent warning letters to the owners of 17 buildings, demanding that they stop renting rooms to tourists, and the City Council is considering a motion to require the Housing Department to report on its enforcement of the law.

And after our investigation with Gray Television/InvestigateTV illustrated how children in Hammond, Indiana, had to climb over or under idling trains, risking their lives to get to school, the train company responsible for the blocked crossings, Norfolk Southern, delivered on some [short-term fixes](#). We are watching closely to see if the company will follow through to fund a \$5 million pedestrian bridge over a critical intersection in the town, a longer, more permanent solution. We track and measure real accountability, not merely the promise of change.

There’s something especially heartening when the real-world change spurred by our local journalism efforts is replicated around the country. Our investigative unit with The Texas Tribune revealed in May that there was no evidence of child identification kits having helped identify missing children in the state. Less than a month later, Texas quietly pulled funding from the company that provided the kits. Now, a bill to fund a similarly questionable program in Pennsylvania is [facing opposition](#).

We’re also closely monitoring the ongoing impact from our reporting on the relationship between Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito and their billionaire Republican donor friends, including the increased calls for ethics reform of the court and [Thomas’ travel and real estate acknowledgments](#) in his most recent annual disclosure form.

Since ProPublica’s founding 15 years ago, we’ve taken pride in tracking how our stories resonate with policymakers in the halls of power and people on the ground who are directly affected by our work. Thank you for making this important work possible.



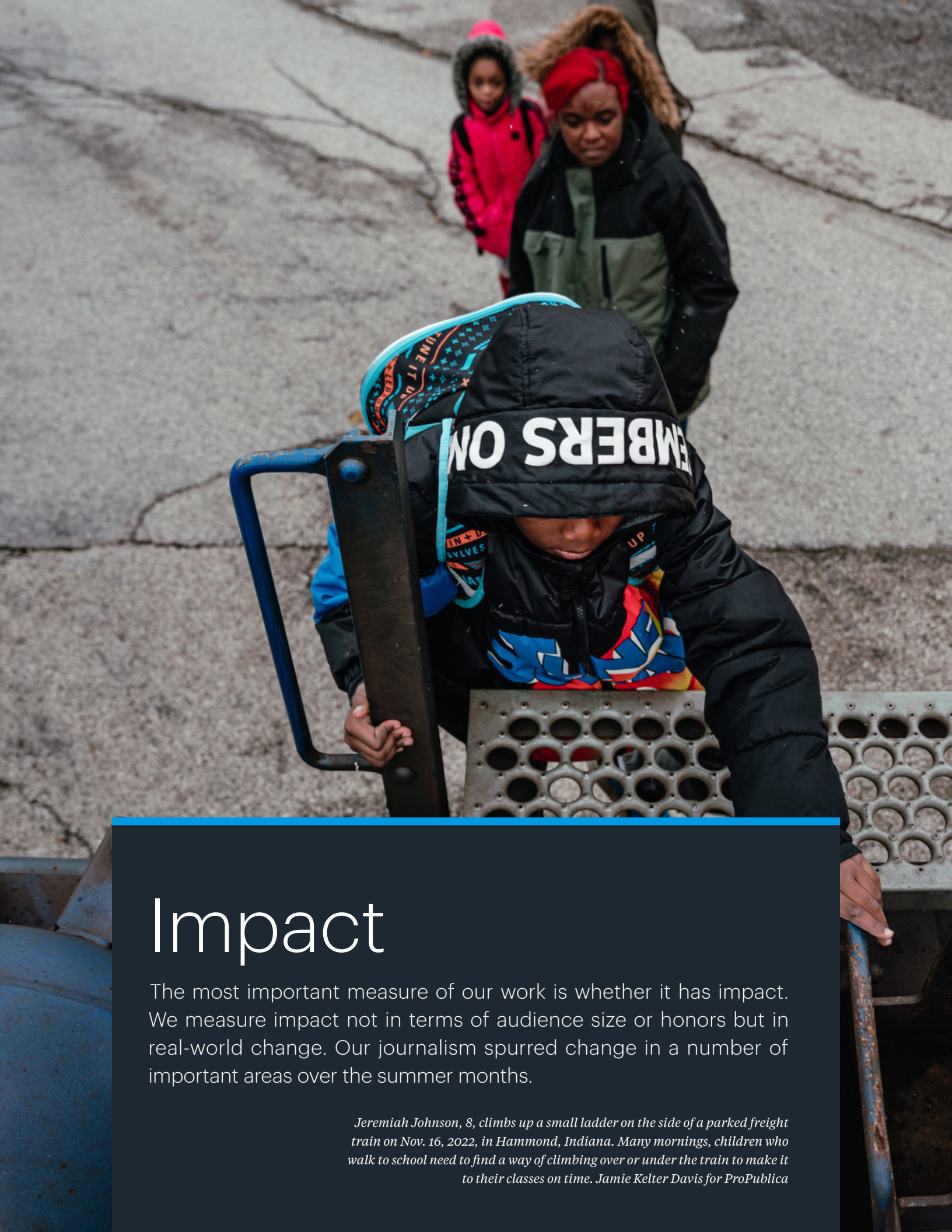
Robin Sparkman

Robin Sparkman,
President



Stephen Engelberg

Stephen Engelberg,
Editor-in-Chief



Impact

The most important measure of our work is whether it has impact. We measure impact not in terms of audience size or honors but in real-world change. Our journalism spurred change in a number of important areas over the summer months.

Jeremiah Johnson, 8, climbs up a small ladder on the side of a parked freight train on Nov. 16, 2022, in Hammond, Indiana. Many mornings, children who walk to school need to find a way of climbing over or under the train to make it to their classes on time. Jamie Kelter Davis for ProPublica



Health

Cigna's headquarters in Bloomfield, Connecticut, on Tuesday, March 21, 2023. Tim Tai for ProPublica

Lawmakers Propose \$45 Million in Federal Funding to Lower U.S. Stillbirth Rate

In July, Congress [introduced two bipartisan bills](#) aimed at reducing the U.S. stillbirth rate and credited ProPublica for its reporting. The [Maternal and Child Health Stillbirth Prevention Act](#) would explicitly allow federal funding earmarked for mothers and children to also be used to prevent the 20,000 annual stillbirths, and the [SHINE for Autumn Act](#) would authorize \$45 million in federal funding over the next five years for programs to improve data and research. We reported in February that U.S. lawmakers are [demanding action](#) following our [investigation](#) into the failures of federal agencies and health care providers to reduce the country's stillbirth rate. Our reporting over the past 18 months found that among wealthy countries, the U.S. ranks as one of the worst in reducing its stillbirth rate, and 1 in 4 stillbirths may be preventable.

Cigna Under Fire for Denying Claims Without Reading Patient Files

A congressional committee and government regulators are [scrutinizing](#) health insurance giant Cigna following an [investigation](#) by ProPublica and The Capitol Forum that revealed company doctors reject hundreds of thousands of claims a month, sometimes without ever opening a patient file. We reported how the system used by Cigna to process claims used an algorithm that allowed doctors to reject claims in batches by automatically labeling them “not medically necessary.” Over two months last year, Cigna doctors refused to pay for 300,000 claims, spending an average of 1.2 seconds on each case. Two organizations that accredit health insurers to make sure plans are abiding by certain standards have additionally opened investigations into the denials system. In July, a California law firm [filed a class-action lawsuit](#) against Cigna, citing our reporting as the basis for the action, alleging Cigna violated a state law requiring



Illustration by ProPublica. Source images: Whitney Curtis for ProPublica, Equip for Equality report.

insurers to conduct a “thorough, fair and objective” investigation of patient claims for medical care. Cigna disputed the reporting as “biased and incomplete” and said the savings achieved through the system are passed on to clients.

Hospices in Four States to Receive Extra Scrutiny

Three months after ProPublica and the New Yorker published an [exposé of hospice fraud](#) in November 2022, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services announced [significant reforms](#) to how it inspects hospice providers, effective immediately. Our reporting revealed how hospice care has transformed into a \$22 billion industry plagued by exploitation and alarming business practices and sparked immediate demands for reform from [Congress](#) and [government watchdog agencies](#). In July, federal regulators [rolled out enhanced oversight](#) of new hospices in Arizona, California, Nevada and Texas, targeting providers highlighted by our investigation.

Illinois Law Imposes Stiffer Penalties for Covering Up Patient Abuse

Spurred by our reporting, the Illinois governor [signed a bill into law](#) in June strengthening penalties for health care employees who conspire to hide abuse or interfere with investigations. In September 2022, an investigation by ProPublica and Local Reporting Network partners Lee Enterprises and Capitol News Illinois exposed a [history of egregious patient abuses and other misconduct](#) at Choate Mental Health and Developmental Center, a state-run facility for people with mental and developmental disabilities. We found that over a 10-year period ending in 2021, the inspector general’s office investigated more than 1,500 reports of patient abuse or neglect, and at least 26 employees have been arrested on felony charges connected to the facility. In the wake of our reporting, state officials have sprung into action, [seeking harsher penalties](#) against workers who obstruct investigations, [calling for legislative hearings](#), [relocating patients and removing Choate’s director](#) from his position.



Illustration by Matt Huynh, special to ProPublica

Organ Donors to Be Tested for Chagas Disease

The Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, the organization that governs U.S. organ transplant policies, [voted unanimously](#) to require donors be tested for a parasitic ailment called Chagas disease after we reported on [the death of Bob Naedele](#), a former police detective who died in 2018 after receiving an infected heart. The policy change comes after years of recommendations from experts for screening to prevent such deaths. Though cases of Chagas disease in the United States are rare, the parasite has been a known risk for transplant recipients for decades.

Head of Minnesota Nursing Board Steps Down

One month after our April [investigation of the Minnesota Nursing Board](#), Executive Director Kimberly

Miller stepped down. Miller had been [placed on leave](#) amid accusations of mismanagement following our reporting, co-published with Minnesota Public Radio and KARE-TV. A 2015 state audit found the board was slow to act on patient complaints, and nurses accused of serious misconduct had been allowed to keep treating patients. Our story revealed that while the board ramped up its discipline for a few years, cases had ticked back up again and the board's slow disciplinary process had put the public in harm's way. The time to resolve complaints had risen to 11 months on average. What's more, while state law generally requires the board to resolve cases in under a year, hundreds of unresolved cases were more than a year old. In a previous interview with ProPublica, Miller acknowledged the backlog and said the board was working to "right the boat," though she did not respond to questions about complaints surrounding her job performance.



Government

Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Eric Lee/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Clarence Thomas Acknowledges Undisclosed Real Estate Deal and Discloses Private Jet Flights

Our [investigations](#) into Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas' decadeslong relationship with Republican megadonor Harlan Crow and, separately, Justice Samuel Alito's luxury travel with billionaire and Republican donor Paul Singer have raised questions about influence and ethics at the nation's highest court. Lawmaker reaction has been swift, with [demands](#) that Chief Justice John Roberts investigate these trips and gifts as well as a Senate Judiciary Committee [hearing on judicial ethics reform](#) held in May. Senators [sent a letter](#) to Republican donors featured in our reporting, including Republican power broker Leonard Leo, requesting a full accounting of gifts to Supreme Court Justices. And in August, Thomas for the first time [acknowledged that he should have reported](#) selling real estate to billionaire Harlan Crow

in 2014. Writing in his annual financial disclosure form, Thomas said that he "inadvertently failed to realize" that the deal needed to be publicly disclosed. Thomas also disclosed receiving three private jet trips last year from Crow, two of which we reported on.

In response to our initial report, Thomas acknowledged the trips and defended his failure to disclose them, citing guidance from colleagues and others in the judiciary. Crow issued statements about his relationship with Thomas, which we've included in our stories. He acknowledged that he'd extended "hospitality" to Thomas and his wife, but he said that Thomas never asked for any of it and it was "no different from the hospitality we have extended to our many other dear friends." Leo did not respond to questions about his organizing Alito's 2008 trip but said in a statement that he "would never presume to tell" justices Alito and Scalia "what to do."

Executive Summary

As directed by Congress in § 10301(1)(B) of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), the IRS has spent the months studying the feasibility of an IRS-run free direct e-file tax return system (Direct File). The study of a potential Direct File option was conducted in the context of the IRS's IRA Strategic Operating Plan (SOP), which outlines the vision for the overall transformation of taxpayer services. Filing taxes can be time-consuming and difficult, and the IRS is committed to delivering significantly improved services by providing taxpayer assistance with their tax filing obligations. This study was informed by the experiences of the IRS and other governments around the world that offer free government filing of tax returns for their citizens.

IRS Report to Congress

Photo illustration by ProPublica. Source image: IRS Inflation Reduction Act report to Congress.

IRS Pilots Free Online Tax Filing Program

In 2019, we reported that TurboTax uses deceptive design and misleading ads to get lower-income tax filers to pay to file their taxes, even when they are eligible to file for free under an agreement with the IRS. We later revealed that Intuit, the maker of TurboTax, was deliberately hiding the free edition in search results. Our investigative series prompted a range of impact, including city and state lawsuits and an investigation by the IRS. Before our coverage, Congress was close to passing a provision that would have barred the IRS from creating a free tax filing option; in the wake of our stories, that was scrapped and the IRS made major reforms to its agreements with the tax prep software industry. In May 2022, Intuit reached a \$141 million settlement with state attorneys general to pay up to \$90 apiece to more than 4 million people who had paid for TurboTax even though they were eligible to use it for free. In May of this year, New York Attorney General Letitia James announced that the process of actually mailing checks was about to commence. A suit by the Federal Trade Commission is ongoing. The IRS announced in May that it would develop an experimental tool to allow Americans to file taxes directly with the agency for free.

READER FEEDBACK

"The quality of the work that I have read is truly significant. I appreciate the extensive and intensive research you have put into your subjects. I have a particular interest in the Supreme Court, and the ramification of justices accepting benefits from parties who will have or share interest in cases coming before the Court. Thank you for your work."

—Patricia in New Jersey



Housing

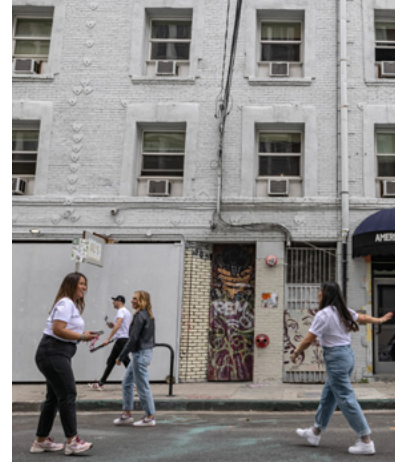
Top: Illustration by Max Erwin for ProPublica. Bottom right: A HomeVestors billboard in Asheville, North Carolina. Harrison Shull/Aurora Photos/Cavan Images/Alamy Stock Photo.

Predatory House-Flipping Franchises Come Under Fire

In June, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau told a U.S. Senate Committee that the Department of Justice and state attorneys general should turn their attention to the predatory practices of HomeVestors of America, the “We Buy Ugly Houses” company, and other house-flipping franchises following our [investigation](#). Additionally, the president and CEO of HomeVestors, the self-proclaimed “largest homebuyer in the U.S.,” [announced he would step down](#), citing the toll from “recent press coverage.” Our reporting discovered that some company franchises had deceived sellers and targeted vulnerable people. The company also teaches its franchisees to build relationships with nursing home administrators and probate lawyers and to scan neighborhoods for signs of desperation such as water shut-off notices, police tape and burn scars. In response, HomeVestors’ spokesperson said

ProPublica’s examples represented a fraction of the company’s transactions. She also said that such predatory behavior isn’t taught or tolerated and that “lying is against our code of ethics and our culture.”





LA Housing Department Cracks Down on Residential Hotels Renting to Tourists

The Los Angeles Housing Department is demanding that residential buildings meant for low-cost housing stop renting rooms to tourists in violation of city law. The department had previously [announced an investigation](#) one day after ProPublica and Local Reporting Network partner Capital & Main reported that 21 residential hotels were [advertising on travel websites](#) despite a 2008 ordinance aimed at preserving residential hotels for affordable housing. The department said it will investigate all 21 of the hotels identified in our story and pledged to issue citations and make referrals to the city attorney's office as appropriate. The agency will also evaluate the resources needed and review its processes to more effectively enforce this ordinance.



Top left: A tourist map of California is seen next to the Hometel Suites hotel in Los Angeles in July. Barbara Davidson for ProPublica

Top right: Tourists shoot photos and videos outside the American Hotel, a residential hotel in downtown Los Angeles that's supposed to be reserved for housing. Barbara Davidson for ProPublica

Bottom right: Tourists make their way out of the H Hotel parking lot and head to the front desk in May. Barbara Davidson for ProPublica



Illustration by Imran Hussein, special to ProPublica

Senators Call for Consumer Protections in Fast-Tracked Home Deals

Prompted by a [2022 investigation](#) by ProPublica and Sahan Journal, a U.S. Senate subcommittee met in July to call for [oversight and consumer protections](#) in “contract for deed” real estate transactions. Our reporting in November found that these alternative home financing deals can leave buyers financially devastated and unscrupulous sellers free to resell the properties. The investigation examined the impact of such deals on Somali Muslim families in the Twin Cities area who said they signed contracts they didn’t understand for homes with inflated prices and large down payments. Investors have been offering contracts for deed as a way to buy a house without paying traditional interest (as a principle of their faith, many Muslims avoid paying or profiting from interest), yet our reporting found that the contracts lack many of the consumer protections of a mortgage and contain large balloon payments.

READER FEEDBACK

“I have come to rely on the in-depth investigative reporting of ProPublica. Your work has focused attention on issues of importance to our daily lives and to our democracy. I regularly share ProPublica stories with colleagues. ... Thank you for doing great work and breathing life into investigative journalism.”

—Margaret in New Hampshire



Criminal Justice

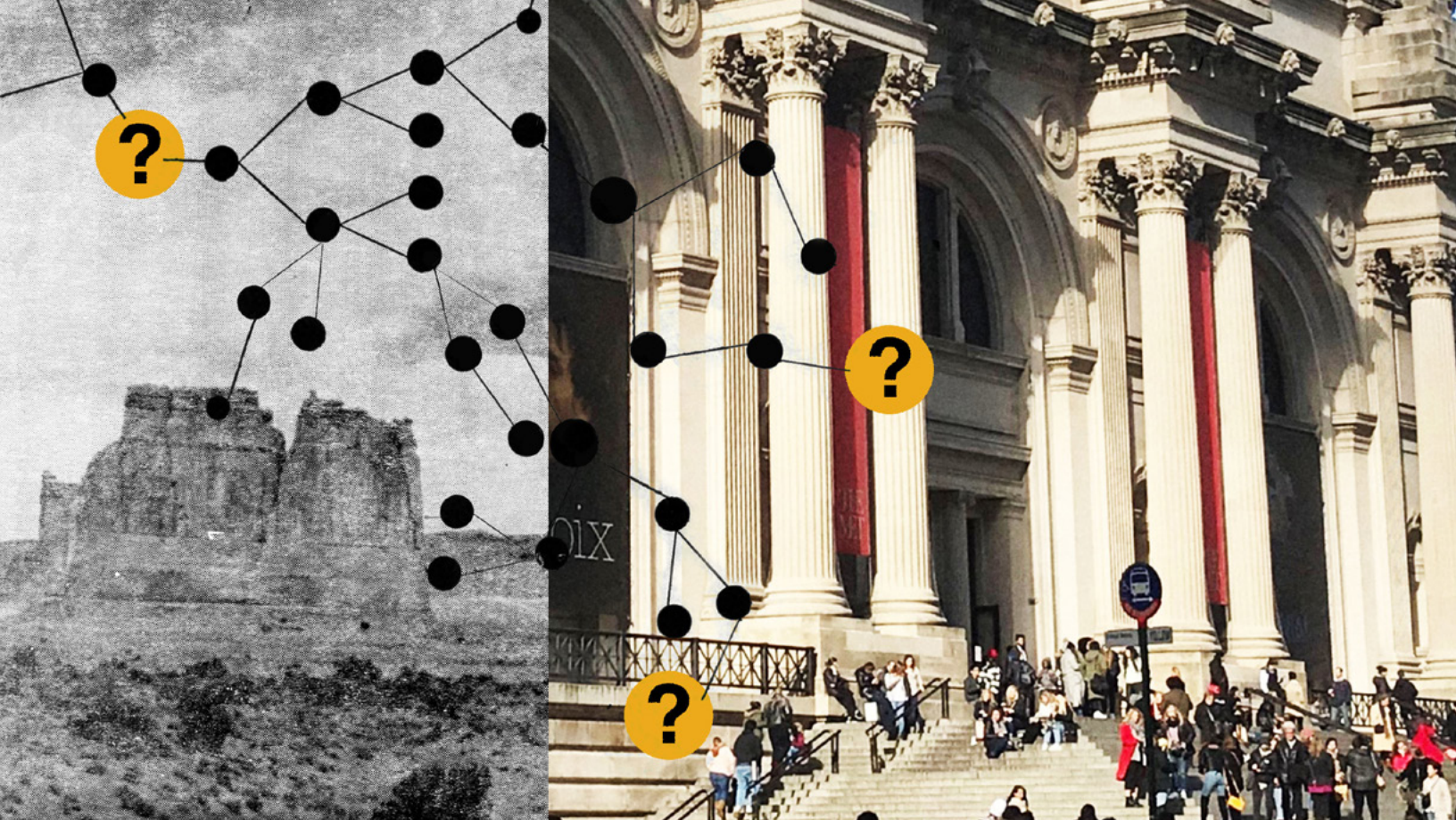
Chicago police headquarters at 35th Street and Michigan Avenue in 2020. Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune/Tribune News Service via Getty Images

Colorado Lawmakers Mandate Audit of Halfway Houses

In response to our [yearlong investigation](#) into Colorado’s halfway houses, the facilities [will get an independent financial audit](#) for the first time in 20 years. A [state law](#), signed by Gov. Jared Polis in April, directs Colorado’s Division of Criminal Justice to hire a third-party auditor to evaluate the finances of halfway houses every five years. Our investigation found the facilities often imposed punitive policies on residents, while lacking adequate employment training and effective drug treatment programs, and passed along costs that sank residents into debt. Last year, Colorado legislators directed \$87.7 million in taxpayer money into the network of reentry facilities — nearly 16% of the state’s public safety budget. Meanwhile, the state’s recidivism rate is one of the worst in the country, with nearly 50% of the people who leave a Colorado prison back behind bars within two years, many sent directly from a halfway house.

Chicago Prosecutors Drop Cases Relying on Testimony of Officer Accused of Perjury

Prosecutors in Illinois have [dropped at least 15 court cases](#) that hinged on the word of a former Chicago police officer who’s now charged with perjury and forgery. Jeffrey Kriv is accused of lying under oath 44 times to get out of speeding, parking and red light camera tickets involving his personal vehicles; he blamed a purported girlfriend for taking his car and getting the tickets. ProPublica and the Chicago Tribune previously detailed Kriv’s [long history of alleged misconduct](#) as an officer and his current legal trouble, shedding light on Chicago’s troubled history of police accountability. A lawyer for Kriv, informed of the reporting by ProPublica and the Tribune, said “many of the facts you compose are incomplete or not true,” though he did not say what was inaccurate.



Racial Justice

Top: Illustration by Alex Bandoni/ProPublica. Source Images: Lorina Capitolo/Newsday RM via Getty Images and the National Park Service. Bottom right: Walter Echo-Hawk, a Pawnee attorney with the Native American Rights Fund, testifies at a congressional hearing in July 1989 on repatriation. Ed Lallo/Getty Images

The Met Will “More Thoroughly” Investigate Artwork Origins

An article from April [investigated the origin](#) of every Native American work donated or loaned to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by the noted art collectors Charles and Valerie Diker. That reporting showed that only 15% of the 139 works provided by the Dikers had solid or complete ownership histories. In a written statement to ProPublica, the collectors said: “For nearly 50 years, inspiring appreciation for the arts of Native America has been our greatest passion.” The couple also said that they had assessed “all available information relating to provenance” before acquiring the works. In May, the Met announced it [planned to hire four experts](#) to investigate “more thoroughly” the history of works in its collections. In response to ProPublica’s earlier reporting on the Diker Collection, the museum had said in a statement: “Although some

progress has been made in updating the online catalog information and providing more complete provenance information, we recognize there is still much work to do and that this is an ongoing process that requires relationship building, patience, and great care. This is important work, and it is precisely one of the intentions of the Dikers to have a large, well-resourced institution such as The Met devote the time and scholarship to these Native items.”





Collage by ProPublica of Illinois Gov. J. B. Pritzker and screenshots. Source Images: illinois.gov, Leo Weekly, AL DÍA, Independent Record, The Denver Post and Axios Austin.

New Illinois Law Shifts Repatriation and Reburial Power to Tribal Nations

In August, Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker signed into law [sweeping reforms](#) that will for the first time give tribal nations final say over how and when the remains of their ancestors and sacred items are returned to them. The Human Remains Protection Act follows decades of Indigenous activism, new leadership within the Illinois State Museum and Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and ProPublica’s [Repatriation Project](#), which revealed the extent of the failure of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act to force the return of human remains and belongings to their respective tribes. It found that the remains of more than [110,000 Native Americans are still held](#) by prominent institutions across the United States. More than 50 newsrooms have used the [database](#) from our investigation to report on the progress of repatriation by local institutions. Following our reporting, more than a dozen schools and museums have pledged to redouble their efforts to [return human remains and belongings](#) that were taken from Native American gravesites.

Anchorage Library Official Resigns After Inflammatory Comments

The deputy director of the Anchorage Public Library resigned, less than three weeks after ProPublica and Local Reporting Network partner Anchorage Daily News published an article documenting her history of offensive comments and social media posts. We reported that in March 2022, Judy Eledge expressed her disgust to a co-worker about the use of Indigenous land acknowledgements and the sharing of pronouns. She called transgender people “very troubled.” The colleague recorded the conversation out of fear no one would believe the hostile work environment Eledge fostered. “Equitable, to me, is a racist word,” Eledge told her subordinate. Eledge has played an active role in Alaska politics, with appointments to the state Board of Education, the Anchorage Health and Human Services Commission and the Alaska Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee. In a brief phone conversation, Eledge said she could not comment on accusations involving her statements at the library because they are the subject of a lawsuit.



Education

Top: Baker College graduate Bart Bechtel holds his diploma at home in Essex, Maryland. Mary F. Calvert, special to ProPublica.
Bottom right: Bechtel at home. Mary F. Calvert, special to ProPublica.

Michigan College Under Federal Investigation for Recruitment Practices

Following a ProPublica and Detroit Free Press [investigation](#) last year, the U.S. Department of Education has opened an [investigation into Baker College](#), a large nonprofit school in Michigan, over its “recruitment and marketing practices.” Our reporting found that Baker College spent more on marketing than it did on financial aid, while less than one-quarter of its students graduate — far below the national average for private four-year schools. An exceptionally large number of former Baker students with loans had filed claims with the federal government that they were defrauded or misled by the college. We additionally reported that upon retirement, former presidents routinely served on the college’s Board of Trustees, which is supposed to provide independent oversight on the decisions of the school administration, raising ques-

tions about the school’s governance. In a statement to reporters, Baker emphasized a continuing commitment to improving student outcomes and reducing student loan debt, though it did not provide specifics. The investigation is ongoing.





Illustration by Laila Milevski/ProPublica

Illinois Once Again Attempts to Reform School Ticketing

Illinois legislators and activists are [rewriting a bill](#) that would make it illegal for schools to involve police in ticketing students for minor misbehavior. The legislation was originally introduced in February 2023 but did not pass. An April 2022 investigation by ProPublica and the Chicago Tribune revealed the extent of [Illinois public schools' collaboration with police to ticket students for misbehavior](#) like vaping and truancy. The practice flouted a state law banning school employees from issuing fines as discipline and violated a different law preventing schools from referring truant students to police so students can be fined. The investigation exposed how the fines posed a hardship for lower-income families and unpaid fines were sometimes sent to collections or deducted from parents' tax refunds. In addition, because these ordinance violations are classified as adult offenses, they are ineligible for expungement and can follow these young people throughout their lives.

Meanwhile, in a local court in August, a college student [won her 3-plus-year-long legal battle](#) over a student ticket issued when she was in high school. After her [case was featured](#) as part of ProPublica's "The Price Kids Pay" series in 2022, two prominent civil rights attorneys volunteered to represent her. Her case was a dramatic example of the impact of school ticketing and showed the extraordinary effort it can take to argue against a ticket in a system built for assembly-line justice.

Washington Lawmakers Strengthen Oversight of Private Special Education Schools

In Washington, lawmakers voted nearly unanimously to [strengthen oversight](#) of schools that serve some of the state's most vulnerable public school students. Education officials had [launched an investigation](#) into Northwest SOIL, the state's largest network of privately run schools for students with disabilities following a harrowing [report](#) we published with the Seattle Times exposing years of abuse complaints, lack of academics and squalid conditions. Leaders of Northwest SOIL and Fairfax Hospital, its owner, defended the program in a statement to the Times and ProPublica, saying administrators take seriously the responsibility of addressing students' complex needs. "We are proud of our overall academic and clinical performance and earned reputation for accepting the most difficult referrals in the area," the school said.

Washington education officials have also since [barred the private special education school](#) from accepting new students after their investigation found "unacceptably high" levels of physical restraints and students isolated in locked rooms. Fairfax sued the state in late July to reverse the suspension of student placements. "As outlined in the lawsuit, the prohibition on new students is unlawful," Christopher West, CEO of Fairfax Behavioral Health, said in an email. The superintendent's office "is inserting the state agency into decisions that should be made by parents or guardians and local school districts about where a child with mental health issues should receive an education." The state has asked the court to dismiss the lawsuit, and a hearing is set for Sept. 29.



Environment

The Marshall Fire incinerated 550 homes and businesses in Louisville, Colorado. Chet Strange, special to ProPublica

Colorado Passes Bill to Protect Residents, Homes from Wildfires

In May, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis [signed into law](#) a bill that mandates a statewide wildfire-resistant building code, a step that scientists say will help protect residents and first responders as climate change intensifies blazes. The measure passed after a [ProPublica investigation](#) found that Colorado regulations hadn't kept pace with the threat fires pose to the state's urban areas. We reported that previous legislative efforts had been repeatedly stymied by developers and municipalities, while taxpayers shouldered the growing cost of rebuilding after the fires. Before this bill, Colorado was one of only eight states without a minimum construction standard for homes. "Articles like ProPublica's helped drive the awareness that we are all in this together," said Mike Morgan, director of the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention & Control.

READER FEEDBACK

"I'm grateful for ProPublica's great work uncovering the ways in which privilege and big money corrupt our economy, democracy and society. Keep digging, and thank you."

—Rick in North Carolina



Children and Families

Collage of a brochure for the National Child Identification Program's fingerprinting kits. Obtained by ProPublica and The Texas Tribune

Colorado Restricts Court-Mandated Family Reunification Camps

Following our reporting on child custody in Colorado, the state passed [new legislation](#) in May that prohibits family courts from ordering children to participate in reunification programs that isolate them from a trusted caregiver. The legislation makes Colorado the first state to pass a law based on the federal Keeping Children Safe From Family Violence Act, also known as Kayden's Law. Our [reporting](#) brought to light how some court-ordered reunification camps used physical restraint, threats and the removal of personal items — including food, clothing and shower supplies — to force children to comply with treatment. The new law also requires experts who advise the court on custody cases to be trained in working with victims of domestic violence and child abuse. Last year, we reported that [Colorado custody evaluators](#) advising the court on domestic violence and child abuse al-

legations had themselves been accused of domestic violence. State lawmakers have [credited ProPublica's reporting](#) for exposing the need for reforms.

Texas Pulls State Funding for Ineffective Child Identification Kits

Texas lawmakers will no longer spend millions of taxpayer dollars on [child identification kits](#) after a ProPublica-Texas Tribune investigation revealed there is no evidence the kits have helped locate missing children. A similar bill in Pennsylvania that would require purchasing the same child ID kits is [facing key opposition](#) in the wake of our reporting. Our [investigation](#) found that the company that distributes the kits used exaggerated statistics as it sought contracts in Texas and other states, and similar kits are available for free. We also revealed that Kenny Hansmire, a former NFL player who leads the company, had a string of failed businesses, owed millions in federal



The Texas Capitol in Austin. Evan L’Roy/The Texas Tribune

tax liens and had previously been barred from some finance-related business in Connecticut by banking regulators because of his role in an alleged scheme to defraud or mislead investors. “As with most businesses, there have been legal disputes including the one with the State of Connecticut. Those matters have been properly resolved, closed, and are completely unrelated to the National Child ID Program,” Hansmire told ProPublica and the Tribune in an emailed statement. He claimed to have “paid debts entirely” and said: “We live in a society of second chances. My story is no different.”

Texas Legislature Closes Gun Background Check Loophole

In May, the Texas Legislature passed a law that closes a gun background check loophole first revealed by ProPublica and The Texas Tribune in July 2022. The bipartisan measure amended a state law to ensure that people who were involuntarily hospitalized for mental illness as juveniles cannot purchase firearms. Legislators passed a law in 2009 that required local officials to report court-ordered mental health hospitalizations to the Department of Public Safety, which must then forward the information to the national firearms background check system. Our report-

ing found that local court clerks were not sharing that information for juveniles, however, due to problems with the law’s wording and vague guidance from the state. Following our investigation, the Texas Judicial Council called on lawmakers to close the gap in the legislation.

Court Orders Texas to Release Uvalde School Shooting Documents

A state district judge ordered the Texas Department of Public Safety to begin releasing records related to the May 2022 Uvalde school shooting that the agency has kept for over a year. The decision marks a win for a coalition of news organizations, including ProPublica and The Texas Tribune, which sued the agency in August 2022. The lawsuit sought the release of records that would bring more clarity to law enforcement’s failed response, including emails, video footage, call logs, emergency communications and forensic records. Laura Lee Prather, a lawyer with the firm representing the news organizations, said she hopes the lawsuit will encourage agencies to produce information like 911 calls and body camera footage as quickly as possible. “That’s how you promote trust in law enforcement,” Prather said. “It’s also how you prevent future tragedies.”



Regulation

Jeremiah Johnson climbs down a small ladder on the side of a parked freight train on Nov. 16, 2022, in Hammond, Indiana. Jamie Kelter Davis for ProPublica.

Blocked Train Crossings Crisis Draws Calls for Action

Our investigations into [railway safety](#), highlighting the dangers of long trains and trains blocking railroad crossings in Hammond, Indiana, for hours or even days, have [spurred outcry](#) by residents, safety advisories by the Federal Railroad Administration and demands for change by bipartisan lawmakers. The report revealed how major train companies routinely allow trains to block crossings, preventing vehicles from reaching emergencies and endangering children trying to get to school, among other disruptions. Reporters found that there were at least 28,000 reports of trains stopped on crossings last year alone. Since our reporting, Norfolk Southern has made [short-term improvements](#) and there were no reports of blocked trains in Hammond two weeks into the school year, though long-term commitments, like building a pedestrian bridge, have yet to be confirmed.

OSHA to Reform Workplace Safety Program After Reports of Asbestos Dangers

ProPublica and NPR News' October 2022 investigation detailing [dangerous working conditions](#) at a chlorine plant has prompted the federal government to reform one of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's workplace safety programs. OSHA's Star Program exempts plants with strong safety programs from random, unannounced inspections. But our investigation found that at least four of the eight chlorine factories that currently use asbestos are in the Star Program. Following the release of the report, the American Public Health Association questioned OSHA about the ethics of including companies that use asbestos in their Star Program, and OSHA declined to comment at the time. But in July 2023, OSHA announced plans to [reform the workplace safety program](#) that reduced inspections at some manufacturers, and that our reporting helped inform the public feedback part of this process.



Technology

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass. Andrew Cabellero-Reynolds/Getty Images

Senator Warren Investigates Google’s Hunt for Soldier’s Medical Data

Referring to ProPublica’s [investigation](#) published last December, Sen. Elizabeth Warren has [begun investigating](#) Google’s efforts to collect medical information derived from biopsy specimens of millions of military service members. Our report found that in late 2015, Google began to gather medical information at military installations and hospitals around the country, which it planned to use to build AI tools to potentially aid the diagnosis and treatment of cancer and other diseases. In a statement, Ted Ladd, a Google spokesperson, attributed the ethics complaints to an “inter-agency issue” and a “personnel dispute.” “We had hoped to enable the [military’s Joint Pathology Center] to digitize its data and, with its permission, develop computer models that would enable researchers and clinicians to improve diagnosis for cancers and other illnesses,” Ladd said, noting that

all of Google’s health care partnerships involve “the strictest controls” over data. “Our customers own and manage their data, and we cannot — and do not — use it for any purpose other than explicitly agreed upon by the customer.”

In response to questions ProPublica, the JPC said none of its de-identified data would be shared during its modernization process unless it met the ethical, regulatory and legal approvals needed to ensure it was done in the right way. Expressing concerns around privacy and economic competition, Warren has written to Google and records related to the company’s pursuit of this trove of medical data overseen by JPC.

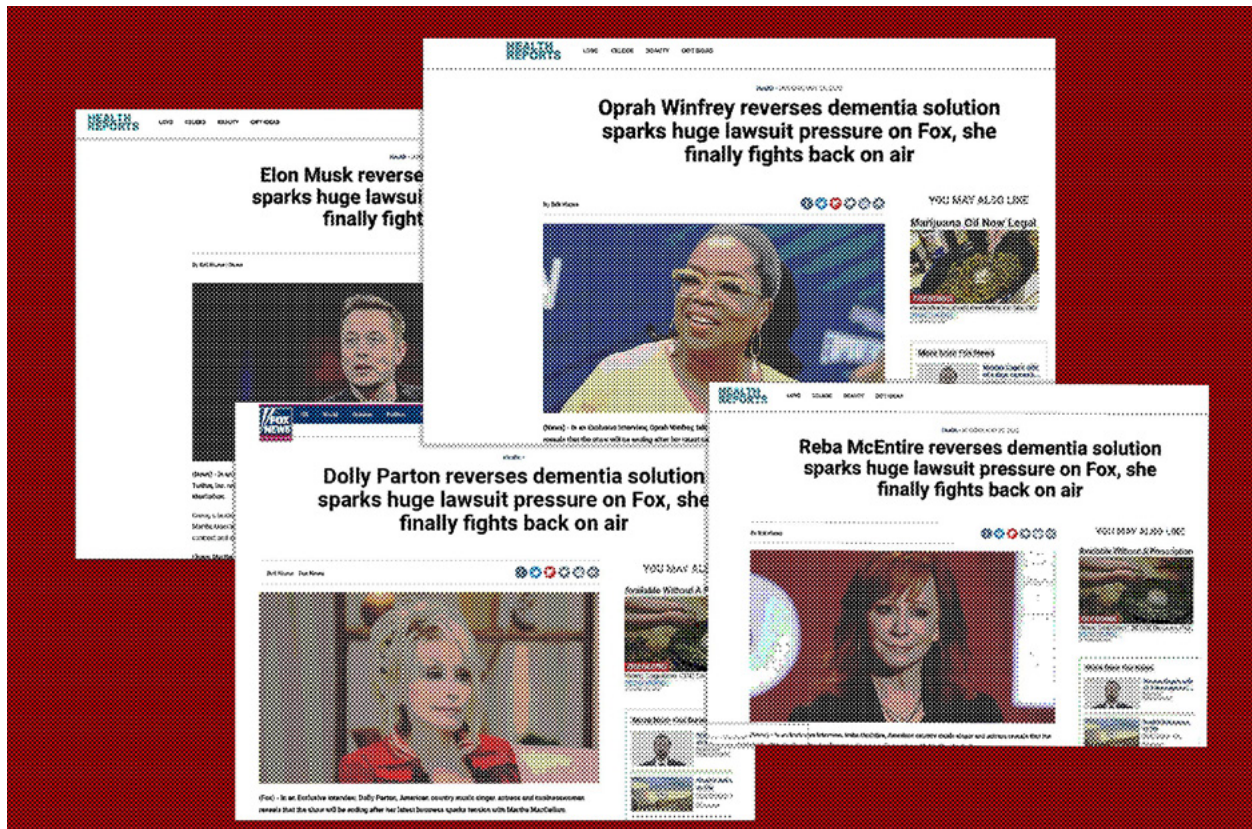


Illustration by ProPublica. Source Images: Screenshots taken by ProPublica of fake news stories accompanying AdStyle ads.

Ad Network Removes Scam With Fake Celebrity Endorsements

A mysterious network called AdStyle has been placing ads with fake endorsements from celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Elon Musk on conservative sites based in the U.S. and abroad. These scam ads promote dubious medicines and cryptocurrency frauds. After reporters contacted the company, AdStyle removed investment and dementia scam ads from the network. The prevalence of scam ads on AdStyle and its many partnerships with right-wing sites around the world exemplify how conservative publishers, politicians and operatives profit from fleecing their fellow right-wingers. “We have taken immediate action to reinforce our systems and processes, working diligently to enhance our ad approval mechanisms to better prevent the appearance of misleading or low-quality advertisements,” the company said in an unsigned email. “We are actively reviewing and refining our content moderation policies.”

READER FEEDBACK

“In today’s world, when it is difficult to know who to trust, I know ProPublica has done their research and are reporting with truth.”

—Tami in Indiana

Words of Conviction

Tracing a Junk Science Through the Justice System

The Insurrection

The Effort to Overturn the Election

more than a decade, a training program known as 911 call analysis and the methods used to read across the country and how it flowed deep into the justice system.



Environment



The Cold War Legacy Lurking in U.S. Groundwater

by Mark Swaby, Rajin Simon and Alex Miorjeski, video by Gerardo del Valle, Liz Moughon and Mauricio Rodriguez Pons

Dec. 9, 2021, 5 a.m. EST

Recognition for Our Work

Some of our most ambitious work from last year has received honors in recent months, including five Edward R. Murrow Awards and six Online Journalism Awards. A [full list of awards](#) that ProPublica and our partners have won is on our website. Here are some of the highlights from this summer.

Collage by Lisa Larson-Walker/ProPublica

Edward R. Murrow Awards

— Multiple Categories

“Plot to Overturn the Election” (with PBS’ FRONTLINE) won the news documentary category

“A Uranium Ghost Town in the Making” (with the Los Angeles Times) won the hard news category

“Meet the Woman Fighting for the Rights of Voters Who Can’t Read” won the excellence in video category

“The Night Raids” won the excellence in writing category

“Wy-Kan-Ush-Pum (Salmon People): A Native Fishing Family’s Fight to Preserve a Way of Life” (with Oregon Public Broadcasting) won the news documentary category

Online Journalism Awards

— Multiple Categories

“Roots of an Outbreak” won the 3M Truth in Science Award and the University of Florida Award in Investigative Data Journalism for a small/medium newsroom

“Words of Conviction: Tracing a Junk Science Through the Justice System” won the Al Neuharth Innovation in Investigative Journalism Award for a medium newsroom

“Collecting the Receipts Communities Can Use” (with Oregon Public Broadcasting and NBC News) won the Gather Award in Community-Centered Journalism for a medium/large newsroom

“A Uranium Ghost Town in the Making” won the Digital Video Storytelling award, series category for a small/medium newsroom

“Wy-Kan-Ush-Pum (Salmon People): A Native Fishing Family’s Fight to Preserve a Way of Life” (with Oregon Public Broadcasting) won the Digital Video Storytelling award, long form category for a large newsroom

Robert F. Kennedy Book and Journalism Award

— Domestic Print

“Culture of Cruelty”

Dart Award for Excellence in Coverage of Trauma

“The Landlord & the Tenant”

National Association of Black Journalists’ Salute to Excellence Award — Online Project: News

“The Price Kids Pay”

Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Award for Investigative Reporting

“The Price Kids Pay”

Fred M. Hechinger Grand Prize for Distinguished Education Reporting

“The Price Kids Pay”

National Headliner Award, Education Writing

“Invisible Schools”

Joseph D. Ryle Award for Excellence in Writing on the Problems of Geriatrics

“Endgame: How the Visionary Hospice Movement Became a For-Profit Hustle”

Society of Publishers in Asia Award for Editorial Excellence, Excellence in Feature Writing, Global

“The Night Raids”



Partners

Partners have been a vital part of ProPublica since our founding. Over the past few months we extended our list, including both publishing and reporting partners, to 303 news organizations.

Lamira Samson and her son Jeremiah Johnson stand in front of a parked freight train that often blocks the route to Jeremiah's elementary school in Hammond, Indiana. Jamie Kelter Davis for ProPublica



Illustration by Max Erwin for ProPublica

Partner Spotlight

In April, ProPublica's Topher Sanders and freelancer Dan Schwartz teamed up with **Gray Television/ InvestigateTV** reporter Joce Sterman to examine the dangers of blocked railroad crossings. InvestigateTV's team captured heart-stopping footage in Hammond, Indiana, of children forced to crawl beneath lengthy Norfolk Southern freight trains to get to school. Prior to publication, the journalists showed the footage to Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, who expressed shock, commenting, "Nobody can look at a video with a child having to climb over or under a railroad car to get to school and think that everything is OK." InvestigateTV's gripping and accessible 10-minute segment was distributed to and aired on 100+ stations. The investigation quickly led to impact, with the railroad company implementing fixes, and resulted in hundreds of tips coming in to the newsroom about similar crossings endangering communities around the country.

For the investigation into HomeVestors, the "We Buy Ugly Houses" company, ProPublica sought to maximize impact by partnering with **Shelterforce**, an independent publication covering community development, as well as **The Dallas Morning News**, the newspaper local to HomeVestors' home base. Reporters Anjeanette Damon, Mollie Simon and Byard Duncan revealed the troubling tactics the home buying company's franchisees have used to get people to sell their homes, including deception and targeting the elderly, the sick and people so close to poverty that they feared homelessness would be a consequence of selling. David Hicks, CEO of HomeVestors of America, announced his retirement in June, citing recent press coverage of the company's homebuying practices, saying in a letter that it had taken a "personal toll on me." The investigation garnered huge audiences on ProPublica's website and social platforms. The audience team produced a video on ProPublica's nascent TikTok account about the investigation and its impact that generated more than 630,000 views.

All Partners, May-August 2023

Anchorage Daily News

The Atlantic

Capital & Main

Capitol News Illinois

Chicago Tribune

The Chronicle of Higher Education

THE CITY

COLab, the Colorado News Collaborative

The Commercial Appeal

The Current

The Dallas Morning News

Documented

El Faro

Expressen

Frontline

The Guardian

High Country News

LAist

Lee Enterprises Midwest

The Maine Monitor

The Marshall Project

Mississippi Today

MLK50: Justice Through Journalism

Mountain State Spotlight

The New Yorker

Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal

Organized Crime and Corruption

Reporting Project

Paper Trail Media

The Philadelphia Inquirer

The Salt Lake Tribune

Shelterforce

Source New Mexico

Sun Herald

USA Today Network-Wisconsin

Verite News

WPLN

*New partners marked in **bold**.*







Background: Collage by ProPublica of tearsheets from The Dallas Morning News, The Philadelphia Inquirer and the Chicago Tribune. Back page: Kathleen Flynn for ProPublica



 **PROPUBLICA**

propublica.org

Follow us @propublica on:

 Twitter |  Facebook |  Instagram |  Threads |  Mastodon |  TikTok