



Our First Year



ProPublica Illinois — Our First Year

One year ago, we launched as ProPublica's first regional newsroom. Our mission? Publishing investigative journalism that shines a light on injustice and holds power accountable here in our home state of Illinois.

As a team, we set out our goals even before we officially opened our doors. We wanted to tell stories that would otherwise go untold. We wanted to strengthen the journalism ecosystem we had joined. And we wanted to help build a community of journalists and a body of journalistic work representative of the world around us, examining issues of importance to communities that are often overlooked and bringing those stories into the lives of the people most affected by them.

Some 150 articles later, we are well on our way.

In 12 months, we have produced more than a dozen major investigations examining crucial issues ranging from gun trafficking to property taxes to immigration. Every week, for 52 weeks and counting, our [newsletters](#) take readers behind the scenes of our work. We built an online widget that tracks campaign dollars flowing into the Illinois governor's race, the most expensive in the state's history. The [Politic-IL Insider](#) column analyzes our state's infamous politics. And through [ProPublica's Local Reporting Network](#), we have supported and co-published journalism about public housing issues in southern Illinois.

You may have read our stories in the pages of the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Sun-Times, Hoy and the Chronicle of Higher Education, or on the websites of Chicago magazine, The Atlantic and Mother Jones; heard them on WBEZ public radio; or seen them on Univision. They've been published in outlets big and small, across Illinois and the country.

We've road-tripped with Chicago's [Free Street Theater](#), hosting workshops around the state to hear what people have to say about their communities and the issues they care about most, helping surface ideas that can lead to more relevant, powerful journalism. With our "[Ask ProPublica Illinois](#)" feature, we conduct a transparent conversation with readers about how we do what we do, whether it's [explaining our guidelines for using anonymous sources](#), talking about [how we keep bias out of our reporting](#) or [offering tips for identifying fake news](#). We began a journalism mentorship program to work with aspiring reporters on the city's South and West sides. We filed thousands of requests under the Freedom of Information Act and analyzed millions of lines of data. Most importantly, we have produced hard-hitting journalism that has already led to meaningful change.

Zero Tolerance

In a series of investigative stories, we have provided a rare, [comprehensive look](#) at the secretive network of Chicago shelters that have housed thousands of immigrant children in recent years, including those taken from their parents at the border as part of the Trump administration's zero-tolerance policy.

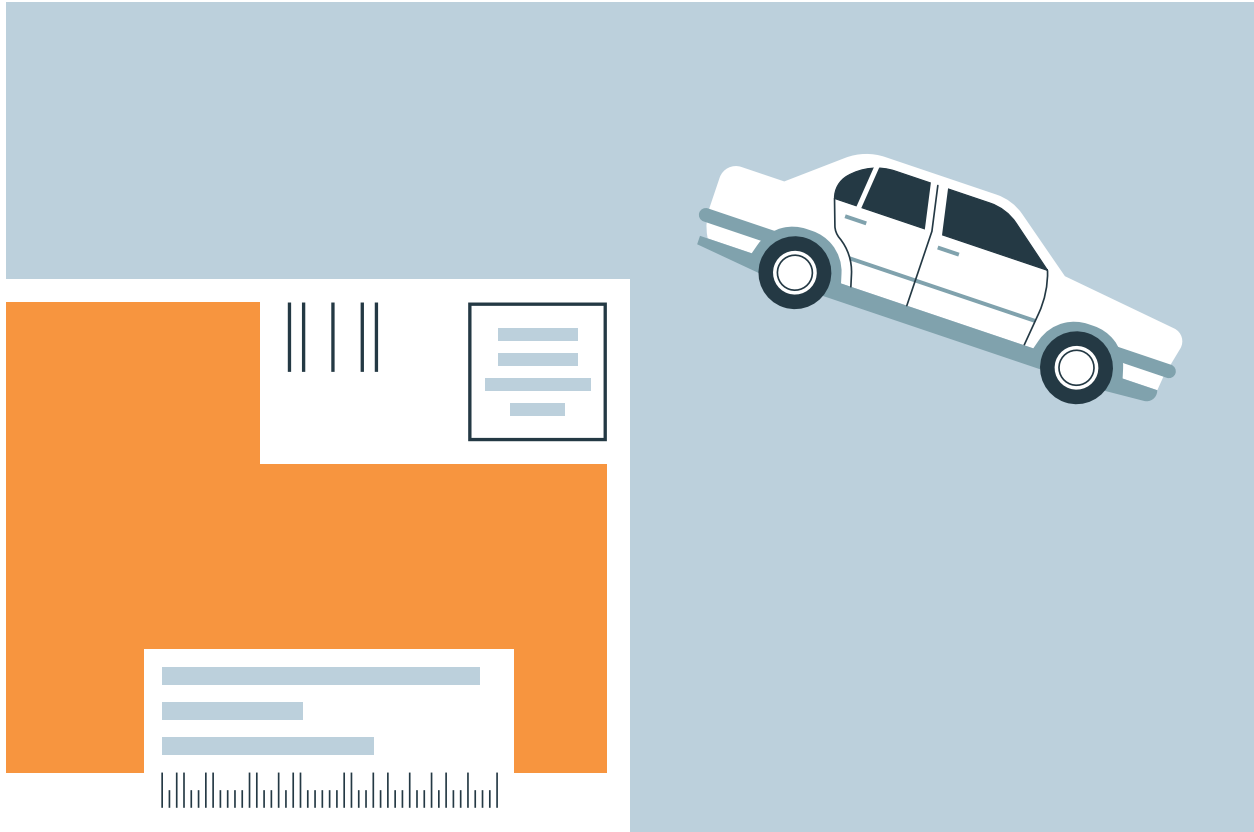
In one [story](#), using thousands of confidential internal records, ProPublica Illinois reporters Jodi S. Cohen, Duaa Eldeib and Melissa Sanchez documented the children's troubles both before and after entering federal custody, how long they spent in detention and the difficulties they faced there, including allegations of abuse and negligence, as well as the trauma they continue to face.

We also published a piece tracing [what happened to the 99 children sent to Chicago after being separated at the border as part of the zero-tolerance crackdown](#), including a 10-month-old who was bitten repeatedly by an older child and later hospitalized after falling from a highchair during a five-month stay at a shelter here. Our reports described, in detail, cases of severe depression and other — potentially irreparable — mental health challenges children suffered as reunification delays lasted months.

The stories, which sparked national attention, were published in English and Spanish and underscored the importance of local reporting in helping to shape public understanding of national policy issues.



Lydia Fu for ProPublica Illinois



Rob Weychert/ProPublica

Driven Into Debt

In February, we published an investigation that revealed how vehicle ticket debt has made Chicago the nation's capital for Chapter 13 bankruptcy filings, a phenomenon that disproportionately affects poor African Americans in the city. Our investigation led to a third-party study and report by the Woodstock Institute, which confirmed that Chicago's vehicle ticketing practices unfairly burden low-income and minority communities. The report also offered several policy recommendations, including an audit of Chicago ticketing enforcement practices to identify the existence of any geographic, racial or economic bias.

This initial reporting sparked an ongoing series called "Driven Into Debt" and a partnership with WBEZ to dig deeper into this problem, including a story about how the city issues multiple tickets to the same vehicle in one day, in violation of its own policies, and another about how a 2012 hike in the charge

for vehicle city sticker violations to boost revenue only served to intensify a spiraling debt problem that affects thousands of low-income drivers. Former City Clerk Susana Mendoza publicly expressed regret for her role in the penalty change.

Throughout our reporting, we've asked the public to share their experiences, questions and concerns about this issue. The response has been remarkable. Our reporters made a series of radio appearances to discuss their findings, during which listeners jammed the phone lines eager to tell their stories and seek guidance. Not only have people reached out to us, they started engaging with each other and demanding answers from the city. As a result, ticketing is now a topic at the center of debate for Chicago's 2019 mayoral election.

The Tax Divide

Reporter Jason Grotto took on the extraordinarily challenging subject of property taxes, which serve as the bedrock of local government funding for education and public safety, and revealed that, in one of the largest and most economically and racially divided counties in the United States, the system is an utter failure. To do this, Grotto studied an arcane system for almost two years, reading thousands of documents, analyzing more than 100 million computer records and interviewing dozens of experts, attorneys and property owners affected by deeply flawed assessments.

“The Tax Divide” continued reporting that Grotto began at the Chicago Tribune, in which he found that Cook County’s assessments of residential properties were so riddled with errors that experts questioned the integrity of the entire system. Among the most significant findings was the high level of regressivity, the overvaluing of low-priced homes and the undervaluing of high-priced ones. And the appeals process, which the county relies upon to right inaccurate assessments, was actually making the inequity worse.

In partnership with the Tribune, Grotto and ProPublica Illinois data reporter Sandhya Kambhampati examined the roughly \$200 billion commercial and industrial assessment system, revealing that, like their residential counterparts, the owners of commercial and industrial properties suffered great inequities

in assessments, with small businesses punished while owners of downtown skyscrapers caught massive tax breaks. The team also identified the politically powerful law firms profiting off the county’s inaccurate assessments, providing the first comprehensive look at the billions of dollars at stake.

Reaction was swift and comprehensive. The county board president vowed to implement a new system that will be fair and equitable, while **the inspector general for Cook County launched an investigation** into assessment practices. Drawing heavily on our reporting, three prominent **public interest law offices filed multiple lawsuits alleging violations of state and federal civil rights and housing laws**. State and local lawmakers, concerned that the property tax system favored those who supported the Cook County Assessor politically, **introduced legislation to limit campaign contributions to the assessor**. Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner **issued an executive order** to limit legislators from benefiting from the tax appeals system through their law firms and the county board required Berrios to testify at a hearing about his methods.

In the March 2018 Democratic primary, **the public voiced their frustrations by voting Assessor Joseph Berrios, who was also chairman of the powerful Cook County Democratic Party, out of office**.



Haisam Hussein, special to ProPublica



*Illinois Policy Institute has called for government reform while channeling money to firms owned by insiders.
(Susie Cagle, special to ProPublica Illinois)*

Revelatory Stories Brought to Light

For our first major investigation, reporter Mick Dumke, in partnership with WBEZ and the Chicago Sun-Times, took on one of the underlying issues of gun violence in Chicago: [how illegal guns move through the city](#). The story focused on the troubling case of a young man named John Thomas who brokered almost two dozen illegal gun sales at the urging of a friend, who turned out to be a paid federal informant. Through interviews with Thomas, family members, other defendants, attorneys, police and prosecutors, as well as examining hundreds of pages of

police reports and court records, Dumke exposed the shortcomings of federal enforcement efforts to stem the flow of weapons, raising questions about whether they are dismantling gun networks or effectively helping to set them up.

In early 2018, Dumke led an investigation, co-published with the Sun-Times, into [the web of finances behind the conservative think tank Illinois Policy Institute](#) and found that the organization's CEO, John Tillman, and his associates moved millions of dollars around five interconnected nonprofits, steering money to

for-profit ventures in which they have a stake. One of the nonprofits funded by the IPI, a **“watchdog” organization called Project Six, shut its doors after Dumke’s investigation**. Dumke also spearheaded an investigation into Chicago’s notorious gang database and [found dubious entries, discrepancies and outright errors](#), including the names of alleged gang members as old as 132. We were the first news organization to obtain and publish the contents of the database. Dumke’s reporting raised serious questions surrounding privacy and surveil-

lance, **prompting the Police Department to promise to enact new policies for how the data is accessed and challenged**, and it was included in a federal lawsuit asserting that the gang database is unconstitutional and discriminatory.

We co-published an investigation in April with the Chronicle of Higher Education about how the [University of Illinois at Chicago quietly returned \\$3.1 million in grant funds](#) to the National Institute of Mental Health after one of the university's most renowned child psychiatrists, Dr. Mani Pavuluri, violated research rules — including testing the powerful drug lithium on children younger than 13. The university president and chancellor have pledged to improve the research oversight process, and our investigation continues.

In November 2017, Cohen, in partnership with a reporter at the Chicago Tribune, investigated the Chicago Police Department's disciplinary procedures and found that numerous cases had been mismanaged or lost, resulting in officers not serving their disciplinary orders. The investigation **prompted officials to track down lost cases and ensure officers served punishments** that were, in some cases, years overdue. **The department also is implementing a new case management system.**

Last October, Eldeib revealed how [juvenile offenders at a facility in southern Illinois were receiving lengthy sentences](#) in adult prison for minor offenses, such as spitting at or shoving a guard. After our investigation, lawmakers pledged to address the issue and an advocacy group recruited



Jaylan Banks, 18, was sentenced to eight years in an adult prison for punching a correctional officer at the juvenile correctional center in Harrisburg in southern Illinois. In the past, he might have lost privileges, served a short stint in solitary confinement or had his juvenile term extended. (Nick Schnelle for ProPublica Illinois)

lawyers to review the cases of the youths charged with adult crimes.

In June, Eldeib extended the spotlight from the state's juvenile justice agency to the child welfare system to co-publish an investigation with The Atlantic that unveiled how, over the last three years, hundreds of children in the care of the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services [collectively spent over 27,000+ days in psychiatric hospitals beyond medical necessity](#) because the agency could not find placements for them. One week after the story, Illinois **lawmakers called for a public hearing, demanding state child welfare officials explain why they routinely fail to find better homes for hundreds of children in psychiatric hospitals.** In addition, the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois, which has monitored the state's child welfare agency for decades

as part of a federal consent decree, **asked a federal judge to take the rare step of appointing a “special master”** to resolve disputes and data requests related to providing more appropriate services for such children.

Our journalism has already begun to spark change, but we know that there is much more work to be done. Part of our commitment as an Illinois news organization is to stick with stories over time, producing the rigorous and meaningful journalism that drives change. We are excited to continue shining a light on these issues in the years ahead, and to connecting with new communities in Chicago and around the state that we haven't yet reached, to tell stories that need telling. We hope you will join us.

What People Are Saying

We ask donors why they gave to ProPublica. Here's what a few of them said:

*“Thank you so much for your coverage of the detained children crisis. I was spurred to donate today by your piece based on abuse records from the detention centers. You are fighting for our democracy and social justice. Please keep going.” — **Sarita***

*“We made a donation to ProPublica today because we are so impressed with what you do. Fearless reporting, diving deep, shining a light on things that need to be seen, analyzed, and understood. We thank you for all your hard work and your dedication to quality journalism.” — **Kathleen Jones and BJ Wishinsky***

*“Because the work you do makes a positive difference in the lives of the disenfranchised, underrepresented and ignored.” — **J.D.***

Honors

- Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for local reporting for “The Tax Divide”
- Taylor Award for Fairness in Journalism for “The Tax Divide”
- Nominated for 10 awards from the Chicago Chicago Headline Club and won four, including:
 - 2017 Watchdog Award for Excellence in Public Interest Reporting awarded to “The Tax Divide”
 - Best Multimedia Feature Presentation awarded to our series on police accountability in Chicago
 - Best Investigative Reporting (general interest daily newspaper) for “The Tax Divide”
 - Best Multimedia Collaboration for our series on police accountability in Chicago
- National Headliner Award for news series in a daily newspaper, awarded to “The Tax Divide”
- Excellence in Financial Journalism Award for Local and Public Service Reporting awarded to “The Tax Divide”
- The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Award for Investigative Reporting.



Kristen Norman for ProPublica Illinois

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- Chicago Sun-Times
- Chicago Tribune
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- Austin Weekly News
- Before It's News
- Blavity
- Block Club Chicago
- Boise Weekly
- Business Insider
- Chicago Magazine
- Chicago Patch
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- Radio Free
- Rock River Times
- Salon
- Telemundo Chicago
- The Southern Illinoisan
- The Triibe
- Univision Chicago
- The Village Free Press
- The Wire
- Wisconsin Gazette

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- WBEZ
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