Impact Report

The Marshall Project

Winter 2023

The Marshall Project tracks the impact of our journalism on policymakers, advocates and other media.

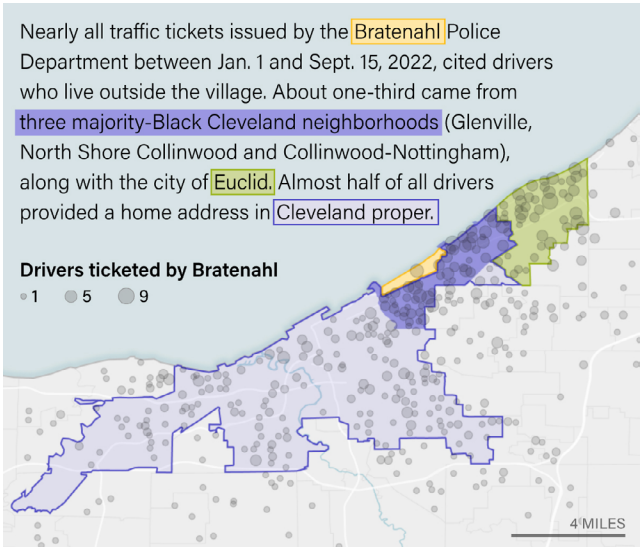
HAUNTED MILLIONS The state of Mississippi is demanding huge payments from the country's third-largest prison company, prompted by our investigation into "ghost workers." In November, the Mississippi state auditor, Shad White, announced that Management & Training Corporation had improperly billed the corrections department and demanded the company pay nearly $2 million, one of the largest demands he's ever made. Our 2019 investigation, co-published with several local media outlets, revealed that MTC was charging the state for thousands of prison guard shifts that were never worked. Mississippi prisons are among the country's most violent, and the shortage of corrections officials is part of what makes them that way. While fewer workers meant more danger for staff and incarcerated people, it created more profits for MTC.

NEW BUT DEADLY The D.C. City Council has passed legislation requiring more regular reporting from the agency that monitors federal prisons where Washingtonians are often incarcerated. The move was prompted in part by our investigation into abuse at one such penitentiary in Illinois. Our story, published in partnership with NPR, revealed how many people were being kept in "double solitary" confinement in Thomson prison – and how often deadly violence resulted.

Local media created pressure on the City Council to act. Washington City Paper used The Marshall Project's reporting to call out the Corrections Information Council for failing in their oversight mission.

"A little-known D.C. agency could have scooped those veteran reporters by months, but never did," the paper wrote. Two days later, the Corrections Information Council released its inspection of Thomson, which featured similar reports of abuse and mistreatment. The new law awaits the signature of Mayor Muriel Bowser.

THE PROMISE OF LOCAL REPORTING The Marshall Project has tracked the impact of our stories in regular reports dating back to 2016. We believe in the power of journalism to propel social change. But we weren't prepared for how successfully and how quickly that strategy would work at the local level.



Source: Data on traffic tickets issued by Bratenahl police obtained from the Village of Bratenahl Mayor's Court docket; map layers from Natural Earth, Cleveland City Planning Commission and the U.S. Census Bureau; demographic statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau.

In 2022, we opened our first newsroom in Cleveland, Ohio, and started publishing stories in September. Nearly every one of our investigations has prompted a response from those in power. Some recent examples:

POLICE ON THE HOOK The federal government is not letting Cleveland police off the hook, prompted in part by an analysis from The Marshall Project. The first big story from our new Cleveland newsroom, co-published with six local newsrooms, answered questions about the federal consent decree that has governed the Cleveland police department for the last seven years: How much has the consent decree cost? What has the community really gotten for its money? Does the city still need to be under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Justice? We didn't take a stand, of course, but we surfaced a lot of opinions on the subject. The very next week, the federal monitor issued a 75-page report describing Cleveland's police practices as "disturbing" and "alarming," and identifying several ways in which the department had not made sufficient progress to be relieved of supervision.

DRIVING WHILE BLACK An Ohio lawmaker is vowing to introduce legislation that requires police agencies to record the race of the people they stop for traffic violations. State Rep. Juanita Brent, a Democrat from Cleveland, was motivated by an investigation from The Marshall Project and News 5 Cleveland, showing that police in the wealthy, mostly White suburb of Bratenahl are disproportionately stopping drivers of color: At least 60% of those ticketed were Black, even though 75% of Bratenahl residents are White. Recording race data would make it easier for the public to see whether traffic stops are unfairly targeting Black drivers.

Just one month after publishing our story, we noticed that Bratenahl officers issued significantly fewer citations — only seven traffic tickets in December, as opposed to 17 in November. Meanwhile, one Bratenahl resident urged the mayor to take action against the disproportionate number of stops, saying the village was in a crisis. The mayor disagreed in an email, calling The Marshall Project "an obscure group that few have heard of. They have already receded into the obscurity from whence they came." We'll see about that!

PHOTO COLLAGE BY THE MARSHALL PROJECT; PHOTOS FROM GETTY IMAGES AND ZUMA

GETTING A GOOD LAWYER Our stories sometimes help people get the legal representation they need, and lawyers often cite our work in court:

- Charges were finally dropped against a woman facing a potential life-without-parole sentence after we revealed how frequently people in her position lack an effective lawyer. Our 2021 investigation with The Dallas Morning News and NBC examined the lack of legal protections for people facing life without parole. Although they're facing life and death behind bars, the legal resources they're guaranteed are nothing like those for people facing execution. At the center of our investigation was Shuranda Williams, a Dallas woman who spent a year in jail without even talking to a lawyer. Since our story was published, she was appointed new counsel — then her bond was reduced, allowing her to get out of jail — and finally, prosecutors dropped the charges against her in June 2022.
- In July, Larry Driskill stepped out of a Texas prison, on parole after seven years behind bars for a murder he may not have committed. Last January, staff writer Maurice Chammah's "Anatomy of a Murder Confession" unearthed coercive interrogation techniques used by Texas Ranger James Holland in Driskill's case. Driskill's lawyers think The Marshall Project's coverage was a key factor in the state parole board's decision to free him.
- Tiffany Woods is one of many people serving a lifetime sentence in Louisiana for an accidental death — and now, thanks to our story, she has new legal representation. Tiffany was a young mother whose baby died of malnourishment in the months after Hurricane Katrina. She and her baby's father are among 4,200 people in Louisiana serving life-without-parole sentences, many of them for crimes that wouldn't be punished as severely in other states.

FEEDING ADVOCACY A coalition of civil and human rights organizations filed a complaint urging United Nations special rapporteurs to declare the United States' longstanding practice of subjecting people to life without parole and extreme sentences "cruel, racially discriminatory" and "an arbitrary deprivation of liberty." The complaint cites two Marshall Project stories, one from 2018 by Abbie VanSickle and one from 2021 on life without parole in Florida by Cary Aspinwall.

THIN BLUE LINE The Maryland Court of Appeals in September cited our story "The Short, Fraught History of the 'Thin Blue Line' American Flag" multiple times in a decision overturning a conviction at trial where bailiffs wore COVID masks with the thin blue line flag image. The decision relied heavily on our history and analysis of the image in declaring the masks prejudicial to the right to a fair trial.

POLICING THE SHERIFFS The FBI is using The Marshall Project's investigative series on sheriffs to investigate potential illegal activity associated with the "Constitutional Sheriffs" movement. We published the largest survey ever conducted of sheriffs' political opinions, and more than half of the sheriffs who responded said they would place themselves between a higher government authority and their constituents. Shortly after the story was published, staff writer Maurice Chammah learned from a source at the Federal Bureau of Investigation that at least one field office is advocating for more resources to investigate. This story generated significant media interest, appearing in multiple media outlets including NPR's All Things Considered and Here & Now, Wisconsin Public Radio, Radio France, and the podcasts Vox's Today Explained and The Daily Beast's Fever Dreams. The series was also cited by The New York Times, The Independent, WNYC's The Takeaway, Oregon Public Broadcasting, Truthout, and Investigate West.

OUR AWARDS

Impact is our highest aspiration — but awards are great recognition from our peers.

2022 Pulitzer Finalist
"Foster Theft:" National reporting, finalist

2021 Murrow Awards
"The Zo:" Excellence in Innovation, winner

2022 The Sigma Awards for data journalism
"Felony Vote:" Single project, winner

2022 The Sigma Awards for data journalism
Weihua Li: Portfolio, winner

2022 Penn State College of Communications Bart Richards Award for Media Criticism
"The Language Project," winner

2021 Collier Prize for State Government
Coverage of Mississippi prisons, winner

2021 ONA Online Journalism Awards
"Dog Bites:" Collaboration, winner

2021 Nonprofit News Awards INN
"Foster Care:" Insight Award for Explanatory Journalism, winner

2021 EPPY Awards, Editor & Publisher
"Serving Incarcerated Audiences:" Best Community Service, winner

2021 NABJ Salute to Excellence Awards
"Dog Bites:" Online Project News, winner

**Awards made between July 1, 2021 and June 30, 2022.*