



**COLUMBIA
JOURNALISM
INVESTIGATIONS**

Annual Report

2023-2024



Columbia Journalism Investigations

Impact Report
2023-2024

 COLUMBIA JOURNALISM SCHOOL

About CJI

Columbia Journalism Investigations (CJI) is Columbia Journalism School's postgraduate reporting program. CJI employs recent graduates and pairs them with experienced journalists to produce high-impact investigative stories in partnership with leading news organizations. CJI's dual mission to train accountability-focused journalists and to strengthen investigative journalism in under-resourced newsrooms gives fellows real-world reporting opportunities, steeped in hands-on training and guidance.

The past year represented a fruitful period for Columbia Journalism Investigations, as fellows embarked on investigative reporting projects with transformative effects on their own careers and on the communities they cover. Year after year, CJI acts as an amplifier. By offering recent Columbia Journalism School graduates the time, resources, and mentorship too often missing in today's media landscape, CJI benefits the fellows, the newsrooms and the researchers with whom they partner, as well as the communities whose stories are brought to light. Fellows go on to lead successful careers in a challenging industry, invigorating the journalistic ecosystem with a robust skillset and real-world experience.



Focus Areas

CJI investigations center on four priority beats.

Climate Change

Equity and Accountability

Immigration

Civil and Human Rights

Interdisciplinarity:

CJI's reporting process is interdisciplinary, drawing on the strength of Columbia University as a world class research institution. Recent CJI teams have partnered with subject-matter experts at Columbia Climate School, Columbia Law School, the Mailman School of Public Health, International Research Institute for Climate and Society, and the Center for International Earth Science Information Network.

The Partnership Model:

The CJI model is built on collaboration. Partnerships often span multiple newsrooms across different platforms and geographies, allowing CJI to dig into topics that are too vast for even the best journalism organizations to tackle comprehensively on their own.

The CJI network of professional partners spans the U.S. media landscape, ranging from nonprofit news organizations to commercial news outlets, including traditional print publications like USA Today; digital-only outlets like ProPublica; and public-media broadcast outlets like NPR. CJI has also partnered with numerous regional and local newsrooms, as well as international partner news organizations.

Cultivating Leaders:

There are nearly 100 CJI alumni across the country who have continued to dig deep and are leaders on their beats. Steeped in investigative excellence, fellows go on to lead impactful careers at newsrooms like Mother Jones, The Marshall Project, Washington Post, Associated Press, Houston Chronicle, Philadelphia Inquirer, Boston Globe, The Times Picayune, American Public Media, New York Focus and many others.

Impact

Leveraging the platforms of numerous newsroom partners, CJI effects real change. CJI's award-winning journalism has spurred congressional inquiries and changes to state legislation and corporate practices. Impact on public and corporate policy ranges from changes in the dating app industry's sexual assault response procedures to new federal and state rules on workplace heat and a new state bill aimed at helping New York City's children who lost a parent to COVID-19.

The impact of CJI's journalism occurs on three levels:

01 **Fellows:**

Fellows gain invaluable opportunities to develop ambitious investigative projects that are exceedingly rare for junior reporters in a newsroom or solo freelancers. Fellows leave CJI exceptionally well-equipped for wherever their journalism careers may take them.

02 **Partner Newsrooms:**

CJI's teams infuse partner newsrooms with computational and investigative techniques, providing the time, effort and expertise that many journalists on daily and weekly deadlines do not have.

03 **Stories:**

CJI's reporting affects social change and demands accountability. CJI's prizewinning investigations have been picked up and cited by hundreds of publications and dozens of radio and TV programs across the country. They have spurred tangible policy impacts that make a difference in real people's lives.

One objective measure of CJI's success is the recognition its journalism receives. Over the past year, CJI investigations have won top prizes in some of the most prestigious contests, including an Edward R. Murrow Award, a Best in Business Award, a Sigma Delta Chi Award and a National Headliner's Award.

2023-2024 Fellows & Investigations

Highlights of recent investigations, and the fellows who brought them to life, are detailed below.

Global Migration Team Fellows

The CJI team dedicated to covering immigration and migration has exposed exploitative worker conditions within the home health-care industry and gender-based violence and discrimination at the U.S. border, among other injustices.



Jose M. Del Pino, '23 M.A. Politics

Del Pino is a Chilean journalist who has worked in print, radio and TV for Clarin Group in Argentina, Canal 10 in Uruguay and Canal 13 and Bio Bio in Chile. He also served as an associate professor at Gabriela Mistral University.

“I am convinced that our research embodies the type of journalism the world urgently needs — one that fosters discussion, reflection, and accountability.”



Churchill Ndonwie, '23 M.S.

Ndonwie is an immigration reporter based in New York City. His work has been published in New York Focus and Chalkbeat.

“CJI helped me build and solidify some of the skills I learned in class, but also solidify some new skills as a reporter I am now taking on in my current internship.”

Investigation: New Smuggling Routes



A mother from India holds her son as they wait to be transported from a temporary staging area for migrants in Jacumba Hot Springs, California, in June. REUTERS/Go Nakamura

In June 2024, CJI Fellows Jose Del Pino and Churchill Ndonwie, published, in partnership with Reuters, a six-month investigation entitled “[New \\$72,000 migrant smuggling routes to the US start with charter flights.](#)” The fellows and their partner reporters traced two new intercontinental migrant smuggling routes — one from India and the other from West Africa — using border apprehension data, aviation data and close to 100 interviews with people in nine countries, including government officials, police, airline employees, smugglers, travel agents and migrants. CJI and Reuters found that some migrants were paying around \$72,000 for charter flights and overland travel to reach the border, a staggering amount.

Impact

Our investigation topped the Reuters’ website and became the most read story for days after its release.

The outlet featured the story on [its World News podcast](#) and pushed it out via phone notifications to its newsroom subscribers, spurring interview requests from Columbia to Chile to Nicaragua.

CJI Fellow Jose Del Pino appeared on several Spanish-language programs to share our findings.

The story was also picked up by other outlets sparking commentary and debate [especially](#) in [Nicaragua](#), which was a [focus](#) of the investigation, and in [India](#) where some of the migrants featured were from.

The Romanian aviation authorities said they were auditing a charter flight profiled in the story after the CJI fellows asked about the incident and US government officials and immigration experts circulated the story internally.

Investigation: Toxic Labor



*(Illustration by Janelle Retka /
Columbia Journalism Investigations)*

In September 2023, CJi Fellows Janelle Retka, Samantha McCabe and Jiahui Huang shed light on how disaster restoration companies aren't protecting their mostly immigrant workforce from dangerous post-disaster toxins, exacerbated by climate change, in a multi-part investigation called "[Toxic Labor](#)," done in collaboration with the Center for Public Integrity and Futuro Media. This continued climate coverage explored the fallout of a regulatory system poorly equipped to meet the evolving landscape of natural disasters accelerated by a changing climate.

The CJi fellows and their partners found that disaster restoration companies take advantage of a loosely regulated system for climate catastrophes, leaving their workers to get sick as a result. Our investigation found that these largely undocumented and immigrant workers are often unaware of the long-term health impacts of their exposure to toxins, and struggle to access healthcare when they need it. It also raised questions about the role of regulatory agencies like the U.S. Health and Safety Administration in safeguarding the health and well-being of these workers.

Impact

In addition to winning an Edward R. Murrow Award and several awards for investigative reporting in 2024, the series was republished and picked up by national and local outlets, including [Univision](#) and [All Things Considered](#), as well as environmental health news organizations.

CJi fellows, in partnership with Public Integrity's reporter and Futuro Media's radio producers, developed an hour-long [audio documentary](#) that aired in April 2024 on Futuro's Latino USA program on 400 public radio stations across the country.

CJi and its partners also shared an original questionnaire and data analysis and a [detailed toolkit](#) with local newsrooms whose coverage areas include immigrant-heavy neighborhoods, inviting them to investigate the disaster restoration industry in their own communities.

The team also shared what they learned from their fellowship experiences among the broader journalism field:

In April 2024, the fellows wrote an [analysis piece](#) for [Columbia Journalism Review](#) on how climate change is creating new beats for reporters to cover.

Investigative Team Fellows



Willow Higgins, '23 M.A. Politics

Before joining CJI, Higgins was an investigative reporter on Evangelical efforts to combat sex trafficking in Texas. She has worked as a city council reporter and an editor at a fact-checking company, and was an editorial intern at Texas Monthly.



Ryan Kost, '23 M.A. Politics

Kost is an investigative and narrative journalist from Arizona. He has more than a decade of experience working in newsrooms, including as a staff writer for The San Francisco Chronicle, The Oregonian and The Associated Press.

Investigation: Improper Conduct

In December 2023, CJI published, in partnership with National Public Radio, the curtain raiser on an 18-month investigation into prosecutorial misconduct in Ohio, called “[Improper Conduct](#).” Done in collaboration with NPR, The Ohio Newsroom and NPR member station WVXU/Cincinnati Public Radio, [our national story](#) revealed that courts in Ohio had affirmed improper conduct by more than 100 county prosecutors over a four-year span. More than a dozen of these prosecutors did so at least twice — and none of them faced any documented history of discipline as a result.

Investigation: Improper Conduct

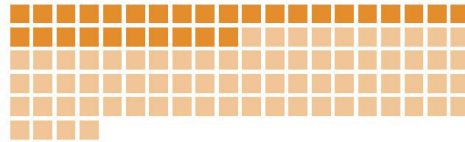
A small number of prosecutors accounted for a disproportionate share of improper-conduct rulings

Each of these 13 prosecutors had more than one ruling between 2018 and 2021 where appeals courts found improper conduct or mistakes.

13 PROSECUTORS OUT OF 109 TOTAL ...



... WORKED ON 30 OF THE 104 CASES WHERE IMPROPER CONDUCT WAS FOUND.



Notes: More than one prosecutor may be on each case. Columbia Journalism Investigations was not able to confirm the trial prosecutors involved in four cases.

Source: Columbia Journalism Investigations analysis of Ohio prosecutorial misconduct allegations from 2018 to 2021. Icons by Mood Design Studio for Noun Project.
Credit: Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR

Impact

The radio piece ran on hundreds of NPR member stations across the country, and the digital piece was republished or picked up by more than a dozen public-radio outlets. NPR also featured the investigation on its [Up First podcast](#).

Law schools including Pace and Northwestern cited the investigation in their [blogs](#) and on their [websites](#), and **a CJI fellow presented our findings at a [symposium on current reforms in prosecutorial accountability at University of Pennsylvania Law School](#).**

The Improper Conduct series has resonated with audiences across Ohio. Dozens of listeners and readers — many of them incarcerated people in Ohio prisons — have called and sent letters to CJI and its partner newsrooms, eager to tell their own stories of possible prosecutorial misconduct.

The Ohio Office of Disciplinary Counsel clarified its policy on prosecutorial misconduct claims, and vowed to create an ethics boot camp for county prosecutors. The series also spurred [Lucas County Prosecutor Julia Bates](#) — who was interviewed in the Improper Conduct curtain raiser — to create a conviction integrity unit to review potential wrongful-conviction cases, including those involving prosecutorial misconduct claims.

Original Data Analysis

As part of the investigation, CJI fellows spent nearly two years reviewing and analyzing more than 1,000 appellate court decisions to build a unique database that laid the foundation for the series.

The fellows consulted legal experts at Columbia University and beyond who have studied prosecutorial misconduct to develop a [methodology](#) for compiling this database. In April 2024, CJI published an [editor's note](#) announcing the [partial release](#) of our Ohio case dataset.

Cross Border Data Team Fellows



Jana Cholakovska, '23 M.S. Stable

Cholakovska is an international investigative reporter covering the environment, public health, labor rights and politics. She has worked with The Washington Post, Public Health Watch, Grist, The Guardian, VICE and at the Investigative Reporting Lab in her native North Macedonia.

"The fellowship allowed me to further develop my investigative and shoe-leather skills. I was able to delve deeper into public records, learn to read lobbying disclosure forms and cultivate sources within local and federal government agencies. "



Pooja Sarkar, '23 M.A. Business and Economics

Sarkar is a financial investigative journalist and served as a senior assistant editor at Forbes India, where she covered private equity, climate finance and government spending. She also produced and anchored Forbes India's book podcast. Sarkar is a first-generation student and the first woman in her family to be employed.

"This was my first full-fledged work in America and to be able to dedicate six months to a single investigation, with outside news partners doing collaborative work, has been one of the most beautiful journeys of my career. ... Throughout the fellowship, I saw the importance of data and AI and now I have slowly started learning to code thanks to CJI. "



Alec Gitelman, '23 M.S.

Gitelman has worked in IT, film production and broadcast news and has focused on marrying data journalism with documentary filmmaking. His goal is to turn every story into a multimedia story whenever possible.

"During my fellowship, I learned more about the investigative mindset, in-depth reporting and many of the intangible skills required to succeed in this job. I made progress as a researcher, as an interviewer and as a data journalist. ... CJI was a welcoming and nurturing home for me these past six months – an experience that will last a lifetime. "

Investigation: Chemical Windfall



Photos by Erica Lee

CJI's 2023-24 cross border data team partnered with reporters from three professional newsrooms to dig into how "forever chemical" polluters get government funding to meet electric vehicle battery demands. Amid record spending to combat climate change and to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and the risks posed by car exhaust, the investigation highlighted the urgency to make lithium-ion batteries in ways that don't pollute communities.

Our nine-month investigation, dubbed "[Chemical Windfall](#)," and produced in collaboration with [The Examination](#), [The Post and Courier](#) and Belgian public broadcaster [RTBF](#), found the same companies that spewed "forever chemicals" linked with cancer and other diseases in neighborhoods around the world are now key players in the development of electric vehicle batteries — sometimes with hefty taxpayer support. Often those companies keep their chemical formulas and emissions from the public.

Companies making battery chemicals stand accused of misleading regulators, hiding information and contaminating communities while making similar, related products, CJI and its partners found.

Impact

The Chemical Windfall investigation was co-published by [Mother Jones](#) and re-published by [Grist](#). It also inspired two U.S. Congressmen with a history of pushing for tougher chemical regulation to call on regulators to crack down on the forever chemicals used in lithium-ion batteries, which we [reported here](#).



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CONCLUSION

CJI's model is built on partnership and ambition for excellence, and rooted in a pedagogical mission that nurtures new talent. It is galvanized by our belief in the constitutional design expressed in the First Amendment: that democracy relies on a free, courageous, and independent press. Each year, CJI attracts the top graduates of Columbia Journalism School, equipping them to become leaders in this vital field. Investment in emerging journalists now ensures we meet this need in the future.

CJI is uniquely positioned to meet this challenge, leveraging a player-coach model that places emerging fellows side by side with veteran investigative reporters to produce stories that shed a light on abuses of power and the miscarriage of justice. Reporting in the public interest, fellows' work is both impactful and wide reaching, and changes in legislation, regulatory environments, and greater visibility around issues spanning environmental contaminants to the risks undertaken by workers at post climate disaster cleanups, are a clear demonstration of the urgency of this type of deeply researched work.

CJI fellows gain mentoring, investigative, and data skill sets that are transformative in their careers. As they cover the intersections of climate change, equity and accountability, immigration, and civil and human rights, they interface with researchers, students and faculty across the Journalism School and the university. Fellows describe the fellowship as a watershed moment in their careers, leveraging our unique position to provide in-depth reportage and research in a symbiotic relationship with leading news organizations.

Supporting CJI enables us to fulfill our commitment to cultivating tomorrow's leading journalists while strengthening newsrooms and adding to the investigative landscape. In their pursuit of truth, their work is more essential than ever.

APPENDIX

Toxic Labor:

- Toxic Labor, published by [Public Integrity](#) and [Futuro](#) in both English and Spanish, along with a [data visualization](#) of a questionnaire of 100 disaster restoration workers.
- [Birth of an OSHA policy](#)
- [Inside an industry fueled by climate change](#)
- [Florida's anti-immigration law targets disaster relief workers](#)
- [Reporting on workers who rebuild after natural disasters](#)
- Podcast: [Toxic Labor](#)

New Smuggling Routes:

- ["New \\$72,000 migrant smuggling routes to the US start with charter flights,"](#)
- Reuters World News podcast: [Attacks in Russia's Dagestan, new US smuggling routes and Iran's election](#)

Improper Conduct:

- [On the NPR website, "Ohio prosecutors broke rules to win convictions and got away with it"](#)
- [6-minute radio segment that aired on "Morning Edition."](#)
- [Improper conduct: How undisclosed evidence can put Ohioans behind bars](#)
- [Improper conduct: How the harmless error doctrine lets prosecutors' mistakes slide](#)

Chemical Windfall:

- ["Forever chemical" polluters land hefty contracts to meet electric vehicle battery demand](#)
- Video explainer: [Family blames "forever chemicals" in water for slew of health issues](#)
- Illustrated explainer: [A Brief History of Batteries](#)

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