The Power of One Child’s Voice

ProPublica senior reporter Ginger Thompson has spent nearly 20 years writing about the real-life consequences of federal policy on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. She was preparing for meetings in Washington, D.C. in mid-June when she received a call from Jennifer Harbury, a Texas civil rights attorney. Harbury had an audio recording, recently obtained from inside a U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility, that she thought Thompson ought to hear.

The call came weeks after the launch of the Trump administration’s “zero tolerance” immigration policy, prosecuting people who illegally enter the country and taking away children they brought with them. Authorities had allowed only tightly controlled tours of the detention facilities holding these children. Cameras were heavily restricted, and children were not allowed to speak to journalists. Thompson told Harbury to send over the audio.

Cover: Engagement reporter Adriana Gallardo during a protest against the Trump administration’s “zero tolerance” immigration policy in Leesport, Pennsylvania. (Jessica Kourkounis for ProPublica)
The following night, Thompson received the recording: the unmistakable sounds of children, recently separated from their families, sobbing and desperately begging for their parents.

In the nearly eight minutes of heart-wrenching audio, amid the cries and screams of other children, one determined girl pleads repeatedly for someone to call her aunt, whose phone number she has memorized. “My mommy says that I’ll go with my aunt,” she whimpers, “and that she’ll come to pick me up there as quickly as possible.”

Thompson dropped all other plans. Bringing into focus the voices of children suffering from family separation, the audio was tangible evidence of the reality of the policy and what was happening in facilities closed to public view.
Changing the Narrative

For weeks before ProPublica obtained the audio, we had been following the consequences of the Trump administration’s family separation policy. Stories by others poured in from the border about migrant children, some as young as 3 months old, locked in detention centers as their parents were sent to jail.

ProPublica reporters and editors didn’t want to just chase this news, or try to match what other media organizations were reporting. Since our founding 10 years ago, our goal has been to tell the stories that would otherwise not be told. Even when an issue we’re reporting on becomes part of the national conversation, we challenge ourselves to identify its most revelatory parts, the unique points of entry where we can add something different and spur change.

On family separations, we deliberated over questions that remained about children being held in detention centers. Then, on that Saturday night, Thompson obtained a recording from inside one.

Along with editors, translators and web designers, Thompson worked feverishly through the next day, Father’s Day. She first had to earn the trust of the person who recorded the audio, who wanted ProPublica to edit it. As Thompson explained, altering the audio in any way could lead to accusations of falsifying or manipulation. In order for it to be a game changer, we had to release the whole recording.

The story was published on Monday, June 18, minutes before a scheduled White House press briefing about the administration’s family separation policy. As the recording rippled through the White House briefing room, the conference was pushed back by an hour. When Kirstjen Nielsen, secretary of homeland security, finally stepped up to the podium to defend the separation of migrant families, reporters peppered her with questions about the recording. One reporter played the audio during the press conference.

The audio spurred an immediate change in the immigration debate. In addition to being widely covered in media across the country, it caught the attention of members of Congress. Lawmakers cited ProPublica’s audio as they condemned the administration’s policy.

The children’s cries were played on the floors of the House and Senate. At demonstrations around the country, protesters blared the recording.

In a column about the impact, a CNN editor wrote, “No one — not even the hardest of the immigration hardliners — can listen to the audio of the young kids crying and not be reminded that they are the real victims here, and the ones who really need our protection.”

Facing this uproar, President Trump reversed his policy of separating children detained at the border from their parents. Despite his previous insistence that he would stand by it, within 48 hours of ProPublica’s story, the president signed an executive order to end the policy and keep migrant families together. A federal judge in California ordered that parents and children be reunited within 30 days.

By July, the child heard in the recording pleading to call her aunt — a 6-year-old girl from El Salvador named Jimena — was reunited with her mother. Jimena’s memorization of her aunt’s phone number gave her an advantage in helping to identify and find her parents. Without a similar lifeline, some 500 children remain split from their parents, still in shelters or foster care. The story is not over.

Jimena is reunited with her mother, Cindy, one month after being separated at the U.S.-Mexico border. (Nadia Sussman/ProPublica)
Following the Story

To learn more about the detention centers across the country holding migrant children — including those separated from their families, as well as minors who have crossed the border alone — ProPublica reporter Michael Grabell made the suggestion to gather police reports about them. All 100 of them. With the help of dozens of colleagues, within a few days the public record requests had been made.

Following weeks of reviewing police reports and call logs from more than two-thirds of the shelters housing immigrant children, Grabell and reporter Topher Sanders published a report showing that the facilities are rampant with abuse and lack oversight, a situation one child psychiatrist called a “gold mine” for predators.

ProPublica also created a map of 100 facilities holding immigrant children, including shelters and foster care centers. The map was published both to help readers understand their proximity to the facilities and see how children have been spread throughout the country.

We invited readers to share what they know about the facilities and the children inside. For this crowdsourced effort, we partnered with nine news organizations across four countries, including BuzzFeed News, Univision News, the Intercept, PBS Frontline, the Texas Tribune, Animal Político (Mexico), El Faro (El Salvador), and Plaza Pública and El Periódico (both in Guatemala).

Published in English, Spanish and Portuguese, the callout generated more than 200 tips. As a result of this journalism, at least four families were reunited.

In ProPublica Illinois’ reporting on the unusual concentration of immigrant youth shelters in the Chicago area, they discovered that one Illinois-based agency gets more money to house immigrant children than any other organization outside of Texas. ProPublica Illinois reporters Jodi Cohen, Duaa Eldeib and Melissa Sanchez used the records to illuminate problems in the network of Chicago-area shelters, including allegations of abuse and negligence.

Our increased scrutiny of the immigration system didn’t stop our newsroom from continuing to pursue other important issues in recent months, including the junk forensic science of bloodstain-pattern analysis that has become entrenched in the criminal justice system; the health insurance industry’s work with data brokers to vacuum up our personal details; how levees make flooding worse for neighboring communities; the troubling way that police investigate the murders of trans women, identifying them by names or genders they had abandoned in their daily lives; the high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide in first responders; and how a trio of businessmen, despite having no official role or expertise, are shaping Veterans Affairs policy from Mar-a-Lago.

We also released a documentary with Frontline chronicling a year of reporting on violent white supremacists and neo-Nazis, and, thanks to a new two-year grant, we announced the expansion of the ProPublica Local Reporting Network with a focus on accountability journalism on state governments.

ProPublica is committed to pushing these stories forward. As always, our aim is to shine a light and use the moral force of investigative journalism to spark real change.

Insurers and data brokers are predicting health costs based on data about things like race, marital status, how much TV you watch, whether you pay your bills on time or even buy plus-size clothing. (Justin Volz, special to ProPublica)
Impact

Impact has been at the core of ProPublica’s mission since we launched 10 years ago, and it remains the principal yardstick for our success today. Our investigative journalism does more than expose wrongdoing and injustice; we intend for it to spark real-world change. In addition to the impact from our audio recording on the Trump administration’s family separation policy, in the middle period of 2018 our journalism spurred such change in a number of important areas.

**Discriminatory Facebook policies halted**
In 2016, ProPublica reported that Facebook allows advertisers to buy credit, housing and employment ads that exclude anyone with an “affinity” for African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic people from seeing them. Our 2017 follow-up found that the social network had not remedied the problem, which prompted Facebook to temporarily stop advertisers from excluding viewers by race while they reviewed their ad system. Settling an investigation by the state of Washington, prompted by ProPublica’s reporting, in July Facebook said it would no longer allow advertisers to exclude users by federally protected categories.

![Sanna Dilawar was arrested along with her husband, who brutally assaulted her, for fighting back during the attack.](image)

**Dangerous domestic violence policy reversed**
In early 2017, ProPublica reported on “dual arrests” in Connecticut — instances in which police arrest both the victim and the perpetrator of domestic violence. The state has a dual arrest rate about 10 times higher than the national average. Experts say this dissuades victims from calling police because of the fear of arrest and the lasting damage of a formal criminal record. In May, the Connecticut legislature passed a bill, which the governor signed into law, to end the practice of arresting victims of domestic violence along with their abusers when they fight back during the course of an assault.

**Police guidelines enacted**
In April, ProPublica and the Philadelphia Inquirer reported on tactics used by state and local police officers in Pennsylvania — without guidelines or oversight — to help Immigration and Customs Enforce-
ment round up immigrants for deportation, including the questioning and arrests of Hispanics during traffic stops. By June, the Pennsylvania State Police announced that officers will now be required to file a report any time they call immigration authorities to the scene of a traffic stop, detailing the circumstances of the call.

**Measures to improve maternal health advanced**

Our 2017 reporting with NPR on maternal mortality in the U.S. continues to spur significant impact. After decades of congressional inaction, in June the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee voted to allocate $50 million in new funding for programs aimed at reducing the rate of women who die in pregnancy or childbirth. The proposed funding would go to the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau to expand life-saving, evidence-based programs at hospitals, as well as to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to enhance data collection and research. In addition, in August, after ProPublica reached out to a number of consumer health sites that published imprecise, outdated and misleading information about preeclampsia — a dangerous form of hypertension that can develop during pregnancy or in the days and weeks after childbirth — Mayo Clinic corrected its information. The Cleveland Clinic, Harvard Health Publishing and Medline Plus also agreed to make necessary updates.

**White supremacists’ employment terminated**

In May, ProPublica partnered with Frontline to publish an investigation that identified former and active duty members of the military as members of Atomwaffen Division, a neo-Nazi group. Within weeks of the investigation, the U.S. Marine Corps announced that it opened a criminal investigation into the activities of Lance Cpl. Vasillios Pistolis, whom the report identified as a violent white supremacist who took part in the Charlottesville demonstration last August. In June, Pistolis was convicted at a court martial on charges of disobeying orders and making false statements and dismissed from the Marine Corps. In July, ProPublica and Frontline named Michael Miselis, an aerospace engineer with government security clearance, as a member of the violent white supremacist Rise Above Movement. One day after our report, his employer, defense contractor Northrop Grumman, announced that Miselis no longer worked there.

*Heather Dobbs holds her daughter, Claire. Following a C-section in 2017, Dobbs nearly died due to a hemorrhage. (Joanie Tobin for ProPublica)*
And in August, the Marine Corps issued updated orders prohibiting participation in white supremacist groups, encouraging members to report fellow Marines engaged in these activities and tightening rules on accountability.

**Troubled garbage collection company suspended**

In January, ProPublica profiled dangerous practices in the world of private commercial garbage collection in New York City. We reported that, when a man was killed in 2017 by a truck owned by one of the city’s largest trash haulers, Sanitation Salvage, workers told police he was a homeless man who jumped on their truck. Our investigation uncovered the identity of the man as Mouctar Diallo, a helper who was working on the truck that killed him. When a pedestrian was killed by a truck driven by the same driver in April, we followed up with an investigation into the company, discovering labor and safety violations. In August, the Business Integrity Commission, which regulates New York’s private trash industry, suspended Sanitation Salvage’s license to operate and barred the driver involved in both fatalities from working in the industry.

**Unreliable forensics re-examined**

In May, ProPublica and the New York Times Magazine told the story of Joe Bryan, a former Texas high school principal who has spent more than 30 years in prison for the murder of his wife, a crime he claims he didn’t commit. His conviction rested almost solely on “bloodstain-pattern analysis” — a technique used throughout the criminal justice system, despite widespread concerns about its reliability. After our story, the Texas Forensic Science Commission asked a prominent bloodstain-pattern analyst to re-examine the case. Subsequently, the influential state body found that the analysis was “not accurate or scientifically supported” and the expert who testified was “entirely wrong.”

**Risky hospital program scrutinized**

In May, ProPublica collaborated with the Houston Chronicle to investigate pervasive problems with St. Luke’s Medical Center’s once-renowned heart transplant program, which in recent years had some of the worst outcomes in the country. Just two weeks after the story, the hospital temporarily suspended its heart transplant program to review the care provided to patients. It reopened two weeks later, changing procedures and staffing but not finding any “systemic issues.” Shortly thereafter, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services made a rare decision to stop Medicare funding of the hospital’s heart transplant program, saying it hasn’t done enough to improve care after a string of patient deaths.

**Age discrimination probed**

In March, ProPublica published an investigation into IBM’s practices of forcing older workers out of their jobs through retirement and layoffs, replacing them with younger employees and flouting laws intended to protect against age bias. In May, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission consolidated age discrimination complaints against the company from around the country, launching a nationwide probe of age bias at IBM.

**Oversight and accountability for prosecutorial misconduct instituted**

In 2013, ProPublica published a series on how New York prosecutors are almost never punished for misconduct, such as withholding evidence or tolerating false testimony, that can land innocent people in prison or set guilty people free. This June, the New York Legislature passed a bill to create an independent state commission to investigate allegations of prosecutorial misconduct, empowering it to issue warnings and recommend sanctions, including firings, to the
governor. In August, Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed the bill into law.

Child welfare officials confronted
In June, ProPublica Illinois published an investigation highlighting the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services practice of holding children in psychiatric hospitals, sometimes for months, after physicians have cleared them for release. One week after the story, which was co-published by the Atlantic, 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.

Polluting practices limited
In 2017, ProPublica revealed how the Pentagon’s development and testing of weapons has polluted millions of acres of land and drinking water resources across 40,000 U.S. sites, with the Pentagon systematically ignoring or downplaying its cleanup responsibilities. Prompted by our investigation, the Department of Defense Inspector General launched an investigation into the military’s practice of open burning and detonating hazardous explosive materials on its properties, as well as its frequent reliance on federal contractors to carry out that work. In addition, Rep. Carol Shea-Porter, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, introduced an amendment to the defense spending bill requiring the Pentagon to end the outmoded and highly toxic practice of burning old munitions and other explosives in the open air. The bill passed in June.

Trump cronies investigated
In August, ProPublica published an investigation into a trio of Mar-a-Lago member businessmen — Marvel Entertainment chairman Ike Perlmutter, doctor Peter O’Rourke and lawyer Marc Sherman — who are shaping policies at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Without oversight or transparency, the trio of presidential cronies make up an informal council that is exerting vast influence on the VA from President Trump’s private club in Palm Beach, Fla., despite having no official role or expertise. Immediately following our story, Democratic lawmakers in the House launched an investigation and 16 Senate Democrats sent a letter to new Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie demanding that the VA hand over all records of contacts between agency officials and the three men. The liberal veterans group VoteVets sued the VA, on the grounds that the agency’s failure to publicly disclose when they meet with outside experts violates federal law.

Patient privacy defended
In December 2015, ProPublica, in collaboration with the New York Times, reported on patients who had details of their mental health diagnoses and treatments exposed by a New Jersey psychology practice suing them over unpaid bills. In April 2017, the state attorney general’s office and the New Jersey State Board of Psychological Examiners filed a complaint against the psychologist, Barry Helfmann, for failing to protect patients’ confidentiality. This June, the state Board of Psychological Examiners moved to suspend his license for two years.
10 Years of Impact: Behind the Headlines

For ProPublica’s 10th anniversary in June, we spotlighted the stories of people whose lives have been affected by our work over the past decade. Here are a few highlights.

A retired Indiana coal miner with cancer, Bil Musgrave stood to lose his health insurance when a coal company went bankrupt and wanted to use money earmarked for workers’ benefits to cover legal fees and other bills. After ProPublica reported the story in 2015, the company withdrew the plan and Musgrave kept his health insurance, along with 200 other impacted families. “No news organizations knew about it until after ProPublica reported it,” he said.

Isaura Martinez was a temporary worker who shared her story with ProPublica for a 2012 story on the abuses of immigrant temp workers, including lack of safety training and protecting equipment and stolen wages. Though initially apprehensive to talk about her experience, the story gave her the confidence to eventually become a community organizer for workers. “ProPublica helped me to break my silence and fear,” she said.

ProPublica’s reporting on fracking in 2008 gave environmental advocates the information they needed to address a critical issue that was not yet fully understood. “To my mind, ProPublica’s series of articles was the most informative account we had of what was happening with fracking,” said Deborah Goldberg, a managing attorney for EarthJustice. Within 48 hours of our first story, which focused on fracking in New York State, the governor placed a temporary hold on the practice, which remains in effect to this day.

Demetrius Smith was wrongfully convicted of murder but still had a felony conviction because of an unusual plea deal. Following ProPublica’s 2017 story on the practice, which lets a defendant assert innocence but leaves them with a criminal record, Smith got a new hearing that dropped his conviction. “The story made people see what actually goes on in a courtroom with these prosecutors,” he said. “This type of stuff happens all the time and doesn’t get put out there enough.”

ProPublica’s 2008 investigation on deadly force used by the New Orleans Police Department in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina dug into the “unclassified” death of Henry Glover. The reporting uncovered that he was shot by police and died in custody, with the circumstances of the case covered up. It led to one of the officers being convicted of manslaughter. “I prayed very hard for [ProPublica] not to give up on it,” said Henry’s aunt, Rebecca Glover. “The stories made a whole lot of difference to our family.”
What People Are Saying

We ask donors why they gave to ProPublica. Here’s a sampling of recent answers.

“I heard the audio from the detention center and thought back on all the times I’ve shared your reporting: from Tylenol and RDX to Kushnerville, payday lenders and segregated Tuscaloosa schools. I’m a civil-rights attorney, and I know I speak for all of us when I say our work would be impossible without the painstaking investigation undertaken by our kin in journalism. Keep it up!” —Jessie

“Your dedication to exposing the atrocities at the southern border is so important right now. These stories help us to remember who we are as a country and what we have to lose when our values are undermined. Thank you. I am proud to be a recurring donor to ProPublica.” —Janice

“Nothing in this terrifying era of American government and culture has frightened me as much as the concerted attacks on our free press and the attempts to persuade the American public that what they read on respected, professional news media is ‘fake news.’ The fact that a large part of the population seems to buy into this attitude stuns me, and frightens me even more. Please keep doing what you do, and thank you for fighting for all of us and our right to know what responsible journalists learn.” —Claudia
Honors

Most journalism awards are bestowed in the first months of the year, but honors received in the middle period of 2018 included the following:

“The Tax Divide,” a series from ProPublica Illinois and the Chicago Tribune on Cook County’s property tax assessment system, won the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism in the local category; the Peter Lisagor Awards’ Watchdog Award for excellence in public interest reporting; the Lisagor Award for best investigative reporting in a general interest daily newspaper, news service or news bureau; and the New York State Society of CPAs’ Excellence in Financial Journalism Awards for public service and best local reporting.

“Lost Mothers,” our collaboration with NPR, won the Edward R. Murrow National Award for excellence in innovation; a National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine Communication Award; the National Association of Black Journalists’ Salute to Excellence Award for digital interactive news story; the New York Academy of Medicine Health Equity Journalism Prize; and the Deadline Club Award for public interest; and is a finalist for the Online Journalism Awards’ Knight Award for Public Service.

“Automating Hate,” a series with the New York Times and German news organizations on Facebook’s hidden policies that allow hateful speech and targeting, won the Gerald Loeb Award for beat reporting.

“Walking While Black,” a collaboration with the Florida Times-Union, won the National Association of Black Journalists’ Salute to Excellence Award for online news project; the Deadline Club Award for minority focus; and three awards in the Florida Society of News Editors contest for public service, community leadership and beat reporting; and is a finalist for the Online Journalism Award for explanatory reporting and the Online Journalism Awards’ University of Florida Award for Investigative Data Journalism.

“Sold for Parts,” co-published with the New Yorker, on how one of the most dangerous companies in the U.S. took advantage of immigrant workers, won the New York State Society of CPAs’ Excellence in Financial Journalism Award for best general reporting.

“Bombs in Our Backyards,” a series on how the U.S. military is the country’s most dangerous polluter, won the Society of Environmental Journalists’ Nina Mason Pulliam Award for Outstanding Environmental Reporting and SEJ’s Kevin Carmody Award for Outstanding In-depth Reporting; received honorable mention in the National Press Club’s Joan Friedenberg Online Journalism Award; and is a finalist for the
The "Failure Track," our investigation on neglect and profiteering in alternative schools, won the National Award for Education Reporting for investigative reporting.

The "Trump Town" news app, tracking ex-lobbyists and D.C. insiders who have been appointed across the federal government, won the Society of Professional Journalists’ Sunshine Award, and is a finalist for the Online Journalism Awards’ Al Neuharth Innovation in Investigative Journalism Award.

Our story on mental health care in Mississippi’s criminal justice system, won the Deadline Club Award for newspaper or digital feature reporting.

A ProPublica Illinois and Chicago Tribune story on how Chicago police skirt punishment within a failed disciplinary system won two Peter Lisagor Awards, for best multimedia feature presentation and best multimedia collaboration.

"Why America Fails at Gathering Hate Crime Statistics" won the Association of LGBTQ Journalists’ Al Neuharth Award for Innovation in Investigative Journalism.

"Too Broke for Bankruptcy," on how the bankruptcy system fails those who need it most, was a finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award in the explanatory category, and our “Wasted Medicine” series explaining how millions of dollars are wasted every day by U.S. health care providers, was a finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award for personal finance.

ProPublica is also a finalist for five other Online Journalism Awards, including for general excellence in online journalism. Our immersive news game with WNYC on the experiences of asylum seekers is a finalist for excellence and innovation in visual digital storytelling; our reporting on an MS-13 informant who risked his life to work with local police, co-published with New York Magazine, is a finalist in the feature category; a project with the Texas Tribune on federal land seizures during the United States’ first effort of a border wall is a finalist for the University of Florida Award for Investigative Data Journalism; and “Too Broke for Bankruptcy” is also a finalist for the Online Journalism Awards’ University of Florida Award for Investigative Data Journalism.

“Too Broke for Bankruptcy” was also a finalist for the Online Journalism Awards’ University of Florida Award for Investigative Data Journalism.

Our reporting revealed how school districts dump struggling students into alternative schools that are rife with profiteering, harsh discipline and educational neglect. (Brian Stauffer, special to ProPublica)

Unused medical supplies sit in storage at a Partners for World Health facility in Portland, Maine. (Tristan Spinski, special to ProPublica)
Publishing Partners

New partners marked in **bold**.

- Advocate (Baton Rouge, La.)
- Atlantic
- **Audible**
- Bloomberg BusinessWeek
- Charleston [WV] Gazette-Mail
- Chicago Sun-Times
- Fortune
- **Forward**
- Frontline
- Houston Chronicle
- **Kansas City Star**
- Malheur [OR] Enterprise
- New York Magazine
- New York Times
- NPR News
- **Quartz**
- Philadelphia Inquirer
- Reveal
- **St. Louis Public Radio**
- Santa Fe New Mexican
- Source
- **South Bend Tribune**
- Southern Illinoisan
- **Voice of America**
- Vox
- Washington Post
- WBEZ
- WFME, Orlando
- WNYC

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## By the Numbers, May–August, 2018

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