Year in Investigations

Doug Haddix & Mark Horvit
Investigative Reporters and Editors

© IRE 2011
DATA / DOCUMENTS:
Financial documents of more than 100 insurance companies. Created scores for the companies.

FINDINGS: The series exposed companies that continued to sell policies when they had no way to pay claims; revealed company owners who demanded rate hikes while secretly siphoning profits from their struggling businesses; revealed how insurers and reinsurers manipulated the market to overcharge homeowners and maximize profits.
Findings: The Probate Court was set up in part to protect the elderly, but sometimes it turns on a financial faucet that helps drain the estates of people it’s supposed to guard. The financial drain on the estates occurs mainly when Charleston's Elder Support asks the Probate Court to protect the person. In some such cases, court-approved fees for attorneys, guardians and conservators help bleed an estate empty within a year or two.
Findings: A 10-month CNBC investigation revealed thousands of complaints and more than 75 lawsuits stemming from alleged inadvertent discharges from the Remington 700. At least two dozen deaths and more than one hundred injuries have been linked to a possible design flaw in Remington's 700-series bolt-action rifle. Remington stands by its rifle, and maintains it is safe and reliable and that the accidents are a result of improper maintenance and unsafe handling.
Findings: Beginning in the spring of 2010, the Times published a series of stories exposing officials' exorbitant salaries and financial misdeeds in the small working-class town of Bell. The rolling investigation led to criminal charges against eight current and former city officials, as well as millions of dollars in tax refunds to residents. The stories sparked legislative reform efforts aimed at public pay and pension abuses, including a bill that would require California's city, county and schools officials to disclose their compensation online.
Investigative News Network and NPR

Findings: A six-month examination of more than 150,000 reports filed by pilots and others in the aviation industry over the past 20 years reveals surprising and sometimes shocking safety breaches and close calls at local, regional and major airports throughout the country. The investigation was a collaboration between members of the Investigative News Network and National Public Radio. Data for this project was provided by the National Institute of Computer-Assisted Reporting (NICAR).
Findings: The U.S. Navy Veterans, a nonprofit organization that the IRS certified as a tax-exempt charity, lists 85 officers in its national headquarters and state chapters, but the *Times* could only find one of them, Bobby Thompson, who operated out of a duplex in a low-income area of Tampa. From the same location, Thompson had offices for a political action committee called NAVPAC. The Navy Veterans charity maintains an extensive website, has filed scores of tax returns and state registration papers with the IRS and state regulators, but the newspaper found that the Navy Veterans nonprofit is all but invisible.
Findings: The investigation focused on funding for Registered Student Organizations. Each year University of Memphis students pay tuition, but some might not know their money also pays for the tuition for officers of the Student Government Association and Student Activities Council. Five students all receive full tuition. Students pay half of another officer’s tuition. The money comes from the Student Activity Fee, a mandatory charge included in student tuition.
International Consortium of Investigative Journalists with the BBC

**Findings:** A global network of lobby groups has spent nearly $100 million since the mid-1980s to preserve the market for asbestos, a carcinogen now banned or restricted in 52 countries. Scientists say asbestos may cause up to 10 million deaths by 2030, with a mounting toll in the developing world.
Findings: The newspaper obtained a record of every Nevada hospital inpatient visit going back a decade — 2.9 million in all. The information, coupled with interviews with more than 150 patients and health care insiders, yielded a sweeping and detailed portrait of hospital care in Las Vegas. Revealed are the dangers patients have unknowingly encountered as they enter delivery rooms, surgical suites and intensive care units, including thousands of cases of injury, death and deadly infection associated with stays in Las Vegas hospitals.
**Findings:** A lack of regulatory oversight of natural gas lines across Texas has created ticking time bombs under houses. Gas line explosions have killed and injured unsuspecting victims. The investigation focused on faulty couplers linked to many of the accidents. The series forced state officials to order the oil and gas industry to spend $1 billion to dig up and replace aging lines and couplings.
Findings: According to an extensive review of the mayor’s financial records by *The Observer*, even as Bloomberg was trying to counter the loss of taxes and other income from the richest New Yorkers, the foundation he controls was in the process of shuttling hundreds of millions of dollars out of the city and into controversial offshore tax havens that would produce nothing at all for the city in terms of tax revenue. By the end of 2008, the Bloomberg Family Foundation had transferred almost $300 million into various offshore destinations—some of them notorious tax-dodge hideouts.
The analysis was conducted using a little-known database maintained by Virginia State Police called the Criminal Firearms Clearinghouse that tracks guns recovered by local law enforcement officers across the state. The Post obtained the database to circumvent a congressional ban on the release of federal data about guns recovered by law enforcement officers.

**FINDINGS:** “The Hidden Life of Guns” tracks how weapons move easily through society. Stories examined which gun retailers sold the most weapons recovered after crimes; analysis of NRA campaign contributions; how cop killers got their guns; U.S. guns tied to Mexican drug war; impact of assault-weapons ban.
Center for Public Integrity and News 21

DATA / DOCUMENTS: Thousands of pages of documents, reports, accident & investigation data, National Transportation Safety Board & federal regulatory agencies.

FINDINGS: This investigative package was conducted by journalism students from 11 universities participating in the Carnegie-Knight Journalism Initiative in partnership with the Center for Public Integrity. Their work is being published by MSNBC.com and The Washington Post. The 23-story package investigates the state of travel in America, uncovering a breakdown of safety systems across the board. Safety recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board are taking more than 5 years to implement.
Findings: Keeping American weapons from getting into the hands of Mexican gangs is the goal of a program called "Project Gunrunner." But critics say it's doing exactly the opposite. ATF managers allegedly made a controversial decision: allow hundreds of weapons, including assault weapons, on the streets. The idea, they said, was to gather intelligence and see where the guns ended up. Insiders say it's a dangerous tactic called letting the guns "walk." One agent called the strategy "insane." Another said: "We were fully aware the guns would probably be moved across the border to drug cartels where they could be used to kill."
**Findings:** Despite massive expense by U.S. taxpayers, Americans endure some of the worst outcomes for dialysis care in the industrialized world. One in five patients dies each year. Those that survive often grapple with frequent hospitalizations and poor quality of life.
The Seattle Times

DATA / DOCUMENTS: 15,000 pages of documents, including internal e-mails from state agencies. Computer databases and thousands of pages of disciplinary actions from the state. Created a custom database of adult family home enforcement actions from 1995-2009. Also used a state database of death certificates and a state database of hospital admissions (Comprehensive Hospital Abstract Reporting System).

FINDINGS: A rolling investigation finds extensive problems in Washington’s system of adult family homes. Topics included exploitation by owners, lax state regulation/enforcement, neglect and abuse of seniors, and hidden costs to families.
Findings: Hundreds of water providers around the Gulf Coast region are providing their customers with drinking water that contains radioactive contaminants that raise health risks, according to state lab results and public health scientists. The revelations came to light during a four-month KHOU-TV investigation, which examined thousands of state laboratory tests from water providers across Texas.
Findings: A rolling investigation uncovers new avenues for error with medical radiation equipment — through software flaws, faulty programming, poor safety procedures, or inadequate staffing and training. Installments also examined X-rays and unshielded infants, X-rays and kids visiting the dentist, health problems for stroke victims getting scans, and inadequate safeguards in using sophisticated equipment.
Youth Radio and NPR

Findings: The Youth Radio investigation draws on interviews, eyewitness reporting, and Oakland (Calif.) city records to piece together what life is like for girls when they become trapped by pimps -- and how law enforcement continues to criminalize girls the state legally defines as sexually exploited victims. In addition to the broadcast stories, Youth Radio has published interviews with high school students currently working in the sex trade in California and a handwritten pimp "business plan" provided by prosecutors, and delved into the controversy of whether some Bay Area hip hop music glorifies sex trafficking.
**WTHR-TV, Indianapolis**

**Findings:** A new audit of Indiana's job creation programs confirms what WTHR has been reporting for the past year: tens of thousands of new jobs promoted by state leaders have never come. State leaders boast of 100,000 new Indiana jobs in the past five years, but an Eyewitness News investigation finds many of the state's "economic successes" are actually empty fields and deserted factories where thousands of promised jobs never showed up.
California Watch

Findings: State regulators have routinely failed to enforce California’s landmark earthquake safety law for public schools, allowing children and teachers to occupy buildings with structural flaws and potential safety hazards reported during construction. California Watch determined that roughly six out of every 10 public schools in the state have at least one uncertified building project. Inspectors have been missing from construction sites at key moments and have been accused of filing false reports – but that has not stopped them from getting more work.
Bradenton Herald

Findings: The $433,000 salary of a local public health agency executive led the newspaper to dive deeper into the Manatee County Rural Health agency. The newspaper uncovered conflicts of interest, excessive spending and questionable contracts. The investigation produced results: Several board members resigned, new rules for contracts were put into place, and fresh oversight of the agency was put into place.
Findings: From a violent patient allowed to roam free to a pregnancy case that violated policy at every turn and nurses who falsified documents to cover their mistakes, the newspaper’s investigation exposed a raft of problems at the Milwaukee County Mental Health Complex, home to the county’s most vulnerable residents. Lax oversight allowed a patient with a history of violence, including sexual assault, to repeatedly find new victims, including one who became pregnant and another he is charged with sexually assaulting. Staffers repeatedly allowed the patient to leave the secure ward, including overnight visits to a group home, at times signing charts to say he was being checked every 15 minutes.
Findings: Millions of Americans live near oil refineries with aging equipment that’s improperly maintained. In addition, the industry relies on a dangerous chemical, hydrochloric acid, rather than safer alternatives that are more expensive. Inspection and accident reports show that some companies have known about serious deficiencies for years.
Findings: In its “Neglected to Death” series, the newspaper revealed that caretakers in assisted-living facilities across Florida were neglecting patients of proper medical attention and basic care. The improper care has led to the deaths of dozens of residents. The Herald obtained confidential records from the Department of Children & Families that documented the deaths of 70 people in the past eight years from the actions of their caregivers. Many of the cases are overlooked, and the caretakers are rarely held accountable for the deaths of the residents.
Findings: In one of the fastest growing forms of identity theft, crooks are using a stranger’s Social Security number and other personal information to fool the Internal Revenue Service into diverting the person’s rightful refund to the thieves’ pockets, according to a Scripps Howard News Service investigation. The volume of tax- or wage-related identity theft complaints to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission more than tripled from 2005 to 2009 according to a Scripps analysis of more than 1.4 million ID theft records in the agency’s Consumer Sentinel database. SHNS pinpoints the national hot spots for identity theft and offers an interactive map of complaints by ZIP code.
DATA / DOCUMENTS: Nashville Police crime stats, FBI uniform crime stats, Tennessee Bureau of Investigation crime stats

FINDINGS: Nashville Police are “fudging the stats” when it comes to crime. WTVF found burglaries being disguised as “vandalism” and rapes being hidden as “matter of record” reports. Plus, police had made crimes more difficult to report, forcing citizens to wait longer than ever to talk to an officer. Despite claims to have one of the best clearance rates in the country, the number of unsolved homicides has skyrocketed. Mayor Karl Dean ordered an audit.
Findings: NPR spent the past several months analyzing hundreds of pages of campaign finance reports, lobbying documents and corporate records. What they show is a quiet, behind-the-scenes effort to help draft and pass Arizona Senate Bill 1070 by an industry that stands to benefit from it: the private prison industry. The law could send hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants to prison in a way never done before. And it could mean hundreds of millions of dollars in profits to private prison companies responsible for housing them.
Findings: UT Southwestern Medical Center and Parkland Memorial Hospital are known for their contributions to medical research and public health. But have those accomplishments come at a cost to patients? The Dallas Morning News investigates allegations of lax supervision of doctors in training, patient harm, and billing fraud at the publicly funded teaching hospital.
Findings: A USA Today investigation documented 201 criminal cases across the nation in which federal judges found that prosecutors broke the rules. The abuses have put innocent people in prison, set guilty people free, and cost taxpayers millions of dollars in legal fees and sanctions. The newspaper documented 201 criminal cases in which judges determined that Justice Department prosecutors — the nation’s most elite and powerful law enforcement officials — themselves violated laws or ethics rules.
Findings: Forty years ago, New Jersey officials promised to clean up an environment tainted by generations of dirty industry and illegal dumping. Yet the contamination persists. The state has more than 20,000 contaminated sites, including the most Superfund sites in the nation. Many sit untouched year after year because of government inertia and court battles with polluters. “Toxic Landscape” is The Record's ongoing effort to track the pollution and its impact on our environment. With an interactive map, you can find contaminated sites near you, and get information about the status of attempts to clean them up.
Findings: Despite hundreds of oil and natural-gas pipeline accidents in the last decade, there are no federal regulations governing how far major pipelines should be from homes, or schools or businesses. Even in the 1929 Michigan law that governs the location of oil pipelines, there is no mention of how far they should be set back from such structures. The law requires only that companies make a good-faith effort to minimize the physical and economic impacts of pipelines.