

Chicago Tribune

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To the judges:

In "Betrayed," Tribune reporters for the first time quantified the staggering prevalence of sexual violence against students in a large U.S. school district.

Using confidential records, innovative data analysis and sensitive interviews with young people, the team discovered and verified 523 times when police investigated a case of sexual assault or abuse of a child inside a Chicago public school in the last decade and uncovered child-protection failures that extended from neighborhood schools to the district's downtown offices and the state capital.

The series sparked concrete actions that could protect students from sexual violence for years to come, including district-wide reforms, the introduction of 12 pending state bills and enforcement efforts by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

Wrenching stories from students and former students helped reinforce the toll of the institutional failure and spark those reforms. Interviews were guided by almost daily newsroom conversations about how to interact ethically with young survivors of sex crimes, resulting in interactions that reflected journalism's highest standards and withstood high-stakes public scrutiny before a national audience.

Ultimately, 18 students or former students described sexual abuse in interviews corroborated by government records. It was only when readers saw their faces, heard their voices and read their accounts buttressed by government reports that the human cost of this civil rights tragedy became clear.

Reporters decided to directly approach victims who now are adults, but first contact the parents or adult representatives of victims who were younger than 18.

From the first encounters, reporters gave every student or former student the power to decide whether to share their accounts, and whether to do so on the record. When young people consented, on or off the record, reporters discussed their place in the stories multiple times to make clear what the Tribune might publish.

Reporters repeatedly returned to those who consented and gave them opportunities to change their minds and withdraw from the project. Even when students chose to cooperate, the reporters and editors tried to assess whether telling an individual's story could do harm to her or him.

And the reporters applied journalistic standards honed over years of investigating sexual violence against vulnerable people:

- Was the victim's account corroborated or disputed by witnesses or by documentary evidence?
 - Were any restrictions placed on the reporters' access to information, by the victim, third parties or government agencies? Did we have access to all the facts we needed?
 - Were the facts we gathered plausible to specialists who focus on this type of crime?
- Were there gaps in our reporting?

Student sex crime survivors named in this series chose to be identified, saying they hoped to herald change and protect younger classmates.

The Tribune also sought out educators, attorneys, medical professionals and others who faced prosecution and the loss of their professional licenses and careers if they shared protected information with the newspaper. Illinois makes it a potential crime to divulge a child's medical and educational records, foster care documents or juvenile court files, while police withhold reports regarding juvenile sexual violence.

Still, the reporters gathered thousands of pages of case records and used those documents in responsible ways, protecting sources, respecting the privacy of crime victims and upholding the First Amendment rights of those who chose to speak out about events they had experienced and witnessed.

In a story of this magnitude, the team felt that any imprecision was intolerable. To eliminate the few false positives in the police data and confirm that sex crimes against students actually occurred in Chicago Public Schools, the Tribune used: PostGIS and QGIS to join the geographic points of crime locations to a shapefile that identified school buildings throughout the city; "nearest-neighbor analysis"; and in-person visits to confirm GPS data. That process took more than four months.

To further check accuracy and obtain more details about the incidents, the Tribune matched hundreds of police-report numbers with Cook County criminal court dockets from both the adult and juvenile divisions. The reporters petitioned the juvenile court for access to dozens of case files.

Shortly before publication, after the Tribune threatened to file a lawsuit to force disclosure of basic data, the district acknowledged that its Law Department had investigated 430 reports that school employees had sexually abused, assaulted or harassed students since 2011, and found credible evidence of misconduct in more than half of those cases.

On June 1, the Tribune published its findings in a devastating online package comprising 12 stories, augmented with striking photography and powerful black-and-white illustrations.

By analyzing crimes against students that were documented in police incident reports, the Tribune charted a new way to measure the scope of sexual violence in a big-city school system. Across America, previous journalistic efforts failed to account for cases where students were abused by peers or the adult abuser was not punished.

The team focused on how to reach young people, not just with the investigative findings but with assistance. Alongside the news articles, the Tribune published an illustrated, downloadable poster for students who might have experienced sexual abuse at school or seen it happen to a classmate, explaining how and why to report misconduct and what to expect after telling someone.

The news staff also created a searchable site that enabled readers to enter a Chicago public school's name to see if police had investigated sexual assault or abuse involving a child inside that building from 2008 through 2017. Readers used that search site more than 76,000 times.

At a bipartisan state hearing in June, two young women whose cases were featured in the series testified to lawmakers. As the women told their stories, some legislators shook their heads in disbelief and dabbed at tears.

"Over the past seven years I have worked through this trauma with the help of an incredible support system and recently through an important, empowering and healing experience with the Tribune," former Chicago student Morgan Aranda said at that June 21

hearing of the state Senate Education and House Elementary and Secondary Education Joint Committee.

Tamara Reed, whose also was 14 when her teacher solicited her for sex, said she felt stronger after being heard. “For a very long time I felt silenced,” Reed told a Tribune reporter after the hearing. “I really enjoyed being able to get in front of people who have the power to make change.”

For work that gave voice to young crime survivors, earned public trust and spurred government and civic action, I proudly nominate the “Betrayed” series for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,

George Papajohn
Investigations Editor