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To the Judges:

In her stunning stories about child sex trafficking in America, Jessica Contrera reveals how often the issue is mishandled and misunderstood — by police, prosecutors and ordinary people trying to help — and how often real children are harmed as a result. Contrera embarked on this reporting knowing how fraught it would be. Writing about children always comes with issues of privacy and parental consent. Writing about sexual abuse can be even thornier, risking sensationalizing pain and over-simplifying complex narratives.

Reporting on child sex trafficking combines those challenges, with an additional obstacle: the anti-trafficking movement's longstanding fear that stories about victims will retraumatize them. As a result, pieces about trafficked children are often written in generalities, referencing only experts, statistics and anonymous anecdotes, or appearing only during the prosecution of a high-profile abuser. Contrera's reporting breaks this mold. She committed to making the lives of real children the focus of every story, even as she held accountable the systems meant to support them.

To show how highly-touted anti-trafficking laws are not being enforced, Contrera told the story of Alexis Ke'Erica Martin, who was trafficked when she was just 15 in the reporter's hometown of Akron, Ohio. When Martin was involved in a crime that led to the death of her trafficker, she should have been granted protection from Ohio's "Safe Harbor" law. Instead, she was tried as an adult and sentenced 15 years to life.

At every step of the reporting, Contrera was mindful of the unfathomable trauma Martin had endured. Contrera first reached out to her advocates in 2019. By staying in touch for more than a year, Contrera earned the trust of Martin's attorneys. Once Martin was freed from prison in 2020, Contrera patiently waited for the now 21-year-old to feel ready to talk. It took eight months.

Contrera consulted trauma experts to guide her reporting with Martin. Trafficking survivors have been lied to and deprived of their agency again and again. Contrera was transparent about what the reporting process would entail: going back through the evidence, interviewing witnesses, and giving the family of the man Martin said had sold her a chance to talk, too. Contrera frequently reminded Martin that it was up to her when she felt comfortable diving into the most difficult parts of her history, when she needed a break and when she wanted her lawyers to be present. Once, in the middle of a long interview in which Martin described being repeatedly raped, Martin had to leave the room to vomit. Contrera did not assume the interview was over. Instead, she gave Martin the choice of what to do next.

That day, Martin wanted to keep talking. But multiple times during the five months of reporting, Martin stopped responding to texts and calls from Contrera, and considered pulling out of the story. Contrera never pressured her to keep going, always encouraging her to decide if she wanted to continue.

All of this made the reporting process far slower. But Contrera simply used that time to track down dozens of people who had been involved in Martin's case, and to dig deeper into the evidence against her. She gained access to more than 5,000 pages of court documents and never-before-seen video footage of the police interrogation of Martin at 15. As a result, Contrera's story proved that the narrative of Martin's crime that had been presented in courtrooms for nearly a decade — that the teenager never told police she was being exploited and only raised it later — was false. The detectives involved admitted they had mishandled the case. And 11 cases similar to Martin's were identified, showing how trafficked children across the country are being prosecuted for violent crimes without regard for the exploitation they experienced.

For her second story, Contrera wanted to show readers that children, who cannot consent to being sold for sex, are still arrested and jailed for being trafficked. Using local law enforcement reporting data, she discovered that the agency arresting the most child victims in the country was the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. Contrera negotiated unprecedented access to the police department's vice unit, spending three graveyard shifts watching undercover detectives arrest potential trafficking victims in casinos and near the Vegas strip. She witnessed a suspected trafficker escape police while his victim, a 16-year-old girl, was punished. Through dozens of interviews, Contrera chronicled how a city that profits from the promise of sex for sale has failed to fund a safe, secure refuge for its most vulnerable children.

This reporting was incredibly fraught from the moment Contrera and photographer Bonnie Jo Mount hopped into a police cruiser. There was no way to ask the adults being arrested for solicitation if they consented to journalists watching the moment unfold. And while reporters traditionally publish names and faces of those charged with crimes, any one of the women arrested may have been being forced into the sex trade. Mount and Contrera decided not to publish any names or identifying photographs of anyone they saw arrested without explicit consent.

Their choices were even more complex when they saw the vice unit arrest children. Contrera's goal was to focus the story on one child, showing how she came to be trafficked and the impact of the arrest on her life. But when Contrera witnessed the 16-year-old girl being arrested, an ethical dilemma arose within minutes. Contrera approached the girl to introduce herself, explain why she was there, and explain why Mount was taking photos. The girl asked, "Can you call my mom?" Contrera knew that calling the girl's mother before the police notified her could interfere in the investigation of her trafficker. Further, she'd have no way of knowing if the number the girl gave her was actually for her trafficker, potentially alerting him that the 16-year-old had been caught by police — and sending him fleeing. Contrera had to explain to the girl that she couldn't call her mom for her — a painful conversation.

After a detective had made contact with the girls' mother, Contrera did reach out. She had an extensive interview with the girl's mother, and was granted permission to write about her and identify her by her first initial, K. Contrera did not ask to identify the girl by her full name, because trafficking experts had advised her that, with K's abuser on the run, her life was already in danger.

This danger made Contrera and her editors scrutinize every detail that ended up in the published story. She knew that the more K could come to life on the page, the more readers would relate to her. And the more they saw her in photographs, the more they could see that she was just a kid. But with every written description and every photograph, the reporters risked identifying K. They agonized over striking the right balance, even when it meant removing compelling details from the text and cutting the most powerful photograph Mount shot, which showed an officer looming over K. The resulting story manages to tell a compelling story about a real girl, without putting her at additional risk.

Throughout her reporting, Contrera grappled with the public's misunderstanding of how child trafficking happens. She frequently heard from advocates that what some portrayed as "raising awareness" was actually misinformation causing lasting damage to real victims. Worse, the issue had been hijacked by QAnon conspiracy theorists trying to appeal to women. To tell this third story, Contrera spent months tracking how one QAnon lie — that Wayfair, the online furniture marketplace, was secretly trafficking children — became one of the fastest-spreading disinformation campaigns on the Internet. Contrera revealed how the Wayfair frenzy blocked real victims from getting help, incited violence by those determined to "save the children," and upended the lives of real children whose pictures were used in the ploy.

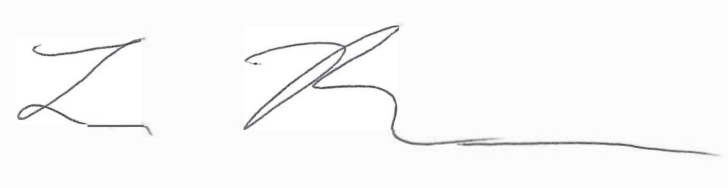
The challenge was how to write about the damage done without further amplifying the conspiracy theory, giving bad actors a platform, or sending readers down dangerous rabbit holes. Contrera made conscious choices to ensure that the story included no links to further misinformation, that every conspiracy theory named in the story was surrounded by context, and that the origins of this particular lie were pinpointed and debunked. To ensure she was not further harming the children whose pictures were spread by conspiracy theorists, Contrera's story named only the children she who gave her explicit permission to do so, along with their parents. She focused the story on one of those children, Samara Duplessis, a 15-year-old girl in Michigan. Contrera used only the details of Samara's life and mental health struggles that the girl herself felt comfortable with. By focusing on the harm done to Samara and her parents, and the harm done to others as the conspiracy theory spread, Contrera struck the delicate balance she set out to achieve. The chief technology officer at Polaris, the non-profit that runs the human trafficking hotline, thanked Contrera for her nuance, saying the story was "condemning QAnon without dismissing the real issue of trafficking."

Polaris is not the only anti-trafficking organization to praise Contrera's reporting. Her stories have been heralded by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Freedom Network USA, the Human Trafficking Legal Center, Rights for Girls, Shared Hope International, Human Rights for Kids and many others as successfully going in-depth without causing further harm. But most meaningful to Contrera has been the victims and survivors of

sex trafficking who have reached out with messages of thanks. “This is the first time I have ever written to an author, reporter, influencer, etc.,” one wrote, “but I felt like you needed to know how good it is to see that someone out there gets it.”

For her extraordinary reporting and careful navigating of these challenges, The Post is proud to nominate Jessica Contrera for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,



Nominator: Lynda Robinson, local enterprise editor, Lynda.Robinson@washpost.com

Reporter: Jessica Contrera, Jessica.Contrera@washpost.com

Stories:

The state of Ohio vs. a sex trafficked teenager

Sex trafficked kids are crime victims. In Las Vegas, they still go to jail.

A QAnon con: How the viral Wayfair sex trafficking lie hurt real kids