



Artist Ricardo "Deme5" Gomez's street painting, "Rules of Engagement" on Bartlett Station Drive in Roxbury. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

wbur

2020 YEAR IN REVIEW

A YEAR IN REVIEW

2020 was unlike any year we've ever experienced. It changed how everyone worked and lived, and it changed how WBUR reported the news — as well as how you experienced it. What it did not change is our commitment to public service and your dedication to supporting our work, for which we are profoundly grateful.

In January 2020, both a presidential impeachment and a presidential campaign dominated the news. While the airwaves were devoted to live impeachment proceedings, WBUR journalists shuttled between Iowa and New Hampshire to capture presidential candidate speeches and interactions with voters. At the same time, we heard murmurs of a puzzling new virus afflicting China, murmurs that grew louder as February began.

The pandemic lent new urgency to WBUR's mission to report the truth. With the added prospect of a contentious presidential transition, along with a long-overdue reckoning with the nation's legacy of racial injustice, that mission never felt more critical.

With your support, WBUR journalists rose to the occasion. With compelling audio and vivid description, insightful data analysis, and deep investigative reporting, they've covered everything from health and education to the environment, immigration, and justice. And in a time when so many of us have had to stay home, our photojournalists have shared their work on wbur.org to show us the world.

In these pages, we revisit some of the signature events of this extraordinary year, showcasing the stories, projects, and photographs that brought the news home to you.



Two women sit with their German Shepherd Niko in front of a yarn sculpture on the fence on Boston Common. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

STATE OF THE STATION

The arrival of CEO Margaret Low in January 2020 marked the beginning of a new forward-looking phase for WBUR, and the pandemic quickly put Low's leadership to the test.

By mid-March, most WBUR staffers had switched to remote work. Station leaders kept one crew working in the station and a second on deck. Most of our journalists and program hosts pivoted to reporting, recording, and broadcasting from home — increasing our chances of staying on the air without missing a beat.

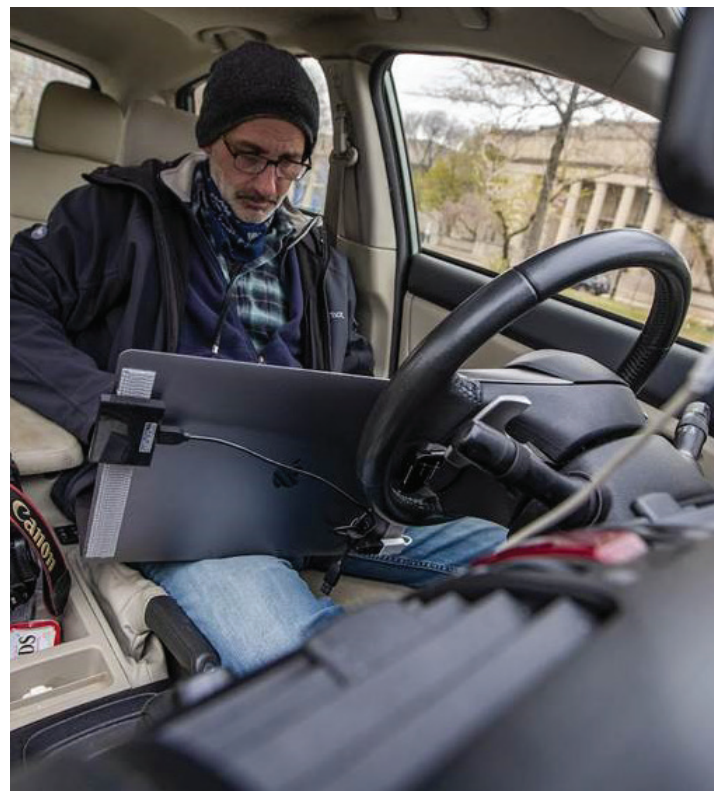
When the pandemic took hold, we knew we had one job: to be there for you. We sought to be the one sure thing you could rely on, every day, for up-to-the-minute news, essential information, and rich storytelling — and, as many of you have told us, simply for comfort and connection.

Like so many organizations, WBUR experienced the pain of the COVID economy; the station's ability to pay for its high-quality journalism was threatened. Many of WBUR's corporate underwriters — the station's primary source of revenue — canceled their bookings as small businesses shut their doors. Closing CitySpace at The Lavine Broadcast Center meant lost ticket revenue and rental fees. Low drew from her unique combination of editorial and business experience to make tough but necessary decisions, including eliminating 29 positions and restructuring the organization in June.

Despite these challenges, the station remains strong. With a deeply talented staff, we are positioned not only to survive the pandemic, but thrive. We'll do it with your support. Listener support has sustained us — and it is what will continue to sustain us. Thank you.



Tonya Mosley, co-host of *Here & Now*, works on the show from her at-home studio in her closet. (Courtesy)



WBUR photojournalist Jesse Costa edits photos in his car in April after photographing food distribution in Chelsea. (Courtesy)

PORTRAITS OF A PANDEMIC

Just as COVID-19 dominated all our lives this year, it dominated the news. WBUR responded with meticulously collected data, deep investigations, and profoundly human stories of bravery and loss.

Numbers you can count on

Early last spring, WBUR began summarizing the state health department's data on confirmed cases, positive test results, confirmed deaths, and more. As the pandemic progressed and we all struggled to make tough decisions about school, work, and our daily lives, WBUR's journalists realized that we needed a consistent, understandable way to track this information — even when the state changed what it reported and how.

The result: a report, updated daily, that uses charts and interactive maps to make the numbers clear. Now including vaccination statistics for Massachusetts, [this comprehensive report remains wbur.org's most visited page](#) — demonstrating the community's hunger for smart data reporting that led us to invest in this work.

More than numbers: lives

As the numbers climbed, it grew all too easy to get lost in them. But behind the numbers — of jobs lost, of cases, of deaths — are real people, and we knew we needed to tell their stories.

More important, we wanted to give people a platform to tell their stories themselves. In April, we invited [five hospital staffers, all working in high-risk positions, to record and share their experiences](#). In May, [we did the same with four members of the clergy working in COVID-19 wards](#). These first-person narratives allowed us to view the pandemic through a new lens.

Many wbur.org readers answered our call to share how the pandemic has affected their work and finances, bringing you accounts of [“My Covid Economy.”](#) Still more chimed in on [Cognoscenti](#), recording fears, hopes, and daily



Dr. Gabriela Andujar Vazquez is the first Tufts Medical Center hospital employee to receive Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)



Rev. Katie Rimer, left, with Rev. Johannah Murphy, says the pandemic forces chaplains “to do things differently and creatively and not perfectly.” (Courtesy)



During a busy week for travel and a worsening coronavirus outbreak, Mario Seide of Everett says, “I have no choice but to work.” (Courtesy)



Workers at the Acme Ice Company in Cambridge loads 50,000 pounds of dry ice into boxes to be shipped out to various pharmaceutical companies in the area for storing samples of COVID-19 vaccines. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

life amid the pandemic.

Local scientists, global impact

Both vaccines approved in 2020 have strong ties to Massachusetts: [Pfizer manufactures a key component in its Andover facility](#) and Moderna is based in Cambridge. WBUR reporter Angus Chen tracked those local angles and [spoke with other experts](#), adding to WBUR's wealth of breaking news stories and in-depth analyses that tapped the region's world-class expertise in health.

Questions and answers

In March, as we saw how fear and confusion were spreading alongside the virus, WBUR launched [a coronavirus newsletter](#). Subscribers quickly joined, and by year's end more than 13,000 people were receiving weekly updates and breaking news alerts. We also compiled online explainers and answers to frequently asked questions with links to [health and financial resources](#), [information on workers' and employers' rights and obligations](#), and most recently [a rundown of vaccine distribution in Massachusetts](#).



A health care worker looks to cross Huntington Avenue. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Meanwhile, CitySpace at The Lavine Broadcast Center offered the [WBUR Town Hall series](#): an opportunity, broadcast live on YouTube, for journalists and experts to connect with the community and answer questions in real time. Those conversations explored some of the broader implications of the pandemic, from what it revealed about racial inequities to its ramifications for the presidential election.



[WBUR Town Hall: The Racial Inequities Revealed by COVID-19 \(June 9\)](#)

ANTIRACISM PROTESTS

While the world struggled with the coronavirus, 2020 also brought renewed national attention to racial inequities in the justice system, with the deaths of George Floyd and others sparking protests around the country.

To help our journalists cover these protests, WBUR conducted specialized trainings on reporting in high-risk environments. Journalists were trained on police tactics, techniques for identifying and responding to crowd dispersal devices and pepper spray, the rights of the press, and what to do if arrested.

In addition to the [on-the-ground coverage from the WBUR newsroom](#), this past year *The ARTery* played a critical role in exploring race and identity within the local arts ecosystem through enterprise reporting on topics such as [being Black in Boston theaters](#), as well as through curated content and cultural criticism. After the reckoning sparked by Black Lives Matter protests, media outlets like WBUR have been an important part of this public conversation and we continued the discussion with [live virtual events through CitySpace](#).

As more of our community consumes WBUR news online, our images are critical storytelling tools — and WBUR captured the protests in Massachusetts with indelible images by staff photographers Jesse Costa and Robin Lubbock.

POWERFUL PHOTOJOURNALISM



Top: Protestors march down Washington Street in May. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Center left: A woman with her son on her shoulders held up a T-shirt that read "Please Don't Kill My Son" at the Justice for Breonna Taylor rally at Nubian Square. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Right: Police motorcycles blocked protestors' way on Tremont Street. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

Bottom left: About a thousand people gathered at Peters Park in the South End to protest police brutality and the killing of Black people by police. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

INVESTIGATIONS WITH IMPACT

Thanks to The Campaign for WBUR and your ongoing support, WBUR Investigations published its first series and hired its final team members in 2020. The WBUR Investigations team pursues stories that hold powerful institutions and people to account, while bolstering watchdog reporting throughout the WBUR newsroom.

Death behind bars

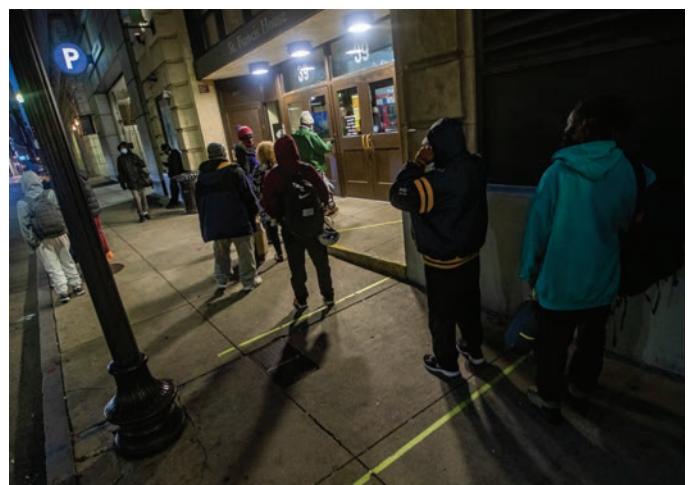
That first series, "[Dying on the Sheriff's Watch](#)," penetrated the state's closely held information about illness and deaths in its prisons and jails to uncover sometimes shocking cases of poor treatment, dangerous conditions, and misleading communications with families. The series proved prescient when COVID-19 hit and spread especially fast among inmates and staff. [WBUR's Deborah Becker stayed on the case](#), thwarting efforts to keep information out of public view.

Becker's work continues to have lasting impact. The Department of Correction stated it will change its reporting policies; two lawsuits allege that inadequate care caused avoidable deaths in correctional facilities; and Governor Charlie Baker included correction workers and incarcerated people in the state's first phase of vaccinations.

Voices of the vulnerable

WBUR journalists uncovered the effects of the pandemic on some of the region's most vulnerable people. In early April, reporter Lynn Jolicoeur broke the news that [tests had revealed "stunning" rates of asymptomatic spread in Boston's homeless population](#). Ultimately Governor Baker also included people experiencing homelessness in phase one of the vaccination plan.

At the outset of the pandemic, WBUR identified elder care as a particularly fragile sector and devoted resources to covering it. In March, reporter Miriam Wasser broke the news that [11 veterans had died of COVID-19 in Soldiers' Home in Holyoke](#). After intense media scrutiny, the home's superintendent was put on administrative leave and Governor Baker's office



From top: An inmate walks down the hallway of a cell unit at Worcester County House of Corrections; Chelsea residents leave the back entrance of Pan Y Cafe with groceries distributed by the Chelsea Collaborative; people experiencing homelessness stand outside St. Francis House in Boston. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

intervened by bringing in the National Guard to test all residents and staff and ordering an independent investigation into Soldiers' Home's management. Wasser stayed on the story, garnering national attention for what was happening at Soldiers' Home and other elder-care facilities: her story aired on NPR's *All Things Considered* in May, and in June [npr.org featured a digital piece](#). The governor ultimately dismissed the superintendent, who now faces criminal charges, and one family filed a federal civil lawsuit.

Meanwhile, WBUR's continuing analysis revealed in October that [COVID-19 deaths are much higher in nursing homes that have more nonwhite residents](#). We will keep reporting this story, along with many more.

Mask procurement

Early in the pandemic Massachusetts struggled to obtain the necessary personal equipment — particularly N95 masks — to protect medical workers, as did most of the country. [WBUR found at least three deals in which masks were never delivered or their quality was subpar](#). In each of these cases, the state pre-paid millions of dollars to brokers. After the media coverage, Attorney General Maura Healey began investigating allegations of price gouging, subpar products and orders that never materialized. A new regulation now prohibits charging unfair prices on goods and services necessary for public health during an emergency.



Bristol County Jail and House of Correction in Dartmouth. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Immigrants at risk

In years past, WBUR reporter Shannon Dooling received national recognition for her groundbreaking work on the immigration beat. Her clear-eyed focus didn't change when the pandemic struck. In reporting on immigrant detainees held in US Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody at the Bristol County House of Correction, [Dooling uncovered overcrowding, poor medical care, abuse, high infection rates, and coverups](#).

A week after Dooling's first report, a class action lawsuit was filed on behalf of the detainees. Attorney General Maura Healey's office requested the immediate transfer of detainees to other facilities after finding that the Bristol County sheriff violated detainees' rights by using excessive force. And when Senator Elizabeth Warren introduced a bill requiring data reporting and transparency in detention facilities, she cited WBUR's coverage.

Policing the police

Another WBUR investigation explored the use of so-called Brady lists in Massachusetts. These lists, which prosecutors use to track police officers whose past conduct may disqualify them

from testifying in court, have been the focus of renewed national attention. Yet WBUR found that [only four of the state's 11 district attorneys said they maintain these or similar lists](#), and five said they do no such tracking.

A Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruling on September 8, recommending that every DA adopt a Brady list policy, cited our August report. After WBUR pushed the Suffolk County DA's office to release the names — a public records request that was initially denied — [the office released 136 names in September](#). WBUR's review of a similar list in Middlesex County revealed cases never before made public, including [a Somerville police officer convicted of stealing \\$83,000 from a police union account](#) and two others suspected of embezzlement.

AND THE (NEWS) BEATS GO ON

While at times it seemed as if every day brought a new “story of the year,” the rhythm of news developments in all WBUR coverage areas continued apace. As followers of WBUR's *CommonHealth* know, for example, the pandemic was not the only significant health story this year.

To take just one example: Carey Goldberg's reporting on the BRCA gene mutations that greatly increase the risk of breast and ovarian cancers. After *Here & Now* aired Goldberg's story on [a national recommendation that all Ashkenazi Jewish women \(those who trace their ancestry to Eastern Europe\) should be tested for the mutations](#), she received this remarkable note from a California listener:

“*Your story may have saved my life. I'm half Jewish and have no family history of breast cancer. But I heard your story and decided to get tested. I just got the results and I have BRCA2...*

All this to say, thank you so much. In a time where journalism is often under attack, I want to say that I'm REALLY grateful for you and your profession. So are my daughters, though they are too young to know it.”

In education, too, WBUR continued to bring you important news and analysis. Our *Edify* team explored the chaos and complexities of sudden school closures at the start of the shutdown and subsequent struggles around remote and hybrid learning. Reporter Max Larkin highlighted the news that [thousands of the state's students didn't apply for college financial aid](#) and reported deeply on [the challenges facing parents and guardians of children with disabilities](#).

And our *Earthwhile* team made WBUR the go-to source for information about [the controversial natural gas compressor in Wey-](#)



In Salem, two students wait as their teacher held up learning packets, asking how many they needed. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

[mouth](#). Opponents say the compressor station raises concerns about increased reliance on fossil fuels, safety and emergency response, and environmental justice and public health. After two unplanned gas releases, Senators Elizabeth Warren and Edward Markey urged regulators to halt construction and investigate—and [cited WBUR’s reporting in the request](#).

[Representative Joe Kennedy’s ultimately unsuccessful challenge to Markey](#) was just one focus of WBUR’s political coverage. [Representative Ayanna Pressley joined Radio Boston](#) in late November to discuss her legislative priorities and the future of the Democratic party. And the national elections, of course, dominated the news both before and after Election Day itself.

WBUR’s commitment to keeping the electorate informed — essential for a functioning democracy — led us to launch a “course” in September, [sent in the form of an automated newsletter](#), that aimed to help both current audience members and new ones become better informed voters. With information on ways to vote, key state and national campaign issues, and the significance of the open Supreme Court seat, the series appeared in both English and Spanish, thanks to our newsroom partnership with El Planeta.



THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

Our work with El Planeta, which also included reporting about the controversial substation in the Latinx neighborhood of East Boston, is just one of the community partnerships that have helped us broaden both our perspectives and our impact. Additional partners include the New England News Collaborative, an eight-station consortium of public media newsrooms, State House News Service, the Dorchester Reporter, and the 43 peer organizations that joined us for virtual events at CitySpace. Our work with them brings more voices into our reporting and helps our programming and services reach new people.

This year we joined forces with another powerhouse in investigative reporting: the Pulitzer Prize-winning nonprofit ProPublica. WBUR reporter Shannon Dooling started working in October with ProPublica and Maine Public Radio to develop accountability reporting around



Here & Now co-hosts Tonya Mosley and Robin Young. (Liz Linder for WBUR)

New England, with impact across the nation. This partnership, which will help us uncover new stories and broaden our collective reach, is made possible through the generosity of the James M. and Cathleen D. Stone Foundation, Bobby Monks, and Paul and Ann Sagan.

And, of course, we continue to collaborate with NPR for our nationally syndicated program *Here & Now* and our new partner, American Public Media, for the nationally syndicated *On Point*.

Robin Young and Tonya Mosley, *Here & Now* co-hosts, worked together to create the provocative conversations, rich analysis, and compassionate storytelling that makes the program a beloved staple of public radio across the country. For *On Point*, host Meghna Chakrabarti helped listeners make sense of the world with nuanced explorations of complex topics, live and in real time. Newly reimagined as a deeply researched and highly produced hourlong show, *On Point* makes essential contributions to the important national conversations we're having on politics, the pandemic, social justice and so much more.

THANK YOU

Our job is to help people make sense of this very complicated world — and in today's contentious and often confusing climate, that job feels more urgent than ever.

So many of you have told us that you couldn't have gotten through 2020 without WBUR. The truth is, we couldn't have gotten through 2020 without you. Your stories, your support, and your trust are what make WBUR your public media source.

Thank you for your partnership.



A message is left on a street signpost near Melrose Wakefield Hospital.
(Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

HONORS & AWARDS

In 2020, WBUR and its journalists were recognized by a variety of renowned institutions.

EDWARD R. MURROW AWARDS

The Edward R. Murrow Awards honor outstanding achievement in broadcast and digital journalism, technical expertise, and adherence to the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) Code of Ethics.

WBUR received two national and eight regional awards, the most for any large market radio station in the United States.

National:

- **News Series:** “[Infectious](#)”
- **Sports Reporting (WBUR & NPR):** “[Learning To Swim With 7-Foot-5 Celtic Tacko Fall](#)”

Regional:

- **Continuing Coverage:** [Medical Deferral](#)
- **Excellence in Social Media:** WBUR
- **Excellence in Sound:** “[Green Operating Room](#)”
- **Excellence in Video:** “[When Climate Change Comes Home](#)”
- **Excellence in Writing:** “[North End Spaghetti Ad, 50 Years Later](#)”
- **Investigative Reporting:** “[Happy Hunting](#)”
- **News Series:** “[Infectious](#)”
- **Sports Reporting:** “[Des Linden](#)”
- **Sports Reporting (WBUR & NPR):** “[Learning To Swim With 7-Foot-5 Celtic Tacko Fall](#)”

PMJA AWARDS

The Public Media Journalists Association, honoring outstanding work by local public radio stations, gave WBUR four awards.

- **Audience Engagement Program, Second Place:** [Special Hour: Opioid Epidemic in Massachusetts](#)
- **News Feature:** “[Green Operating Room](#)”
- **Newscast:** WBUR newscast
- **Sports Feature:** “[Des Linden](#)”

ONLINE JOURNALISM AWARDS

WBUR was a finalist in the “medium newsroom” category of the Online Journalism Awards, the only comprehensive set of journalism prizes honoring excellence in digital journalism around the world.

BOSTON MUSIC AWARDS

The Boston Music Awards showcase the exceptional musical talent in the Massachusetts area. *The ARTery*, WBUR’s platform covering arts and culture, was nominated Music Publication of the Year, and its writers Arielle Gray and Amelia Mason were nominated Music Journalist of the Year.

FELLOWSHIPS

Elisabeth Harrison, WBUR managing editor for news content, was one of 12 journalists in the US selected as a 2020 Health Coverage Fellow by the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation. The fellowship is designed to help the media improve coverage of critical health care issues.