

# INVESTIGATIONS

Thanks to your generosity, [WBUR Investigations](#) now has three talented reporters committed to producing multimedia series – on air, online, and with live events – that shine a light on wrongdoing throughout New England. This team pursues the stories that hold powerful institutions and people to account.

We launched the WBUR Investigations team in September 2018 with the hire of **Christine Willmsen** as editor and reporter. In August 2019 **Beth Healy** joined her and the talented team of two began to dive in. Both journalists are nationally recognized for producing award-winning stories that expose corruption and abuse at government agencies and businesses. **Saurabh Datar**, data journalist, joined the team in September 2020, adding data skill and expertise from his time at the Boston Globe and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

This past year the team published its first investigative series. They also enhanced enterprise reporting throughout the WBUR newsroom by collaborating with other reports and exposed many problems with how the Massachusetts and federal governments handled the coronavirus pandemic.



*Beth Healy and Christine Willmsen in the studio. (Liz Linder for WBUR)*



Family members of Massachusetts county jail inmates who died. Clockwise from far left, Judith Tavarez, Ellen Shannon, Janice Pendleton and Susan Chamberlain. (Jesse Costa and Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

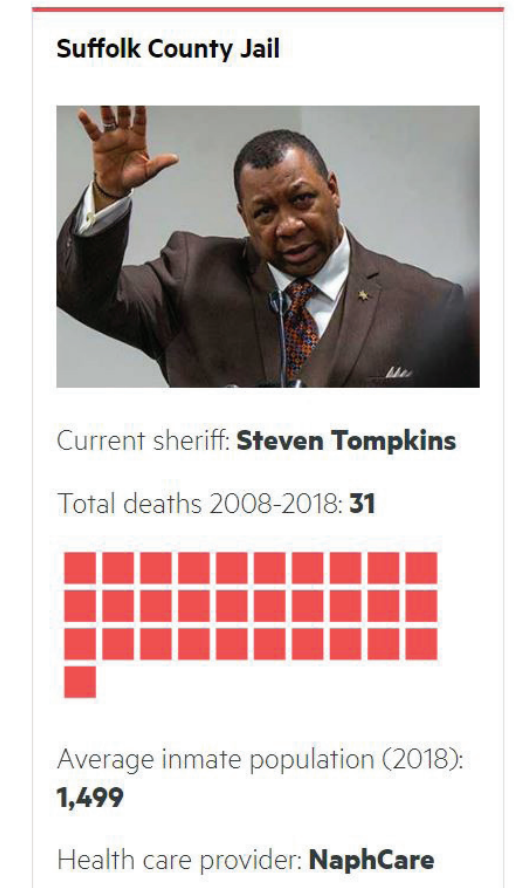
## DYING ON THE SHERIFF'S WATCH

The first in-depth investigative series by WBUR Investigations was released on March 23, 2020. [“Dying on the Sheriff’s Watch”](#) is a four-part multimedia series that delves into the stories and data behind inmate deaths in county jails, accompanied by two supplemental pieces. [“What We Learned”](#) and the [“Reporter’s Notebook”](#) provide readers with a behind-the-scenes look at this investigation.

The WBUR investigation was life-changing for Janice Pendleton, whose brother Rodrick, 51, died a painful death in jail from a bowel obstruction. His death had been one of many with an “undetermined cause” on the Suffolk County jail list of deaths. Pendleton was grateful for closure and answers.

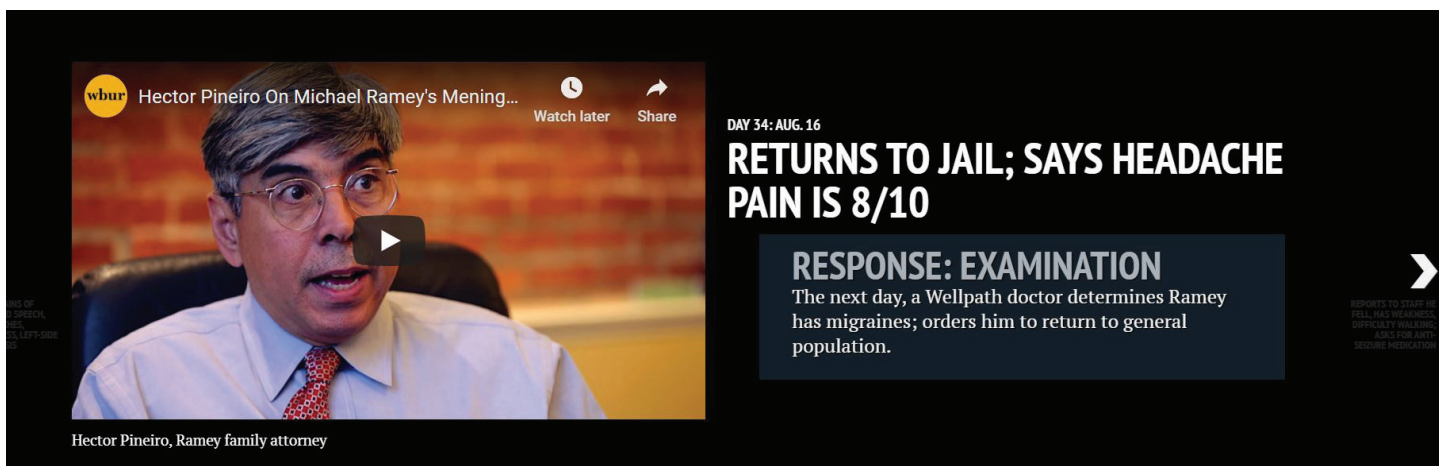
Willmsen and Healy didn’t stop with this story. They looked into 195 deaths in Massachusetts county jails over the past decade. WBUR found 37 more deaths in Massachusetts jails that sheriffs had not reported to the U.S. Department of Justice.

These investigations require a greater investment of time, money and energy than conventional reporting. Willmsen and Healy searched deeply to discover patterns and trends – through public records requests, state police records, lawsuit filings against sheriffs and medical providers, and their own audio and video inside the jails. Sometimes they were denied information or provided heavily redacted documents. At others, records were only released under threat of lawsuit.



Data visualization from “Dying on the Sheriff’s Watch” (wbur.org)

- “Dying on the Sheriff’s Watch” aired on WBUR’s *Morning Edition*, which reaches approximately 400,000 weekly listeners. The audio story features forceful narrative, rich sound and, importantly, humanity. In addition, the series was a featured discussion topic on WBUR’s daily local news magazine *Radio Boston*.
- The accompanying long-form written pieces published on [wbur.org](http://wbur.org) are told through the families of those who died and supported by voluminous documentation of failures at the jails. On the website, readers see visually compelling photographs, interactive graphics and documentary videos. This information-rich, independent content is what ensures the story sticks with readers and listeners – and the evidentiary support is what will effect real change.



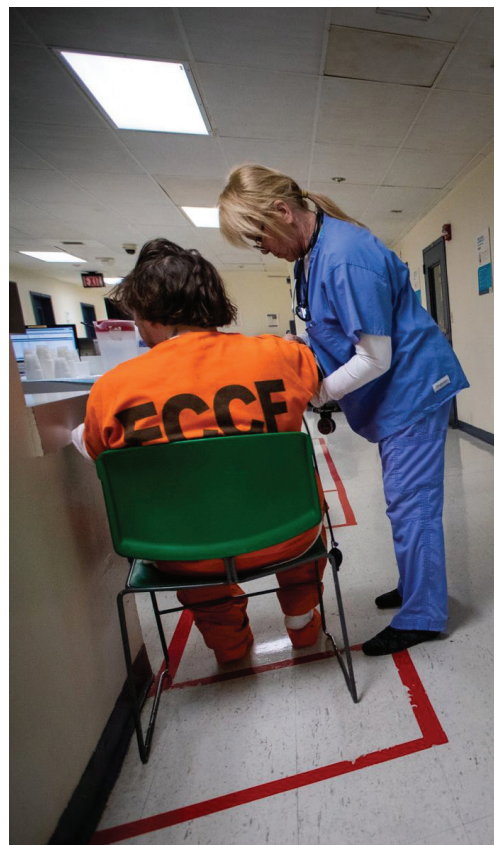
The digital buildout of the stories incorporated video interviews and interactive timelines. ([wbur.org](http://wbur.org))

## ONGOING IMPACT

An [April 3 story](#) documented the series’ initial impact, inspiring local and national lawmakers to call for more transparency from sheriffs, especially given the urgency around the coronavirus pandemic. The piece included reactions from **California Representative Karen Bass**, a member of the House Judiciary Committee; **Massachusetts Representative Seth Moulton**; and **Boston City Councilor Andrea Campbell**.

- [In August](#), after pressing for months, WBUR secured a new interview with Suffolk County District Attorney Rachael Rollins. Rollins’ staff was unable to find any records regarding Pendleton’s death – it seemed that the sheriff had not even reported the death to the DA’s office. Suffolk County Sheriff Steven Tompkins did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Rollins said she has since spoken with the sheriff, connected the general counsels of both offices and coordinated with Tompkins to “make sure this doesn’t happen ever again.”

As COVID-19 continued to spread across the country and throughout Massachusetts, Willmsen partnered with **WBUR reporter Deborah Becker** to highlight the impact on Massachusetts county jails, given their knowledge of inadequate medical care in the facilities.



The infirmary at Essex County jail in Middleton. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

[On April 9](#), WBUR revealed that coronavirus cases more than doubled overnight at the Essex County Jail, one of the jails highlighted in “Dying on the Sheriff’s Watch.”

- Inmates shared that, while living in dorms of 30 beds, they received soiled masks and did not have access to soap or disinfectant. The Essex County Sheriff’s Department wouldn’t tell WBUR how many coronavirus tests it had on hand or how many inmates had been tested.

[On April 28](#), WBUR released a detailed analysis that found “Five Massachusetts correctional institutions appear to be among the hardest hit by coronavirus infections among inmates and staff thus far at the roughly 4,900 jails and prisons in the United States.”

WBUR will continue to press for answers and action, and will update the public on the findings.



Screenshots of video show Sam Dunn, in the red shirt, inside a group cell at the Essex County jail prior to being transported to a treatment center in Bridgewater. (Essex County sheriff’s office)

## COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic is a story that is uniquely local, national and global. It’s a story that intersects with all areas of our lives – including the county jail system – and all WBUR newsroom reporters quickly found themselves covering COVID-19 to some extent. The WBUR Investigations team was no exception.

When the government isn’t providing adequate or clear communications, especially during a global crisis, WBUR and its public media peers step in to play a critical role in providing the public the information they need to make decisions about their health and safety. [In April](#), WBUR Investigations covered hospital morgues that were temporarily storing the deceased in trailers; people were dying from coronavirus at such a rapid rate, there was no more available space.

The pandemic continued, and the team dove into a series of emails to state officials in which the federal government downplayed the risks of the virus – [Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker eventually acknowledged ‘mixed signals’ from D.C.](#) The WBUR Investigations team stays on the story today, continuing to ask for more information and demand change. Over the past months, this dogged journalism has resulted in a series of articles reporting on newly created pandemic-centric issues.



Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker (center) wears a protective mask while visiting the Battelle N95 decontamination site, on Saturday, April 11, in Somerville, Mass. (Michael Dwyer/AP)

## MASK PROCUREMENT

Early in the pandemic, Massachusetts struggled to obtain the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect medical and essential workers, as did most of the country. The U.S. mask shortage — specifically N95 masks — resulted in a number of questionable deals as the state struggled to procure the protective equipment it needed to fight the virus. WBUR Investigations covered the miscommunication between Massachusetts and FEMA when promised supplies went missing.

This situation inspired Willmsen and Healy to dig deeper, finding a wave of people and companies taking advantage of the crisis to make a profit, jumping into the loosely regulated business of selling masks and other PPE to hospitals and health departments scrambling to keep workers safe.

- [“I Have A Guy In China: Inside The Pandemic Market For Medical Masks”](#) aired on WBUR’s *Morning Edition* on June 10; the corresponding digital piece was published the following day. Part 2 of this mini-series, [“Racing To Find Masks Amid The Pandemic, Mass. Turned To Brokers Who Didn’t Deliver,”](#) came soon after.

WBUR found problems with at least three deals in which masks were never delivered or their quality was subpar. In each of these cases, Massachusetts pre-paid millions of dollars to brokers and waited weeks and weeks to get masks. Massachusetts has been secretive about how it has spent taxpayer money for personal protective equipment like masks. State officials declined to comment on the troubled transactions and would not explain whether the state had a process for vetting these brokers. While the use of state tax-dollars is always an important public issue, during this pandemic, it can be a life-or-death decision. Today, there are updates in this area:

- Attorney General Maura Healey is now investigating allegations of price gouging, subpar products and orders that never materialized.
- A new regulation prohibits charging unfair prices on goods and services necessary for public health during an emergency. Before the pandemic, Massachusetts had a price-gouging law only relative to oil and gas.

## EVICTIIONS & HOUSING INSECURITY

An increasingly urgent issue exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic is that of housing insecurity. Before COVID-19 hit, many in the Greater Boston community struggled to find homes they could afford; now, hundreds of thousands in Massachusetts can't afford their rent or mortgage payments.

The WBUR Investigations team has reported on this issue since August. [“Housing Crisis Looms as Mass. Renters and Homeowners Miss Payments”](#) covered the 654,000 Massachusetts residents who missed their July rent or mortgage payment or feared they wouldn't pay in August. The situation has become more dire in Massachusetts — the state moratorium on evictions expired October 17 — and WBUR continues to follow the story.



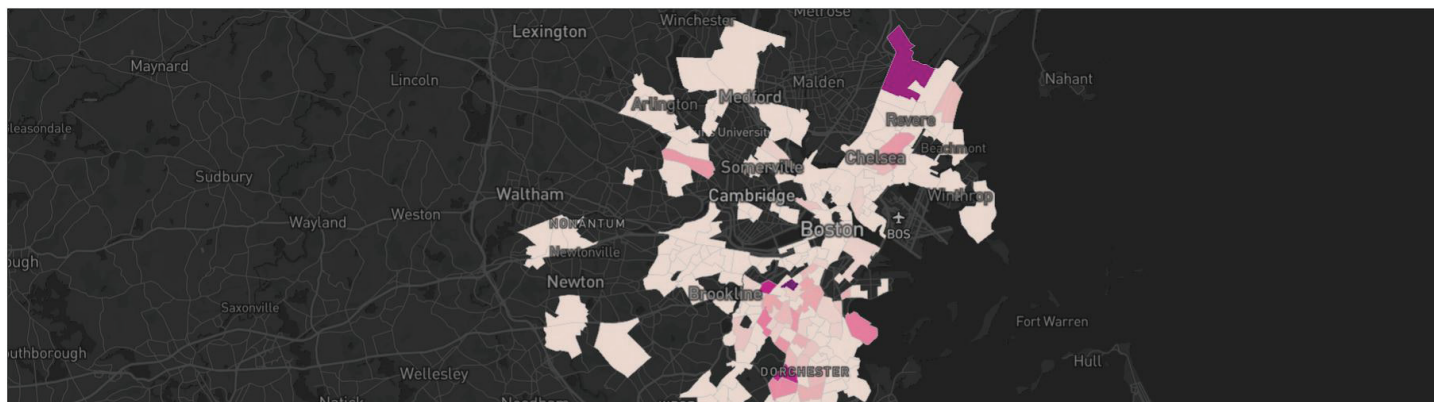
Landlord She Ling Wang walks up to Robelio Gonzalez (left) after Gonzalez was briefly detained by ICE agents outside the Lynn apartment. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

October coverage from WBUR Investigations reported on the efforts of housing advocates, landlords and Governor Baker's administration in the face of an impending wave of evictions. The frequent reporting culminated in an in-depth investigative piece on October 15, two days before the moratorium expiration date — a collaboration with Healy and WBUR reporter, **Simón Rios**. In researching [“Despite Eviction Ban, Some Landlords Pressure Tenants To Leave Amid Pandemic.”](#) Healy and Rios discovered that unofficial eviction tactics have increased throughout Massachusetts, especially in communities home to immigrant workers and Spanish speakers. This reporting was translated into Spanish through an ongoing partnership with **El Planeta: Boston's Latino Daily**, and published on the El Planeta website, as well, to reach an even greater number of people.

### Eviction cases pending in Boston area census tracts

At least 743 eviction cases were filed from January through September 2020. There are thousands of eviction cases in the pipeline statewide, and many more could follow after the eviction ban ends.

5 10 15 20 25 or more eviction filings



Data from Eastern Housing Court, housing courts in Chelsea, Brookline, Cambridge, Newton, Somerville, and select BMC courts. Only cases that were active, open, or suspended due to COVID-19 are included in the analysis. (Saurabh Datar/WBUR)

- Data journalist Saurabh Datar contributed an analysis of pending evictions in the Boston area, accompanied by an interactive map on [wbur.org](#). WBUR found the most cases in poorer parts of Roxbury, Dorchester, Revere and Chelsea — communities that are expected to be hard hit as the moratoriums end. These cases do not include the illegal eviction tactics WBUR uncovered.

- **Meghan Kelly**, WBUR multi-platform editor contributed an accompanying [digital explainer on how evictions work in Massachusetts](#). In service to WBUR’s mission to provide the public with the information they need, Kelly walks readers through the steps of a legal eviction and provides resources for those seeking help or more information.

This story is still developing, and WBUR will stay on it with the intensity it requires.

## PARTNERSHIPS

The impact of investigative journalism hinges on the right people reacting to the story. While securing larger audiences helps, targeting specific audiences is sometimes even more effective. In certain situations, affecting the one right person to make change is all it takes. The strategic development of meaningful partnerships is one of the ways the WBUR Investigations team is looking to make an impact and reach the right people.

WBUR Investigations partners with all teams within the WBUR newsroom.

- Since Willmsen joined the station, she has cultivated a watchdog mentality among reporters and provided training to enhance the newsroom’s culture of accountability.
- She oversaw an increase in public records requests and led efforts to invest in research tools like LexisNexis, which has aided reporters in gathering information about people, businesses and government actions.
- Reporters and editors regularly consult with Willmsen on story development, resulting in a number of investigative pieces from beat reporters, including multiple stories on the coronavirus.

## EL PLANETA

With help from a station-wide partnership with local Latino daily, *El Planeta*, WBUR has had an increasing number of stories translated into Spanish in order to reach a wider audience. As noted above, this partnership is critical as we report on the housing insecurity crisis in Massachusetts, which WBUR Investigations has found is hitting Spanish-speaking communities and immigrants especially hard. Moving forward, the team will continue to grow the relationship with *El Planeta*.

## PROPUBLICA

WBUR has joined forces with ProPublica, a Pulitzer Prize-winning nonprofit investigative newsroom. WBUR is working to hire another investigative reporter for the team, one who will work closely with ProPublica. Having a bigger team means WBUR will be able to focus on bringing an investigative lens to news developments, while also pursuing long-form enterprise investigations.

This partnership, made possible through the generosity of the James M. and Cathleen D. Stone Foundation, Bobby Monks and Paul and Ann Sagan, will aim to make a national difference with reporting that focuses on New England issues with resonance throughout the country.



## LOOKING AHEAD

Under Willmsen's leadership, WBUR is becoming a destination for unique, relevant and impactful multimedia investigations that reverberate beyond Massachusetts. By giving a voice to the marginalized and shining a light on injustice, we are providing an important service to the public.

WBUR Investigations has a solid foundation from which to build as the team grows and moves forward. With Boston as the hub of many federal and state agencies, future investigations may delve into issues such as government accountability, environment, social services and public infrastructure.

They also will include virtual and live events at CitySpace at The Lavine Broadcast Center, which will provide opportunities for the community to understand investigative journalism, as well as for stakeholders to have real conversations and create solutions.

The investigative journalism team's near-term goals include:

1. Formalizing the details of the long-term reporting partnership between WBUR and ProPublica, hiring the new investigative reporter, and collaborating on a story.
2. Forming partnerships with other leaders in the field, such as Reveal, the Marshall Project, and Maine Public Radio.
3. Providing further training for reporters and editors about investigative interviewing skills and ways to background people in WBUR's newsroom, as well as Maine Public Radio.
4. Acquiring and building an electronic library of data sets – such as voter registrations, deaths and lawsuits

With the support of the Investigations team, WBUR journalists will incorporate accountability journalism into all station initiatives, producing journalism that can make a real difference. With the team of three in place – including the first and only data journalist in the entire WBUR newsroom – and one more to come, the group is eager to double down on exposing hidden issues about which the public deserves to know. Willmsen hopes the team will produce one or two long-form investigative pieces in the next year, in addition to shorter enterprise stories.

## THANK YOU

As many local newsrooms are shrinking, Americans are increasingly calling for accountability journalism. Bostonians are no different. In a 2019 WBUR membership poll, 59% of respondents chose investigative journalism as a top priority. WBUR knew it was important to establish a stand-alone investigative unit, but even station leadership was impressed by this audience demand. Your trust and belief in WBUR has enabled us to meet the clear public need.

In this historic moment, a time when distrust and fear run rampant, our community is hungry for information they can trust, information that gives them power over their own lives. Investigative journalism uncovers issues hidden deliberately or accidentally – misuse and mismanagement can happen without deliberate malfeasance. Investigative journalism learns the truth and tells the stories – in words, with pictures and sound, backed up by data – so that the world can change.

Ultimately – and with your help – WBUR hopes to become New England's destination for compelling investigative projects. Thank you for partnering with WBUR in this endeavor.



## WBUR INVESTIGATIONS STAFF



**Christine Willmsen**  
***Senior investigative editor-reporter***

Christine Willmsen joined WBUR to launch the Investigations team in September 2018. Prior to WBUR, she worked at the Seattle Times for 16 years, writing investigative stories about social injustice, government malfeasance, environmental issues and criminal justice.

Willmsen was named a Pulitzer Prize finalist in the investigative, public service and breaking news categories and was on the reporting team that won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for breaking news. Other national awards she has won include Scripps Howard Public Service Award, Society of Professional Journalists' Sigma Delta Chi Award and Investigative Reporters and Editors Award.

She received a Nieman Fellowship from Harvard University in 2015 and an honorary Doctor of Letters from her alma mater Simpson College.



**Beth Healy**  
***Senior investigative reporter***

Beth Healy joined WBUR in 2019 after 19 years at the Boston Globe, where she was a member of the award-winning Spotlight Team from 2017 - 2019 and 2004 - 2008. While there, she was part of the six-part investigative series and podcast, "Gladiator: Aaron Hernandez and Football Inc.," based on the life and death of the NFL star — a finalist for IRE's Award for Sports Investigations. She was also on the team that wrote Debtors' Hell, a Pulitzer finalist.

While at the Globe, she worked in the Business section for nearly a decade covering the financial beat and reporting on major stories such as the financial crisis and numerous frauds. She also investigated the transit system's pension fund and the abuse of immigrant domestic workers, among other stories.

Before the Globe, Healy held reporting roles at the Boston Herald, Crain's Chicago Business and The Boston Business Journal and made numerous radio appearances on WBUR, NPR, and other stations.

## WBUR INVESTIGATIONS STAFF



**Saurabh Datar**  
***Investigative data reporter***

Saurabh Datar joined WBUR from the Boston Globe, where as a data and graphics journalist he worked on a number of landmark projects, including with the Spotlight team.

Saurabh has immense talents in data research and analysis, as well as in developing innovative graphics and visuals to illustrate investigative findings. Three of the projects he's been involved in have been Pulitzer Prize finalists.

Prior to the Globe, Saurabh was a data journalist at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and before that he brought data journalism to the Mumbai newspaper Mid-day, where he was a copyeditor and reporter.