National Association of Black Journalists Awards BGA/Sun-Times for Best News Series

August 11, 2022


The annual Salute to Excellence awards — announced at the NABJ annual conference in Las Vegas on Aug. 6 — honors journalism that “best covers the Black experience or addresses issues affecting the worldwide Black Community.”

The award marks the first time the BGA has received the NABJ honor.

The series, The Costly Toll of Dead-End Drug Arrests, was published in December and examined how minor drug possession cases are routinely tossed out in the courts, but not before adversely impacting thousands of lives.

The investigation was a collaboration between the BGA and Sun-Times and was authored by the Sun-Times’ Frank Main and the BGA’s Casey Toner and Jared Rutecki.

The reporters analyzed 280,000 drug possession cases using nearly two decades
of court data compiled by The Circuit, a collaborative of news organizations, including the BGA and Injustice Watch in partnership with civic tech consulting firm Datamade. The University of Southern California’s Annenberg Center for Health Journalism provided support for the project as well through a 2021 National Fellowship.

The investigation revealed about half of the drug possession cases in Chicago between 2000 and 2018 — about 140,000 — were dropped at their earliest stages.

The dropped cases were the result of a long-standing, commonly understood rule among prosecutors not to pursue criminal charges against anyone caught with user-level amounts — around a gram, according to interviews with judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys, as well as an examination of hundreds of case files.

And the dismissal rate has soared in the most recent years. In 2018, almost three quarters of drug possession charges were dropped.

The investigation examined the toll of the lives of tens of thousands of Chicagoans — mostly Black men — who have been jailed on drug charges everyone knew from the beginning were never going to stick. The series also examined how other parts of the country have worked to resolve these inequities.

The NABJ is the premier organization supporting the work of Black journalists throughout the nation, advocating on behalf of media professionals worldwide and supporting equity in the workplace and in the media. It is headquartered on the campus of the University of Maryland-College Park. For a complete list of winners go here.