

# Injustice Watch

IMPACT REPORT 2024



# Injustice Watch is a Chicago-based nonprofit journalism organization that examines issues of equity and justice in the court system.

## WHO WE ARE

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Our team of investigative reporters, editors, and community builders works collaboratively to produce public service journalism about the Cook County court system. Our reporting has led to policy changes, people in power resigning or being fired, innocent people being freed from prison, increased participation in judicial elections, and much more.

**Our goal is one of public service:** to listen to and center people affected by institutional injustices and provide our community with the perspectives, information, and resources needed to hold power to account. We promote transparency and accountability in the court system through our large-scale, investigative projects. We work to ensure equitable access to information and strengthen democracy through intentional audience engagement and community-building.

## OUR VALUES

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We are guided by our core values of accessibility, collaboration, and care.

**Accessibility:** We believe everyone deserves access to reliable information about the court system — especially those most affected by it. We make our reporting free and available to all Cook County residents. We promote accessibility by distributing print copies of our stories, translating our work, producing easy-to-read explainers and resource guides, and hosting in-person community events and workshops.

**Collaboration:** We value the contributions of everyone on our team and believe our work is better when we collaborate both within and across departments, maximizing communication and transparency. We look for opportunities to partner with other newsrooms and organizations in ways that complement our skills and resources while upholding our standards and values.

**Care:** We seek to inform and empower people as a way to improve our community. We produce ethical, human-centered journalism that prioritizes truth and fairness and holds power to account. We work deliberately to foster respect and understanding in our workplace through a commitment to transparency, solidarity, and work-life balance.



Nina Singleton's parents, Nicole and Michael Brown, look over records an Injustice Watch reporter helped them obtain about their daughter's overdose death in the Cook County Jail last year. Abel Uribe for Injustice Watch

Injustice Watch strives to do journalism that positively impacts our community.

Our work often leads to real and measurable change. We track the impact of our work in many forms, including legislation and policies to address problems we've identified through our reporting, corrective actions after our work exposes wrongdoing, community engagement around a topic we've covered, and positive outcomes in the lives of people we've featured in our reporting.

Here are some highlights from our work in 2024. ►



# Judicial elections

Before Injustice Watch began reporting extensively on judicial elections, Cook County voters generally knew very little about judges on their ballots, about one-third of voters skipped the judicial races altogether, and a judge hadn't lost a retention election in Cook County since 1990. Injustice Watch identified this information gap and set out to inform and engage the Cook County electorate about the importance of judicial elections and the impact judges have on our lives.

Each election year, we investigate and report on judicial candidates, produce comprehensive, nonpartisan judicial election guides for the primary and general elections, and run a large-scale community engagement campaign known as #CheckYourJudges. Our digital guides are used by hundreds of thousands of Cook County voters each election. We also print copies of our guide, which we distribute throughout the county.

Our work has helped shift the narrative around judges and judicial elections; more voters are paying attention to judges than ever before. Participation in judicial retention elections has increased every election year since we started publishing our election guide.



## A spotlight on our November 2024 judicial election guide

Our team spent months researching and reporting on the 77 Cook County judges running for retention in the November general election. This was a massive effort involving hours of courtwatching, following up on hundreds of tips, talking to attorneys who practice in every division of the court, knocking on doors, and digging through public records.

Our guide included details on each candidate's work history and legal experience, political connections, responses to our candidate survey, and ratings from all 13 bar associations.

**Community engagement:** Our judicial election guide is a full-team effort — not only the work of writing and editing the candidate profiles, but also the promotion, distribution, and community engagement work that helps get our guide into the hands of voters across Cook County.

This fall, we printed 150,000 copies of the guide — 30,000 more than in the primary — and distributed them throughout Cook County at more than 350 libraries, coffee shops, food pantries, laundromats, village halls, senior buildings, and other locations.

We distributed 4,000 guides to the Cook County





Jail and conducted seven voter education workshops with incarcerated voters about judicial elections.

We also hosted workshops on the West Side, set up tables at farmers markets, hosted a guide distribution party, and partnered with dozens of community groups and newsrooms across the county to spread the word about our guide.

**Impact:** In the course of our research, reporters David Jackson and Kelly Garcia found that two judges, Shannon O'Malley and E. Kenneth Wright, were claiming homestead exemptions on homes they own in Will County. Illinois law requires judges to live in the jurisdiction they serve and allows homeowners to benefit from homestead exemptions only on their "principal residence."

As a result of our reporting, both judges were referred to the Judicial Inquiry Board for investigation. Our work also led several bar associations to reconsider — and ultimately downgrade — their ratings of these two judges, demonstrating the key role Injustice Watch's rigorous reporting and research plays in the local judicial voter education ecosystem.

Hundreds of thousands of Cook County voters used our judicial election guide. O'Malley ultimately lost retention, while several other judges came close. This was the third time a judge was not reelected since we started our judicial election guides.

#### KEY STATS

**120,000**

Print guides distributed in Cook County ahead of the primary election

**150,000**

Print guides distributed in Cook County ahead of the general election

#### MEDIA PARTNERS

Austin Weekly News  
Block Club Chicago  
Chicago Reader  
Chicago Sun-Times  
Chicago Tribune  
Cicero Independiente  
Forest Park Review  
Harvey World Herald  
Hyde Park Herald  
La Raza  
NBC-5  
Riverside-Brookfield Landmark  
South Side Weekly  
Telemundo  
WBEZ  
Wednesday Journal  
WGN  
WVON



# Investigations



## Cook County Jail deaths

Last year, senior reporter Carlos Ballesteros began looking into a sudden rise in deaths at the Cook County Jail. He learned that more people had died in the jail in 2023 than in any year since 2013 and the death rate was higher than any year since at least 1995. Carlos filed more than 70 Freedom of Information Act requests with the Cook County Sheriff's Office, the Cook County medical examiner, and the Illinois State Police, and obtained thousands of pages of records, which showed lapses in medical care or supervision preceded at least half the deaths. (We've sued the sheriff and agencies for improperly denying two of the requests so far.) He also learned the sheriff's office was violating a state law that requires law enforcement agencies to inform families about the circumstances of their loved ones' deaths. In fact, Carlos was the one who told several family members how their loved ones died.

In June, we published "Dying on Dart's Watch," which highlighted oversight failures and Sheriff Tom Dart's lack of transparency and communication about deaths at the jail. The project was republished by our partners at The Appeal, Block Club Chicago, and South Side Weekly.

**Reaching people inside:** We printed 400 copies of Carlos' investigation and sent them to people incarcerated at the Cook County Jail, with an invitation to contact us. Since then, we've gotten a steady stream of phone calls and letters from people sharing their experiences in the jail and sending tips about what we should investigate next.

**Impact:** In the months since publication, the Cook County Board of Commissioners announced plans to hold hearings on the findings of Injustice Watch's investigation. Many of the families who lost loved ones are now suing the jail.

## Abuse at Aunt Martha's

Senior reporter David Jackson found state officials in the Department of Children and Family Services had known for years about violence, sexual abuse, and misconduct by guards and residents at Aunt Martha's Integrated Care Center, a facility on Chicago's South Side for the state's most vulnerable foster children. Aunt Martha's was shut down in August 2023 after two staff members were accused of sexually abusing kids there. But David found allegations of abuse had been raised nearly nine months earlier and other red flags at the facility dated back nearly to its launch in 2019.

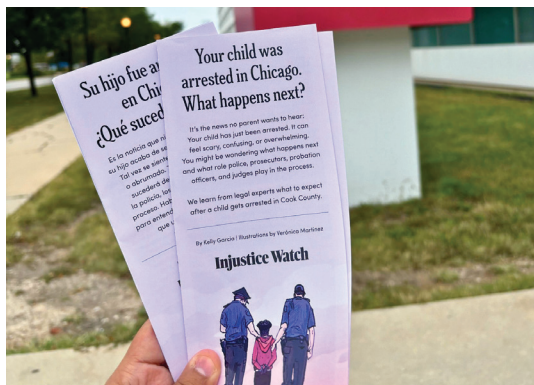
**Impact:** Following our reporting, lawmakers published a four-page resolution asking the state auditor general to probe the oversight failures by the Department of Children and Family Services.

## Chicago's failed youth diversion program

Senior reporter Dan Hinkel and reporter Kelly Garcia spent more than a year investigating Chicago's repeated failures to implement a program to divert children from the criminal justice system. Police have referred just 286 kids to the latest version, a \$10 million program called Youth Intervention Pathways, and only 35 have completed the program. The failures stem from a lack of buy-in from police, too little funding and support from the city, and reliance on nonprofit service providers with spotty records. We also obtained a decade of Chicago juvenile arrest data and found that while arrests are down significantly since 2013, the racial disparities in arrests have persisted, with police arresting more Black children in 2023 alone than they did white children in the entire previous decade.

This project was republished by Block Club Chicago and The Imprint, a national news organization focused on the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

**Filling information gaps:** As part of this project, Dan and Kelly identified a lack of information online about what happens when a child is arrested in Cook County. To fill the information gap for people most affected by the court system, Kelly created a step-by-step explainer about the process and possible outcomes after an arrest. Pamphlets featuring the explainer, illustrated by our artist-in-residence Verónica Martinez, were printed in English and Spanish and distributed at juvenile court and to youth-serving community organizations across the city.



The Ware family had no heat in the last two winters at a building known for serious code violations. Abel Uribe for Injustice Watch

## The Tenant Trap

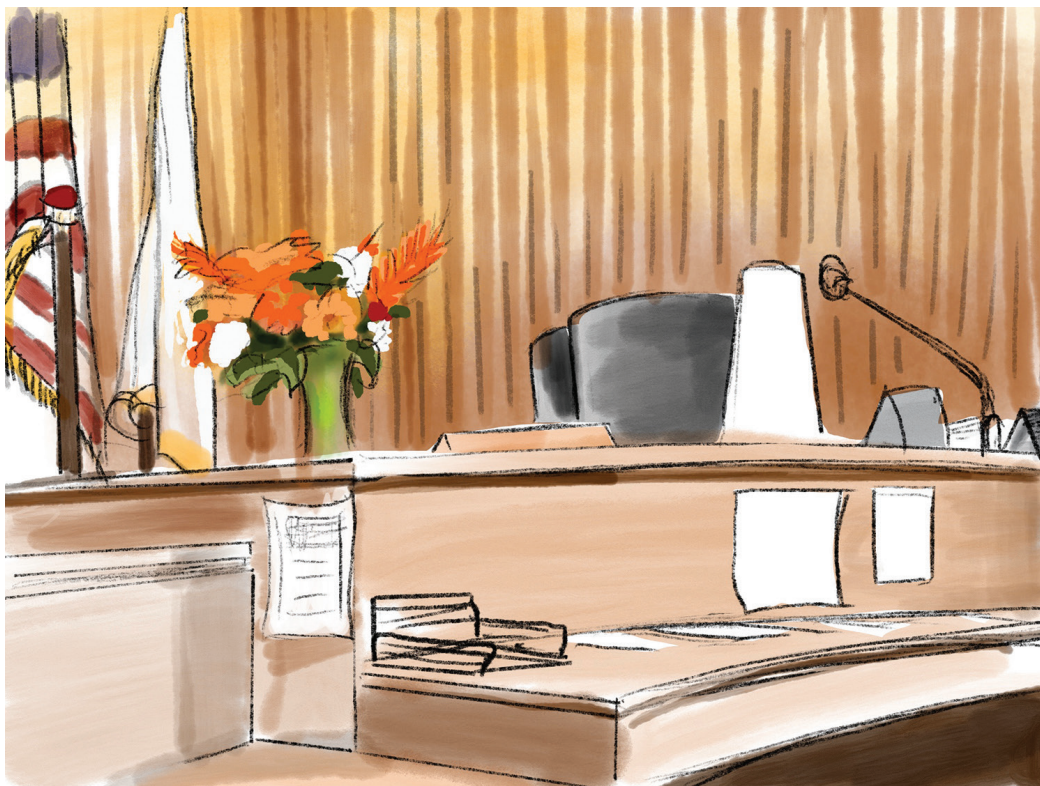
In August, we published *The Tenant Trap*, a yearlong, multipart investigation by senior reporters Alejandra Cancino and Maya Dukmasova, who found that thousands of lower-income renters in Chicago are trapped in unsafe buildings and at risk of eviction while their landlords evade accountability. Maya and Alejandra interviewed more than 100 tenants, landlords, judges, attorneys, and other experts and conducted an unprecedented analysis of more than 2.3 million records from the Chicago Department of Buildings and the Cook County Circuit Court. They found 2,654 buildings with chronic serious building code violations — two-thirds of them in majority-Black communities. They also found at least 328 buildings where landlords filed evictions at the same time the city was taking them to court over building conditions, including rat and roach infestations, lack of heat or water, and fire code violations.

In the face of these substandard housing conditions, Maya and Alejandra found families fighting back — by withholding rent, calling city building inspectors, and suing their landlords. Each part of the series followed a different group of tenants trying to improve their living conditions and hold their landlords accountable. But in each case, the tenants found a legal system set up to protect landlord profits over their right to safe and habitable apartments.

**Sharing our work:** Maya and Alejandra have presented their work to Chi Hack Night, the Chicago Housing Justice Coalition, and the Eviction Lab, and were featured on WTTW, City Cast Chicago, WVON, and WGN.

**Impact:** After we shared our findings from “*The Tenant Trap*,” Circuit Court Chief Judge Timothy Evans issued an order allowing tenants to request information on code violation lawsuits against their landlords. This can help them in defending against an eviction.





A courtroom sketch by Injustice Watch's artist-in-residence Verónica Martínez

# Ways to support Injustice Watch

Injustice Watch produces human-centered, data-driven investigations that have a real impact in our community.

## Donate online

Scan the QR code or visit [InjusticeWatch.org](https://InjusticeWatch.org) to make a donation.



## Donate by mail

Mail a donation to our office at  
55 E. Jackson Blvd., Ste. 640  
Chicago, IL 60604.

## Find other ways to give

Email [donate@injusticewatch.org](mailto:donate@injusticewatch.org) to learn about other ways to give, including stock donations, planned gifts, and corporate giving.

## Spread the word

Share our work with family and friends!

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