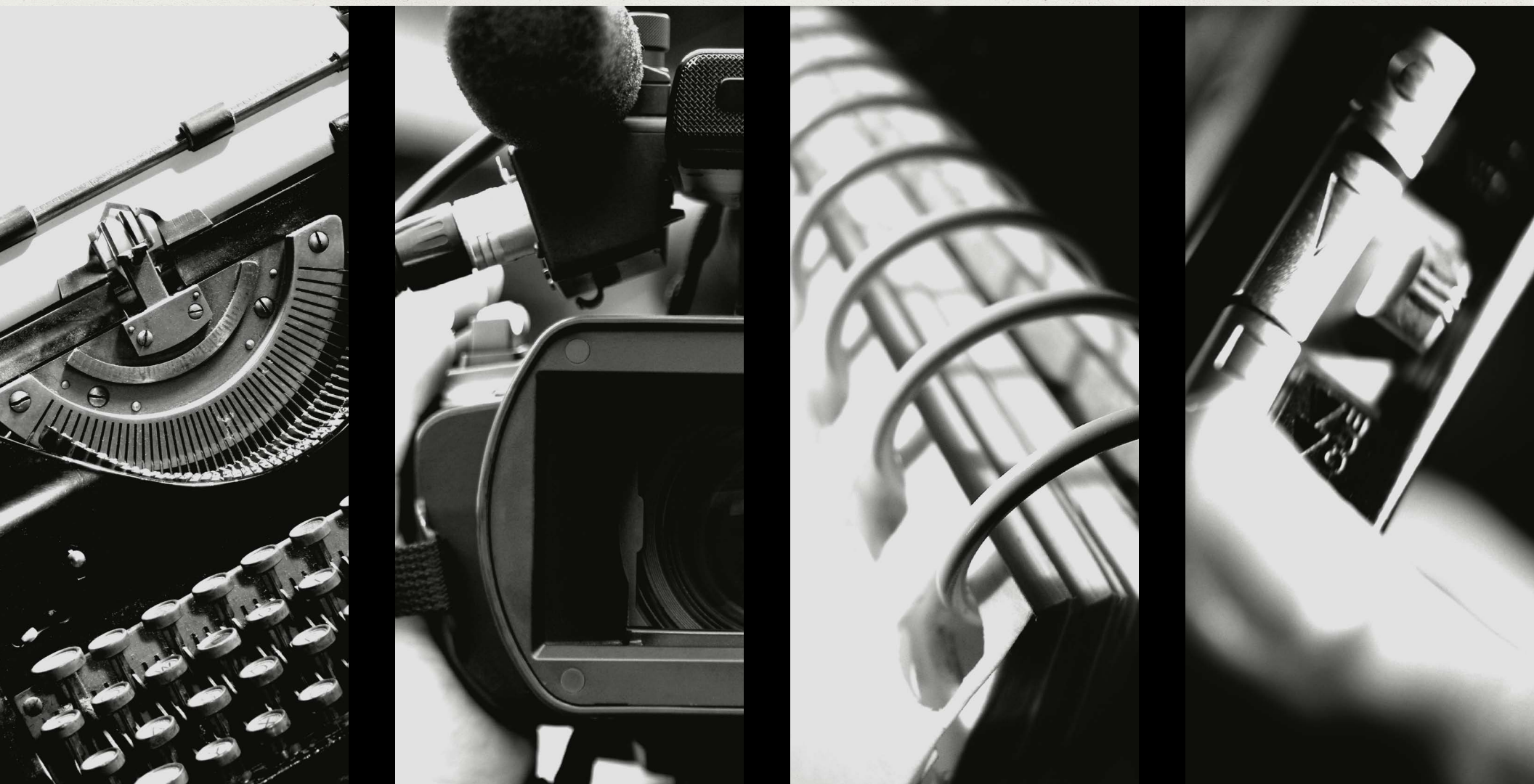




# UNTOLD STORIES

A Survey of Freelance Investigative Reporters





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# FOREWORD

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SINCE 2007, PROJECT WORD has enabled aspiring freelance journalists from around the world to report underrepresented stories for a broad range of media. We do this because we feel strongly that good journalism is central to an open, democratic society. As a project sponsored by Investigative Reporters and Editors, we help freelance reporters to deliver their best work to editors and their audiences. In the process, we have become increasingly concerned about the state of freelance investigative reporting. This concern culminated in a national survey, conducted in mid-2014 and summarized in this report. It illuminates the many challenges freelancers face and offers solutions to sustain their work.

This report would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of a range of individuals and organizations. For dissemination and outreach, we are grateful for the cooperation of the following groups: the Asian American Journalists Association, the Association of Independents in Radio, the Columbia Journalism Review, the Fund for Investigative Journalism, the Global Investigative Journalism Network, Investigative Reporters and Editors, Journalism and Women Symposium, The Nation Institute, the National Association of Black Journalists, the Native American Journalists Association, the Pulitzer Center, the Society

of Environmental Journalists, and the Society of Professional Journalists.

The following individuals provided crucial help and/or encouragement at various phases: Nathalie Applewhite, Sandy Bergo, Sarah Blustain, John Collins, Stephanie Cook, Laura Didyk, Margaret Engel, Susan Fassberg, Ruxandra Guidi, Mark Horvit, Brant Houston, Janice Hui, Jo Ellen Kaiser, Esther Kaplan, Heather Leach, Erin Siegal McIntyre, Erin Mishkin, Annie Murphy, Margie O'Driscoll, Charissa Pratt, Hannah Rappleye, Lisa Riordan Seville, and Erin Smith. Over the years, Project Word and its director have been grateful for the support of The Christensen Fund, the Mailman Foundation, the Fund for Investigative Journalism, The Nation Institute, and a group of dedicated individual supporters. The Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting, with funding from the McCormick Foundation, has also supported the director's editorial work. This report is an outgrowth of the care and grace of two anonymous donors to Project Word, whose support has been a godsend—a humble thank you. And lastly, thank you to the journalism professionals who took time out of their busy schedules to fill out the survey—especially those who volunteered for post-survey interviews.





01

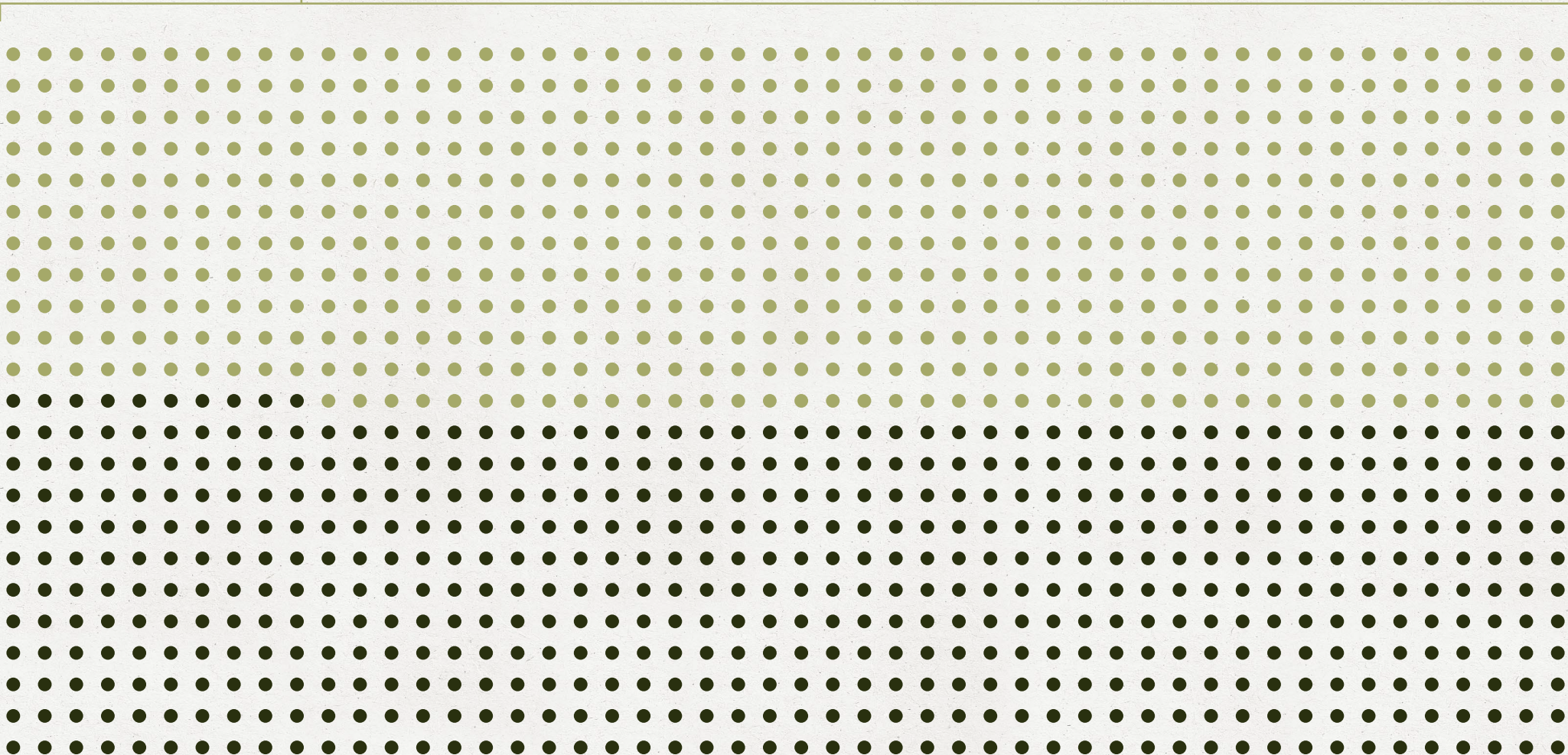
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**HIS SURVEY GREW out of a conversation with a major journalism funder in the spring of 2012. During the discussion Project Word observed that, at least anecdotally, increasingly dire conditions seemed to be forcing many freelancers to abandon public-interest stories. We were challenged to provide evidence. Because we found no relevant survey data, we decided to take on the task.

We asked about the challenges and opportunities facing contemporary freelance investigative reporters. More than 250 journalists responded. Based in 36 states and 26 countries, the respondents represented all ages, media, beats, and experience levels (see figures pages 8–9). They answered questions about their work—from pay and copyright, to legal protection and working with editors. Along with quantitative data, the survey produced nearly 50 pages of comments.



In the last 5 years, from 212 survey respondents alone, inadequate support for freelance reporters has deprived the public of at least 560 stories or as many as (or even more than) 1,150 stories that the reporters considered important.





## SECTION 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The survey focused specifically on four key points: how much harder freelance investigative work has become, what forces are driving the difficulties, how these challenges have affected the public interest, and how to strengthen the investigative freelance economy.

The upshot: According to survey respondents, stories are indeed disappearing. Eighty-one percent of respondents reported that in the past five years, resource constraints forced them to forfeit

“**Stories are indeed disappearing.**”

“otherwise viable and important public-interest reports.” According to the numbers, inadequate support for respondents alone has deprived the public of a minimum of nearly 600 such stories—and as many as 1,100 or more (see figure page 3).

The sad truth, we discovered, is that respondents are reaching into their own pockets to do this work: nearly one-third (30%) reported putting up more than \$5,000 a year, and some much more. Cumulatively in the past five years, respondents have spent a minimum of almost half a million dollars, and as much as nearly \$1 million, to finance their public-interest reporting (see figure page 5). Almost all of those surveyed (92% of 137 respondents) reported experiencing “anxiety on a daily/monthly basis regarding finances.” (see figure page 14) More than two-thirds supplemented their income in some way, and most (64% of survey respondents) dedicate less than half of their work to investigative reporting

(see figures page 6 and 9). According to numerous qualitative comments, respondents were intensely frustrated that they could not afford to report in the public interest. They seemed intent at carrying on an independent spirit that has produced an array of powerful public-interest exposés over the past 40 years—dating back to [Seymour Hersh’s reporting on the My Lai massacre](#).

Our respondents offered abundant solutions—a portion of which we highlight below, and the bulk of which we list in greater detail in the report’s [Appendix of Additional Comments](#). We close with recommendations to build on these solutions, in the hopes that they will help sustain journalists on whom the public depends for the tonic of independent reporting.

A caveat: This report does not try to provide a comprehensive resource guide for freelancers, take a thorough look at the landscape of freelance investigative reporting, or promise to resolve the crisis reported here. While all these would be valuable objectives, this report simply presents survey results. Project Word canvassed freelance investigative reporters during a time of great change, adaptation, and experimentation. We did so because we believe that the most viable solutions tend to come from the wisdom of those most directly involved.



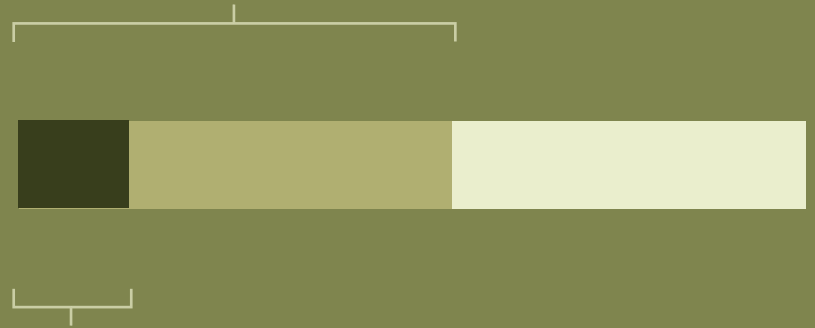
# 84%

of 199 respondents were subsidizing their work, reaching into their pockets for over

# \$460k/ year

# 55%

failed to recoup their expenditures from story revenue, grants, or donations.



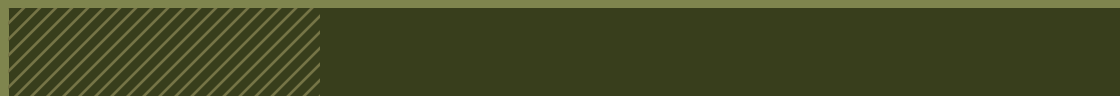
# 14%

received no compensation at all, resulting in “significant financial distress.”

\*Out of 179 respondents

**>70%**

**supplemented their  
freelance reporting,**



**and of those,**

**28%**

**had more than one source  
of supplemental income.**

\*Out of 203 respondents





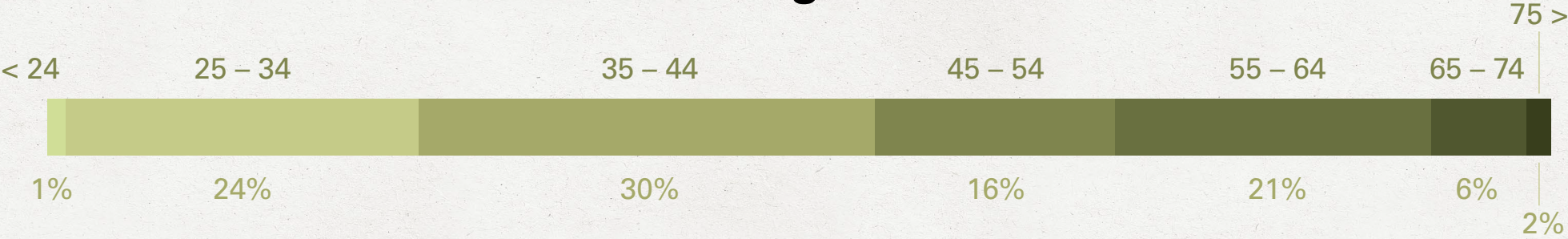
## 02

# METHODS

**T**HANKS TO THE email lists, website postings, and tweets of a dozen participating journalistic organizations, more than 250 freelance reporters responded to a link for Project Word’s online survey. Everyone received 40 main questions; a subset of closer to 100 respondents also volunteered to answer 30 additional optional questions (not all respondents answered each question, which is why some questions have fewer respondents than others). We asked respondents exactly how much investigative reporting they were doing and where they placed pieces. All respondents answered basic questions about their work—from pay and copyright, to legal protection and working with editors. The survey defined “investigative reporting” as work in the public interest “revealing facts, images or stories that powerful interests may not want known.”

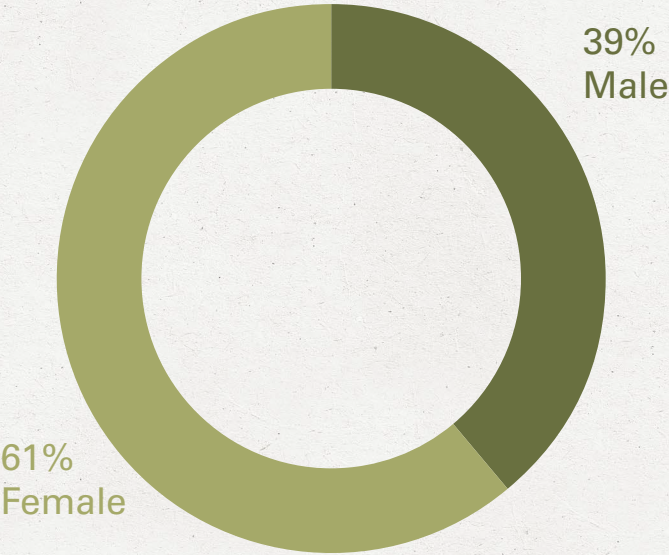


# Age



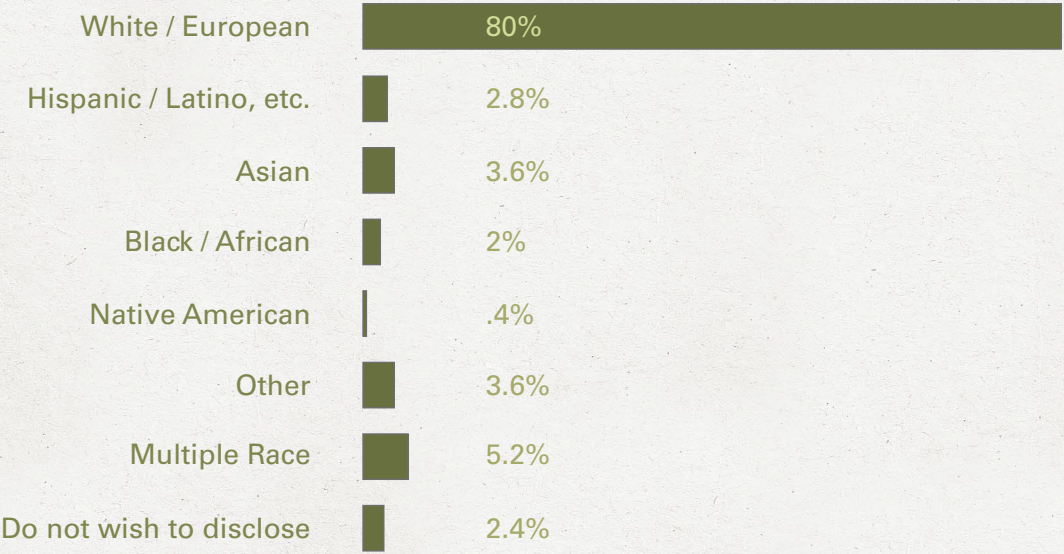
\*Out of 251 respondents

# Gender



\*Out of 246 respondents

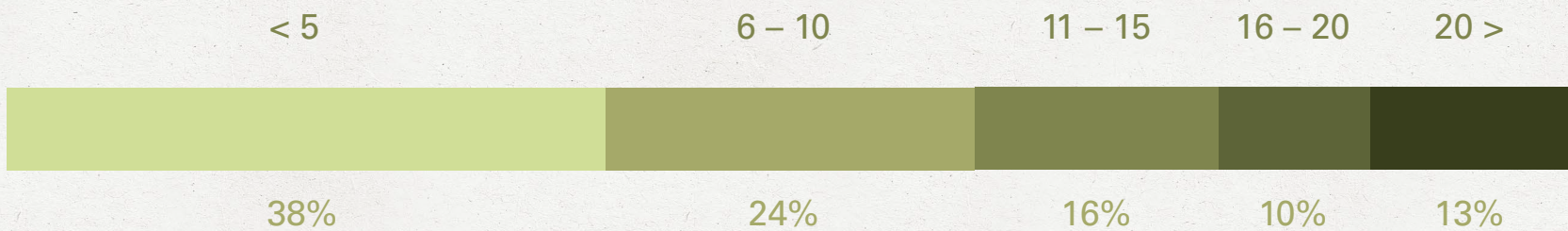
# Race/Ethnicity



\*Out of 251 respondents

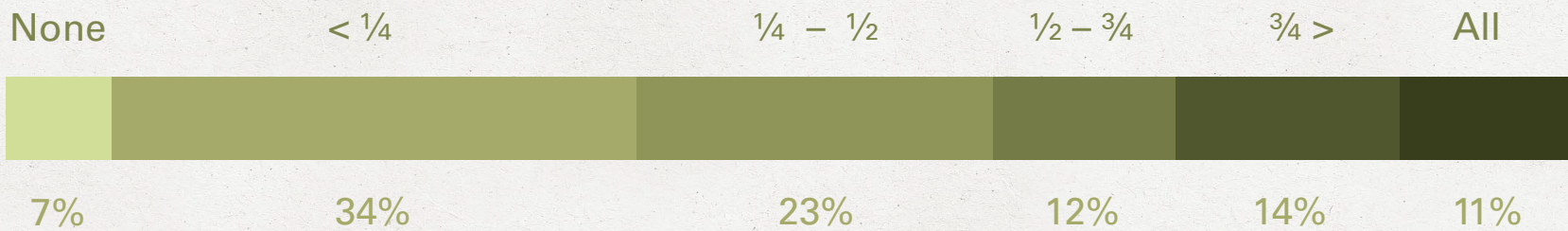


# Years of Experience Freelancing



\*Out of 225 respondents

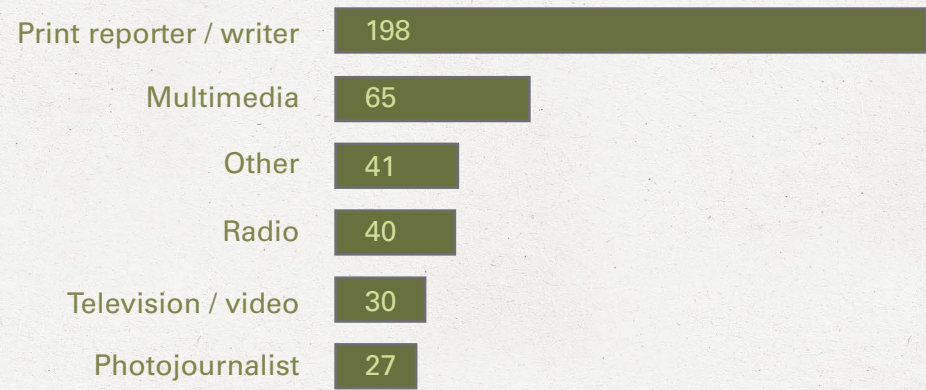
# Portion of Work Described as “Investigative Reporting”



\*Out of 223 respondents



# Current Medium

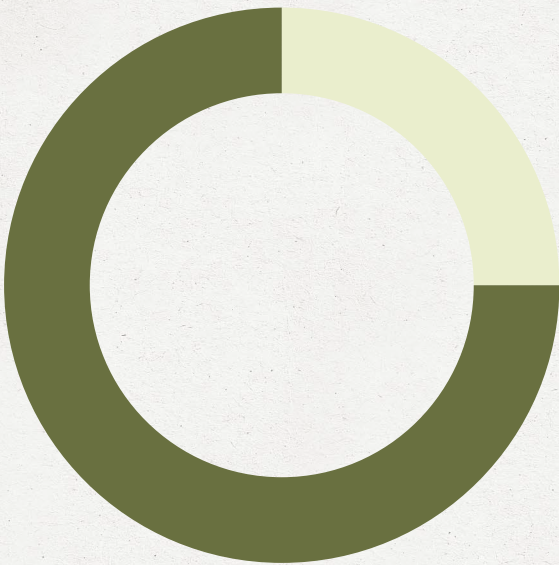


\*Out of 241 respondents, some respondents belong to multiple categories.

# Previous Experience



\*Out of 225 respondents, some respondents belong to multiple categories.



**75%**  
were in freelance as a choice,  
and not because they were  
laid off from a job.

\*Out of 241 respondents





## 03

# CHALLENGES: OVERVIEW

PERHAPS THE MOST telling findings concerned activities outside of investigative reporting: we found that at least 70% of respondents supplement their income—and that, amid economic stresses, most dedicate less than half their work to investigative reporting.

As managers of their own businesses, freelance reporters constantly hunt for investigative income: they pitch editors, they research funding sources, they apply for grants or fellowships. But out of sheer economic necessity, they also must scour leads for alternative revenue—by developing lucrative feature stories or doing non-journalism work entirely. Either option may hinder their ability to serve the public, jeopardizing the promise of journalism. This section highlights the numbers behind this unfulfilled promise.

In some ways, the findings of this survey are not new. Freelancers have always had to hustle, always been vulnerable, always struggled between checks, always had to chase leads for new work. But if the



## SECTION 3: CHALLENGES: OVERVIEW

survey is any indication, the past five years have proved particularly challenging.

Declining pay is reportedly a big part of the problem. Compared to the equivalent investigative project five years ago and adjusted for inflation, nearly half the respondents (44%) reported getting paid less, and nearly one quarter (22%) by half as much.

In this climate, respondents claimed repeatedly, they cannot cover the cost of investigative tasks—pursuing documents, cultivating sources, and traveling to report the story close up. More than two-thirds of respondents said outlets have commissioned pieces at least once without covering the expenses of reporting them—to say nothing of the associated time and living expenses (see figure page 16).

“I exist only on social security, food stamps, Medicaid,” wrote a print reporter and former newspaper staffer, age 64 to 73 years old, with over 20 years experience freelancing. “I live in one room and buy clothes at thrift shops. As a prize-winning investigative journalist, I find this disgusting.”

Funders are not making up the difference, as we’ll see below. As a result, freelancers are reaching into their pockets to serve the public. Only about 10% of 199 respondents said they were not financing their reporting (another 5% explicitly didn’t do investigative reporting at all). The vast majority (85%) said they were subsidizing their own work—of those, 10% were putting up more than \$10,000 annually. As a consequence, respondents have paid out a minimum

of \$460,000 annually—and as much as nearly \$1 million—to support their public-interest reporting (see figure page 5).

According to the survey, little is coming back. Of the reporters who subsidized an investigative report over the past five years, more than half (55%) reported that they failed to recoup their expenditures from story revenue, including grants or donations. Some (14%) said they received no compensation at all for their outlays and experienced “significant financial distress.”

“I exist only on social security, food stamps, Medicaid.”

The results are predictable: 92% of 137 freelancers reported experiencing “anxiety on a daily/monthly basis regarding finances.” (see figure page 14).

Thirty-six percent said they were “not at all confident” in their ability to plan financially for the future. Nearly half (46%) of 131 respondents reported being in debt for more than \$5,000, and nearly one-fifth (21%) for more than \$30,000. Based on these figures, these respondents alone carried an overall estimated total debt a minimum of nearly \$1.25 million. While the survey itself does not establish a link, it could be easily inferred that this debt stems at least partly from reporting costs. As it is, incurred story debts prevented 41% of respondents from “doing more investigative reporting.” If this trend continues, it will slowly erode a national capacity for future investigative reporting.



## SECTION 3: CHALLENGES: OVERVIEW

Beyond narrow pay issues, respondents also reported the following associated challenges:

- Disappearance of freelance budgets—and entire outlets
- Overworked editors
- Contracts that won't let them resell their work
- Contracts that don't protect them against libel
- Costly health insurance
- Inadequate access to research tools or affordable trainings

In the face of these combined factors, freelancers are forced to do more hustling than reporting. Only about one-third of respondents (34%) spent more time pursuing stories than pursuing revenue, including grantwriting or unrelated work. Forty-three

percent spent more time on business than on reporting—of which a handful (14%) spent “significantly more time.” If the public is missing out on much of a freelancers' time, it's partly because that time disappears in the maw of business operations and income maintenance.

In the past five years, according to the survey, freelancers have significantly limited their investigative reporting due to economic concerns. One question asked how many colleagues have had to “drastically cut back their investigative reporting due to resource

“Freelancers are forced to do more hustling than reporting.”

constraints—or abandon such reporting entirely.” More than half (51%) reported at least three colleagues retrenching in this way. Assuming that respondents were not reporting the same colleagues, the number of reporters who could not fully serve the public due to resource constraints totaled at very minimum 300 to 450 reporters (this does not include the respondents (32%) who reported simply “everybody I know has had to cut back”).

Some are leaving the field entirely: “If health insurance and a decent income had been easier as a freelancer,” wrote a print reporter and photojournalist who went on to academia, “I might have continued with it full time.” Another respondent added: “Despite writing an investigative feature that was the most read article in Mother Jones magazine last year, increasingly, I'm having to consider doing something other than journalism to make a living.”

As a consequence, the public is losing valuable stories. In the past five years, 81% of respondents reported having to forfeit stories due to “resource constraints”—more than half gave up at least five stories (55%), and another one-quarter abandoned more than five stories. Nor were these puff pieces. The question explicitly referred to “otherwise viable and important public-interest reports” (see figure page 3). Based on comments and interviews with respondents, such aborted stories covered a range of topics, from how the Pentagon handles the health of soldiers and the US role in mass killings in an ally country, to global reproductive rights, an investor's plan to bundle and sell minority-owned broadcaster companies on the public spectrum, and “blatant corruption” in Florida.

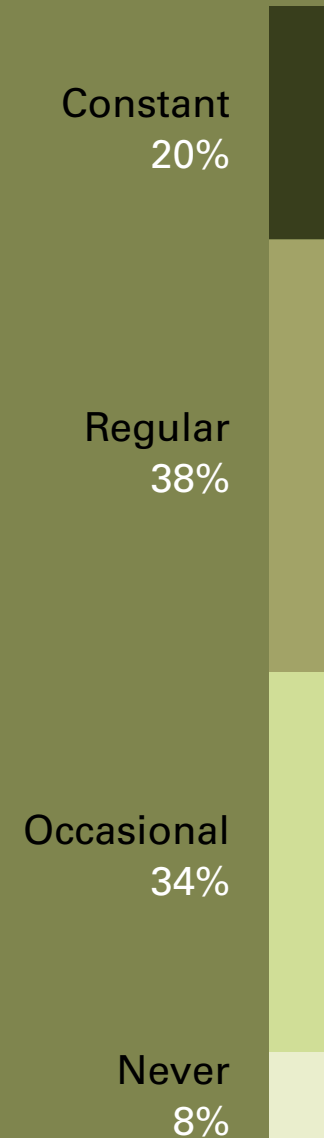


### SECTION 3: CHALLENGES: OVERVIEW

According to the sums for the past five years, inadequate support for freelance reporters has deprived the public of at least 561 such stories and possibly as many as 1,100 or more. This is for survey respondents alone. Freelancers are savvy, resourceful survivors. But according to the survey, they largely cannot survive economically *and* fulfill their potential to the public.

To the extent that this shortcoming exists, according to the survey, it results largely from four interrelated elements, explored in the next section.

## Financial Anxiety



\*Out of 137 respondents





# 04

# CHALLENGES: ANALYSIS

**F**REELANCE INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS face four main challenges:

1. **Unworkable economics**
2. **Overstrained and underfunded outlets**
3. **Inequitable contracts**
4. **Inadequate tools**

## I. UNWORKABLE ECONOMICS

### **Time and Money**

Media outlets, which normally pay writers by the number of words, rather than the hours of reporting, are failing to cover the time and costs of investigations—the false leads, arduous data searches, voluminous emails and phone calls, formal requests to obstinate government agencies, and sheer patience for the hunt. Because the legwork can ultimately go unpaid, economically savvy respondents often hesitate to follow leads. Even when leads pan out, “it becomes



## SECTION 4: CHALLENGES: ANALYSIS

a bad, beat-the-clock scenario,” wrote a print reporter with 16 to 20 years experience as a freelancer. “You have tons of work to do, and the more deeply you dive into your subject, the less money you make per diem.”

“It’s often much more profitable to write fluffier stories for magazines. I recently spent several months chipping away at an investigative story and I was only paid \$200 for it. Whereas if I write a piece for a special issue of a magazine, I can easily make \$800 in a single week.”

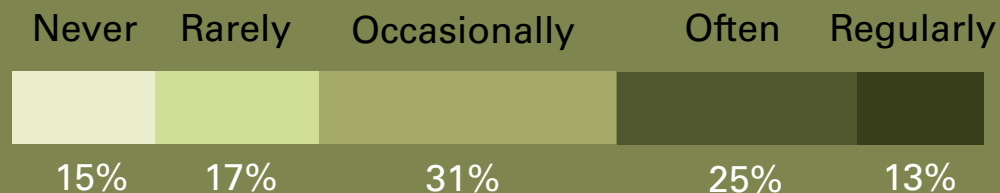
—Print reporter, age 44–53, 0–5 years freelancing

### Declining Income in Online Age

Compared to the equivalent investigative project five years ago and adjusted for inflation, nearly half the respondents (44%) reported getting paid less—nearly one quarter (22%) by half as much. Asked to characterize fees for their “most lucrative investigative report,” 40% reported receiving pay of under \$1 a word—from 31–50 cents (12%), to 21–30 cents (6%), and even 0–20 cents (7%). Some outlets are eliminating freelancer budgets—or closing altogether.

“The blogs only pay \$50USD! I thought freelancers would refuse, but to my unpleasant surprise, the race to the bottom won out...”

—Print reporter and former newspaper staffer, age 24–33, 0–5 years freelancing



69%

**said outlets commissioned pieces without covering the expenses of reporting them.** \*Out of 212 respondents



## SECTION 4: CHALLENGES: ANALYSIS

“Even places that will pay \$1/word, plus expenses, still amount to \$3,000–6000 at most, which is a pretty small amount for a story that can take upwards of a year to report and write. Not to mention that you get paid on publication, so what are you supposed to eat during the year of reporting and writing?”

—Print reporter, age 34–43, 11–15 years freelancing

## II. OVERSTRAINED AND UNDERFUNDED OUTLETS

### Shifting Audience: Attention Span of Readers (as perceived by outlets and their editors)

Audience trends may exacerbate the problem. Armed with sophisticated metrics to inform investors, advertisers, or funders, outlets relentlessly feed web audiences. Fewer editors with smaller staffs are expected to produce more content in shorter form to induce more measurable interest. That doesn't always bode well for development of large-scale reporting projects, which are expensive, time-consuming, and unreliable in popularity.

“Someday in the near future only stories that start and end on one smartphone screen will be purchased.”

—Print reporter and former newspaper, radio, and magazine staffer, age 64–73, 6–10 years freelancing

## Challenges Ranked by Importance to Respondents

- 1 Income to report stories—and still pay bills**
- 2 Bandwidth of editors: communication and relationship-building**
- 3 Lack of benefits (e.g., health and libel insurance)**
- 4 Unfavorable contracts with outlets**
- 5 Outlets that don't use freelancers**
- 6 Retaining intellectual property on stories**
- 7 Audience shifts: diminishing interest in complex investigative pieces**
- 8 Access to skills training**

\*Rankings were developed according to the mean score of importance by respondents in each category. Each of these categories was ranked by between 201 and 214 respondents.



## SECTION 4: CHALLENGES: ANALYSIS

“Commercial media, ‘60 Minutes’ included (my old gig), shy away from politically ambiguous, controversial, in-depth stories much more often due to management’s perception of what the audience wants. Veer right after 9/11, stop doing foreign stories once ‘war-weariness’ sets in, do more entertainment-related pieces, etc.”

—Print reporter, former broadcast staffer, age 44–53, 6–10 years freelancing

### Turnover of Editors

The upheaval brought about by new media has caused a rapid turnover among editors, severely disrupting the kind of trust-building that freelancers require.

“Nearly all of the editors I work with now were not in their position five years ago. There seems to be a factory in New Jersey that churns them out.”

—Photojournalist and multimedia reporter, former newspaper staffer, age 44–53, 11–15 years freelancing

## III. INEQUITABLE CONTRACTS

To the extent that recent trends in technology have jeopardized a freelancer’s ability to survive doing investigative reporting, the difficulty boils down to terms on paper covering two categories:

### Copyright

In a previous age, freelancers could more easily resell a piece to noncompeting outlets in other regions or coverage areas. But in the

online era, content is more international and universally accessible. And outlets are increasingly demanding the right to repurpose and permit reuse of a freelancer’s work, including online reposting or “aggregation.”

“At one time, editors accepted your desire for ‘First North American rights’ and copyright. Now outlets and editors want access to electronic rights and it is difficult to go up against their legal staffs or publishers.”

—Print, multimedia, and online reporter; former newspaper, magazine, radio, and broadcast staffer, age 54–63, over 20 years freelancing

### Safety and Liability

If valuable stories don’t reach the public, it’s often because freelancers can’t risk doing them in the first place: Unlike staffers, they have no paid access to a libel lawyer, libel insurance, and protection in case of a legal action.

“Contracts that put all of the liability on the freelancers has a chilling effect on investigative reporting.”

—Print reporter and former magazine staffer, age 44–53, 16–20 years freelancing

## IV. INADEQUATE TOOLS

Respondents wrote that their work is hindered by a lack of access to a range of reporting tools that many staff reporters depend on—expensive database research services; research assistance; and legal assistance with FOIA requests.





## 05

# OPPORTUNITIES: OVERVIEW

## HELPING FREELANCE REPORTERS SERVE THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Judging from the comments from respondents, any efforts to strengthen independent reporters will be galvanized by freelancers themselves. If this survey is any indication, good ideas abound. For more, see our [Appendix of Additional Comments](#). Here is a small sample of what survey respondents urged:

### **Standardize Credibility**

Create a loose confederation of experienced freelancers, to help funders and editors choose freelancers with confidence.



## SECTION 5: OPPORTUNITIES: OVERVIEW

“ I think when it comes to legacy news organizations, freelance investigative reporters might be taken more seriously if their services were offered as part of a consortium of journalists who have been ‘vetted’ in some way that gives editors a comfort level with skills and competence.

—Non-freelancer staff reporter (interview)\*

### Add Affordable Trainings Explicitly Suited to Freelancers

Focus trainings on business management, multimedia skills, cross-platform distribution, data mining, query letters, grantwriting, and Freedom of Information requests.

### Advocate for Freelance Reporters

Explore better health-insurance options, lower self-employment tax, stronger FOIA laws—think creatively and think big.

“ I would deeply appreciate a fund that forgave student debt in [appreciation] of journalism as a public service.”

—Print, ex-newspaper staff, age 24–33, 0–5 years freelancing

“ When government contracts or public private partnerships are exposed for waste, fraud and abuse, and wind up saving taxpayer dollars, the reporter deserves a percentage of the savings, just like in a *qui tam* suit. That would surely create an incentive!”

—Print and radio reporter, former radio staffer, age 54–63, 6–10 years freelancing

“ I would deeply appreciate a fund that forgave student debt in [appreciation] of journalism as a public service.”

### Organize and Share Information

Facilitate collective strength to ensure that freelance investigative reporters can cooperate to their own benefit in concrete ways—from exchange of intelligence to formulation of pay standards.

“ I’d love to see a sharing of information about how much different outlets pay—it would help with negotiations.”

—Print and multimedia reporter, former newspaper staffer, age 44–53, 6–10 years freelancing

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\*To gain an outside perspective, Project Word conducted a parallel survey of 100 non-freelancer journalism professionals, including staff editors, staff reporters, facilitators, and journalism educators: their responses were segregated from the freelancer data, and their comments noted here as “non-freelancer.”





## 06

# OPPORTUNITIES: ANALYSIS

FROM PRACTICAL TO blue-sky ambitious, respondents had their own ideas to address core challenges. A small sample is provided below, but a more comprehensive sample can be found in the [Appendix of Additional Comments](#).

## I. CREATE SUSTAINABLE ECONOMICS

Collaborate, organize, and explore to advance viable economic arrangements at every level of ambition.

“Create a reporting cooperative.”

—Photojournalist, multimedia, ex-newspaper staff, age 44–53,  
11–15 years freelancing

“Train reporters to run a quality freelance business.”

—Print, multimedia and online reporter, former newspaper staffer,  
age 34–43, 6–10 years freelancing



## SECTION 6: OPPORTUNITIES: ANALYSIS

“Centralize information about how much different outlets pay to assist with reasonable negotiations.”

—Print and multimedia, ex-newspaper staff, age 44–53, 6–10 years freelancing

“Make [it] mandatory for nonprofit news organizations to hire a certain percentage of freelance work.”

—Print, radio, TV, and multimedia reporter, ex-newspaper, age 34–43, 11–15 years freelancing

One respondent worked as part of a successful [collaborative in Portland, OR](#).

## II. ASSIST OVERSTRAINED AND UNDERFUNDED OUTLETS

Vet freelancers; help them develop, place, and fund stories; engage editors in the funding process.

“It would be helpful if there were a more developed relationship between outlets and foundations that fund freelance reporting, so that editors could be clued in to what money might be available to subsidize the reporting being done by the freelancer.”

—Print reporter and former newspaper staffer, age 24–33, 0–5 years freelancing



# 93%

**said they “would be willing to join a collective of freelancers for the right cause.”**

\*Out of 190 respondents



“ Editorial support is critical. If, for example, the FIJ had staff editor(s) to help reporters, that would make a huge difference.”

—Television and multimedia reporter, age 44–53, over 20 years freelancing

### III. STANDARDIZE CONTRACTS

Come up with fair contracts, and standardize them.

“ I would love to see a boilerplate template that a freelancer could send an outlet, rather than the other way around. Once we get their contract, we are already at a negotiating disadvantage.”

—Print and radio reporter and photojournalist, former newspaper, radio and wire staffer, age 54–63, 0–5 years freelancing

“ Pay has to depend on the amount of time spent on research, NOT on the word count.”

—Print, ex-newspaper staff, age 64–73, over 20 years freelancing

“ Contracts where publications accept at least some legal responsibility would be most helpful.”

—Print, ex-magazine staff, age 44–53, 16–20 years freelancing

### IV. IMPROVE SERVICES

Provide legal and research assistance.

“ Pressing needs are (a) financial support for the legwork that comes with investigations—records searches, travel, etc., and/or (b) some type of collectively available suite of research tools (LexisNexis, Accurint, online database access).”

—Print reporter and former magazine staffer, age 34–43, 6–10 years freelancing

“ Good media perils insurance is expensive. The nonprofit sector could help freelancers find—and pay for—affordable policies.”

—Print and multimedia reporter, former newspaper staffer, age 54–63, 16–20 years freelancing

“ Support on non-answered FOIA requests” [e.g., legal support to pressure federal bureaucracies to act on requests]

—Print reporter, age 64–73, more than 20 years freelancing



# ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY

## CHALLENGES AND SHORTCOMINGS

The public is losing important stories, and freelancers are going into their pockets to keep themselves afloat. Foundations and donors drive much of the good reporting done today, by freelancers and non-freelancers alike. Here are the principal philanthropic challenges, aspirations, queries, and solutions, in our respondents' words (more in our [Appendix of Additional Comments](#)):

### Funding the Reporter

Reorient funding to reflect contemporary challenges: Fellowships are far too rare. Applications can divert valuable time from the reporting. And grants fall short, providing only partial support for specific stories.

“ To pay only for reporting and production is like paying a police officer only for those hours when she or he is arresting someone.”

—Multimedia reporter and former magazine staffer, age 34–43,  
11–15 years freelancing



## SECTION 7: ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY

“Most of the funders I’ve contacted only pay for expenses to report a story, assuming that the publication will pay sufficiently to make such reporting worthwhile. But the publication’s pay never does.”

—Print reporter and photojournalist, age 54–63, 16–20 years freelancing

### Increase Unbiased Funding Sources

If journalism grants aren’t sufficient, reporters often must apply for problematic issue-oriented funding.

“An issue of increasing concern is journalism that is paid for by foundations or institutions with clear ideological or financial interests in the outcome. Even if there is an effective editorial firewall, this poses ethical problems for both freelancers and outlets.

—Print and TV reporter, ex-newspaper, magazine, and TV staff, age 54–63, 11–15 years freelancing

### Facilitate Multiple Grants

Facilitate additional funding: Since grants rarely cover a story’s costs (only 32% of respondents said grants covered the majority of expenses; see figure p. 26), reporters sometimes apply for second and third grants—which can cause complications. Only 39% of respondents (43 of 110) tried applying for multiple grants on a single project. If single grants aren’t enough, make it easier to apply for more.

“Each funder wants sole credit, they don’t cooperate.”

—Print reporter, former newspaper and magazine staffer, age 44–53, 6–10 years freelancing

“I am concerned about balkanization in the nonprofit journalism universe, with too many organizations handing out too many smallish grants that are just large enough to appeal to reporters or organizations, but not large enough to really support a project. There is too much organizational self-preservation, not enough eye on the broader mission.”

—Non-freelancer staff editor who works with freelancers at a major national outlet

### Streamline Applications

Take a cue from the Common Application for college admissions—simplify grant applications to avoid diverting time and attention away from the reporting itself. And if possible, don’t require that a reporter complete the bulk of reporting on a story, on the reporter’s dime, before deciding whether to fund it.

“Painful. Every grant application is different. Standardization of requirements would be a HUGE help (i.e., summary statement should be 50 words or less for ALL grant applications, not 50 for this one, 15 for that one, 300 for that one, etc.).”

—Print, television, and multimedia reporter, age 44–53, 6–10 years freelancing

“Usually [a good story] starts with just an idea. Nobody gives you money till you are halfway there. I once saw advice to academics saying they should apply for grants for the project they have just finished since they could write a great proposal! That’s what we have to do.”

—Print, ex-newspaper staff, age 64–73, over 20 years freelancing



## SECTION 7: ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY

### Postscript: Success Stories

Sometimes things go right. And that brings lessons, too.

“ I once applied for an Annenberg and a Fund for Investigative Journalism grant for the same project (Indian youth suicide). Both came through in amounts that, when totaled, allowed me to do the project. They were happy to coordinate; it [just] involved a little adjustment of deadlines.... The organizations also provided different and complementary types of advice and support.”

—Print and online reporter, former magazine staffer, age 64–73, 0–5 years freelancing

## FULFILL THE PROMISE

Respondents weighed in on what would enable them to better serve the public—including the obvious.

“ Support the person behind the project. Offer funding that covers the time we spend investigating, pitching, reporting and writing—not just the equipment, research and travel expenses involved in a project.”

—Print and multimedia reporter, ex-newspaper staffer, age 34–43, 16–20 years freelancing

“ [Funders] just need to publicize themselves more broadly.”

—Print, age 34–43, 11–15 years freelancing

“ Facilitate interaction with their donor recipients.”

—Print and multimedia reporter, age 54–63, over 20 years freelancing

only  
**32%**  
said that grants cover  
the majority of their  
reporting expenses.

\*Out of 116 respondents

“ Be willing to give feedback and critiques of proposals ideally pre-submission, but also post.”

—Print reporter, age 34–43, 6–10 years freelancing

“ Expedite response time.”

—Print reporter, former newspaper and magazine staffer, age 24–33, 0–5 years freelancing

“ Make it less time-consuming to apply for grants. Have an initial round where you submit just a 250-word project idea and one clip. Then have them invite the best applicants to submit a full proposal.”

—Print reporter, age 24–33, 0–5 years freelancing



THIS SURVEY SHEDS light on current experiences of freelancers with the aim of effectively stabilizing the field of freelance investigative reporting. To that end, Project Word recommends that strategies be developed to do the following:

**Short-Term**

- Work with lawyers to develop boilerplate contracts that are fair to freelancers, editors, and outlets
- Arrange access to affordable support services, from LexisNexis to legal assistance in FOIA requests.
- Provide story-placement services and auxiliary editing to freelancers.
- Help freelancers develop story queries and grant proposals: where helpful, coordinate efforts to advance funding for a reporter's work.
- Advance current efforts to tailor more trainings to cash-strapped freelancers.



## SECTION 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

### Mid-Term

- Engage philanthropic partners to increase support for freelance investigative reporters, exploring how to fund reporters' time.
- Better publicize resources and programs available to freelancers.
- Develop a system to vet promising and established freelancers and facilitate access to them.
- Work with relevant organizations to publicize the experience of independent reporters and their role in the public interest.

### Long-Term

- Systematically review existing models of distribution and monetization to find ways to benefit freelancers and thus the public.
- Expand efforts by relevant organizations to advocate for freelancers on key issues, from tax and health insurance to open-government policies.
- Engage philanthropic partners in open conversation about how to streamline the grants process.
- Facilitate efforts by freelancers to cooperate, collaborate, and organize in their own interest through existing channels or through new ones.

### Current Work

Many of the above objectives are already being taken on, at least in part, by a range of peers in the field—from Investigative Reporters and Editors and Investigative News Network, to the Poynter Institute, the Society of Professional Journalists, and the American Society of Journalists and Authors. A full list of contacts appears in the next section.

### Project Word and IRE

Project Word is a fiscally sponsored project of Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc., a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting. IRE was formed in 1975 to create a forum in which journalists throughout the world could help each other by sharing story ideas, newsgathering techniques, and news sources.

As fiscal sponsor, IRE serves as the administrative home of Project Word's programs and activities. Both entities work with freelancers, allied journalistic organizations, and the philanthropic sector to advance the practice of rigorous, independent, public-interest reporting.

To comment on this survey or to explore collaboration in support of freelance journalism, please contact Laird Townsend, Director, Project Word at: [ProjectWord.org](https://ProjectWord.org)



# RESOURCES

## A PARTIAL LIST OF NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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### **Alicia Patterson Foundation**

The Alicia Patterson Foundation fosters, promotes, sustains and improves the best traditions of American journalism by providing support for journalists engaged in rigorous, probing, spirited, independent and skeptical work that will benefit the public.

[aliciapatterson.org](http://aliciapatterson.org)

### **American Society of Journalists and Authors**

Founded in 1948, the American Society of Journalists and Authors is the nation's professional organization of independent nonfiction writers.

[asja.org](http://asja.org)

### **The Asian American Journalists Association**

The Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit educational and professional organization with more than 1,600 members across the United States and Asia.

### **Association of Independents in Radio**

AIR is global social and professional network of 900+ independent and media organization producers that offers advocacy and training programs.

[airmedia.org](http://airmedia.org)

### **Freelancers Union**

Freelancers Union promotes the interests of independent workers through advocacy, education, and services.

[freelancersunion.org](http://freelancersunion.org)

### **The Fund for Investigative Journalism**

FIJ is a non-profit that provides grants for investigative journalism in an effort to fight against racism, poverty, corporate greed and governmental corruption.

[fij.org](http://fij.org)

### **Global Investigative Journalism Network**

The Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) is an international association of nonprofit organizations that support, promote, and produce investigative journalism through conferences, professional trainings, providing resources, and more.

[gijn.org](http://gijn.org)



## RESOURCES

### **The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists**

Founded in 1997 as a project of the Center for Public Integrity, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists is a global network of 185 investigative journalists in more than 65 countries who collaborate on in-depth investigative stories.

[icij.org](http://icij.org)

### **Investigative News Network**

INN is an association of 100 North American organizations that supports its member organizations distribute stories of impact, network resources and services, and develop new revenue streams to become more sustainable.

[www.investigativenewsnetwork.org](http://www.investigativenewsnetwork.org)

### **Investigative Reporters and Editors**

IRE is grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting by providing a forum in which journalists throughout the world can share story ideas, newsgathering techniques and news sources.

[ire.org](http://ire.org)

### **Journalism and Women Symposium**

JAWS supports the professional empowerment and personal growth of women in journalism through their Conference and Mentoring Project, fellowship programs, and regional gatherings.

[jaws.org](http://jaws.org)

### **National Association of Black Journalists**

The National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) is a member-based organization of journalists, students and media-related professionals that provides quality programs and services to and advocates on behalf of black journalists worldwide.

[nabj.org](http://nabj.org)

### **National Hispanic Journalists Association**

NAHJ is a member-based non-profit dedicated to increasing the number Latinos in the newsroom and works towards fair and accurate representation of Latinos in the news media.

[nahj.org](http://nahj.org)

### **National Writers Union**

The only labor union that represents freelance writers.

[nwu@nwu.org](mailto:nwu@nwu.org)

### **The Nation Institute**

The Nation Institute is a nonprofit media center dedicated to strengthening the independent press and advancing social justice and civil rights through book publishing, grants for investigative journalism, and journalism fellowships.

[nationinstitute.org](http://nationinstitute.org)



## RESOURCES

### **Native American Journalists Association**

NAJA is member-based association that serves and empowers Native journalists through programs and action that promotes Native cultures and strives to increase the representation of Native journalists in mainstream media.

[naja.com](http://naja.com)

### **100 Reporters and Editors**

100Reporters exists to hold accountable those wielding power and controlling money—specifically, governments, public officials and corporations in the U.S. and abroad—through fearless reporting that spans the globe.

[100r.org](http://100r.org)

### **The Poynter Institute**

The Poynter Institute is a leading instructor, innovator, convener and resource for anyone who aspires to engage and inform citizens in 21st Century democracies.

[poynter.org](http://poynter.org)

### **Project Word**

Project Word is a non-profit organization that advances media diversity and the public interest by helping aspiring freelance journalists with diverse backgrounds from around the world report underrepresented stories for a broad range of media.

[www.projectword.org](http://www.projectword.org)

### **The Pulitzer Center**

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting is an award-winning non-profit journalism organization dedicated to supporting the independent international journalism and focuses on under-reported topics, promoting high-quality international reporting, and educational programs.

[www.pulitzercenter.org](http://www.pulitzercenter.org)

### **Society of Environmental Journalists**

The Society of Environmental Journalists is a North American member-based association of professional journalists dedicated to more and better coverage of environment-related issues.

[www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org)

### **Society of Professional Journalists**

SPJ is a member-based non-profit providing professional development and advocacy for the First Amendment rights for professional journalists.

[www.spj.org](http://www.spj.org)





**A PROJECT OF  
INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS AND EDITORS**

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