Dear Judges,

When federal prosecutors announced the “largest gang takedown in New York City history,” a Bronx raid that led to the indictment of 120 people in April 2016, Alice Speri, a criminal justice reporter at The Intercept, was the first journalist to cover the story in-depth. Her reporting raised serious questions about the work of police and prosecutors in a case that most media outlets had covered by simply repeating the claims made in prosecutors’ press release.

Since then, Alice has dug deep into the policing of “gangs” in New York, publishing a series of exclusives about the NYPD’s use of a sweeping and secretive gang database and reporting on how a gang designation could derail the lives of mostly black and brown youth, often with little connection to any criminal acts. The article we’re submitting for your consideration is a culmination of three years of reporting on the case of the “Bronx 120,” as the 2016 raid and prosecutions came to be known in the impacted community.

In this exclusive story, Alice followed the outcomes of the Bronx 120 prosecutions long after the arrests had faded from the news. Her reporting reveals troubling details about the prosecutions, and raises serious questions about due process, the abuse of federal conspiracy charges, and the criminalization of social relationships in communities of color. The story reveals that while all 120 defendants had been portrayed by prosecutors, police, and the media as dangerous gang members connected to a string of violent attacks spanning over a decade, less than half were actually alleged to be gang members in court filings.

While prosecutors had talked about a number of murders in their press conference about the raid, none of the 120 were charged with murder, and two thirds of the defendants were not convicted of any violent crimes. Instead, Alice discovered that nearly half of the defendants were being retried in federal court for crimes – mostly low-level drug dealing – that had already been adjudicated in state court.

Alice’s story also exposes the growing use by prosecutors targeting poor communities of color, of the federal RICO Act — a conspiracy statute that was designed to pursue organized crime. The story highlights a number of systemic problems with our criminal justice system, including the reliance by prosecutors on a mass plea bargaining system that effectively deprives poor defendants of their right to due process. In the case of the 120, only two defendants chose to fight their charges in court — and they ended up with sentences severely higher than co-defendants who had been accused of the same conduct and accepted plea deals.
While the reporting was based, in part, on months of combing through court records — as Alice worked closely with a CUNY professor and graduate students also pursuing research on the case — the writing centers the stories of the young men whose lives were devastated by the raid. Alice particularly follows the story of Kraig Lewis, who was in graduate school in Connecticut when police came to arrest him over a years-old incident, and who spent the following two years at the Metropolitan Detention Center before a judge sentenced him to time served.

Alice also worked closely with filmmaker Stephanie Tangkilisan, who followed Lewis and his family throughout his ordeal and told his story in the documentary video published along this article, “Trouble Finds You.” The article also tells the stories of Carletto Allen, who believed the justice system would prove his innocence and took his chances at trial — ending up with a six year conviction when prosecutors had offered him a plea to time served — and of Nicholas Bailey, who had been sentenced to a rehabilitation program as a juvenile offender, only to be rearrested and retried, years later, in connection to the same crimes.

Over the course of three years reporting this story, Alice embedded herself in the community impacted by the raid, and she believed strongly in bringing the results of her work back to them. That’s why, in addition to publishing the story and documentary, Alice worked with a number of community organizations to host two screenings of the documentary and public debates about gang prosecutions: one at CUNY Law School, attended by more than 300 people, and a smaller one at the Bronx Defenders offices that was attended by many of the 120 themselves and their families. Alice has also worked with Kraig Lewis to encourage him to share his story directly on radio programs and at public events, and her reporting has been cited by a number or groups working to keep police and city officials accountable to the public about their gang policing practices.

On behalf of The Intercept, we are delighted to nominate reporter Alice Speri for this award.

Best wishes,

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