

Los Angeles Times

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To the California Journalism Awards judges,

California's legalization of recreational cannabis came with a slew of promises aimed at remedying the ill effects of the "war on drugs": stamping out the illegal market, rectifying racial injustices by clearing criminal records and boosting the ranks of Black and Latino entrepreneurs, protecting small legacy cannabis farmers and making recreational cannabis accessible to all consumers, among others.

But six years later, a wide-ranging [Los Angeles Times investigative series](#) uncovered appalling exploitation and death among a largely ignored labor force, corruption in local government and a multibillion-dollar cannabis market in disarray.

California's decision to reduce criminal penalties for outlaw cultivation and its lack of a robust statewide enforcement policy allowed [illegal farms to flourish](#) and criminal enterprises to operate in rural regions with near impunity. Massive illegal grows engulfed entire communities, exacerbating cannabis-related violence. State and county inspectors checked farms for noise pollution and water run-off but ignored the [exploitation of workers](#) on both licensed and unlicensed farms. Laborers were treated as if invisible: frequently cheated of wages and required to live in squalid conditions. At least 35 workers died on cannabis farms in California and Southern Oregon – 20 of carbon monoxide poisoning – but none of the 32 California deaths were reported to state labor safety investigators. Legacy farmers, once [promised protection](#) by the state, [faced financial ruin](#) amid plunging crop prices and competition from illegal operators and big corporations. Unlicensed retail stores [operated in plain sight](#), some run by local street gangs. The decision to place licensing under local control unleashed [a wave of bribery](#). Government officials worked as cannabis consultants or forged other financial ties with the industry even as they regulated the businesses. Meanwhile, the social injustices of the war on drugs lived on for [tens of thousands of people](#) as the state failed to clear marijuana-related felonies and misdemeanors from their records. And programs aimed at helping entrepreneurs from communities disproportionately harmed by past drug policies instead created [additional hardships](#) and roadblocks for them.

Capturing the scope and depth of the problem posed a formidable challenge. Reporting on the cannabis industry is often piecemeal and limited in scope, and much of the debate over the drug is driven by the agendas of industry marketers, politicians, law enforcement and social justice campaigns. To dig beneath the rhetoric, a team of Times reporters needed an ambitious approach that would investigate a broad swath of the cannabis experience, from the farmhouse to the courthouse. To accomplish that, they had to win the trust of growers, workers, business owners, people with marijuana-related convictions, local regulators, police and state agents in the field – many of whom faced possible retaliation and sometimes even threats of violence if they talked. Times journalists traveled into remote areas where outlaw farms and seasonal camps are guarded by guns and media attention is unwelcome. During one trip, several men surrounded Times photojournalist Brian van der Brug and one used a tire iron to smash his rental car. Another told him, "The only reason you don't have a bullet in your head right now is because you are talking to me." Despite the dangers, the journalists persisted.

No one, not even the state, knew the extent of illegal cultivation in California. So investigative reporter Paige St. John drew on satellite imagery from public and private sources to [map illegal cannabis cultivation](#) over nearly 3,000 square miles of the state. Her analysis found that everywhere she looked, illicit outdoor production had increased since California reduced criminal penalties for unlicensed

operations as part of legalization. The story of the death and exploitation of a nearly invisible worker class came into view only after numerous 1,000-mile road trips to meet with laborers, many of whom didn't speak English. St. John and Van der Brug found workers sleeping in tents beside the greenhouses they tended or in plywood sheds, broken-down trailers, shipping containers or even barns, beneath the drying plants. Workers used holes in the ground for toilets, empty chemical drums for wash basins and buckets of water warming in the sun for showers. Food supplies were meager. Workers everywhere complained of toiling months through heat, rain and snow only to be cheated of their wages. It was as if they had been plucked from time, before the farmworker rights movement and advocates like Cesar Chavez. St. John used coroner's records to identify 35 workers who died on cannabis farms. In ["Dying For Your High,"](#) St. John, Van der Brug and staff writer Marisa Gerber unveiled a hidden class of easily exploited victims, most immigrants in fear of losing their ability to work.

On the corruption front, previous media stories have focused on the small number of prosecutions related to cannabis bribery. But investigative reporters Adam Elmahrek and Robert J. Lopez and Times staff writer Ruben Vives wanted to gauge the scope of the problem for themselves. That required intense, on-the-ground reporting in cities across the state, from the rural mountains near Oregon to the Mexico border. The reporters combed through thousands of pages of court records, campaign finance documents, financial disclosure records filed by public officials, emails, text messages and other documents obtained from cities. They interviewed dozens of public officials and cannabis entrepreneurs about their experiences. What emerged was a clear portrait of legalization gone awry. By handing off licensing to cities and counties, the state created a system in which thousands of part-time, often low paid local officials suddenly had the power to pick winners and losers in a hyper-competitive, multibillion-dollar industry. The investigation, ["\\$250,000 Cash in a Brown Paper Bag,"](#) went beyond citing law enforcement investigations; it uncovered hidden bribery and found more than a dozen officials who had direct financial ties to the industry they were overseeing.

Within days of the newspaper's investigation on regulators' failure to protect exploited cannabis workers, the California Department of Cannabis Control expanded its regulatory mission, directing officers for the first time to investigate when they encounter evidence of labor exploitation or human trafficking. California's workplace safety agency launched an investigation into farmworker deaths identified by The Times. Lawmakers [said they would call](#) for hearings on farmworker abuses such as those reported by The Times, introduce protections for cannabis workers and address the failure of cannabis regulators to investigate labor exploitation. "We should be a little bit ashamed that we've allowed this helter-skelter approach to commercializing and legalizing the cannabis industry," Sen. Dave Cortese, a San Jose Democrat who leads the Senate Labor Committee, said in the wake of the newspaper's series. The chair of the state Assembly's public safety committee told the newspaper he would seek a wide-ranging state investigation into public corruption and other problems identified by The Times. The newspaper series also prompted [a new state law](#) – passed unanimously and signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom last year – mandating that the state Department of Justice and the Judicial Council oversee conviction clearances. The law provided the courts with deadlines for removing marijuana convictions from the criminal records of tens of thousands of people. Newsom's cannabis czar created a multi-agency task force to address illegal cannabis shortly after The Times asked state officials to respond to its findings about the explosive increase in illegal farms.

To our knowledge, the paper's series is the most wide-ranging examination ever conducted on the fallout of a state's legalization of recreational cannabis. There have been no retractions, requests for corrections or complaints made in response to the series.

We are proud to submit our work for your consideration.

Sincerely,

