

What's in the TAKEN civil forfeiture investigation: Table of contents

William Ramsey
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Pizza delivery tips, hundreds of dollars, seized by police and not returned for six years. Eleven leather office chairs. Cash stuffed into a police file, with no record later of who owned it.

These fruits of civil asset forfeiture add up, across the state, week to week. Both financially — for law enforcement — and in terms of the toll on citizens' lives in South Carolina.

A team of journalists from the USA TODAY NETWORK, most based in Greenville, spent two years examining this, with a major investigation of civil asset forfeiture in South Carolina. Their work is driven by an exclusive database, built from details of every forfeiture case in the state from 2014-2016.

WHAT WE PUBLISHED:

January 28

Contents include —

► **Citizens are losing millions to forfeiture:**

“It’s a dirty little secret. It’s so consistent with the issue of how law enforcement functions. They say, ‘Oh yeah, we want to make sure that resources used for the trafficking of drugs are stopped’ ... but many of the people they are taking money from are not drug traffickers or even users.”

► **Tying forfeiture to state’s race history:**

Seventy-one percent of all seizures in South Carolina are taken from black people, and 65 percent of the money South Carolina's police officers seize in civil forfeiture is taken from black males.

▶ **Musician fought back after his money was taken by police:**

"I wasn't going to allow them to take my money. I was going to fight for what was right."

▶ **City tried to seize her home:**

She's endured years of efforts by the city of Conway – first by forfeiture, then by foreclosure – to seize her house, an attempt to shut down drug dealers.

▶ **How we brought TAKEN to life:**

"Once we began to understand the scope of this issue in our state, we realized that we needed to broaden the scope of our data collection and on-the-ground reporting. To examine a broken statewide system, we needed to tell the story of how civil forfeiture played out across South Carolina."

▶ **He fought off a robber, but police seized his money:**

He didn't know about civil forfeiture when his money was seized. He didn't know the hoops he'd have to go through to get his money back from police.

January 30

Contents include —

▶ **Examining South Carolina's broken system of property seizure:**

The TAKEN investigation identified hundreds of instances where property owners never received notice of forfeiture cases — sometimes because serious errors were made by the prosecutors tracking them down.

▶ **When police seize vehicles they shouldn't have:**

At least a dozen times, police seized vehicles despite finding amounts of drugs that weighed less than the threshold required by the state's forfeiture statute, our investigation found.

► **Widow almost lost house to police for not stopping crime:**

The grandmother, now in her 80s with wispy gray hair, has sheltered generations of her family under her roof. Relatives' pictures line the living room. Hummingbird feeders hang on a pole in the yard. A tent provides shade to a concrete patio where a few plastic chairs sit near a grill. "This is all I've got."

► **No one notified her about her truck:**

His mom called the Sheriff's Office to see how she could get her truck returned. "I've never been in any trouble. I had nothing to do with my son's case."

► **How to keep your property — possibly:**

It's still possible to get your money back — but beware that you will have to admit the money is yours, which is fine if it's legitimate money.

More: [A 'historic event': Thanking TAKEN series, 71 SC legislators unveil bipartisan push to reform civil forfeiture](#)

February 4

Contents include —

► **Highway sweeps mean search for cash:**

Officers win trophies, some based on how much money they seize from drivers. Sheriff Chuck Wright says it's all in "good, clean fun." It is also highly profitable.

► **You could call him the king of SC forfeiture:**

His public image is that of a tough-on-crime, God-fearing, gun rights supporter who's unafraid to mix guns and religion into his sheriff's persona in a heavily conservative county.

More: SC cops defend keeping cash they seize: 'What's the incentive' otherwise?

▶ **Prove where your television came from:**

it's not enough to just say where it came from, like "this is a TV that my sister bought for me." You need documentation to back it up. "Who has a receipt on a TV they bought five years ago? I challenge anyone to find that paperwork."

▶ **Lose your car over small amounts of some drugs:**

The deputy smelled marijuana, and the black driver in his early 30s copped to the drugs. He reached inside the SUV to pull out a cigarette box from the floorboard. The box held a single homemade marijuana cigar. But it's what they found next that was the problem.

▶ **Judge admonishes prosecutors in Greenwood case:**

Dashcam footage contradicted police officer accounts, and the judge noticed.

February 6

Contents include —

▶ **One town turned a big profit. More could:**

It was late spring and the two highways that bisect this tiny rural village thronged with beach traffic. Most of the motorists were from out-of-state, bound for nearby Myrtle Beach until they were pulled over.

▶ **What one mechanic did when his bankroll was taken:**

The amount of marijuana was right on the line between a misdemeanor and a felony. The auto mechanic from Nichols said officers added up the sticks and stems and the bags themselves so that the weight ticked over to an ounce.

The incident might have ended there if he hadn't been carrying thousands of dollars.

More: [How local cops use federal rules to seize millions on SC roads](#)

► **Tension of police interaction dominates forfeiture:**

“How much money do you have in your pockets right now?”

That's the question critics say is posed for one reason only — to find out if the driver has cash that police can seize.

► **What to do if you are facing property seizure:**

You do not have to sign a consent form, and doing so will not help your legal case if you've also been charged with a crime connected to the forfeiture.

► **"Devastating" consequences for waitress:**

She claims she was tricked into signing a consent form. “The agent covered a portion of the signature page with his hand and assured her it was nothing more than a receipt,” her attorney said.

► **Why it was hard to get dashcam video:**

Over a span of two months, The News submitted Freedom of Information requests to 15 law enforcement agencies for 49 traffic stops. We got a dozen videos in return.

February 11

Contents include -

► **Police seized his money from the mail without telling him:**

The next day, his friend told him he hadn't received the delivery, which required a signature to accept. The Greenville man called FedEx. Speak to police, they said.

▶ **Bootlegging Greenville case broke ground in 1937:**

The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and in 1939, the justices made a narrow decision. Forfeiture should be avoided, whenever possible, and it should be conducted "only when within both (the) letter and spirit of the law," the justices ruled.

Someone bringing a whisky bottle on board a train doesn't give the government the right to seize the whole train, they said.

▶ **From pirates to kingpins, the history you never knew:**

From America's earliest years to the modern day, the government has taken money and property from citizens to pay its bills.

▶ **Cancer patient, bar owner loses \$30,000:**

His cook got into trouble. That was what started it. Then the nine video poker machines in one man's bar gave authorities cause to search his 1994 Monaco RV.

Police called his RV a "container" instead of a vehicle so they could take it.

▶ **They seized his lottery winnings and kept them for a year:**

He told police he'd just won \$5,000 in the North Carolina lottery, and then he showed them the documents. Still, police took the money.

February 13

Contents include —

▶ **How police hold money for years, lose track of it:**

Police across South Carolina are losing track of who they take money from — hundreds of thousands of dollars — and sometimes they're keeping the money for years or even decades before asking a court if they can keep it, The Greenville News investigation TAKEN has found.

▶ **Oddest thing South Carolina police have taken:**

One forfeiture case named two dishwashers, a Frigidaire range, four interior doors and a pair of boat shoes as defendants.

▶ **What happens in other states in America?:**

In some states, the money goes to the state's general fund, to education or is used for drug addiction prevention.

▶ **He went to the hospital for medical treatment, but lost his money:**

When Bradley Atwater checked himself into Palmetto Baptist Hospital in Columbia with cuts on his arm, hospital staff took his clothing and possessions. Then they called the cops.

▶ **Sometimes police keep money from dead defendants:**

When they filed a petition to seize the money a month later, he was already dead. They went ahead anyway.