

What Else Happened? 203: Congress Tries to Prevent Another Larry Nassar

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- Kat Jercich: Welcome to What Else Happened? a show for people who want to know what stories this week may have slipped under the radar. I'm Kat Jercich.
- Regina Mahone: I'm Regina Mahone, and we're the managing editors at rewire.news, where we deliver evidence-based journalism for people who are passionate about health, rights, and justice.
- Kat Jercich: This week on What Else Happened? we'll talk about a new report on your favorite short-term rental app, Airbnb, the fight against sterilization abuse in Washington state, and new legislation to combat sexual abuse of athletes.

Regina Mahone: And we'll chat with writer and activist Raquel Willis about a popular supermarket chain's refusal to provide insurance coverage for a drug that can literally save lives.

Kat Jercich: Let's get going.

Regina Mahone: Our first story this week is a bit of a doozy. A new report on the popular short-term rental site Airbnb arrived at some troubling conclusions. In response to the findings, Airbnb claims the report is based on bad data.

Kat Jercich: Oh, God. What are people saying Airbnb is up to this time?

Regina Mahone: This time? What stories are you remembering?

Kat Jercich: Well, three Australian hosts were charged with the murder of a guest last year, and then there was that story on Matter of the dad who died while trying out a tree swing while staying at an Airbnb in Texas.

Regina Mahone: Oh, my God. I remember that story. It was gutting.

Kat Jercich: Yeah, and not to mention the research and stories on Airbnb and the home-sharing business, in general, suggesting racial discrimination, gentrification, and even gender discrimination.

Regina Mahone: Yeah, I mean Airbnb has been in the news for a variety of reasons over the years, often with reporters and advocates raising questions about its culpability in situations involving hosts or renters. In my home state of New York, there was a situation more recently involving \$100,000 in property damage and stolen items. For its part, Airbnb maintains that these incidents are incredibly rare and that, when they do happen, the company does its part to support investigations and injured parties.

Kat Jercich: What's with this new report?

Regina Mahone: Right, so a report released this week from a politically-influential hotel workers' union, as Politico put it, found that rents have increased in the city due to an Airbnb effect. The report claims that, by removing apartments from New York City's long-term rental market, Airbnb has increased rent in the city by an estimated 1.4% or about \$380 more in rent for the median New York tenant over the past three years. In Manhattan, that's an increase of about \$700. With some estimates putting the average rent in the city at \$3,000, that's a big deal.

Kat Jercich: Yeah, no kidding, but Airbnb is arguing that data is flawed?

Regina Mahone: Yeah, so Airbnb says the data is flawed because it relies on discredited methodologies. For example, as David Reid of CNBC reported, it sees the report as looking at the wrong apartments when determining how many apartments

have been removed from the city's long-term rental market, but the report also raises concerns about racial disparities and who is benefiting financially from the short-term rental market.

It suggests that the people generating the bulk of the income in primarily-black communities are white. As Politico reported, white people represent three-quarters of the hosts in Stuyvesant Heights, which is a section of the Bed-Stuy neighborhood in Brooklyn, and generate more than 60% of the revenue. But get this. White people make up only 7.4% of the neighborhood's population. This is where it gets really tricky. I think if Airbnb were more catty, it would have put in all caps its response to the method the researchers used to get all of these states. According to Airbnb, they determined the race of hosts by using a computer analysis of Airbnb host photographs.

Kat Jercich: Basically looking at a photograph and determining someone's race based on that photograph?

Regina Mahone: Yeah, it sounds like that.

Kat Jercich: Okay, that's a little suspect.

Regina Mahone: Right, and so Airbnb and researchers it quotes on its Airbnb Citizen site say that you can't compare such a computer analysis of host photos with resident data in which residents are self-identifying.

Kat Jercich: You mean that if you're comparing, say, census data, in which people select their race, with the computer analysis of photographs, it's an apple and oranges kind of comparison?

Regina Mahone: Exactly, but of course, if you walk around one of these neighborhoods, it's not that difficult to see that there are a lot of not black and brown people moving into these largely black and brown neighborhoods.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. That is something we're seeing a lot of in Chicago and elsewhere too.

Regina Mahone: Airbnb also notes the study wasn't peer reviewed, and the site quotes an ACLU attorney who argues that the study is promoting a biased belief that "neighborhoods should remain segregated based on race and class." Honestly, I'm a little confused about that interpretation, but maybe I'm missing something.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I feel like there's a difference between critiquing gentrification and promoting segregation, especially because gentrification has historically also led to segregation in that black and brown families are pushed out of neighborhoods, question mark?

Regina Mahone: Yeah, in school systems. But yeah, there are definitely some flags on both sides. Whether or not the report is conveniently supporting assertions you mentioned earlier around economic and racial inequities, it's probably too soon to confirm,

but I, for one, am definitely interested in taking a closer look at this data and what people in these communities are saying about the home-sharing economy and its impact on their neighborhoods.

This country has a long history of divesting economic resources from the people who pour everything into their communities, only to have said communities taken from them when property values are increasing apartment by apartment, block by block. I bring this all up so that we can continue asking questions about those business practices and continue searching for the truth about your favorite app, because at the end of the day, even if it's a favorite, there's probably some problematic stuff going on too.

Kat Jercich: Listeners in the southeastern parts of the United States might be familiar with Publix, a grocery store chain that was recently named by Fortune as one of the world's most admired companies, but listeners might not know that Publix was recently reported as having denied employees access to an HIV-prevention drug called Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis, or PrEP. It's not clear, at this point, whether the company is doing so out of cost concerns or because it has moral objections to the lifestyles associated with the drug. Here to talk with me about the importance of PrEP access and how policies like these might be putting people in danger is writer and activist Raquel Willis. Hey, Raquel. Thanks for being on with me today.

Raquel Willis: Thank you for having me, Kat. It's good to be on.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. First off, can you just talk to me about the importance of regular access to PrEP?

Raquel Willis: Definitely. PrEP is, for me as someone who takes it, it has just been amazing at really reassuring me that my health is where I would imagine it would be, and it's also just given me a security around, particularly, HIV prevention and how that has affected my life as a black trans woman. I definitely know a lot of black trans women who are living and thriving with HIV. However, there has always been kind of a lack of conversation around our access to prevention and also access to care after folks contract HIV, and so it's been important to have this as an option. I think, like many other issues, this is a trans health issue that goes under the radar and that's not receiving enough attention.

Kat Jercich: PrEP can be pretty expensive, right?

Raquel Willis: Definitely. I know, at least in my research, at one point it was at least 1,300 per month, and that doesn't even include-

Kat Jercich: Oh my God.

Raquel Willis: ... office visits and lab work if you don't have insurance. I've been lucky to have insurance through Kaiser, and I know that there are other insurance plans across the US that cover it to various degrees, but then there also many that don't,

right? That's because this is still seen as extra, right, or seen as something that isn't integral to a trans person's healthcare. Often, when people think of trans people, they often only think about hormones or think about transition-related care, so other things like sexual health aren't seen as a priority, unfortunately.

I also would add that there are definitely ways that folks can figure out how to cover the cost of PrEP if they don't have coverage, or even if they do. Gilead definitely has a copay coupon program that some folks are eligible for. It still is difficult right now to really find all of the info that can kind of succinctly tell you if you're covered or if you have access to these plans, but it is out there.

Kat Jercich: Would you explain to our listeners what Gilead is?

Raquel Willis: Oh, yeah. They're a pharmaceutical company that really provides PrEP, and so they have different programs that they provide to people who are on it that really can help with costs. Obviously, folks aren't receiving, necessarily, as much coverage as we would like to see, but hopefully we'll continue to see more and more ways in which people can get coverage for PrEP and TRUVADA. Again, I'm saying that I'm not affiliated with Gilead at all or anything like that.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. Sure, sure, sure.

Raquel Willis: Just to be clear. [laughs]

Kat Jercich: Yeah. [laughs] I was just curious. I appreciate that. For folks that think they might be good candidates for PrEP, how might they find out more information about it?

Raquel Willis: Well, the best way, as always, is really discussing with your primary care physician. In my experience, I had access through Kaiser to speak with someone who specifically specializes in PrEP and TRUVADA access, and so that is great, right? But I would imagine that most insurance companies don't necessarily have someone specifically designated on the PrEP and TRUVADA shift, if you know what I mean.

Kat Jercich: Right.

Raquel Willis: Definitely getting in contact with your primary care physician to look at options. Unfortunately, as trans people know, a lot of times we have to do our own research and bring that research to our primary care physician, so that is really something that I hope to see change more and more in the future. But it is great to be able to advocate for yourself and be able to really hold your physician accountable, or whoever your healthcare provider, accountable.

I think other considerations when we think about the importance of access to HIV-prevention services and medication really revolves around how trans people and trans women are treated in our society. If we consider this idea, right, that, oh, risky behaviors will lead to this particular outcome, we forget that just being

trans is risky within itself, being openly trans. You can have an experience that, seemingly, is a not-so-risky experience and still be at risk for being taken advantage of or being mistreated. That is an experience that many trans women face, and so it's important for us to be able to take our own healthcare into our own hands and really have as many methods of keeping ourselves safe as possible. I personally feel like PrEP is one of those ways.

Also, it's not just advocating in the bedroom. It's also advocating at our jobs, right? If you have an insurance plan through your job, right now what we're seeing, especially with this high-profile situation with Publix the company, and they're based in Florida, which is one of the states that, in 2016, had one of the highest HIV diagnosis rates. We are seeing that we have to also advocate in the workplace and advocate with our insurance companies. The situation with Publix is that they actually are denying access to folks who are seeking HIV-prevention medication. It's really an all-around problem right now. We've got to make sure that we have more conversations with this and we have as many folks in our communities and allies who are speaking up about the injustices we're facing in the healthcare system.

Kat Jercich: Thank you so much for joining us, Raquel. This is really great.

Raquel Willis: Of course.

Kat Jercich: Back in October, we discussed a lawsuit involving five mothers who accused New York City of removing their children due to their intellectual disabilities, in some cases within days of childbirth. Well, it turns out people with intellectual disabilities also have to be concerned with their parents or guardians taking away their reproductive autonomy.

Regina Mahone: That's right. In Washington state, people with a guardian are at risk of having their guardian sterilizing them with court approval. What's concerning advocates this week is that the state judicial system is looking to clarify the existing law -- with a form. That form would make it easier for guardians to request permission for sterilization, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

Kat Jercich: Let me make sure I have that right. State law allows guardians to sterilize the people under their supervision, and now the local courts are considering a way to make it easier for guardians to get approval for those sterilizations?

Regina Mahone: That's right. The ACLU is quick to explain that, of course, people who choose sterilization for themselves, potentially for medical reasons, should be supported. This becomes an issue when they're sterilized against their own wishes or are not completely informed of their choices or rights, which is what happened with Ann Cooper Hewitt, who sued her own mother in 1936 at the age of 20. Her mother, who succeeded at getting her daughter classified as having an intellectual disability, claimed that her sterilization was "for society's sake" due to the girl's "erotic tendencies," according to the ACLU.

Kat Jercich: That is horrifying.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. Unfortunately, that's one of many reasons people use to justify taking away someone's reproductive autonomy. The ACLU, on its website, sites the issue of sexual assault as a major reason.

Kat Jercich: Wait. What?

Regina Mahone: Apparently, some people say they're protecting their loved one by getting them sterilized so that if they're assaulted, that's one less thing for them to have to worry about?

Kat Jercich: Oh my God.

Regina Mahone: I know. It's something else, right? But it's complicated. Obviously, neither of us are in those situations, so we can't speak to what the experiences might be for those in guardian roles. We do, however, support people being able to fully exercise their human rights, and well, let's not forget the fact that this country has a dark history of forced sterilization.

Kat Jercich: Right, and to no one's surprise, that history's had devastating impacts on black and brown communities and people with disabilities, in particular. As Rewire has reported, some 20,000 men and women were coercively sterilized between 1919 and 1952 in California alone. S.E. Smith noted in a piece last February for us that many of those people were of Mexican descent and had a disability or were considered "feeble-minded."

Regina Mahone: Yeah. I mean this is a topic for its own podcast because we couldn't possibly cover it comprehensively enough in this short segment. For example, this country also has a history of sterilizing prisoners. I will note that today, at least, there is a glimmer of hope for advocates in that some states are working to implement what the ACLU called supported decision making. This sort of legal arrangement is available in Texas, Delaware, and other jurisdictions around the world. What apparently happens is that people with disabilities can choose a trusted advisor who can help guide them in an unbiased way toward a decision of their own choosing. For Washington state's part, I guess we'll see. The ACLU is pushing for the state's judicial system to decline the clarification in favor of a more justice-oriented approach.

Kat Jercich: Justice from justices?

Regina Mahone: A radical idea indeed.

Kat Jercich: It feels like every day this week has brought a new story about the case of Larry Nassar, the USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor who has been accused of sexual assault by more than 250 girls and women.

Regina Mahone: Each story seems to bring with it some more clarity on what exactly went wrong and what is needed to right these terrible wrongs.

Kat Jercich: Right. It's honestly been sort of difficult, at least for me, to keep it all straight while also maintaining emotional self-protection, if that makes sense?

Regina Mahone: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Kat Jercich: Yeah. Some of these stories are so hard, especially as the victims have been giving their impact statements. Makes me wonder how many careers were effectively derailed because of one person's predatory behavior or how many lives, for that matter.

Regina Mahone: Yeah.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. Nassar's actually back in court again, which I'd missed before. He got sentenced to up to 175 years in prison last week in Ingham County, and now he's facing sentencing for more assault charges in Eaton County. More than 60 girls and women are expected to give victim impact statements there.

Regina Mahone: All this raises a bigger question too. It seems clear that Nassar wasn't acting alone. The president of Michigan State University, where Nassar was a doctor, resigned last week, though it's worth noting that if she returns to the faculty, she can have a year-long research leave at her current salary of \$750,000.

Kat Jercich: Oh, God.

Regina Mahone: All of the USA Gymnastics Board also resigned. This reinforces what we know about rape culture, that it's rarely a matter of one person acting alone, which raises the question: how can situations like this be prevented in the future?

Kat Jercich: Right. Not to use a weird gardening metaphor, but if you're pulling weeds, you can't just stop at one and hope for the best. It seems like, in the Nassar case, there's at least some commitment to, well, weeding out the people who kept someone like that in power. As for preventing it next time, one thing that I totally missed this week too, amid all the other news from Washington, is the fact that Congress passed a bill on Monday that actually requires governing bodies for amateur athletics, aka things like university and Olympic teams, to immediately report abuse claims to law enforcement.

Regina Mahone: Why was this not the case already?

Kat Jercich: Well, the laws differ a little from state to state, but these competitions happen all around the country, so this federal bill would codify procedures, especially as the Olympic games approach. It also creates a center to develop and enforce policies and training for sports governing bodies to prevent physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of athletes, and organizations would be able to establish rules preventing adults accused of sexual abuse from interacting with young athletes.

Given what happened with Nassar, it's also worth bringing up that it would require amateur organizations to limit one-on-one interactions between athletes under 18 and adults who aren't their legal guardians. Hopefully, I think that would prevent a lot of the normalization and secrecy of the kind of behavior Nassar was able to get away with.

Regina Mahone: Yeah, but that seems like a pretty ambitious bill.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I think it's also worth noting, well, we can't stop sexual assault through laws alone. We already know that sexual abuse survivors might not feel safe going to the police for many reasons, and this still puts the onus on the organizations to take action, which seems to me like it's already setting up potential loopholes for exceptional figures. Yeah. By the way, this bill was introduced last May. If it takes a huge tragic scandal for Congress to move on stuff like this, how are we ever going to address rape culture as a society?

Regina Mahone: Yeah, but it's a step.

Kat Jercich: It is a step. Here's to many more.

Regina, what's bringing you joy this week?

Regina Mahone: Journaling is bringing me joy this week. I have to say I would journal a lot last year in the mornings, but I fell out of the habit over the holidays, and it's January. Well, no, it's February.

Kat Jercich: Oh my God.

Regina Mahone: I know, and I'm trying to get back into some routines. I feel like, in the morning before I start working, I'm just drinking my cup of tea for the day.

Kat Jercich: I thought you were going to say drinking a whiskey when you said, "I was drinking."

Regina Mahone: Drinking some whiskey in the morning. Yeah, I mean, sure.

Kat Jercich: Yeah.

Regina Mahone: I don't know how ... Yeah. Anyway, having my tea and just sort of writing about my current mood and centering myself a little bit. I know you've talked about meditating, and I think journaling, for me, is pretty much a meditative thing in that it's really helping me to set some clear intentions for my day and to stay focused on the things that I put into my Passion Planner. This sounds like a commercial. It's not. But yeah. I've been going strong for the past week and, yeah, and it's bringing me a lot of joy because I feel like my day is ... I'm pretty clear-headed for the most part.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. That sounds really nice. I'm always really impressed with the intentions that you set for your days. It's something I really look up to about you.

Regina Mahone: Oh, thanks, Kat. How about you? What's bringing you joy this week?

Kat Jercich: I'm going on a Groundhog Day date tonight. I'm pretty excited.

Regina Mahone: That sounds like fun.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. My friend Sophie made a Groundhog Day shirt years and years ago, and so I'm trying to figure out what outfit I want to wear for this date. I don't have a sweet Groundhog Day shirt or any kind of rodentia-themed clothing, but I'm probably going to wear a lumberjack jacket or something kind of woodsy, you know?

Regina Mahone: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kat Jercich: To kind of go along with the theme. I love February. It's one of my favorite months. Has my favorite holiday, Valentine's Day, so this feels like a good way to get it started.

Regina Mahone: I have so many questions for you. Okay, so what makes it a Groundhog date?

Kat Jercich: Well, it's on Groundhog Day. Today is February 2nd.

Regina Mahone: Okay, but do you do something like do you watch Groundhog Day? What do you do?

Kat Jercich: I'm kind of letting Sophie dictate this because she loves Groundhog Day. I think we're going to have a groundhog-themed pizza.

Regina Mahone: Oh.

Kat Jercich: Yeah, with mushrooms on it because they come from the woods. I don't know what else. What else do groundhogs like? Maybe we'll have a shadow -- shadow puppetry? I don't know.

Regina Mahone: Okay. You're saying a lot of things. It's so great. Then February. You love February. I mean it's Black History Month.

Kat Jercich: Yes, it is.

Regina Mahone: Who doesn't love February?

Kat Jercich: That's very true.

Regina Mahone: Why do you love Valentine's Day? What's the deal with that?

Kat Jercich: I just love giving people presents when I think that they are great, and so I was always the child who gave valentines to every single person in class. I will give valentines to bunch of my friends. I'll leave chocolate for people. I'm just very into the idea of a holiday to express affection, especially platonic affection. I know it's supposed to be for couples, but I just love giving people valentines, especially cheesy valentines.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. I really like the idea of Galentine's Day from Parks & Recreation, so is that along the lines of what you mean?

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I treat Valentine's Day like Galentine's Day, like a gender-inclusive Galentine's Day, but honestly, I don't know. I'd like to be a little stereotypically romantic, but with platonic friends, just writing nice notes and doing things that you might do for a date, but also, I think you can do it with close friends too, sending cards and flowers and stuff like that. Maybe I'm just a weird sap, but I love Valentine's Day. Anybody wants to send me valentines, hit me up.

Regina Mahone: I think you've inspired me to do more. I used to send cards all of the time. I used to send cards to my close friends and my family on Valentines' Day. I still send one of my sisters chocolates because, I don't know, we just declared a long time ago that we'd always be each others' valentines.

Kat Jercich: Oh, I love that.

Regina Mahone: I like to do that. I love sending my nieces and nephews little chocolates in the mail just because they're cute and they need chocolate, but yeah, I got to get my act together because it's coming up.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I like that we're sort of mutually inspiring each other this week. And every day.

That's our show for this week. If you liked it, please rate it on Apple Podcasts and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

Regina Mahone: Thanks again to Raquel Willis.

Kat Jercich: You can find her @RaquelWillis_ on Twitter.

Regina Mahone: You can follow Rewire @Rewire_News, and me @byreginamahone.

Kat Jercich: I'm @KJercich on Twitter.

Regina Mahone: Good luck with the headlines, and we'll see you next week on What Else Happened?

What Else Happened? is a Rewire Radio production for rewire.news created and hosted by Regina Mahone and Kat Jercich, the managing editors at Rewire. Nora

Hurley is our producer. Marc Faletti is our executive producer, and Rewire's editor-in-chief is Jodi Jacobson.