AI Sovereignty Starts With Trust

Not code, not infrastructure — but community partnership.

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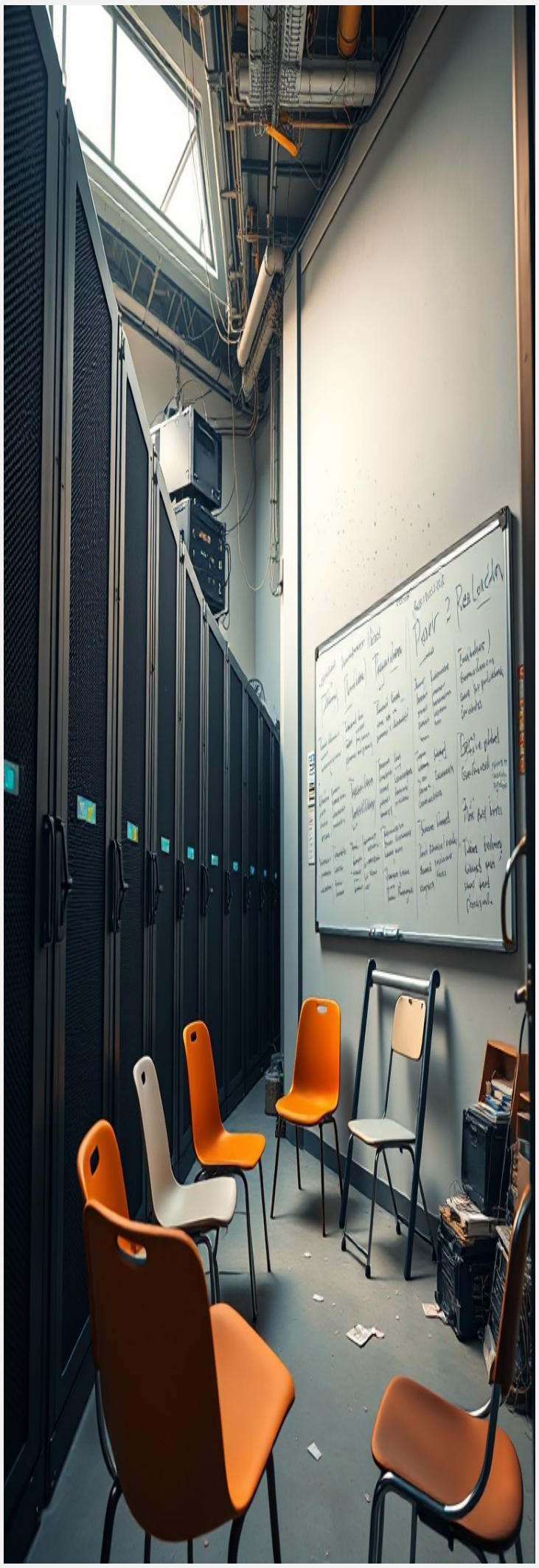
THE DATA

2008

Year of First Major Wage Theft Estimate

The year Berkeley researchers, in partnership with community groups, first quantified wage theft in San Francisco's Chinatown restaurants.

In 2008, UC Berkeley researchers, working directly with the Chinese Progressive Association, estimated that Chinatown restaurant workers lost over $10 million to wage theft. This was not a top-down audit but a co-designed, community-validated study — a foundational model for participatory data science. The data was not collected for academic prestige but for justice: to fuel a policy change that would return stolen wages.

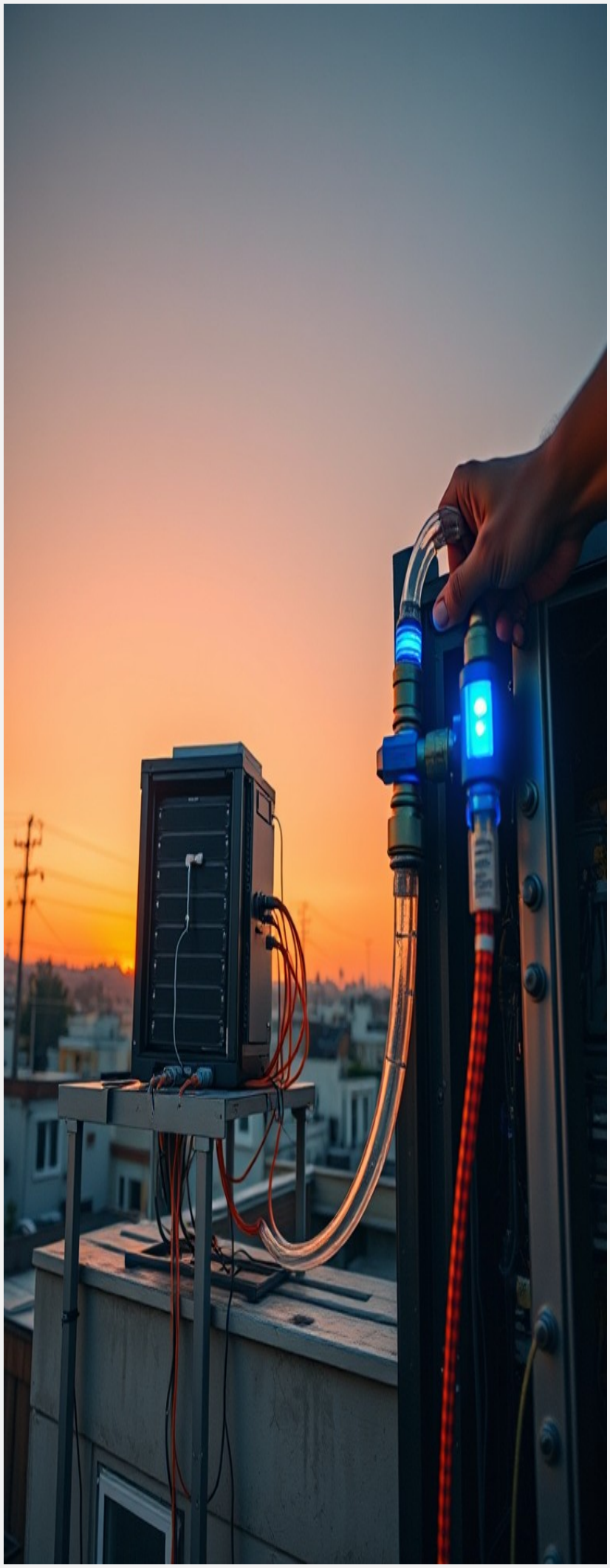


Source: Berkeley News · Published November 02, 2026
https://news.berkeley.edu/2026/11/02/in-community-partnered-research-uc-berkeley-was-a-trailblazer-today-its-a-powerhouse/

01

Data Ownership Is Sovereignty

The 2008 wage theft study succeeded not because of advanced tools, but because the community owned the data. Workers weren’t subjects — they were co-investigators. Their lived experience shaped the survey design, defined the harm, and validated the results. For AI sovereignty, this means that any model trained on community-generated data must be governed by that community. Open weights are not enough — true sovereignty requires shared ownership of the problem, the data, and the solution.



02

Sovereignty Requires Humility

Berkeley’s shift from ‘research on’ to ‘research with’ communities wasn’t technical — it was cultural. Faculty like Meredith Minkler and Emily Ozer redefined academic success to include public impact, not just publications. This is the core of AI sovereignty: institutions must restructure incentives to reward collaboration over solo authorship. For startups and individuals building sovereign stacks, this means choosing open, co-created tools — like those used in participatory research — over proprietary, closed systems that extract value without reciprocity.

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