**Improper Walking in Illinois – a great data driven story**

In the sessions we spend quite a bit of time looking at arrest data for the Central Illinois city of Champaign. 81k rows of data, and a dozen variables mean there are plenty of potential stories one could work on. The obvious topic to explore would, arguably, be race, and the disparities between numbers of arrests of people by racial group.

We choose this dataset partly because it’s such a good example of data-driven journalism: while one option might be to look at the data with a statistical focus, that risks being quite a dry story.

In the actual story, the team had been thinking about their options, including a statistics-based account of racially biased policing. In the event, a much better story turned out to be sitting in the data.

One of the local TV journalists working on a series of stories about demographic change in central Illinois was, Jeff Kelly Lowenstein. He and his colleagues were looking at differences in relations between the community and police in Champaign, and Urbana, its sister city on the banks of the Mississippi.

In a piece written for the Chicago Tribune in 2012, Jeff explained what happened next:

*“We set about asking for and receiving five years worth of arrest data through Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, requests. We found major disparities in the number of arrests of black people in both [Champaign and Urbana]*

*In 2010, black people made up 16 percent of the population in both Champaign and Urbana, according to the U.S. Census Bureau*

*But in both communities at least 40 percent of the arrest charges were against black people in each of the years from 2007 to 2011.*

*Within the category of arrest types, there were even greater disparities. One of the largest was in regards to "improper walking on roadway," or jaywalking.*

*In Champaign from 2007 to 2011, 658, or 88 percent, of the 744 jaywalking arrests were of black people. In Urbana, the percentage of black arrestees for the same crime was even higher during those same years.*

*From 2007 to 2011, 110, or 91 percent, of the people cited for jaywalking in Urbana were black. The arrests were not distributed evenly throughout the age spectrum, but rather were concentrated among young people. In Champaign, 85 percent of black people arrested for jaywalking for whom ages were known were younger than 30 years old.*

*In Urbana, the figure was 90 percent.*

*We went to the block of 1500 Hedge Road in Champaign to see what was happening there. We chose that block because it had 82 jaywalking arrests of black people from 2007 to 2011. That was the highest total in the city and 11 percent of this type of arrest in all of Champaign. It also was more than the total number of white people arrested, 72, in the entire city combined.*

*When we went to the block we discovered another important fact. Like many other streets in the Garden Hills neighborhood, it has no sidewalk. We spoke with residents of the block and heard their jaywalking experiences.”*

Source: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/hoy/ct-hoy-8123062-crunch-time-black-people-and-jaywalking-in-champaign-story.html>

Why is this such a good example of a data driven story? To put it at its most simple – because the finished story needed little or no reference to data; it was a story visual story about police arresting people of colour in a poor neighbourhood where there were no sidewalks.

[“Walking While Black”](https://www.google.com/search?q=%22walking+while+black%22&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk01701_xOdtqUaLCtB29qiAZ8kMWiA:1618754348306&source=lnms&tbm=nws&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiT76Lv-YfwAhULT8AKHc-ZCXQQ_AUoA3oECAEQBQ&biw=1280&bih=588&dpr=3) is now a meme, with regional and local versions of the story all over the USA. We refer to the [ProPublica take](https://features.propublica.org/walking-while-black/jacksonville-pedestrian-violations-racial-profiling/) on the story in the session, but it’s one of many which you will find from many cities all over the USA if you search for that phrase, or the hashtag [#walkingwhileblack](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23walkingwhileblack&src=typed_query) on twitter.

**Further reading**

For good examples of data-driven stories, ones which the reader won’t necessarily see as “data journalism” start with the investigative reporting category of the [Pulitzer Prizes](https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/206).

(The [Public Service](https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/204) category also has a lot of data driven stories among the winners and nominees).

[“For Cops, No Limit”](https://www.pulitzer.org/files/2013/public-service/01day1.pdf) is a particularly good example of a story where the reader would barely notice the data, and yet the story could not have been written without it.