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## CS 506 Project Proposal

### Topic:

We are working with BENCHMARKS: A Citizen's Scorecard on Judicial Accountability in Massachusetts to determine conditions in which judicial rulings are more or less likely to occur when a case is reversed. Ideally, the project will uncover never before-seen patterns of judicial behavior and decision-making in criminal and civil cases, which will have the effect of recasting and spurring more aggressive local news coverage of the state court system. As a result, the project should become a valuable tool for judicial accountability. This project is mentored by Maggie Mulvihill from the College of Communication Journalism Department and is partnered with the Boston Globe. It seeks to combine data analysis and investigative journalism to create results that are more impactful than just using one of the two. Specifically, this project should serve as a building block for a new Boston University interdisciplinary news team which will examine case reversals in all 50 states over the past decade.

### Questions:

- What are the similarities between cases that get reversed?
  - Are there certain judges, police departments, or districts that have a higher rate of reversal than average?
  - Are there certain types of crimes that are reversed more often than others?
  - Do the judges who have more reversals have things in common such as race, age, gender, or courtroom management style?
  - What is the base rate of reversal? How is this rate distributed across Massachusetts?
  - For a given locality with a higher than average number of reversals, what is the likely cause (i.e. is it random chance or is it correlated to certain features)?
- What factors are most strongly correlated with the reversal of a criminal conviction?
  - Do conviction or sentencing disparities exist among the different cases? If so, do they correlate with reversals?

### Datasets:

We have a set of 4 CSV files which were collected by previous teams; these were gathered by scraping the Massachusetts Appellate court website [here](#). This website contains many of the published opinions from the appellate court in the state of Massachusetts, but there are also a large number of unpublished opinions which have not been provided to the public and may not be available at all. We would like to, as a part of this project, expand the available court data to make a more complete analysis of the Massachusetts judicial system.

The existing dataset contains 76 MB of court case data within 4 CSV files, totalling 33,548 cases. These include all levels of the judiciary system in Massachusetts and both

criminal and civil cases, but at this time we do not know the full length of time covered by this data. Part of our work will be to determine the bounds of the existing data and expand upon it.