Team K (Judi Bush, Matt Stecklow, Luna Yee)
CS 257 (Software Design)

Web Project Proposal

Working Title

A Death Penalty Review: Execution Statistics from the States (DPRESS)

Tagline: *The history of sentences that ended lives*

Site Purpose

This site will allow interested parties to investigate trends in execution statistics in America, with the intention to entice scholarly debate and discussion over the roles and implications of capital punishment in the United States judicial system.

Dataset Metadata

Name and Authorship

"Executions in the United States, 1608-2002: The ESPY File (ICPSR 8451) (Version date: Jul 20, 2016)"

W. Matt Espy, John Ortiz Smykla

About

This dataset concerns executions performed under civil authority in the United States between 1608 and 2002. The raw data report details including, but not limited to: case number, race, age, name, place, jurisdiction, crime, and date.

External Source

ICPSR: https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/8451
DOI: https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR08451.v5

Recommended citation:
Espy, M. Watt, and Smykla, John Ortiz. Executions in the United States, 1608-2002: The ESPY File . Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2016-07-20. https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR08451.v5

(Accessed via ICPSR on 4 Oct. 2019 with the search term "death penalty united states")

Terms of Use

The Terms of Use, as provided by the ICPSR, state that the data may be used (including in publication) for educational purposes, under the following stipulations:

- Research subjects are not identified, and their personal information is not disclosed

- Research subjects are not investigated, except with written permission from ICPSR

- The data and other materials are not distributed, except and only to other authorized users

- The data are cited properly in any publications, pursuant of the recommended citation

- Citations for any publications using the data are provided to ICPSR

(The full text of the Terms of Use may be found in the local copy of the dataset.)

Local Copy

Our copy of the dataset was downloaded from the link provided (via ICPSR) on 9 Oct. 2019.

The local dataset is hosted on GitHub in the web-project-web-project-team-k repository in the Data/ directory, as well as locally on Luna's clone of the repository.[1]

The raw data is available locally in two formats: ASCII (.txt), and comma-delimited (.csv). Both copies were downloaded during the same session.

Audience

User Constituencies

- Students
    - Students are individuals with varied educational background, seeking information about capital punishment most commonly out of either scholarly curiosity or a need for project material. With this site, students might expect to:
        - *Find citable evidence and/or usable data*, so as to support a claim for a research-based class project of any level of sophistication.
        - *Quickly access an overview of data of interest*, such as those about changes over time, to efficiently understand the topic at hand.

- Educators

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[1] If the repository is public at the time of the deadline, the raw data will only be stored locally so as to avoid infringement of the Terms of Use.

- ○ Educators are people who teach to any range of students at some institution, whether public or private, on matters regarding capital punishment including but not limited to U.S. history, political science, and law. With this site, educators might expect to:
    - *Provide an educational resource to their students*, which they could subsequently access independently, outside of coursework.
    - *Obtain concise data and/or graphics*, for use in instructional resources such as slideshow presentations.

- ● Researchers
  - ○ Researchers are people whose position necessitates obtaining and presenting information about capital punishment in the U.S., such as professors or assistants to policymakers. With this site, researchers might expect to:
    - *Find data relevant to their research*, likely with the aim of pursuing more complex data analysis for professional use (e.g., publication).
    - *Determine the validity of potential research questions*, such as those regarding racial bias in the judicial system, differences between judiciaries at the state level and historical trends in crime and punishment.
    - *Easily corroborate the provided data with different but related data*, such as comparing the statistics of application of the death penalty with the statistics of issuance of the death penalty.

- ● Activists
  - ○ Activists are persons or groups of people of varied backgrounds interested in publicly petitioning for changes in capital punishment policy, or policies within the penal system as a whole. With this site, activists might expect to:
    - *Support their claims with easily-understood data*, such as those regarding racial bias in the judicial system and historical trends in crime and punishment.
    - *Effectively spread the word about specific data*, so as to raise awareness about and garner support for their cause.

- ● Politicians
  - ○ Politicians are similar to activists in that they are interested in publicly addressing capital punishment policy, but, as government officials or aspiring government officials, may be more localized rather than topicalized in their concerns. With this site, politicians might expect to:
    - *Access data relevant to their district*, for the purpose of understanding local history and standards around capital punishment.

- ■ *Raise awareness of judicial practices*, in order to progress a particular political agenda; likely to garner support as well as clarify their stance.

- ● Policymakers
  - ○ Policymakers are distinguished from politicians in that they policy development rather than political agendas, and are established government officials. With this site, policymakers might expect to:
    - ■ *Compare and contrast between states*, in order to understand the nuances of introducing legislation that covers areas with different laws and practices.
    - ■ *Find citable, concise data and/or graphics*, for use in discussions amongst a committee or other assemblage of legislators.

- ● Lawyers
  - ○ Lawyers are persons who work in case law, and primarily those who work criminal cases. With this site, lawyers might expect to:
    - ■ *Access information about relevant precedents*, in order to make a case either against or in defense of a person on trial.
    - ■ *Easily view changes in punishment practices over time*, so as to educate themselves about the historical trajectory of juries' and judges' willingness to levy the death penalty.

Summary of Goals

In summary, users of this site may wish to:

- ● View changes in capital punishment realization over time

- ● View data specific to a location, and/or compare data between locations

- ● View case numbers for further research[2]

- ● Use what they find in a political capacity, including posting to social media

- ● Use what they find in an educational capacity, including citation

- ● Access and potentially use the dataset on which the site is based

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[2] Due to the Terms of Use, it may not be possible for our site to cater to this need.

Requirements

Functional

- Provide suggested search criteria

- Provide a way to search for cases based on year

- Provide a way to search for cases based on geographic location

- Provide a way to search for cases based on race

- Provide a way to search for cases based on what crime was committed

- Provide a way to search by a combination of multiple criteria

- Compile statistics about all cases in a particular search

- Allow the statistics compiled to be posted to social media

- Provide search-tailored suggested citations

- Provide information regarding usage of the dataset[3]

Non-functional

- Present the data in an easily understandable way(s)

- Properly secure name and case number data

- Allow direct URL copy-paste to preserve searches

- Prevent narrowing of results to fewer than 10 cases

Collaboration Plan

We will communicate about times to meet and what we need to accomplish for the project via text message or email.[4] We will hold each other accountable by reminding each other of upcoming deadlines and tasks that need to be completed, as well as by meeting consistently and at least once in the days leading up to a major deadline.

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[3] The Terms necessitate that we do not provide the dataset ourselves, but we may be able to provide a link to and/or descriptive metadata for the hosted dataset.

[4] Contact information has been exchanged off-line.

We are not yet at a stage where we know exactly which role we will all be filling. This will be decided based on our needs as the project progresses.

Currently, most document work is accomplished collaboratively through shared Google Drive files, which Luna exports and commits to the repository. Branch management and forks may be introduced if necessary.

Appendices

Personas

Also available in the [Personas/ directory](#) of the repository.

Tamara Sweeney, Esquire

Name: Tamara "Tam" Sweeney.

Descriptor: Criminal Defense Lawyer.

Quote:
"I always ask my clients, 'Is that your story?' The jury will decide if the story is true; it's my job to make sure that they don't convict out of rash emotion. It's understandable—emotions run high in murder cases—but the courtroom is, and has always been, a place for disseminating fact from fiction, candor from emotion."

Who is it?
Tamara is a 30-year-old criminal defense lawyer from Missouri, currently working at a small law firm in Arkansas. After obtaining her bachelor's degree from Louisiana State University, she studied at the University of Arkansas School of Law to eventually pass the Arkansas state bar exam. She also plays water polo, and is extremely active in her community.

What attitude?
Tamara would use our site in order to find data relevant to the cases she is working on. She sees the site as a resource for gathering information about past cases relevant to the ones she is currently working on so that she can not only build a good case for her clients, but also utilize precedents where helpful in the courtroom.

Which behavior?
Tamara is a searcher with the goal of getting to the data needed as quickly and efficiently as possible. If a site doesn't look like the information it presents will suit the needs of a case, Tam is relatively quick to leave and try a different site. She is also highly fact-oriented, so if she suspects data has been cherry-picked or tailored in any way, she will immediately seek a more neutral source. Ideally, the information found should also be understandable to clients without too much further explanation in order to facilitate greater understanding.

Jules (Professor Abernathy)

Name: Jules M. Abernathy, PhD.

Descriptor: Liberal Arts Professor of Sociology.

Quote:
"The research I do is all about the cyclic relationship between the law and the people: it's about how a society shapes its legal system and how a legal system impacts its society in turn. It's dissolution of responsibility, normalization of punishment severity; and the cultural sense of justice is at the heart of all of it."

Who is it?
Jules is a 44-year-old (tenured) Professor of Anthropology at Pomona College in California. Originally from Richmond, Virginia, Jules obtained his PhD in criminal justice from Brown University before going on to teach at a variety of small colleges before attaining a tenure-track position at Pomona. Aside from teaching within the Sociology department, Jules teaches interdisciplinary electives involving the Psychology, Anthropology and Political Science departments.

What attitude?
Jules is a common purveyor of digital humanities projects, and perceives this site as another in a line of attempts to compile and report statistics about crime. He looks at these projects for two reasons: he wants good resources to provide to his students, and he wants inspiration for new and interesting directions to take his research. He expects untainted data, access to data, proper citations, and ease of use; good visualization is a plus to him, but not a deal-breaker.

Which behavior?
Jules is a browser, and astutely aware of design as he browses; he is patient with difficult websites, but he expects his students or peers to be less patient should he reference the site in instructional resources or publications, respectively. He expects all presentations of data to be purely factual; but so long as the data are treated fairly, he is agnostic towards the political agenda of a resource, being himself a politically-motivated individual. He makes decisions at a fairly slow speed and is very thorough in his treatment digital humanities works.

User Stories

Also available in the [UserStories/ directory](#) of the repository.

As a student, I want to find crime data that I can copy and cite, so that I can use it in a research project.

As a lawyer, I want to know which death penalty cases might be similar to the case I am currently working on, so that I can make an effective case based on past precedents.

As a history professor, I want to easily view legal cases in the time period I am currently teaching students about, so that I can explore differences and similarities between laws then and now.

As an activist, I want to investigate possible bias in past death penalty cases, so that I can understand how to make the law more just today.

As a politician, I want to understand the history of executions in the district I represent, so that I can better understand how my constituency might feel about the topic.

As a policymaker, I want to have access to execution data to obtain clear and convincing statistics, so that I can support my policy proposals.

As Jules, I want to access factual and well-cited data, so that I can give further context to my teaching and research.

As Tamara, I want to quickly and efficiently find data about the death penalty in the local jurisdiction, so that I can tailor my defense towards judges and jurors from this area.