Tipsheet: The state of data journalism outside major cities

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Data journalism stories you can write at the local level

Building permits
Many local governments set these up so developers can apply for permits electronically. A popular system in Texas and several other states is called eTRAKiT, but check with your city or county to find out how contractors apply for permits. You should be able to get a login that allows you to export data to a .csv file. You can then analyze in terms of location, permit value, and company to find out who is building what, where it's being built, and who is likely to afford the new property.

County jails
County jails and local holding facilities are in your community's interest. A prime example is Sandra Bland, who took her life in a county jail. Consider doing a story that analyzes why people are in the county jail. In Texas, the Texas Commission on Jail Standards keeps county jail population data broken down by gender and what category of crime the person has been charged with (i.e. felony, misdemeanor, parole violation, convicted, awaiting trial). Your equivalent state agency may have the same thing. You can use the data as a jumping off point for stories about how long people wait for trial, how high their bonds are, how the cash bail system works, etc.

Annual budgets
No matter where you are, it's likely your readers want to know how their tax money is being spent. A city or county's annual budget document is full of relevant data, usually broken down by department, and then into smaller line items. You can use this information to do simple analyses on the government's highest-spending departments (often law enforcement), to show rapidly increasing spending in another area, or to find departments with stagnant budgets and pursue whether the stagnation is harming the department's mission.

Government salaries
Ask for a list showing the compensation of all of your city or county's employees in a given fiscal year. Make sure to ask for other compensation, like bonuses, travel allowances, retirement contributions, and anything else the government uses for payment. This data should be available in a usable form because accountants in governments of any size are using computer systems. The human resources department likely also is tracking this, so they could be good sources.

Broadband
The Federal Communications Commission does broadband progress reports every couple of years. The data is exportable as a .csv file and broken down nationwide by county. If you live in a rural area, your county almost certainly is part of the 'digital divide,' meaning that a large portion of the residents have trouble getting decent Internet service. You can use the FCC data as a starting point for a story about how a lack of broadband access affects your community's economy.