U.S. Gun Deaths, <http://guns.periscopic.com/?year=2013>

This data visualization is an excellent example of how to take a massive pile of data and make it look simple and digestible. Its goal is to tell the simple, tragic story of the excessive deaths in America that result from gun violence. On its surface the visualization tells that story very well. And on a deeper dive the graphic tells an even sadder story: the deaths concentrate at certain ages, particularly early 20s. A shocking number of 22 year olds—over 400—died in 2013 from gun violence. And the ages around 22 have similarly tragic numbers.

The basic design is just a massive collection of curved lines, which start out orange and turn white when someone died of a gunshot death. The white extension continues for the length of time the person could have lived, had they not been killed prematurely. Hovering over each line gives a name, age, gender, date he or she died, location, age they could have lived to, and what could have killed them. On the left, where the lines begin, there is a running tally of lives lost. On the right, stolen years of life are enumerated. The entire illustration is animated, with a few starting lines drawn individually before the animation speeds up. The data initially shown is for 2013, but there is a button to click in order to see the same data for 2010. All of the lines stretch across a horizontal axis, which represents ages 0 – 108. At the left of the line is a button users can click to view the number of people killed, sorted along the axis by age. It’s represented by an area plot. On hover at any point on the line in this viewing mode, the age, number of people killed and average number who would have died of alternative causes for that age appear.

This visualization starts telling a story right away: on first view once the animation is complete, the story is obvious: Lots of people die from gun violence, and it’s stealing a lot of potential years of life. The graphic also allows for progressively deeper and deeper dives through all the features listed above, and all of the data is relatively simple and intuitive in terms of accessibility. Viewers with a particular goal (e.g. finding the number of people who die at a certain age) would not have much trouble. The only suggestion I’d have there would be to make the button on the left of the horizontal line more prominent. A quick glance could easily miss it with so much else going on on the page.

From a user standpoint the only real frustration I have with the graphic is the forced animation. The animation is cool for the first time, but from a practicality standpoint it’s frustrating to have to wait for the animation to finish. The whole thing takes at least a minute. The only way to skip the animation is to click somewhere on the page, but that is not immediately apparent.

Color choices here are smart: The black background denotes the severity of the topic. The orange is vibrant and represents life very well. The white/gray color appears ghostly in front of the background, especially next to the orange. Contrast is high, which makes the entire thing visually pleasing. The numbers for lives lost and years stolen are large, and their prominence implies their importance and also makes them adequately present next to the animated arches. I think the title could stand to be larger; it seems odd to make it smaller than the numbers themselves. The age labels on the axis are also surprisingly small. I understand labels shouldn’t be huge, but they practically disappear on the page with so much else going on.

Finally, upon clicking each line, some at least link to an article on the subject. This provides an even deeper dive for those who want to do some extensive (and depressing) further digging into the subject. Links range from criminal investigations to obituaries.

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