Meat Charts: Visualizing Data with the Human Form

Lena Groeger

The concept was simple: where you live determines how much your arm is worth. But the data was anything but: 50 states, 13 body parts, a different dollar amount assigned to each arm, leg, or big toe that is seriously injured on the job. While the system of workers compensation in the United States is disjointed and complex, we wanted our data visualization to be clear, intuitive, and effective.

Our solution was to take advantage of the most ready metaphor and something our brains are wired to distinguish easily: the human body. For each state we built a human figure, visually similar to the chart of beef cuts sometimes shown in butcher shops. By allowing people to quickly scan rows and rows of human forms – each body part sized according to how much the state pays in compensation benefits – the interactive graphic conveys at a glance the arbitrary and preposterous discrepancies in state benefits. Lose a thumb in Kentucky? You're entitled to a maximum of almost $200,000. Happen to live in Rhode Island? The top payout is $13,500.

In this short talk Lena Groeger will explain the imagining, designing and building of a data visualization on insurance that became an unlikely viral hit.

http://projects.propublica.org/graphics/workers-compensation-benefits-by-limb