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Data-Driven Journalism

1/29/2022

Critique #1

**Critique: ProPublica’s “Chicago’s “Race Neutral” Traffic Cameras Ticket Black and Latino Drivers Most”**

ProPublica’s analysis on Chicago’s traffic cameras disproportionately black and Latino targeting at alarming rates was both eye-opening and an engaging read. From compelling photographs to enlightening quotes from the residents affected, the report paints a staggering picture of injustice.

The title of the report, “Chicago’s ‘Race Neutral’ Traffic Cameras Ticket Black and Latino Drivers Most,” immediately triggered the reader to ask the question, “Were these cameras designed to be race neutral in the first place?” Further down in the article, it is mentioned that these traffic cameras are thought to be of as race neutral due to their being automated. Computer software does not make biased decisions like a human being, a police officer, would. At least, that was the premise.

The cameras were installed two decades ago by former Mayor Richard M. Daley, whose father’s mayoral tenure was marred by racism and injustices. It is ironic that, Richard M. Daley’s installation of these traffic cameras were supposed to be a bias reducing measure, as his tenure was criticized due to recurring police brutality incidences. The traffic cameras disproportionately ticketed black and Latino drivers as opposed to white drivers, according to the data initially found by two University of Illinois Chicago professors. After reporting the data to the city in April 2020, they were hired to investigate the issue.

Ironically, the city voted to expand the traffic camera program in 2021, even after the disparities were uncovered. The Lori Lightfoot mayoral administration said expanding the traffic camera program was more important than ending it due to traffic casualty numbers reaching “epidemic” levels, an odd choice of wording when the world was amid an actual pandemic. The investigation noted exterior factors attributed to black and Latino drivers being ticket more frequently, such as people of color being less likely to be able to work from home during the pandemic, or people of color living in food deserts, therefore being forced to drive for necessities. In 2020, ProPublica reported citation rates jumped 3 times higher for black drivers than for white drivers.

The article has many significant quotes from the residents affected by the disproportionate traffic cameras, such as Olatunji Oboi Reed saying, “We felt the brunt of it the way white people didn’t.” Additionally, the article said in regard to Reed, “But he says he doesn’t think the city can ticket its way to safer streets.”

Chicago is rooted in racist infrastructure, and the report discussed poorer road conditions in primarily black and Latino zip codes leading to higher rates of traffic incidents, which in turn led to the installation of traffic cameras. The article also mentions, however, that some 300 traffic cameras are installed equally throughout Chicago’s black, white, and Latino neighborhoods.

While this report was insightful and contained a lot of informative data, but an issue I had with this article was simply in its organization. The report could have benefitted from section headers and some reorganization, as I found the story to be jumping around from topic to topic within the overall piece. For instance, the paragraphs about Miami and Rochester discontinuing their traffic camera programs could have gone further down. I think the article would have benefitted from a proper explanation of how the traffic cameras operated, Chicago’s main problem with the disparities, and the data collected before discussing the outcomes of other cities and potential futures.

Furthermore, ProPublica cited itself frequently in the article, without providing further details about the evidence. I personally do not see the appeal in this format, as the data source should be cited rather than “a ProPublica analysis.”

Additionally, graphics that depicted the numbers and data sets would have been helpful, as the information and statistics seemed to be sort of jumbled all over the report. Looking at a visual representation of the data would have driven the significance of it home. The graphic images of the different streets that feature traffic cameras throughout the Chicagoland area were pleasing to the eye, but I think more specific sites would be helpful.

The article’s biggest drawback is the disorganization. It highlights stories of the residents affected, shows photos of them, and discusses the factors that went into the disparities. However, the story does not flow as well as it could, because it interrupts itself. Section headers would greatly improve this already intriguing article.

All in all, this investigation was compelling and clearly had a lot of significant data that was collected.

Link: <https://www.propublica.org/article/chicagos-race-neutral-traffic-cameras-ticket-black-and-latino-drivers-the-most?token=Qj-z1yP8Y-L3FBsN3cXHWBvCzOd86ht3>