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Data-Driven Journalism

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Final Project Idea #1:

I would be interested in assessing the demographic trends of people charged with sex crimes against minors within the State of Maryland and how their cases are handled/resolved. For instance, is there a statistically significant difference in how cases involving female and male defendants are handled? How many cases result in convictions, and what percentage of those are actually full trials versus plea deals? How does the rate of convictions in Maryland compare based on county?

I would have to rely heavily on the Maryland judicial case search website for court-related records. I imagine the Census would also be a helpful way to find demographic information. There is also an official sex offender registry at the state level, as well as additional data branching off of that, which I would utilize.

I expect that there will be a marked difference in how male and female defendants are treated by the court system. I also expect there will be a difference based on the race of the defendant. What’s more, given the nature of these crimes, I would expect to see a very low conviction rate and an even lower rate of bench and jury trials.

Final Project Idea #2:

As a backup idea, I also think it would be interesting to look at county police departments within the State of Maryland and assess their use-of-force policies and related incidents of police violence. Is there are marked increase in police violence in certain counties versus others? Is there any correlation between the use of body-worn cameras and use of force? Are Maryland’s local police departments’ use-of-force policies generally pretty uniform, or do they differ widely based on the county?

Because police departments are government organizations, they’re supposed to be held to a high degree of transparency. I would utilize data made directly available by local police departments as much as possible, but I would also want to find data obtained from outside sources, including any databases compiled by nonprofits or accountability organizations. I would again want to utilize court records in instances where a police use-of-force case was prosecuted or an officer was sued civilly.

Obviously, I expect that Baltimore City will skyrocket above all neighboring jurisdictions as far as the frequency of unjustified police violence. I suspect that areas of lower socioeconomic status will have higher rates of police violence as well. I know that, surprisingly, although Howard County is one of the richest jurisdictions in the state, they didn’t implement body-worn cameras on all officers until spring of 2021, which piques my curiosity about other counties and their camera policies.

Another interesting facet that one of my classmates suggested looking into is how much funding each police department receives and if that correlates to whether they have department-wide body-worn camera requirements. I could also first do an overview of how many states in the U.S. require body-worn cameras and then focus in on Maryland specifically.