Records for social justice

The records you need to expose injustice

Nellie Bly, Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens and the other investigative muckrakers of 125 years ago exposed societal injustice primarily through people sourcing and going under cover.

Think what they could have done with public records, as well?

More than ever, journalists are needed to comfort the afflicted — to right wrongs and balance societal power. Here are a dozen public records that can help you expose social injustices in your community:

Criminal Justice

• Use of force. Examine excessive force records to see if people of color are injured by police more often than whites. The FBI started collecting the data nationally in 2019: bit.ly/ForceFBI.

• Racial profiling. Analyze arrest and speeding ticket data of local law enforcement to see if people of color are more likely to be apprehended or ticketed. See great use of such data by the Connecticut Racial Profiling Prohibition Project: ctrp3.org.

• Sentencing discrimination. Examine sentencing data in your community to see if people of color are more likely to get longer jail time. See examples by The Sentencing Project: bit.ly/Time-Jailed.

Neighborhood Disparity

• Heat. Poor inner-city neighborhoods are often physically hotter than wealthier suburban neighborhoods, as National Public Radio and University of Maryland journalism students showed through U.S. Geological Survey heat data: hotneighborhoods.

• Redlining. A classic story using Home Mort-

gage Disclosure Act data to point out how people of color are denied home loans in certain neighborhoods. See the 1988 Pulitzer-winning expose, "The Color of Money," by Bill Dedman: bit.ly/ColorofMoney.

• Pets. Dog license data often makes for fun features but take the next step by calculating a license-per-capita rate for Zip codes and then layer on census data to show that low-income areas have a much lower licensing rate, putting poor pet owners at a disadvantage.

Environmental Discrimination

• Toxicity. Toxic release inventory data details the bad stuff companies release in your community, often disproportionately hurting disadvantaged communities. Check out the Environmental Protection Agency data at bit.ly/ToxicReleaseInventory.

• Water quality can be awful in poor, rural communities. Check water testing data from local water agencies. Also, the EPA's State Review Framework assesses enforcement of the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act: bit.ly/EPAcompliance.

• Corporate influence. Tap into records to see if state regulators are ignoring complaints because of strong lobbying by industry. See story by the Texas Observer: texasobserver.org/texas-illegal-air-pollution/.

At Work

• Worker safety. To identify dangerous workplaces (hint: rarely a big problem for white-collar workers). Examine Occupational Safety and Health Administration records for local injuries/deaths at osha.gov/oshstats/index.html.

• Good Jobs First (GJF) Violations Tracker. First wide-ranging data on corporate misconduct, covering banking, consumer protection, false claims, environmental, wage and hour, safety, discrimination, price-fixing, and other cases resolved by federal regulatory agencies since 2000: goodjobsfirst.org/violation-tracker.

• Work discrimination. Request complaints and investigations handled by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or request records handled by departments within local agencies. The EEOC collects data from companies that have 100 or more employees: eeocdata.org. ♦

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