HUMANIZING NUMBERS

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BuzzFeeдNEWS

Start your reporting process with people instead of — or at least at the same time as — analyzing data.

Reporting question: Are kids being sent to jail for unpaid fines?

- We started with sources — defense attorneys, advocates, legal scholars.
- Learned that Texas treated truancy as a criminal offense.
- Advocates said it was possible that kids went to jail for unpaid truancy fines — but they had no idea how often.
- An added challenge — juvenile court records are sealed.

Jail records kept by the largest counties

DOB Description	Confined	Arresting Agency	Charges	Warrant #/Issuing Authority	Bond Amt./Type
02/19/1993 WM 6'00"170	02/09/2013 11:00 AM	SMPD	POM-B (SMPD-139680)	NA/NA	1500.00/Surety Bond
02/08/1990 WF 5'09"135	10/04/2014 9:23 PM	SMPD	PI-C (SMPD 14-77255)	NA/NA	Not Set
08/16/1994 BM 5'09"130	06/28/2014 5:20 PM	TSU	CPF/FAIL ATTEND SCHOOL-C	CR12-0158J2/JP2	Not Set
06/28/1965 WM 5'08"230	01/15/2013 8:05 AM	SMPD	ASLT BI/FV-A (SMPD 13-3263)	NA/NA	5000.00/Cash or Surety
06/28/1965 WM 5'07"228	01/19/2014 12:38 AM	SMPD	ASLT BI/FV-A (SMPD 14-4906)	NA/NA	1000.00/Surety Bond
06/28/1965 WM 5'06"220	02/14/2014 9:43 AM	HCSO	MTAG/ASLT BI FV (HAYS)	13-0331CR/County C	75000.00/Surety Bond
06/28/1965 WM 5'06"205	02/25/2015 6:35 PM	SMPD	VIOL PROTECT ORDER-F3 (SMPD 14-74618)	F15-016JP11/JP1.1	25000.00/Attorney Bond

Here are the details of how we analyzed jail data from a related story.

Talking to kids we identified in jail records led us to John Payton, a judge working in the suburbs of Dallas.

Texas Sends Hundreds of Teens To Adult Jail For Missing School

Some datasets for finding real people

- Inmate data from jails to report on judges, schools, police, and for backgrounding people
  - What are the most common charges per judge?
  - What is the most common charge for people under 20?
- Pension data to find former employees
- Birth records (i.e. Ancestry.com for finding the parents of juveniles. Young people tend to be harder to find on Lexis Nexis, but you can usually find their parents)

How to use numbers effectively:
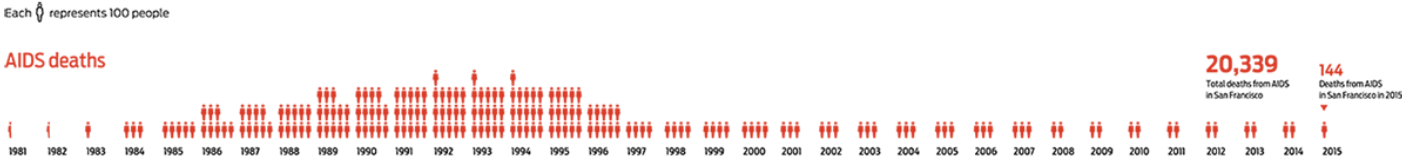
San Francisco Chronicle:

Last Men Standing by Erin Allday

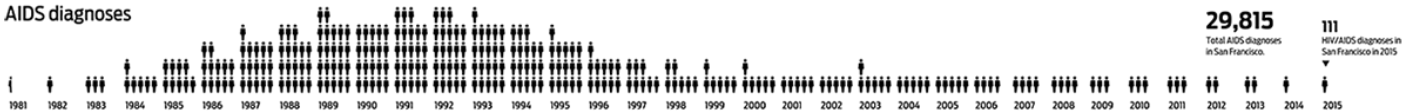They outlived an epidemic, but San Francisco's AIDS survivors are still fighting for their lives.

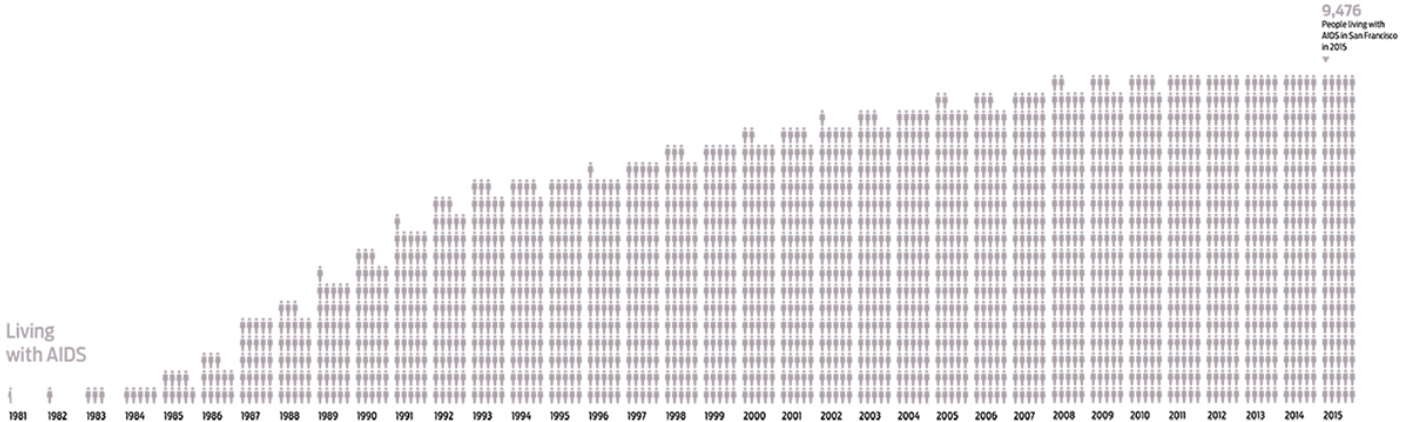# Numbers make these intimate portraits feel like part of something bigger

AIDS
deaths

AIDS
diagnoses

Living
with AIDS

How to use numbers effectively:

- Don't use them

Gateway to Gridlock by Louise Kiernan, Chicago Tribune

"The air smells as if it has been inhaled and exhaled by too many people for far too long and they are breathing it still, snoring and snuffling, sighing and murmuring as they sprawl about O'Hare International Airport like refugees from some invisible war.

Everywhere you look there are bodies. Stretched along tables and the conveyor belts of x-ray machines. Curled up on baggage carousels, slumped against walls and draped along benches."

How to use numbers effectively:

- Don't use them
- **Compare them to something tangible**

[The perfect payday](#) by Charles Forelle and James Bandler, Wall Street Journal

"On a summer day in 2002, shares of Affiliated Computer Services Inc. sank to their lowest level in a year. Oddly, that was good news for Chief Executive Jeffrey Rich.

His annual grant of stock options was dated that day, entitling him to buy stock at that price for years...

Just lucky? A Wall Street Journal analysis suggests the odds of this happening by chance are extraordinarily remote — around one in 300 billion. The odds of winning the multistate Powerball lottery with a $1 ticket are one in 146 million."

How to write effectively about statistics

- Don't use them
- Compare them to something tangible
- **Pull most of it out of the main story**

Data explainers

- Here's a [bad one](#) (I helped write it, so I can say that).

Just look at the headline.

K–12, PUBLIC SAFETY | SPOTLIGHT | ON SHAKY GROUND

Thousands of records merged to create seismic safety database

Data explainers

Use simple language — don't let a sophisticated analysis make you lazy.

[How we identified the nation's worst charities](#)

"The United States is home to roughly 1.6 million tax-exempt organizations.

That's far too many to examine closely. So the Tampa Bay Times and The Center for Investigative Reporting used data collected by the nonprofit charity tracker GuideStar USA to narrow the pool to the 5,800 charities nationwide that report paying professional solicitation companies to raise donations."

Data explainers

When simple language won't cut it...use gifs?

How BuzzFeed News Used Betting Data To Investigate Match-Fixing In Tennis

How to write effectively about statistics

- Don't use them
- Compare them to something tangible
- Pull most of it out of the main story
- **Pretend you're describing your analysis to people at a cocktail party — not a NICAR cocktail party.**

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