> Little Italy and Canton are two nearby neighborhoods in Baltimore. It's about 1.5 miles from one to the other, either seven minutes by car or a half-hour walk.
>
> But for a newborn baby, the neighborhoods couldn't be further apart. Kids born in Little Italy are more than 10 times as likely to die before their first birthday as those born in Canton.

I want to start with a story, a news story I read online. It's a piece about racial inequality in Baltimore. It was published just after Freddie Gray died. It's by Vox Media, one of these data-heavy media startups, big on explanatory journalism.

READ GRAF 1

Already suspicious – can tell that lede came not from on-the-ground reporting, but a quick visit to Google maps.

Here's the tweet that led me to the story. Anyone with a grasp on Baltimore would not pick Little Italy and Canton to depict racial inequality or differences in health outcomes.
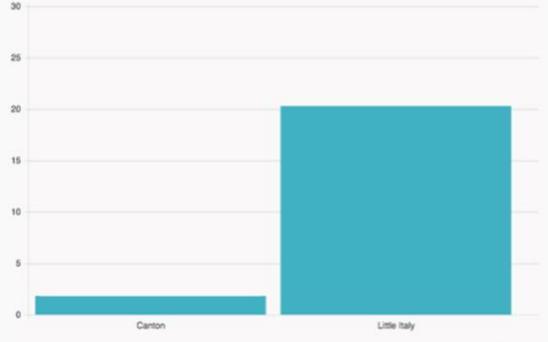
This is data from the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance. Good data, I've heard. But when Vox says Little Italy, look what they're talking about.
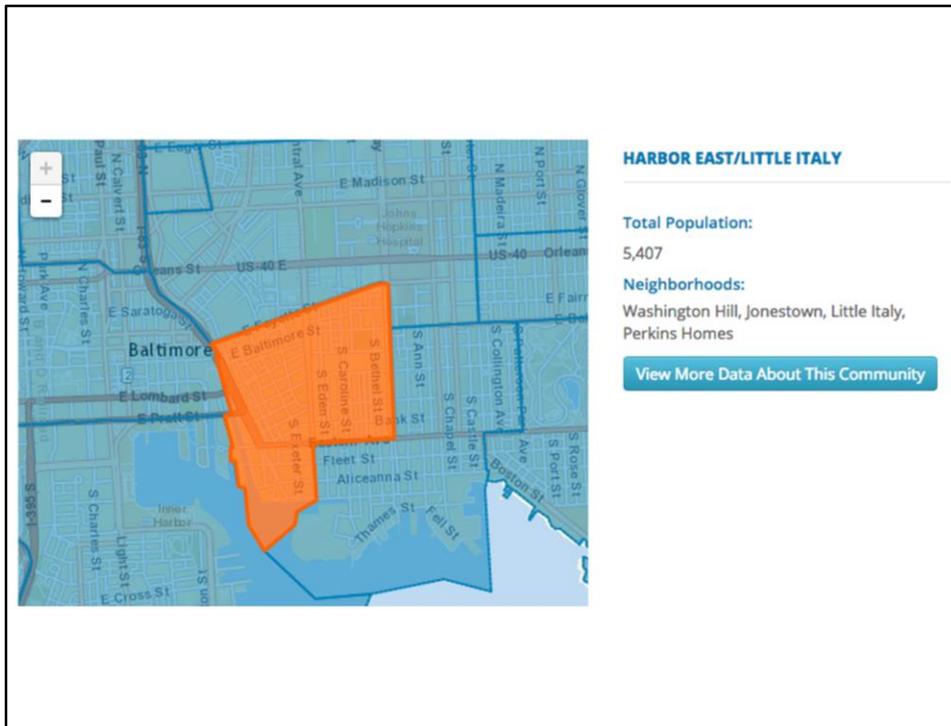
This is from BNIA's site. The statistical area Vox chose? BNIA actually calls it Harbor East-slash-Little Italy. That's an even more nuts comparison to make. No one from Baltimore would ever say Harbor East and Canton "couldn't be further apart," even figuratively.

But look closer at the neighborhoods included in this area.

Perkins Homes. Public Housing. What they're really comparing is public housing to a waterfront neighborhood that started gentrifying 20 years ago.

The thing is, the data is exactly right here, as far as the two populations they compared. But the story—there is no story. If you read it, it's just data point, data point, data point, showing us over and over again how different the outcomes are for Baltimore's poor black neighborhoods compared to wealthier, whiter ones. Then a bunch of quotes from an economist about why infant mortality is worse for babies in poor families. Not news.

And a lot of people read the story. The tweet where I found it was from Vox editor in chief Ezra Klein, self-professed "lover of charts." He has 778k followers. This story is defining—misdefining—a neighborhood for potentially hundreds of thousands of people. That's the danger when you let data define a place without talking to any of the people who live there.

Lesson is, don't let the data do your reporting for you.

It's not like I, as a reporter, haven't unleashed reams of data upon the Baltimore metropolitan region.

I produced WYPR's series "The Lines Between Us." The series was all about inequality in our region. We contracted with BNIA to produce data maps I think literally by the dozen.
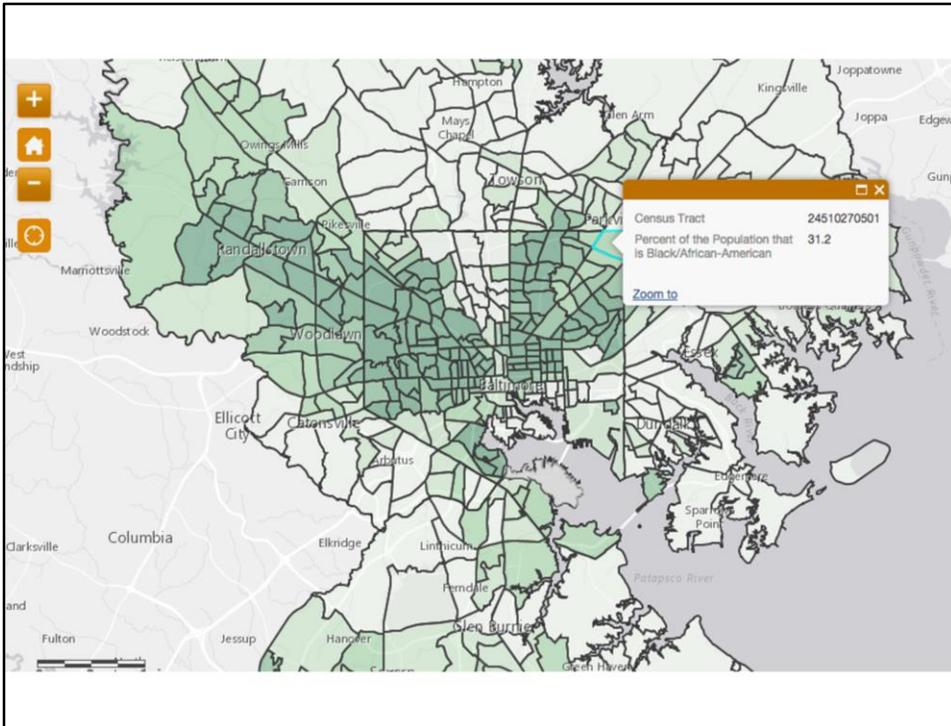
Even put them all together in a big interactive tool.

Episode #12: The Credit Lines Between Us
Air Date: 12.14.12
Law professor Larry Gibson and Governor's Commission on Small Business chair Ackneil Muldrow, II, tell us the role of "Little Willie" Adams in financing Baltimore's mid-century black entrepreneurs, and what the expansion of credit to minority businesspeople in the decades that followed means for black small business today.

Episode #11: Questioning the Illusion
Air Date: 12.7.12
In this episode of "The Lines Between Us" we broadcast the audio from our Dec. 4 film screening of "Race: The Power of an Illusion" and the panel discussion that followed.

Episode #10: The Wealth Gap
Air Date: 11.30.12
Inequality discussions often focus on income inequality. But the wealth gap is just as complicit in perpetuating disadvantage through the generations. We'll talk about how housing contributed to the wealth gap, and meet an 88-year-old black World War II veteran who is feeling the effects of that gap as his health declines.

Episode #10 video extra: Uncle Joe's House
Today's episode is about an African-American World War II veteran who's having trouble selling his house near Mondawmin Mall. In this video extra, his great-niece Dominique Moore gives us a tour of the house.

But we also did more. Every Friday, we went on the air with real people, real stories.

Brown Comes Down: To Be a "Poly Boy"
An African-American man who integrated Baltimore Polytechnic Institute two years before Brown v. Board tells Tom Hall what it was like to become a "Poly Boy."
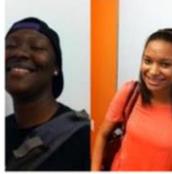
Gun Violence Stories: A Year With Zero Murders
Argenae Howell, a student leader for youth advocacy group "The Intersection," talks to Reginald F. Lewis High School teacher Chantiel Awkard about what it would take to make Baltimore's annual homicide number zero.

Gun Violence Stories: Eric Burrell
Eric Burrell, a student leader for youth advocacy group "The Intersection," on how gun violence has touched his life.

We even had a stream of content on the website called "Your Stories," where people talked about these issues in the first person.
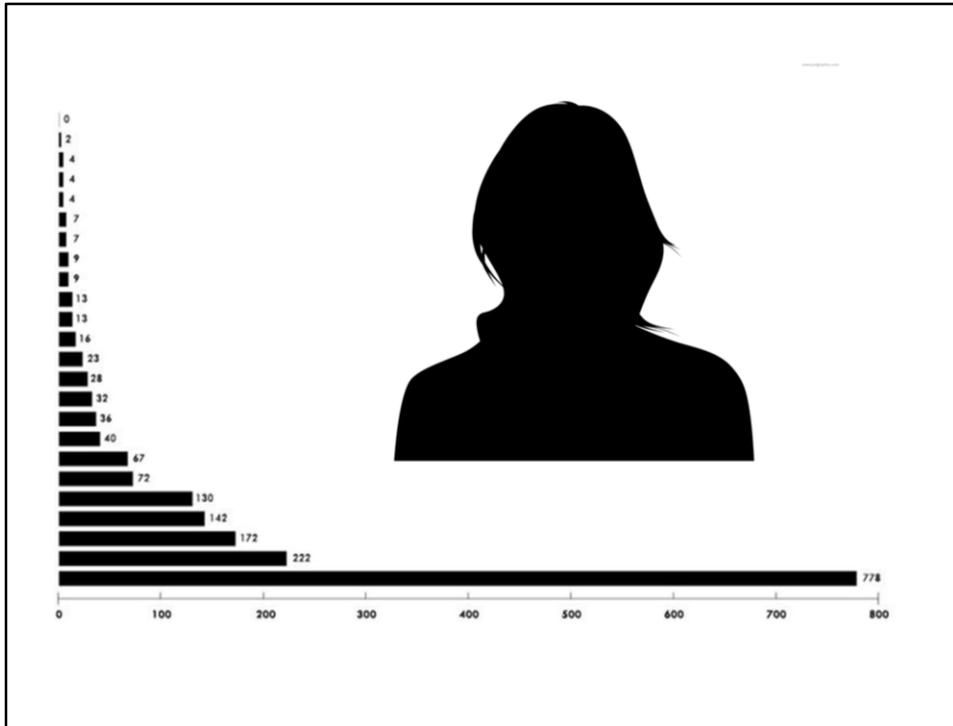
So…how do you humanize the data? You use judgment. Obviously, you don't want to pick someone who's an outlier. We've all seen inspiring "beating the odds" stories, but…to me, the odds *are* the story. What are people up against? The data shows that something is happening to real people. What's happening to most of them?

But remember: your characters will never be perfectly representative of the data. You're not a sociologist or anthropologist, taking quantitative research and adding some qualitative component. You just want to find someone who will help you open a window on an issue for the reader. A way in.

Someone's eyes to look through.

Maps courtesy of Sean Reardon, Kendra Bischoff, and Anna Ponting.
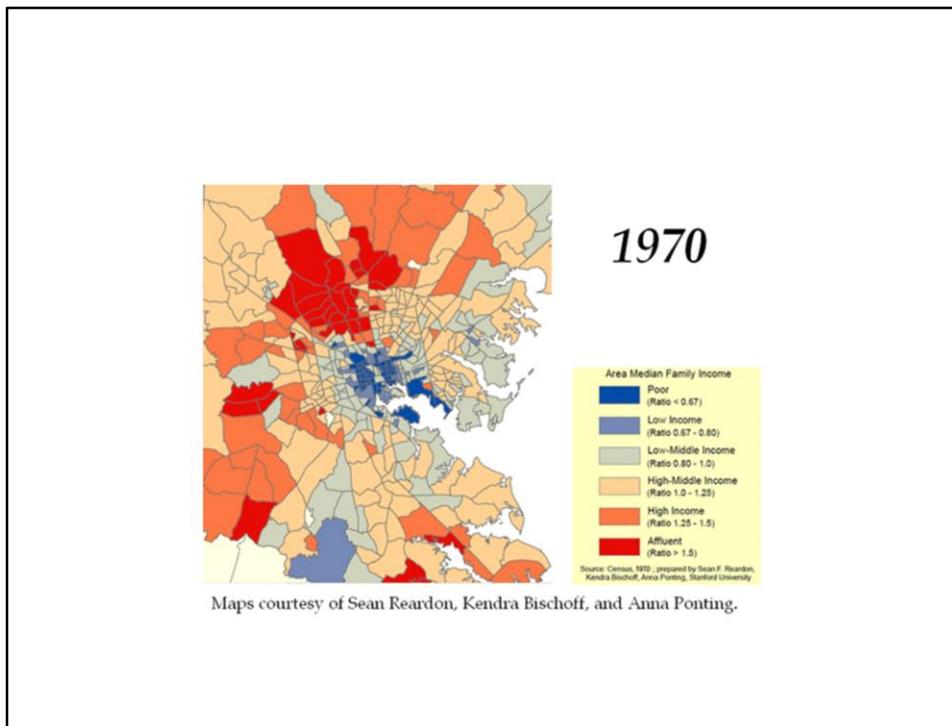
What I find is that data tells me where to go for stories.

In this animated gif, I took a few maps of the Baltimore region over time. Red means a rich neighborhood, blue means a poor neighborhood. The lighter colors in between are middle class neighborhoods. The researchers found that there are many fewer middle class neighborhoods today. They've been replaced by increases in rich and poor neighborhoods.

Watch the Baltimore region change.

Now keep your eye on Northeast Baltimore. It's sort of tenuously hanging on to middle class status.

1970
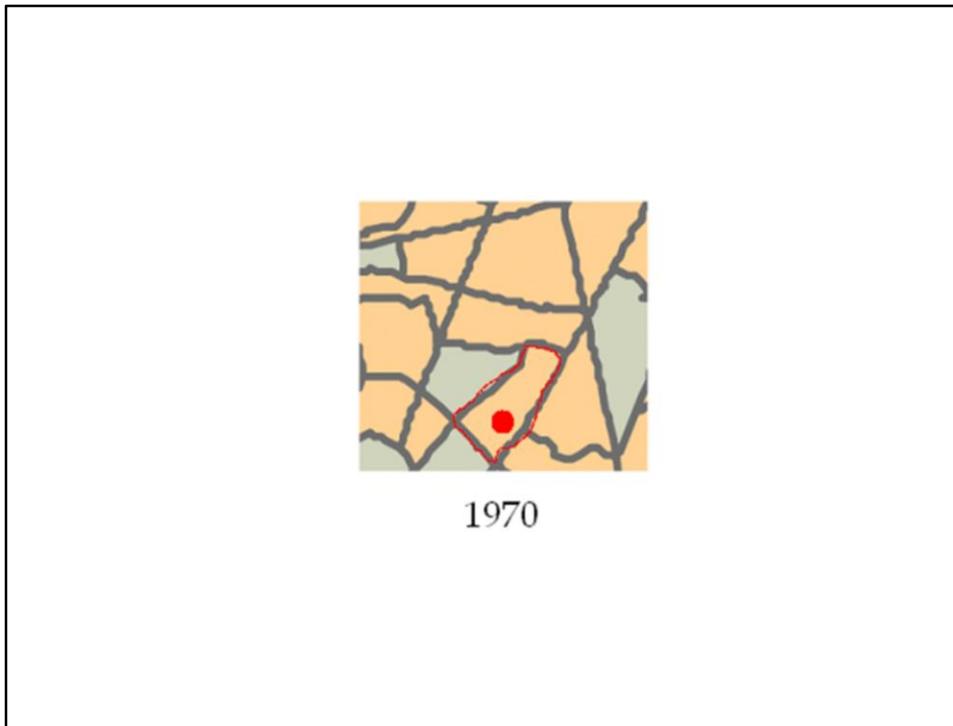
Here I've zoomed in. This is over near Hamliton, northeast baltimore. The Census tract with the red dot does slip into the poor category over time, and the one to the left of it sort of stays in the middle.

My question was, what does it look like for a neighborhood to try to hold onto middle class status. I interviewed the neighborhood association president of the area on the left, and for the blue area, I just got out of my car and talked to people on the street.

The story that emerged was that some people were very anxious—getting active in community associations, taking second jobs, scraping to keep their kids in parochial school, trying to hold their middle class life together. Other people saw this neighborhood as a step up. They'd moved from other neighborhoods and were happy to find houses they could afford in an area with less crime. It was a way into the middle class.

A year and a half later, I moved to this neighborhood. It's been 9 months. I know it better now. Had I missed some nuances? Sure. But by talking to people, I had gotten the feel of the place right, I think.
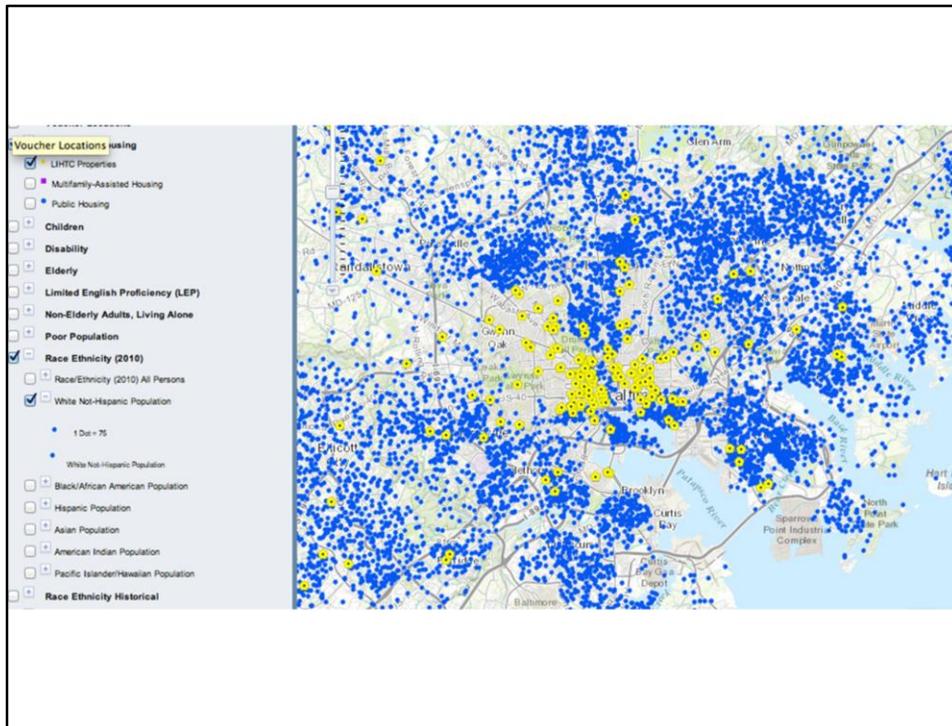
Here's another example of using data to figure out where to go for stories.

The yellow dots on this map indicate housing where developers used a tax credit to create reduced rent units. It's low-income housing.

The blue dots are white people. Not many yellow houses among the blue dots, are there?

A big Supreme Court opinion came down last month about this issue. The case focused on a Texas housing agency and how it doled out tax credits for affordable housing developers. Some developers are willing to reduce rents in some of their units for people making under a certain income. But they need the tax credits to make it worth their while.

The Texas housing agency wound up in court because some people said the agency was disproportionately rejecting tax credit applications for developments in Dallas's white neighborhoods—presumably because people in wealthier, single family areas didn't want them built there. Over time, that ended up cramming low-income housing into neighborhoods that were already poor and, and as it not so surprisingly happens, heavily black and Latino. The map for Dallas would probably look a lot like this map of Baltimore.

That's called a disparate impact. That's exactly the kind of story I'm drawn to. I report with what I call an equity lens—is there equitable distribution of access to opportunity, to community assets. That means I'm thinking about classes of people protected under civil rights laws—typical lines of social stratification like race, disability, gender, age, family structure, etc. And I'm wondering if government policies and the practices of other organizations are playing out differently along those lines. Data is essential for this.

After I left WYPR in 2013, I started reporting on housing as a freelancer for Al Jazeera America. I used this data for two of Al Jazeera stories.

One was set just east of the city. One was set just south. Both had to do with single family home neighborhoods trying to keep out planned low-income developments. In both cases, the "not-in-my-backyard" NIMBY sentiment found an institutional mechanism to gain legitimacy and ultimately shut down developers plans. In one case, they took advantage of a Maryland law that allowed county legislatures to vote to shut down low-income housing tax credit applications. Doesn't matter if the state thinks you have a sold plan, if the county says no, you're done. Neighbors got the Baltimore County Council to shut down a project that way.

The other story, in Anne Arundel County, involved a county legislator writing a zoning bill that would keep a development from getting built.

For both stories, I found characters trying to move from a poor neighborhood to a neighborhood with more opportunity.

I used data about policy—that blue dot, yellow house map, for instance. And I used data to compare places, to compare where people were to where they wanted to be. A couple examples:

"The schools rank in the top 5 percent in the state. A bus line connects to workplaces in Baltimore and Annapolis. Based on an index of homeownership rates, income levels, proximity to jobs and school rankings, the state designated this area a 'community of opportunity.'"

- Here's how I describe the area in Anne Arundel County where developers wanted to put reduced-rent apartments: "The schools rank in the top 5 percent in the state. A bus line connects to workplaces in Baltimore and Annapolis. Based on an index of homeownership rates, income levels, proximity to jobs and school rankings, the state designated this area a 'community of opportunity.'"

> "The target neighborhoods have poverty rates under 10 percent; fewer than 30 percent of the residents are people of color; and less than 5 percent of the population lives in federally subsidized housing."

> "At Joe's former elementary school in Baltimore, 97 percent of the students are low income, and 97 percent are African-American. His middle school in Columbia is one-third low income, with white, Asian, Hispanic and multiracial students making up just over half the population."

In the other story, a woman who used to live in public housing got a voucher that can only be used for rentals in high opportunity areas, as defined by HUD. I used that definition in the piece: "The target neighborhoods have poverty rates under 10 percent; fewer than 30 percent of the residents are people of color; and less than 5 percent of the population lives in federally subsidized housing."

The woman moved with her son to Columbia in Howard County. I used school data to illustrate the move. "At Joe's former elementary school in Baltimore, 97 percent of the students are low income, and 97 percent are African-American. His middle school in Columbia is one-third low income, with white, Asian, Hispanic and multiracial students making up just over half the population."
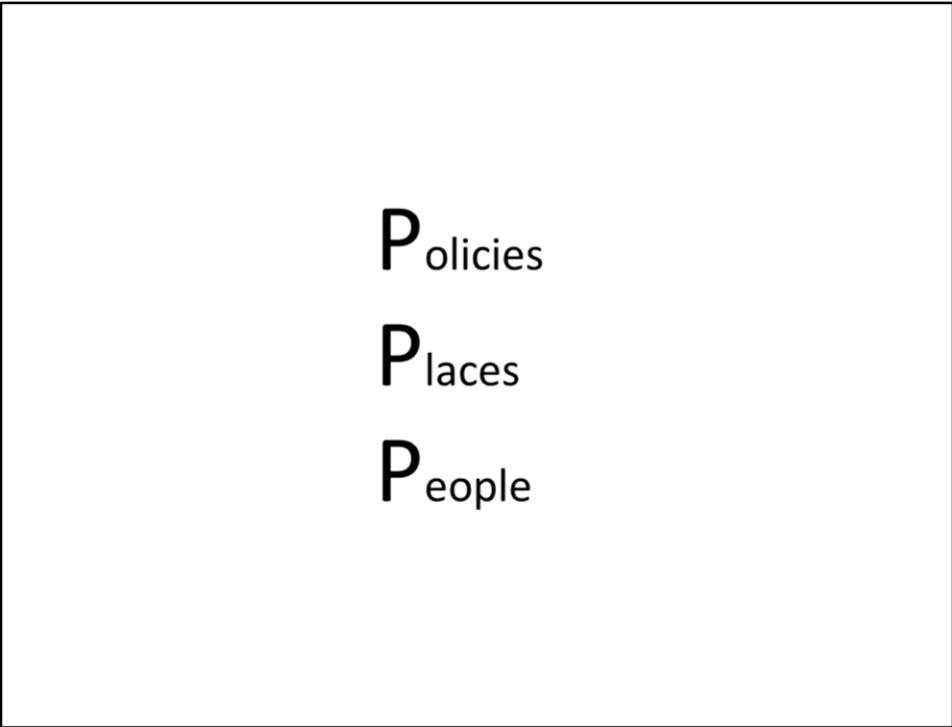
So what's guiding me in how I do reporting with data is what I guess you could call "3 Ps": Policies, places, people

Beyond the consequences of whatever decisions you make as a person, your outcomes are shaped by where you live and by the social institutions in your life, like government, business, community organizations. Policies and places: that's the data I want. Then I tell the stories about the people who have to negotiate the pressure that these numbers bring to bear on their lives.
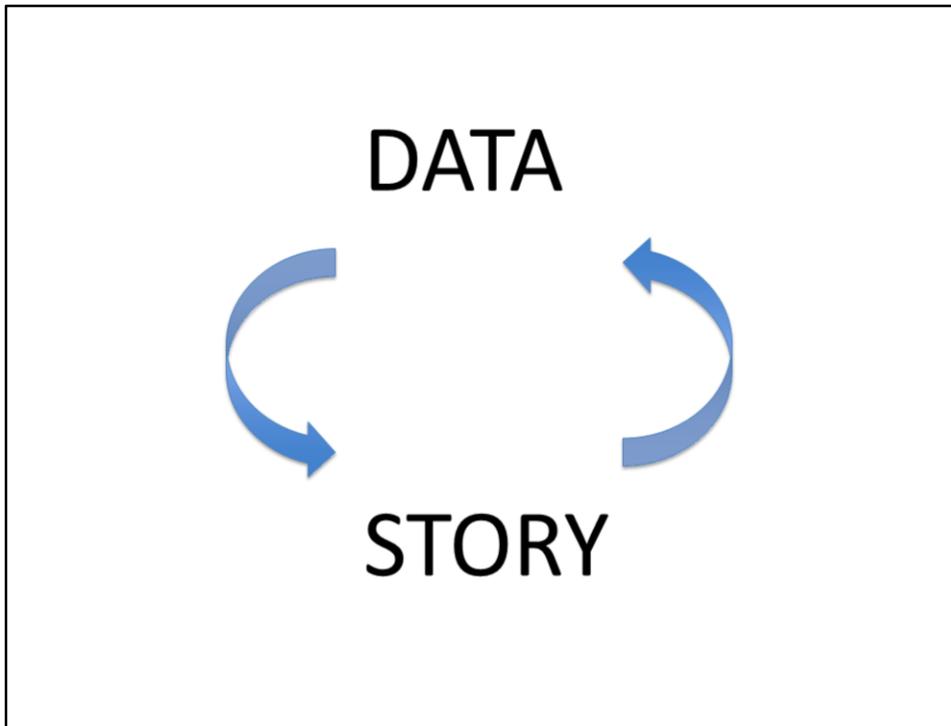
So I find thereare two ways to approach reporting with data. You can look at the data and find a story to tell about it. Or you find people's stories to tell and contextualize them with data.

In Hamilton, I took the data and found the stories.

In the fair housing reporting, I had the stories and dug up the data.

I guess there's one more strategy I'll mention that doesn't fit either of those two molds.

That's when data has already been used to popularize a story or narrative, and you want to get beyond that.

Probably no poor Baltimore neighborhood has been reported on more often than Sandtown-Winchester.

Report: Sandtown-Winchester leads state in number of people incarcerated

Dwight Davis staffs the Baltimore Housing Authority Food Pantry in Sandtown-Winchester. Sandtown-Winchester/Harlem Park has the most people held in state prisons than any other neighborhood, according to a report by the Justice Policy Institute & Prison Policy Institute. (Kim Hairston / Baltimore Sun)

By Justin Fenton
The Baltimore Sun

THE BALTIMORE SUN

News / Maryland / Baltimore
Crime Beat

This article is related to: Jails and Prisons

The narrative of Sandtown is that of a neighborhood that symbolizes blight, that has the most returning prisoners,

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How many jobs does $100 million get you?

0:00 / 9:03

Caitlin Esch

The outside of the shuttered FMC Corp. plant in Baltimore. The plant used to produce insecticides and other agricultural chemicals, but in 2008, the company

where taxpayers poured in 100 million dollars and look how little it got us.

The story to me is not just these outside forces acting on the neighborhood—reentering prisoners, millions in federal investment—but the strength of the community in resisting those forces and trying to take control of their own destiny as a neighborhood. I wanted to break through the narrative that the data-based reporting had already created.

U.S.

A Baltimore neighborhood takes care of its own as it recovers from unrest

Sandtown tries to control its future as the rest of the city floods in to help

April 29, 2015 5:45AM ET

by **Lawrence Lanahan**

So I did this piece for Al Jazeera the morning after the rioting. Followed community leaders as they took control of the cleanup effort the morning after the rioting and talked about what changes *they* wanted to see in their neighborhood.

No data in that story. Well, not totally true. One piece of data, and it came in a quote from a resident named George Norfleet.

During the rioting, someone set a car on fire outside George's house. When a 911 call failed to produce a fire truck, George grabbed some neighbors, and they tried to put the fire out themselves. An example of my theme, there, of residents getting positive things done for themselves.

> George Norfleet understood the rioters' anger. He and his wife Phebe say he was once beaten by Baltimore police and sent to the hospital without being arrested. "I'd say 5 percent of police here are good," he said. "The other 95 percent are bad."

Here's the data in a passage from the story.

Data or not, there's gotta be a story. There have to be real people. Think about stories you've read about neighborhoods, about policy. Some of them are kind of wonky, right? But stories have soul.

That sounds like a cheesy way to talk about it, I know. But when I'm doing this work, that is a question I ask myself. Does it have soul? I often miss the mark. But that's my standard. It's gotta have soul.