

Ethical Implications of the Use of Data and Statistics

Our resources indicated we should avoid lying whether on purpose or by accident. (Gelman & Nolan, 2002) Hence, I found the misuse and misinterpretation of data interesting.

For example our resource said the presentation of numbers could mislead a because:

- They could be fabricated
- They could support misinformation or be misleading
- Comparisons could be arbitrary (Gelman & Nolan, 2002)

I'd like to discuss one example that misled the consumer and another that fabricated data. Both were related to a New York City crime-prevention practice known as stop-and-frisk. This process was defined as allowing police officers to briefly detain, question, and search citizens for concealed weapons when they believed they had or were about to commit a crime. (Legal Information Institute, n.d.)

This practice disproportionately targeted the city's ethnic minorities and a federal judge ruled it unconstitutional last August. (Democracy Now, 2013)

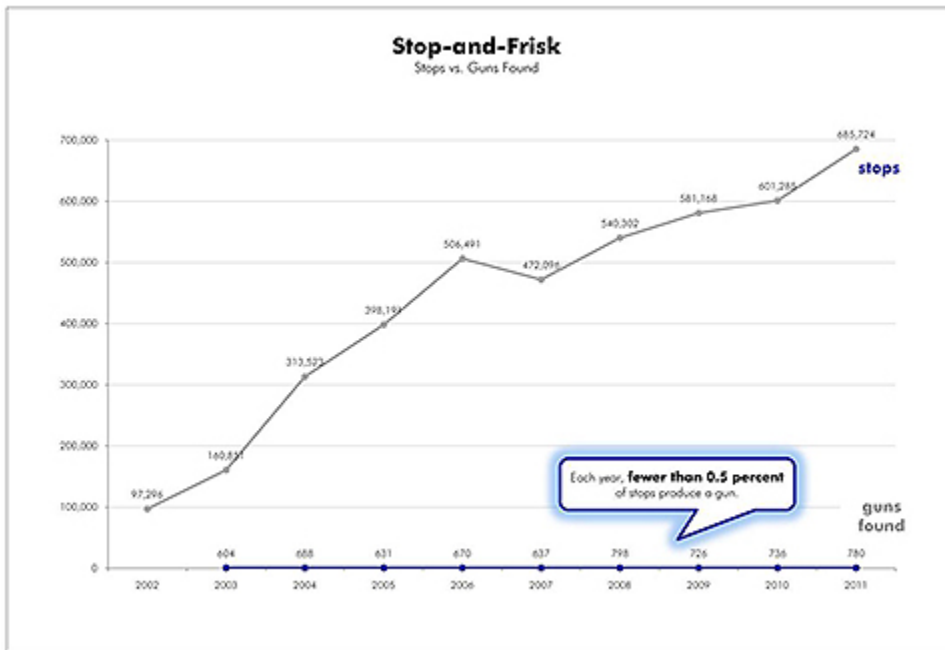
My first example dealt with how local media covered the judge's ruling.

After the judge's decision, local media perpetuated the link between an increase in gun crime to the fact the judge described stop-and-frisk practices as racial profiling. This was troublesome for me to read. I was academically and professionally trained as a journalist. Part of that training included "data-driven" reporting and the ability to interpret statistics. Hence it bothered me when journalists at the *New York Post* declared gun violence would increase as a result of the federal judge's decision. They ran a cover story warning residents of the impending gun violence that would occur as a result of curtailing stop-and-frisk practices.



However, the data, which I will illustrate, indicated gun violence remained consistently low over several years, despite the increase in the number citizens stopped and frisked. In short, the newspaper headline indicated the end of stop-and-frisk would signal the rise of gun violence. Conversely, an examination of longitudinal data

related to the incidences of gun crime and the numbers of individuals stopped and frisked showed incidents of gun violence remained steady – despite the increase in the number of citizens stopped and frisked. (Hart, 2013)



My second example was also related to stop-and-frisk. I heard a radio interview with New York City police officer Adhyl Polanco. He said officers were required to stop at least one person per day. However, he said there times when he and his peers observed neither crimes nor suspicious behavior. In those cases officers were forced to get creative to achieve quotas. (Democracy Now, 2013)

He described incidents where he was called to a robbery and told not to record the occurrence as a robbery because it would raise their Comp Stat number for the week. Instead, he was told to record it as a lost property report. Comp Stat refers to the computer statistics used to strategically control the collection and presentation of crime data. The effectiveness of police department performance was based on those numbers. (DeLorenzi, Shane, & Amendola, 2006)

Polanco cited another example where he was called to a shooting and told not to write a bullet went through a car – but instead write – a sharp object. As a result, this shooting did not show up in the department’s annual report of shootings. Polanco said the long-term consequences of this behavior would be detrimental to the funding and staffing of the city’s police department. For example, if statistics showed less violent crime, the department would not be able to justify hiring more officers. (Democracy Now, 2013)

Concluding, this discussion question and my response indicated our need to examine statistics as well as the ethics related to their publication. (Gelman & Nolan, 2002)

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