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Introduction to solutions journalism

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What's something
that is working in
your community?

39%
of people
globally report
avoiding the
news because it's
too negative

Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024

MOST COMMON REASONS FOR NEWS AVOIDANCE - ALL MARKETS



43%

say there is too much politics and COVID-19



36%

say news has negative effect on mood



29%

say they are worn out by amount of news



29%

say the news is untrustworthy or biased



17%

say it leads to arguments I'd rather avoid



16%

say there is nothing I can do with the information

1

What is solutions journalism?

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SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM IS:

rigorous,
evidence-based
reporting on
responses to social
problems.



SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM IS:

reporting on
something that's
happening now, and
the effects it is
producing.

Four pillars of solutions journalism

Focuses on a response to a social problem — and on how that response has worked, or why it hasn't.

Provides data or qualitative results that indicate effectiveness (or lack thereof).

Shows what can be learned from a response and why it matters to a newsroom's audience.

Places responses in context; doesn't shy away from revealing shortcomings.

Response

Evidence

Insight

Limitations

Why these four?

- **Response:** If the response is worth featuring, it's worth its own story. (We're focused on systemic responses – not kind acts by individual or group)
- **Evidence:** Aren't results what make the story newsworthy?
- **Insight:** What we can show that others can learn from, fulfilling our mission to serve society?
- **Limitations:** Make the story journalism, examining the response, not promoting it.

Is solutions journalism advocacy?

- Not if we **don't overclaim** or **try to predict the future**.
- Not if we show that there are other ways of handling the problem and **this isn't the "right way" or the "only way."**
- Not if we **make the story about the idea and insights** — rather than a particular organization, program or policy.
- Not if we include the **limitations and unknowns** and promise to return when more is known.

Flip the script

The old way doesn't work

Here is one way people say is working better

Here is one big cause of a big problem

Here is how people are addressing it

Something is broken

This group says they have a way to fix it

How do I find the best solution story?

- You can't! It doesn't exist.
- You can find stories that illustrate approaches to problems.
- You can draw out what is new or interesting from any thoughtful effort without implying it's the right or best way to go.

Let's talk about evidence

Why evidence is important

It is the difference between a true solutions story and story that merely reports:

- An untested theory
- Good intentions
- A guess that things will turn out well
- Claims, often self-serving, of a policy's value

What is evidence?

- Numerical or descriptive indications of impact
- Elements that help support the idea that something is working
- Two main types:
 - Quantitative (numerical)
 - Qualitative (descriptive)

Qualitative evidence

- Rather than starting with a hypothesis, you gather data and then the data tells what to extrapolate (e.g., surveys)
- Answers “why and “how” (vs. numerical data, which answers “what”)
- Can be sensitive to context
- Can produce totally unexpected results and insights

Vetting evidence

- Need enough to be credible
- Interrogate the data
- What else could the evidence be saying? What other factors could be causing the results?
- Is it a quality study?
Peer-reviewed?
- Who paid for the research?
What was the effect size?
Comparison group?
- Is there a reason to suspect bias?

How to use evidence

- Don't overclaim or predict the future
- Tell the audience what you don't know
- Use graphs and data visualizations to present numbers
- Be careful about causation and correlation

Pop quiz!

Evidence in solutions-oriented stories:

- A. Can only come from peer-reviewed studies
- B. Isn't enough until all the research is completed, years and sometimes decades after an effort began
- C. Includes information from sources that aren't involved in the effort

Pop quiz!

Evidence in solutions-oriented stories:

- A. Can only come from peer-reviewed studies
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How is solutions journalism distinct from advocacy?

Take a minute and write your response in the chat box, but don't hit enter.

Questions?





2

Why practice
solutions
journalism?

It's **good journalism**

It makes stories stronger,
tells the whole story and
strengthens accountability ...

... by investigating problems
right in front of us.

A problem seen as
intractable becomes
unacceptable.



Accountability

“Toxic neglect:
How Rochester
responded to
its lead poisoning
problem”



By turning to code enforcement and stepped-up inspections of targeted high-risk properties, Rochester, New York was able to reduce the number of children testing high for lead over a 10 year period. It's a preventive model that city believes others can use as well. (*Andrea Levy, The Plain Dealer*)

How contamination goes unabated

Poor code enforcement leaves children at risk in dangerous homes

RACHEL DISSELL
AND BRIE ZELTNER

In 2006, Cleveland City Council passed a law aimed at enticing landlords to voluntarily prove their homes were safe from lead-based paint hazards that continue to cause irreversible brain damage and lifelong health problems for small children.

Nine years later, not one has done so.

The failed effort is, in many ways, symbolic of the city's overall strategy for combating childhood lead poisoning — well-intentioned but ineffective.

After decades of work, the city has a stable of programs, policies and laws to fight its lead poisoning problem, which is among the worst in the nation. But its efforts, which span multiple city departments, are largely outmoded, tenuously funded and mired in bureaucracy.

In its current state, the system is one that:

- Responds only when children are already irreversibly harmed and does little, beyond providing basic educational information, to prevent children from being poisoned.

- Has confusing laws that in many cases are ignored or not fully enforced.

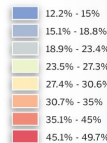
- Sidesteps basic housing-code enforcement, which experts say is vital to creating a sustainable lead-poisoning prevention program.

Cleveland's approach is one that in 2012 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told cities "should no longer be acceptable practice."

City officials rely almost com-

Lead-poisoned children in 'hot' census tracts

Children under 6 estimated to be lead poisoned in "hot," or heavily lead-contaminated, census tract



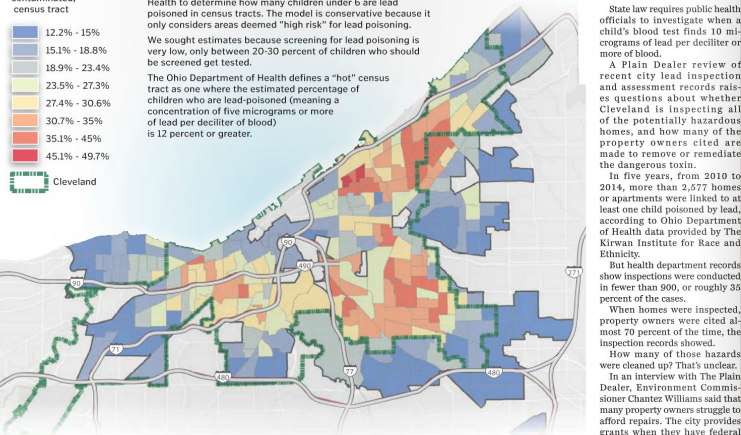
Cleveland

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity created maps for The Plain Dealer to illustrate estimates of the scope of Greater Cleveland's lead poisoning problem.

The map below uses a model created for the Ohio Department of Health to determine how many children under 6 are lead poisoned in census tracts. The model is conservative because it only considers areas deemed "high risk" for lead poisoning.

We sought estimates because screening for lead poisoning is very low, only between 20-30 percent of children who should be screened get tested.

The Ohio Department of Health defines a "hot" census tract as one where the estimated percentage of children who are lead-poisoned (meaning a concentration of five micrograms or more of lead per deciliter of blood) is 12 percent or greater.



SOURCE: Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

THE PLAIN DEALER

"Have you dealt with the City of Cleveland building department for anything?" he said. "They make it so difficult to want to do business with them."

Inspection lack teeth

State law requires public health officials to investigate when a child's blood test finds 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter or more of blood.

A Plain Dealer review of recent city lead inspection and assessment records raises questions about whether Cleveland is inspecting all of the potentially hazardous homes, and how many of the property owners cited are made to remove or remediate the dangerous toxin.

In five years, from 2010 to 2014, more than 2,577 homes or apartments were linked to at least one child poisoned by lead, according to Ohio Department of Health data provided by The Kirwan Institute for Race and Ethnicity.

But health department records show inspections were conducted in fewer than 900, or roughly 35 percent of the cases.

When homes were inspected, property owners were cited all most 70 percent of the time, the inspection records showed.

How many of those hazards were cleaned up? That's unclear.

In an interview with The Plain Dealer, Environment Commissioner Chantrel Williams said that many property owners struggle to afford repairs. The city provides grants when they have federal funding, but not all property owners are eligible.

But Williams said most eventu-

Other cities employ effective lead strategies

RACHEL DISSELL AND BRIE ZELTNER

Greater Cleveland continues to have one of the worst lead-poisoning problems in the nation with more than 10,000 children poisoned in the past five years. In some urban pockets, as many as half of children under 6 are likely to be poisoned. The problem, though, is preventable. ¶ Below are some solutions used in other cities that could work here but would require significant political support. Others are so common-sense you might wonder why they aren't being used already.

1. Code enforcement as prevention

The goal: Preventing exposure to lead for all children, rather than using children as "lead detectors" and reacting after they are poisoned.

What's happening here: Though some effort is put into educating parents in neighborhoods with a lot of older, deteriorating homes about the dangers of lead, little to no priority is given to removing the hazards before the harm is done.

Who's trying to do it right: Though no city has completely eliminated lead poisoning, some, such as Rochester, New York, have significantly cut exposure to the heavy metal by deploying code enforcers to look for and cite lead hazards in homes built before 1978, when lead was banned in paint.

It requires some investment in training, but routine inspections are quicker and can cover far more ground. Some cities concentrate the inspections on rentals, which are at greater risk for hazards or in certain geographic areas where lead-poisoning cases are historically high.

2. Get more kids screened

The goal: Identify more children who inhale or ingest lead so they can be treated and their homes cleaned up to prevent further damage.

What's happening here: Screening rates for childhood lead exposure are dismal here. Though Ohio laws and Medicaid rules require certain children be screened for the toxin, in Cleveland and Cuyahoga County only about 20 percent to 30 percent of the kids who should get tested do.

Ohio health officials created high-risk ZIP codes and screening tools to help doctors and parents figure out which children need to be tested. But the testing laws aren't enforced, and the number of children getting screened has barely budged in Cuyahoga County in a decade.

Who's trying to do it right: Some states, such as Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, require universal screening of children at certain ages. In some of those states, and in the District of Columbia, doctors must provide parents with proof their child has been screened before they enroll in a day care or school, similar to how parents here must provide vaccination records before enrolling their child.

3. Create lead-safe registries

The goal: Create a public registry of homes with no lead hazards or where lead has been eliminated or remediated. Parents or caregivers can search for healthy homes for their children.

What's happening here: Cleveland and Cuyahoga County both have programs to inspect and help remediate homes where lead hazards are identified, using grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. But they do not have registries to share information about the homes they help fix — even though HUD has encouraged "lead safe" housing registries for more than a decade.

Who's trying to do it right: Many cities, counties and states make lead remediation or inspection information accessible in online registries that are simple to create and inexpensive to maintain. Close to home, you can find them in places such as Akron and Michigan.

4. Enforce existing lead-related laws

The goal: Enforce existing laws to protect children from exposure to lead-based paint and prevent the same homes from poisoning children again and again.

What's happening here: Cleveland has lead-related laws on the books, though a Plain Dealer review of records showed that not a lot of muscle goes into enforcing them.

Who's trying to do it right: Cities such as Grand Rapids, Michigan, more aggressively enforce their laws, which force landlords to register rental units and ensure they are safe.

5. Use the power of the courts

The goal: Make property owners follow the law or swiftly end up in front of a judge.

What's happening here: City attorneys file charges against property owners if they fail to fix lead issues that have damaged children or put them at risk. Prosecutors rarely do, and it often takes a year or more to get a case to court. Even that doesn't always fix the problem. Sometimes cases are dropped or properties are transferred into new owners' names, putting more children into harm's way.

Who's trying to do it right: In the District of Columbia, inspectors assess foster homes before children are placed. City officials in Rochester, New York, also give social workers direct access to their lead-inspection records so taxpayer funds don't pay for children and families to live in hazardous homes.

6. Protect foster children

The goal: Don't put children who are in county custody or foster placements in homes that could poison them.

What's happening here: Cuyahoga County screens children placed in foster homes for lead poisoning. It does not, however, inspect the foster or relatives' homes to make sure they are lead safe. County case workers are supposed to assess homes for safety, though they have not specific training to detect lead hazards.

Who's trying to do it right: In the District of Columbia, inspectors assess foster homes before children are placed. City officials in Rochester, New York, also give social workers direct access to their lead-inspection records so taxpayer funds don't pay for children and families to live in hazardous homes.

Impact of the solutions series

Cleveland's health department director and 3 of 4 deputy commissioners fired or resigned

City lead inspection staff rose from 3 to 7

City passed plan that proactively inspects rental homes for first time, modeled on program highlighted in series

Ohio published list of banned homes; Cleveland now posts warning signs on affected homes

Ohio threatened the city unless it complied with list of reforms

3

How to do solutions journalism

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What's missing
from the
conversation?

Is there awareness
of the problem?

NO

May be more suited for
journalism that exposed
the problem

YES

Is there awareness of
potential responses?

NO

Consider solutions
journalism

YES

Sustain pressure to hold
decision-makers
accountable

Is the problem well-known?

If it's a widely-shared problem, some people somewhere will be trying to do something about it. Some of those efforts will be more successful than others.

Choose problems people know about – childhood obesity, climate change, poverty, crime, etc.

Seek a (positive)
difference

Finding differences in performance for the same tasks leads to solutions stories.

Under some circumstances X works, and under some it doesn't. What are the circumstances that make it work?

Apply the four pillars

Response and how	Evidence
Insight	Limitations

Take a small slice

“What’s a small piece of this issue that’s really important to my audience?”

“Who’s doing a better job with that?”

- Efficiency
- More equitably
- More widely accessible
- With better accountability
- Less waste of natural resources
- Better results for subgroups: youth, marginalized communities, etc.

Solutions stories have characters

- The story is what the character is doing
- Shows them trying to solve a problem
- Highlights the results of the response
- Shows what's different from what others do
- Highlights what can be learned from it

Key questions for reporting stories

- How does the response work? Slow the interview down.
- Where did this idea come from? If it hasn't been tested locally, does it have a track record from elsewhere?
- What metrics matter when it comes to measuring success?
- What does the research say?

Key questions for reporting stories

- What parts of the problems aren't being addressed by the response?
- What do the critics say?
- What are barriers to replication? Limitations help take it out of the realm of being a silver bullet.

Tips for doing radio solutions stories

- Set up the problems and introduce the idea of a response in the host introduction
- First 1 to 3 sentences are about the details of the response
- Quote someone – evidence, how the response works, more details
- 1 to 2 sentences on limitations
- 1 sentence on insights, if not already covered
- Close the story

Written stories in 800 words by paragraph

- 1-3: The response, then summary of problems that led to the response
- 4-6: Evidence (data) on the problem and the response
- 7-9: Insight (quotes) from the response implementer, relevant authorities
- 10-12: Limitations and more evidence on results (from data, beneficiaries, etc.)
- 13-15: Insight from other sources
- 16-18: Insights on lessons from the solution
- 19-20: Expand the response or future of the response

TV story in 2 minutes

- Start with the person's story
 - Soundbite from person
 - Describe problem
 - Soundbite from expert
 - Describe solution
 - Soundbite from beneficiary
 - Some evidence of success (maybe a graphic)
 - A few limitations
- 20 seconds**
15 seconds
15 seconds
10 seconds
20 seconds
15 seconds
15 seconds
10 seconds

Visuals and solutions journalism

Visuals matter as much (or more) than words

- People are more likely to remember visuals with a story than words.
- Remember that there is a power difference between journalists and sources.
- It's important to recognize biases and privilege in our reporting, including images.

Youth volunteers on the frontlines to curb the spread of COVID-19



GENERAL ▾

GOVERNANCE ▾

HEALTH ▾

ENVIRONMENT ▾

POLITICS ▾

INVESTIGATIVE ▾

Almost all households in the 10 villages that surround the solar plant are still using fuel wood for cooking, and some at the nearby trading centres have installed mini-solar systems for lighting, charging of phones, operation of small salons and for powering of music systems played in bars.



A resident setting his mini solar system for charging lights, phones and radios.

COURTESY PHOTO

Visual checklist

- **First impressions:** What is the reporter/storyteller communicating to their readers right off the bat, individually or collectively.
- **Proximity and intimacy:** Is the audience able to connect to the characters in the visual? Is there a sense of intimacy or familiarity between photographer/subject(s)?

Visual checklist

- **Main characters:** Is the visually centered character perpetuating visual stereotypes/harmful narratives.
- **Intent vs. impact:** “The impact we hope or expect a story to have is less relevant than its actual influence.”
- **In context:** As a whole package, the selection of images, sequencing of imagery, the captions.

SJN resources

Solutions Story Tracker[®]

Welcome to a curated database of rigorous reporting on responses to social problems.

16,300 stories produced by 9,200 journalists and 2,000 news outlets from 93 countries. The stories cover responses in 194 countries, in 16 languages. This resource is made possible because of a growing movement of journalists who use solutions journalism to illuminate both problems *and* evidence-based responses to them.

[Learn more about the Solutions Story Tracker.](#)

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CONTENTS

[MENU](#)

▼ I. Introduction (30m)

Welcome

How do I know it's Solutions Journalism?

How do I know it's NOT Solutions Journalism?

Why Solutions Journalism?

What Kind of Impact Can Solutions Journalism Have?

Solutions Journalism in Your Workflow?

▶ II. Basic Reporting (60m)

▶ III. Basic Storytelling (30m)

BASIC TOOLKIT

Welcome



Questions?



Thank you



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