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# Getting to CSV: Unlocking Public Data in the Civil Justice Space

Dan Bernstein,  
Research Analyst



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## Overview

- Why do we care about court data?
- What is civil court data?
- How are we getting court data?
- What lessons can we learn from this project?

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## **What is the Legal Services Corporation (LSC)?**

- A congressionally established corporation created to fill “the justice gap”
- The largest funder of civil legal aid for low-income Americans in the United States
- Provided over \$400 million in 2018 in funding to 132 grantee organizations in the 50 states and territories

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## **“The Civil Court Data Project”**

- Our goal is to gather state court data at the state and local level to:
  - Answer fundamental questions about the experience of low-income individuals in the civil justice system
  - Develop tools to promote equality in the civil justice system
  - Develop relationships with local organizations who can utilize court data and analysis

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## Garnishment in Tennessee during COVID

- Advocates wanted:
  - TN Supreme Court to stop debt collectors from garnishing stimulus checks
  - asked for any recent data on debt collection and garnishment in April 2020
- We determined:
  - nearly 2500 instances of garnishment activity since courts closed
  - \$200,000-\$400,000 collected in garnishment during COVID
- Our partners submitted the analysis to the Tennessee Supreme Court to inform next steps

# What does court data look like?

unique case number with the court system

Case:

Case type, date filed, and court location

Parties:

full name, street address, attorney name  
(‘pro se’ means no legal representation)

Judgment:

Outcomes, money owed, interest rates,  
other notes

Events: original filing, payments and fines,  
hearings

The screenshot displays a court database interface with the following sections and data points:

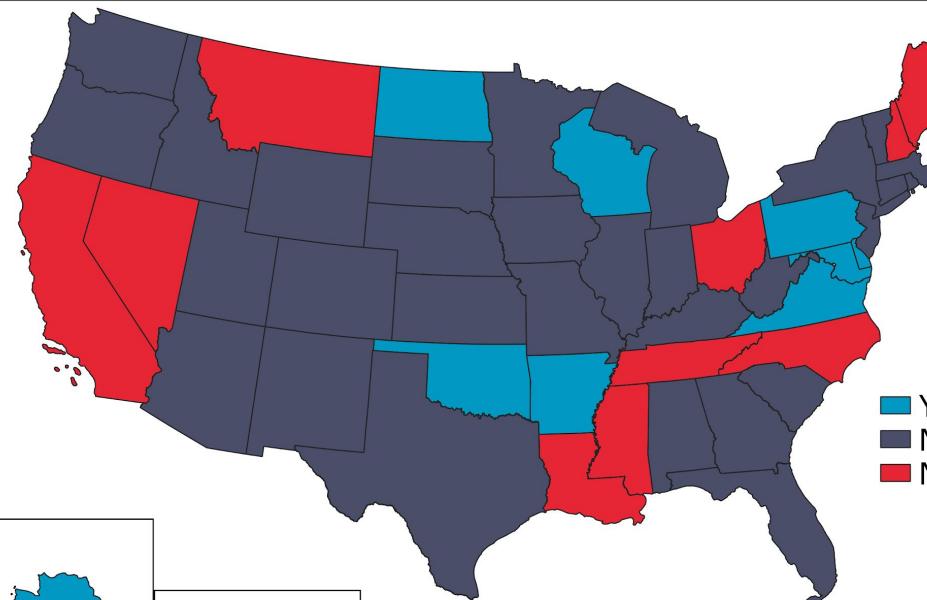
- REGISTER OF ACTIONS**: Case No. JP02-F00021966
- PARTY INFORMATION**:
  - Defendant: KOEPERNIK, JOHN ERIK, 122 HARMON RD #25, HURST, TX 76053
  - Plaintiff: HURST INN APARTMENTS, 122 HARMON RD #208, HURST, TX 76053
  - Lead Attorneys: Pro Se
  - Pro Se
- EVENTS & ORDERS OF THE COURT**:
  - DISPOSITIONS**:
    - 01/13/2000 JUDGMENT (Judicial Officer: Bierman-Davis, Linda)  
Judgment of \$480.00  
Awarded To: HURST INN APARTMENTS  
Awarded Against: JOHN KOEPERNIK  
Comment: Cross Action: N PJ Atty Instr: 0.00 Interest Set Date: 01/13/2000 Trial Date:
  - OTHER EVENTS AND HEARINGS**:
    - 01/03/2000 Case Filing | CASE FILING
    - 01/03/2000 Payment Receipt | RECEIPT OF PAYMENT | PAYMENT RECEIVED
    - 01/03/2000 Paper | ISSUE PAPER
    - 01/03/2000 Attorney Appointed to Defn Pursuant to SSRA | FORC | FORCIBLE DETAINER CITATION
    - 01/03/2000 Historical Comments

Tarrant County, TX Justice of the Peace Court.



**So what's the problem?**

## Court Data Availability via Statewide Portals, 2020



Yes

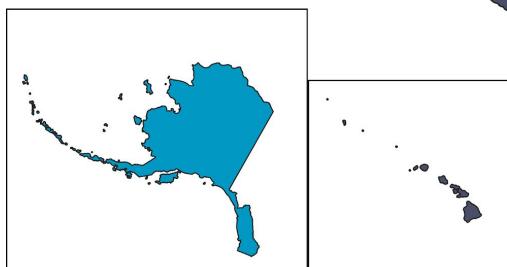
No

No website

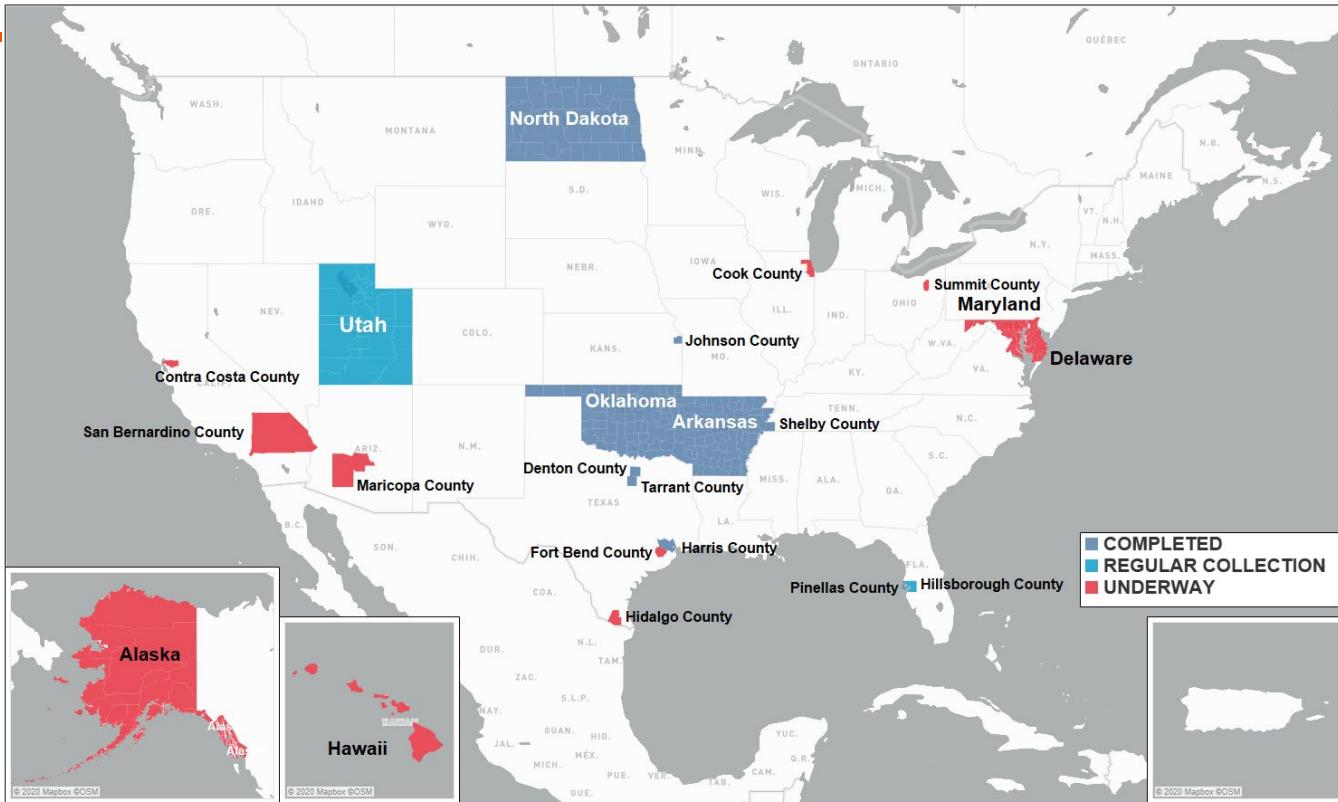
### Criteria for availability:

- Multi-year historical case records
- Hosted on a state-wide website\*
- Scraping is not prohibited by Terms of Services
- Access is not blocked by CAPTCHA, Paywall, or Log-In

\* Oklahoma has two websites that collectively contain all counties' court records.



# Data Collection (April 2020)



# Court data comes in all shapes and sizes

CourtVIEW		Search Results		Log on																																																							
<b>JU-01-00886CI Estate of marguerite, Scott vs. Satal, Mark PBF</b>																																																											
Case Type: Eviction District Court (JU) Action: Eviction - District Court Case Status: Closed Case Judge: Froehlich, Peter B File Date: 09/12/2001 Next Event:																																																											
<a href="#">All Information</a> <a href="#">Party</a> <a href="#">Docket</a> <a href="#">Disposition</a>																																																											
<b>Party Information</b> Estate of marguerite, Scott - Plaintiff DOB: Alias Disposition: Party Attorney Disp Date:  Satal, Mark - Defendant DOB: Alias Disposition: Party Attorney Disp Date:																																																											
<b>Docket Information</b> # Date Docket Text 06/12/2001 All Records Prior to 09/24/10 are Converted Records. For more information please come to the Clerks Office with the case number or name. Juneau Trial Courts 123 4th Street Juneau, AK 99801 Please note that some converted data, especially dates, may be incorrect.  06/12/2001 Filed Date: Jun 12 2001 Forcible Entry & Detainer Prior to Conversion Date: 06/12/2001 09:00 AM Judge: Peter B Froehlich Location: JU Event Text: FED (15 MIN)  06/12/2001 ** CONVERTED PAYMENT HISTORY AS OF 09/24/10 Receipt Date: 06/12/01 Receipt Number: 238740 Am Party from: LAW OFC OF PATRICK CONHDY.																																																											
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Case</td> <td>95CV10831</td> <td>Caption</td> <td colspan="3">NEIGHBORS ET AL. vs. FRONT ROW VIDEO ET AL</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Chapter</td> <td>61</td> <td>Nature</td> <td colspan="3">RE</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Status</td> <td>TERMINATED</td> <td>Judge</td> <td colspan="3">DANIEL W VOKINS</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="6">Division M4</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="6"> <a href="#">Search</a> <a href="#">Case History (ROA)</a> <a href="#">Plaintiff/Defendant</a> <a href="#">Court Events</a> <a href="#">Other Cases</a> <a href="#">Accounting</a> </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="6"> <a href="#">Sort By Ascending Order</a> <a href="#">Sort By Descending Order</a> <a href="#">Print Friendly</a> </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="6"> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>10/1/1999</td> <td>CASE CONVERTED TO JIMS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>10/30/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 10/25/95, MICR # 00199, SHERIFF'S RETURN FROM JO. CO., KS. SERVED LARRY D. LOCHNER, JR. 10-13-95 C/S</td> </tr> <tr> <td>10/05/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 10/05/95, MICR # 00115, WRIT OF RESTITUTION AND EXECUTION AND RETURN;REQUEST AND SERVICE INSTRUCTION FORM FILED WRIT OF RESTITUTION AND EXECUTION ISSUED TO SHERIFF OF JO CO KS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>09/29/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 09/26/95, MICR # 00319, SERVICE RETURNED FROM SPECIAL PROCESS SERVER SERVED LARRY LOCHNER 9-11-95 C/S</td> </tr> <tr> <td>09/26/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 09/21/95, MICR # 00240, JOURNAL ENTRY OF JUDGMENT FOR PLTF AGAINST DEFTS FOR##\$3819.00 &amp; COSTS &amp; POST JD MT INT## CASE STATUS HAS BEEN CHANGED FROM PENDING TO TERMINATED</td> </tr> <tr> <td>09/08/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 09/05/95, MICR # 00697, PETITION (61) (FORCIBLE DETAINER). REQUEST AND SERVICE INSTRUCTIONFORM FILED. SUMMONS AND PETITION (1) ISSUED TO PLAINTIFF'S ATTORNEY FOR SERVICE BY PROCESS SERVER. ANSWER DATE 9-21-95.</td> </tr> </table> </td> </tr> </table>						Case	95CV10831	Caption	NEIGHBORS ET AL. vs. FRONT ROW VIDEO ET AL			Chapter	61	Nature	RE			Status	TERMINATED	Judge	DANIEL W VOKINS			Division M4						<a href="#">Search</a> <a href="#">Case History (ROA)</a> <a href="#">Plaintiff/Defendant</a> <a href="#">Court Events</a> <a href="#">Other Cases</a> <a href="#">Accounting</a>						<a href="#">Sort By Ascending Order</a> <a href="#">Sort By Descending Order</a> <a href="#">Print Friendly</a>						<table border="1"> <tr> <td>10/1/1999</td> <td>CASE CONVERTED TO JIMS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>10/30/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 10/25/95, MICR # 00199, SHERIFF'S RETURN FROM JO. CO., KS. SERVED LARRY D. LOCHNER, JR. 10-13-95 C/S</td> </tr> <tr> <td>10/05/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 10/05/95, MICR # 00115, WRIT OF RESTITUTION AND EXECUTION AND RETURN;REQUEST AND SERVICE INSTRUCTION FORM FILED WRIT OF RESTITUTION AND EXECUTION ISSUED TO SHERIFF OF JO CO KS</td> </tr> <tr> <td>09/29/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 09/26/95, MICR # 00319, SERVICE RETURNED FROM SPECIAL PROCESS SERVER SERVED LARRY LOCHNER 9-11-95 C/S</td> </tr> <tr> <td>09/26/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 09/21/95, MICR # 00240, JOURNAL ENTRY OF JUDGMENT FOR PLTF AGAINST DEFTS FOR##\$3819.00 &amp; COSTS &amp; POST JD MT INT## CASE STATUS HAS BEEN CHANGED FROM PENDING TO TERMINATED</td> </tr> <tr> <td>09/08/1995</td> <td>FILE STAMP 09/05/95, MICR # 00697, PETITION (61) (FORCIBLE DETAINER). REQUEST AND SERVICE INSTRUCTIONFORM FILED. SUMMONS AND PETITION (1) ISSUED TO PLAINTIFF'S ATTORNEY FOR SERVICE BY PROCESS SERVER. ANSWER DATE 9-21-95.</td> </tr> </table>						10/1/1999	CASE CONVERTED TO JIMS	10/30/1995	FILE STAMP 10/25/95, MICR # 00199, SHERIFF'S RETURN FROM JO. CO., KS. SERVED LARRY D. LOCHNER, JR. 10-13-95 C/S	10/05/1995	FILE STAMP 10/05/95, MICR # 00115, WRIT OF RESTITUTION AND EXECUTION AND RETURN;REQUEST AND SERVICE INSTRUCTION FORM FILED WRIT OF RESTITUTION AND EXECUTION ISSUED TO SHERIFF OF JO CO KS	09/29/1995	FILE STAMP 09/26/95, MICR # 00319, SERVICE RETURNED FROM SPECIAL PROCESS SERVER SERVED LARRY LOCHNER 9-11-95 C/S	09/26/1995	FILE STAMP 09/21/95, MICR # 00240, JOURNAL ENTRY OF JUDGMENT FOR PLTF AGAINST DEFTS FOR##\$3819.00 & COSTS & POST JD MT INT## CASE STATUS HAS BEEN CHANGED FROM PENDING TO TERMINATED	09/08/1995	FILE STAMP 09/05/95, MICR # 00697, PETITION (61) (FORCIBLE DETAINER). REQUEST AND SERVICE INSTRUCTIONFORM FILED. SUMMONS AND PETITION (1) ISSUED TO PLAINTIFF'S ATTORNEY FOR SERVICE BY PROCESS SERVER. ANSWER DATE 9-21-95.
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<b>Case Description</b> Case ID: 778798 - THE TIMBERS vs SAMFORD, TRACY -Nonparty Trial Filing Date: Monday, January 03rd, 2000 Type: 46 - FED - OTHER Status: none																																																											
<b>Related Cases</b> No related cases were found.																																																											
<b>Case Event Schedule</b> No case events were found.																																																											
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## Docket Report Results

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Case ID: 778798  
Docket Start Date: 12/20/2000  
Docket Ending Date: 1/23/2001

**Case Description**

Case ID: 778798 - THE TIMBERS vs SAMFORD, TRACY -Non-jury Trial  
Filing Date: Monday, January 03rd, 2000

Skip to Main Content Logout My Account Search Menu New Civil Search Before Search		Back	Location: All JP Courts Help
<b>REGISTER OF ACTIONS</b> Case No. FPO2-FW0021966			
HURST INN APARTMENTS vs JOHN ERIK KOEPERNIK & ALL OCCUPANTS		Case Type: Evictions	
	S S S S	Date Filed: 01/03/2000	
		Location: JP No. 2	

CaseSearch		District Court of Maryland	
<a href="#">Go Back Now</a>			
<b>Case Information</b>			
<b>Court System:</b>	District Court For Baltimore County - Civil		
<b>Location:</b>	TOWSON		
<b>Case Number:</b>	08-04-0000217-2000		
<b>Title:</b>	COMCAST CABLEVISION OF MD, LP vs SMITH, ANN		
<b>Case Type:</b>	CIVIL		
<b>Filing Date:</b>	01/04/2000		
<b>Case Status:</b>	Closed		
<b>Causes Information</b>			
<b>File Date:</b>	01/04/2000		
<b>Cause Description:</b>	001 ; REGULAR CLAIM		
<b>Filed By:</b>	plaintiff		
<b>Filed Against:</b>	defendant		
<b>Remedy Type:</b>	<b>Amount:</b>	<b>Comment:</b>	
Not Applicable	\$272.40	CONTRACT ; DISMISSED (RULE 3-507)	
<b>Involved Parties Information</b>			
Defendant			
Name: SMITH, ANN			
Address: 112 MARYBURN CIR			
City: OWINGS MILLS	State: MD	Zip Code: 21117	
Plaintiff			
Name: COMCAST CABLEVISION OF MD, LP			
Address: 101 CORPORATE DR.			
City: BALTIMORE	State: MD	Zip Code: 21236	
<b>Attorney(s) for the Plaintiff</b>			
Name: KOBLENZ, NEBB S			
Appearance Date: 01/04/2000			
Address Line 1: STE 203 B RESERVOIR CIR			
City: PIKESTOWN	State: MD	Zip Code: 21208	
<b>Judgment Information</b>			
Case Judgment Comment History			
Amount: 0.00 Interest: 0.00 Atty_Fee: 0.00 Judg_Cost: 0.00 Other_Amount: 0.00 Poss_of_Prop: 0.00 Damages_Pop: 0.00 Value_of_Prop: 0.00 Damgs_Val_of_Prop: 0.00 Repl_Detn_Amnt: 0.00			

# What I think my workflow will be...

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Evaluate website for data quality, quantity, and “scrape”-ability



Scrape all case numbers



Scrape case records using case numbers



Parse sections from HTML case records

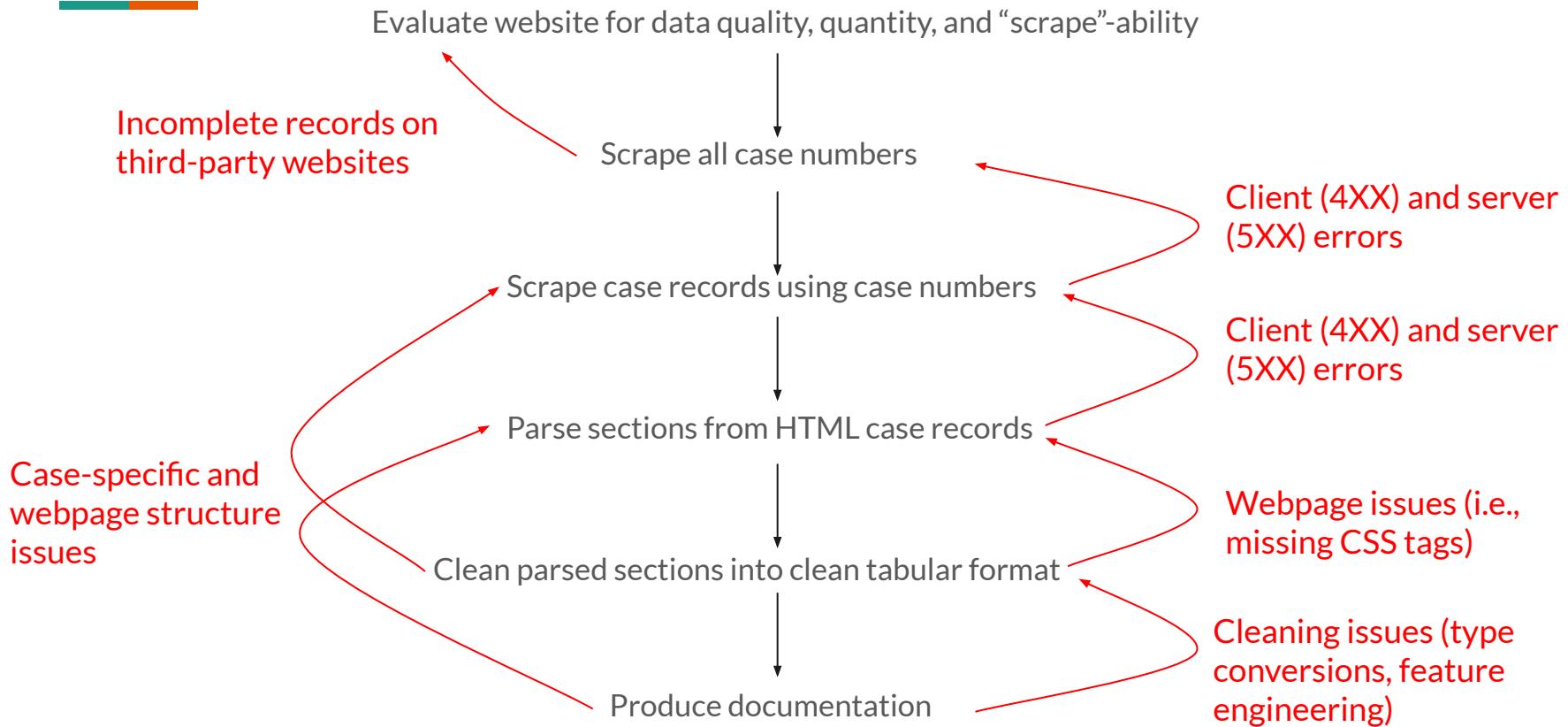


Clean parsed sections into clean tabular format



Produce documentation

# What my workflow actually is...



# Lessons Learned: Web scraping

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- Be respectful
  - Monitor website response times and adjust your requests accordingly.
  - Plug: Urban Institute's [SiteMonitor](#) makes this easy and pain-free
- Be resilient
  - Find ways to “break” the website to understand error patterns: try big queries, small queries, clearly erroneous queries
  - Add explicit verification steps that confirm the expected inputs and outputs of scraping, parsing, and cleaning
- Be resourceful
  - Understand the network activity required for accessing web data.
  - Plug: [Chrome DevTools](#) provides methods for inspecting

# Lessons Learned: Creating datasets

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- Be clear about the intention of your final dataset
  - Do you strive to preserve the structure of the raw data?
  - Do you need to standardize the data model across different sources?
- Understand how users will access the data
  - Will there be live connections to dashboards?
  - If data will need to be updated, what data formats makes this easy?

# I want to hear from you!

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For questions, collaboration, and data sharing, please reach out:

Dan Bernstein

[bernsteind@lsc.gov](mailto:bernsteind@lsc.gov)

@danbernstein18