

FBI to overhaul crime tracking

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Abstract:

Submission of local crime data remains voluntary. Since 2013, when Congress mandated that the FBI track human trafficking, only five of the nearly 18,000 agencies have provided information, according to FBI records.

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Full text:

An unknown number of crimes -- rapes, robberies, assaults, arson and others -- go unrecorded. Washington -- The FBI is in the midst of a major overhaul of its signature tracking program that for more than eight decades has been regarded as the most reliable measure of crime in the USA. Federal authorities are attempting to convert hundreds of law enforcement agencies to an alternate reporting system that would account for perhaps scores of offenses that have never been recorded in the bureau's annual summary of crime in the USA, part of its Uniform Crime Report. Assistant FBI Director Stephen Morris, who oversees the bureau's crime data collection functions, said there is no estimating the number of "lost" offenses because of the "summary" nature of the current reporting structure. "You don't know what you don't know," Morris said in an interview with USA TODAY. Murders may be the most consistently tracked offenses in the summary portion of the report. But an unknown number of other crimes often committed in the course of those deaths -- rapes, robberies, assaults, arson and others -- go unrecorded. Long-standing reporting limitations allow for tracking only the most serious single offense from each incident, regardless of how many other offenses have been committed. The UCR crime summary tracks 10 specific offenses, including murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault. It does not record crucial details about race, gender and relationships of both victims and offenders. Neither is there specific information about where crimes take place and the identification of specific weapons involved, all of which could assist law enforcement officials and lawmakers in devising more effective anti-crime strategies. The giant holes in the reporting method, federal authorities and analysts acknowledge, call into question the reliability of a measure that often determines how hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer money is spent. "We don't have a good sense at all of the relationships involved in crime because we are still using a 1930s tool," said University of South Carolina Professor Geoff Alpert, who specializes in law enforcement research. In place of the summary crime report, the FBI is expanding the capacity of a National Incident-Based Reporting System, or NIBRS, that has the potential to account for much of what is lacking. Instead of 10 offense categories, it tracks 24; it has the capacity to record how often law enforcement officers use deadly force and whether those encounters involve a disproportionate number of minority suspects. The absence of such detailed data derailed recent attempts to broadly analyze officer-involved shootings in the wake of last year's racially charged fatal police encounters in Ferguson, Mo., and Staten Island, N.Y. The long-needed overhaul has drawn the strong support of FBI Director James Comey, who recently lamented the lack of basic data as "unacceptable." "Not long after riots broke out in Ferguson last summer, I asked my staff to tell me how many people shot by police were African American in this country," Comey said in a speech last month at Georgetown University. "I wanted to see trends. I wanted to see information. They couldn't give it to me." Federal officials conceded that fixes will probably not come quickly. Morris said it could take "years" to expand the system to produce a more representative sample of crime in America. Just 6,300 of nearly 18,000 U.S.

police agencies funnel the more detailed crime information to NIBRS, while about 10,000 agencies provide the basic summary data.

Morris said at least 400 agencies are needed to convert the summary systems to the richer data delivery method under NIBRS for the FBI to produce a sound national report.

Among the police departments that do not participate are some of the largest in the country: New York, Chicago and Philadelphia.

Although a system for reporting the more detailed information has been available since the late 1980s, persistent compliance problems remain. Agencies have never been required to report. Submission of local crime data remains voluntary. Since 2013, when Congress mandated that the FBI track human trafficking, only five of the nearly 18,000 agencies have provided information, according to FBI records.

"For whatever reason, police departments have not been willing to expend the extra effort to do it," said Carnegie Mellon University Professor Alfred Blumstein, who has spent decades examining crime statistics. "How the FBI is going to get that extra cooperation is unclear right now."

Morris said federal officials are in the midst of an audit involving about 400 agencies identified for possible conversion to the new reporting system.

Richard Beary, president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, said completing the needed conversions will require federal money. The replacement of a records system even at a small department could cost \$100,000 or more, he said.

Though there has been no rush to adopt the new system, officials hope the recent attention focused on the current system's shortcomings could prompt change. "The fact that the (FBI) director put a spotlight on this issue a couple of weeks ago, we have been quietly celebrating," Morris said.

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