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Technology Talk

Why Participating in NIBRS Is a Good Choice for Law Enforcement

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The way crime is counted in the United States is changing, moving from monthly aggregate reporting of summary crime and arrest statistics to detailed reporting of crime and arrest activities at the incident level. This shift in reporting practice reflects the fundamental nature of police recordkeeping and has important implications for police information management and operations. Incident-based reporting promises richer data regarding the nature of crime and law enforcement's response, and will greatly expand analytic capabilities at the local, state, and federal levels.

Crime Reporting Programs

The collection, reporting, and analysis of crime and arrest data across the United States began 85 years ago when the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) created the Committee on Uniform Crime Records (UCR) in 1927. In 1929, the IACP published a Uniform Crime Reporting manual and began data collection from 400 law enforcement agencies.¹ Following congressional legislation authorizing the attorney general to collect crime information, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) assumed responsibility for UCR in September 1930, by which time the number of reporting agencies had grown to more than 800.²

The UCR program is based on monthly submissions of aggregate crime and arrest reports from U.S. state, tribal, and local law enforcement agencies. Detailed offense information is collected on eight UCR Index offenses in the summary UCR program. Even among these offenses, however, reporting provisions of the UCR program mask a potentially substantial volume of crime as a consequence of reporting provisions associated with the "hierarchy rule" and the "hotel rule."³ The aggregate reporting nature of the summary program fails to capture victim and offender characteristics or relationships for most offenses. Complex classification and counting rules and reporting artifacts associated with the traditional summary UCR program are known to produce what has been referred to as the "dark figure" of crime.⁴

Recognizing the limitations inherent in aggregate reporting in the summary UCR program, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and the FBI funded a three-phase UCR redesign program in 1982.⁵ The original BJS-funded study recommended a two-tiered implementation strategy for unit-record (or incident-based) reporting.⁶ The resulting National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) expands the range of offenses reported by the police and collects more detailed information on crime incidents. In addition, NIBRS collects offense and arrest data on 22 crime categories, spanning 46 offenses (compared to the 8 UCR Index offenses), as well as a number of offenses for which only arrest information is reported. NIBRS collects 53 specific data elements,

including offenses within an incident; incident location (e.g., bar, motel, or residence); characteristics of victims and offenders; relationships between victims and offenders; and nature and scope of injury or dollar loss incurred in the incident. Moreover, NIBRS eliminates the need for the “hierarchy rule” (because multiple types of crimes can be reported within a single incident) and collects an expanded array of attributes involved in the commission of offenses, including whether the offender is suspected of using alcohol, drugs or narcotics, or a computer in the commission of the offense and whether the arrestee was armed with a weapon.

The greater detail and flexibility of NIBRS has enabled researchers to better explore the dynamics of crime and criminality, including studies focusing on crime analysis, characteristics of offenders, characteristics of victims, police response to intimate partner violence, and the extent of violent crime victimization against the elderly.⁷

National Crime Statistics Exchange (NCS-X)

The BJS and the FBI have jointly undertaken a new initiative to create the National Crime Statistics Exchange (NCS-X). The NCS-X initiative seeks to increase participation in NIBRS by recruiting an additional 400 strategically selected agencies to report to NIBRS and submit their data through their state UCR program. While the scientific basis for computing U.S. statistics would be provided by an increase in reporting, the ultimate objective is to significantly increase reporting of NIBRS data, which will create the kind of robust data repositories that help decision makers and legislative bodies formulate effective strategies to reduce crime.

Like the summary UCR program, participation in NIBRS is voluntary, although some states strongly encourage all agencies to participate. There are currently 15 U.S. states with complete NIBRS agency participation, 18 states that submit both summary UCR and NIBRS data, and 10 states that have no current program under way, with the remaining 7 states exploring or working on participation to various degrees.

Given the variance of state mandates or encouragement and the voluntary nature of the program, law enforcement agencies have a choice to make regarding participation. The question for most law enforcement executives is “Why should I participate? What is the value for my agency to participate in NIBRS?” This article suggests factors that agencies should consider in determining whether to move forward with NIBRS reporting.

Reasons to Participate in NIBRS/NCS-X

The reasons why it is beneficial for today’s law enforcement agencies to adopt and report incident-based data follow:

1. **Modern law enforcement records management systems are incident based.** Progressive law enforcement administrators have long recognized the extraordinary value of detailed and complete information on crime incidents and calls for service.⁸ Incident-based systems enable chiefs and commanders to more effectively measure workload, correlate crimes with suspects, measure the performance of strategies their agencies employ to reduce crime, and dynamically respond to the constantly evolving needs of their communities. Most commercially available law enforcement records management systems are designed to efficiently manage incident reporting, and they typically already capture the basic data required for NIBRS reporting. For agencies with such an automated system, the data needed to participate in NIBRS is probably already being collected and managed.
2. **Adopting NIBRS will improve data quality.** NIBRS reporting standards enforce edits to ensure that data are accurately reported. The edits function to limit or require key data elements depending on the nature of the incident and its unique attributes, which serve to improve the overall quality and utility of the data gathered. The result is more accurate, timely, and complete information, which in turn can generate more thorough analyses, more productive investigations, and better performance measurements. Enhancing the quality of incident reports produces secondary benefits as well, improving the utility of U.S. local, state, regional, and national information sharing.
3. **Building NIBRS into incident report processing reduces work and cost.** Adoption of the NIBRS data collection edits can help foster greater accuracy in initial data entry. This translates into better offense classification; fewer corrections for officers, supervisors, and records personnel; and a reduction of other time-consuming tasks related to correcting inaccurate and incomplete reports.
4. **Adopting NIBRS reporting standards enables more accurate and meaningful crime analysis.** The incident-based nature of NIBRS reporting and the additional data captured enables more

comprehensive and detailed analyses of crime and victimization. Effective crime analysis requires timely, accurate, and complete information, which can be efficiently harvested from NIBRS-compliant incident-based offense reports. Crime analysis enables agencies to understand the dynamics of crime within their communities and intelligently deploy resources for effective intervention. Broader, more strategic analyses of crime and victimization at U.S. state and national levels can help inform policy makers of emerging trends and contribute to legislation and programs designed to address and ameliorate emerging crime problems.

5. **NIBRS does not increase crime in a jurisdiction.** One of the biggest impediments to local agency participation in NIBRS has been the concern that NIBRS will significantly increase the volume of crime reported by the jurisdiction, not because the amount of crime actually increased or that more accurate reporting resulted in the reclassification or discovery of additional crime, but rather because NIBRS abandons the hierarchy rule and reports all offenses within an incident. Earlier research, however, demonstrates that the vast majority of incidents involve only a single offender, single victim, and single offense. Additionally, the FBI has analyzed NIBRS submissions for two decades (1991–2011) and found that there is actually very little impact on the volume of crime reported. Rape numbers, for example, were not affected at all; robbery, aggravated assault, and burglary showed very slight increases (0.5, 0.6, and 0.8 percent, respectively). Larceny showed a 3.1 percent increase, and motor vehicle theft recorded a 2.8 percent increase.⁹
6. **NIBRS supports the development of strategy and performance evaluation.** Leveraging NIBRS standards for data quality, the collection and analysis of incident-based data become even more useful when defining metrics for evaluating the performance of specific programs, projects, and strategies that are designed to reduce or respond to specific crime categories.
7. **NIBRS supports expanded information sharing.** NIBRS reporting standards support universal standards for law enforcement incident and records management. The implementation of these standards expands information sharing at U.S. local, regional, state, and national levels, including the National Data Exchange program (N-DEX). The latest version of the National Information Exchange Model (NIEM) incorporates all required NIBRS fields in the data model, making it a best practice to incorporate these data elements and relationships into any law enforcement records management system.¹⁰
8. **NIBRS participation is an indicator of a professional agency.** The implementation of NIBRS reporting standards produces more robust and better quality incident-level data, contributing to evidence-based research and practices, which supports data-driven policing and facilitates best practices in contemporary law enforcement management and operations aligning with CALEA accreditation standards. Such a commitment reveals a level of transparency and accountability that demonstrates that law enforcement executives are actively invested in advancing the profession and furthering the adoption of evidence-based practices.

Conclusion

One in three law enforcement agencies throughout the United States currently participates in NIBRS reporting. These agencies have incorporated NIBRS reporting standards into their records management systems and harvest the data for submission to U.S. state and national programs in order to build comprehensive and actionable data sources that provide a better understanding of crime, criminality, and victimization. Law enforcement professionals have increasingly recognized the importance of building robust incident-based records management systems that support evidence-based practices and data-driven decision making to further strategic planning and tactical deployment within their jurisdictions, as well as to enhance and sustain planning and development efforts at U.S. state and national levels.

The NCS-X program is designed to strategically expand NIBRS reporting to produce a representative database of U.S. incident reports by working closely with 400 select law enforcement agencies. The program will support local agencies' incident-based reporting practices, analytic methods, and information sharing capabilities. ♦

Financial support, technical assistance, and enhanced analytic functions may be available to assist agencies in contributing NIBRS data. The NCS-X partner organizations, BJS and FBI are working closely with candidate agencies in exploring options to facilitate NIBRS reporting.

Notes:

¹Committee on Uniform Crime Records, International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Uniform Crime Reporting: A Complete Manual for Police* (New York, NY: IACP, 1929).

²Eugene C. Poggio, Stephen D. Kennedy, Jan M. Chaiken, and Kenneth E. Carlson, *Blueprint for the Future of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program: Final Report of the UCR Study* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics and Federal Bureau of Investigation, May 1985), 21, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bjs/98348.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2014); and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), *Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Handbook* (Clarksburg, WV: FBI, 2004), 2, <http://www2.fbi.gov/ucr/handbook/ucrhandbook04.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2014).

³The initial Crime Index consisted of murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft of \$50 and over, and motor vehicle theft. Arson was added to the Index by congressional mandate in 1979. The “hierarchy rule” limits the reporting of offenses to the single most serious offense in a series of offenses. For person offenses, however, one offense is scored for each person victim, regardless of the number of victims. If multiple person offenses are committed against a single individual, however, only the most serious of those offenses will be reported in UCR. Burglaries of multiple hotel rooms are scored as a single burglary. FBI, *UCR Handbook*, 10–12, 28–29.

⁴See Albert D. Biderman and Albert J. Reiss, “On Exploring the ‘Dark Figure’ of Crime,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 374, no. 1 (November 1967): 1–15, http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/2027.42/67517/2/10.1177_000271626737400102.pdf (accessed June 22, 2012). Biderman and Reiss refer to the “dark figure” of crime as “occurrences that by some criteria are called crime yet that are not registered in the statistics of whatever agency was the source of the data being used.” For a general discussion regarding the limitations of the UCR program see Albert J. Reiss Jr., “Problems in the Documentation of Crime” in *Criminal Behavior and Social Systems*, ed. A.L. Guenther (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976), 111–130.

⁵In 1982, BJS funded Abt Associates to examine the UCR program, its history, objectives, data elements, and relationships with other systems. See Poggio et al., *Blueprint for the Future of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program*. In 1984, the FBI began the second phase of the project, the goal of which was to identify available options and recommend changes. In 1988, the FBI’s third phase produced specifications for data collection and submission and system implementation.

⁶Poggio et al., *Blueprint for the Future of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program*, 43–48. This strategy contemplated that only a sample of perhaps 3 to 7 percent of law enforcement agencies across the United States would report comprehensive incident-based data, consistent with the reporting requirements of today’s NIBRS, then called “Level II reporting.” The remaining 93 to 97 percent of law enforcement agencies would report incident-based data, but in a much more abbreviated format, focusing on Part I offenses with only a limited range of victim, offender, and more detailed incident data; this would be “Level I reporting.” Arrest data for both Part I and Part II crimes were to have been captured in both levels, with linkages to cleared offenses. In spite of these recommendations, the law enforcement community elected full NIBRS implementation, effectively endorsing Level II reporting for every agency.

⁷For examples of research using NIBRS data, see Erica Smith, *Violent Crime against the Elderly Reported by Law Enforcement in Michigan, 2005–2009*, NCJ-238546 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 2012); Robin Weber, *An Analysis of Domestic Violence and Arrest Patterns in Vermont Using NIBRS Data* (Northfield Falls, VT: Vermont Center for Justice Research, November 2012); Melissa E. Dichter, Steven C. Marcus, Melissa S. Morabito, and Karin V. Rhodes, “Explaining the IPV Arrest Decision: Incident, Agency, and Community Factors,” *Criminal Justice Review* 36, no. 1 (2011), 22–39; D. Faggiani, Ed., *Justice Research and Policy, Special Issue: Research Using the National Incident-Based Reporting System* (Washington, D.C.: Justice Research and Statistics Association, 2007); David Hirschel, Eve Buzawa, April Pattavina, and Don Faggiani, “Domestic Violence and Mandatory Arrest Laws: To What Extent Do They Influence Police Arrest Decisions?” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 98, no. 1 (2007): 255–298; April Pattavina et al., “A Comparison of the Police Response to Heterosexual Versus Same Sex Intimate Partner Violence,” *Violence Against Women* 13, no. 4 (2007): 374–394; Roland Chilton and John P. Jarvis, “Using the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) to Test Estimates of Arrestee and Offender Characteristics,” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 15, no. 2 (1999): 207–224; Roland Chilton and John P. Jarvis, “Victims and Offenders in Two Crime Statistics Programs: A Comparison of the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS),” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 15, no. 2 (1999): 193–205; Kenneth R. Coyle, John C. Schaaf, and James R. “Chip” Coldren, Jr., *Futures in Crime Analysis: Exploring Applications of Incident-based Crime Data*, NCJ-127201 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, January 1991); David J. Roberts and Seth Jacobs, *Demonstrating the Operational Utility of Incident-Based Data for Local Crime Analysis: Reporting Systems in Tacoma, Washington, and New Bedford, Massachusetts*, NCJ-145860 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 1994); and William Spelman, *Beyond Bean Counting: New Approaches for Managing Crime Data* (Washington, D.C.: Police

Executive Research Forum, January 1988).

⁸See George Turner, Jeff Brantingham, and George Mohler, "Predictive Policing in Action in Atlanta, Georgia," Technology Talk, *The Police Chief* 81 (May 2014): 72–74; Walter Perry et al., "Predictive Policing: What It Is, What It Isn't and How It Can Be Useful," *The Police Chief* 81 (April 2014): 30–35; William Bratton and George L. Kelling, "Cops Count, Police Matter: Of Tactics and Strategy," *The Police Chief* 79 (December 2012): 54–59; Charlie Beck and Colleen McCue, "Predictive Policing: What Can We Learn from Wal-Mart and Amazon about Fighting Crime in a Recession?" *The Police Chief* 76 (November 2009): 18–24; Jeff Godown, "The CompStat Process: Four Principles for Managing Crime Reduction," *The Police Chief* 76 (August 2009): 36–42; George CascOn, "CompStat Plus: In-Depth Auditing, Mentorship, Close Collaboration," *The Police Chief* 72 (May 2005): 34–43; and Phyllis P. McDonald, "Implementing CompStat: Critical Points to Consider," *The Police Chief* 71 (January 2004).

⁹Federal Bureau of Investigation, Effects of NIBRS on Crime Statistics (Washington, D.C.: FBI, 2011), http://www.iacptechology.org/documents/Effects_of_NIBRS_on_Crime_Statistics_FBI_Report.pdf (accessed August 4, 2014).

¹⁰For more information on the National Information Exchange Model (NIEM), see <http://www.niem.gov>.

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