

U.S. News: Wanted: Decent Crime Stats --- Outdated system for gathering national data hampers fight against murder uptick

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Abstract:

The problem is increasingly under discussion at law-enforcement gatherings, such as a Justice Department summit this week on violent crime and a meeting of the International Association of Chiefs of Police in Chicago later this month.

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Full text:

As law-enforcement officials struggle to cope with a sudden, unexplained rise in violent crime in many cities, they find themselves hampered by an outdated system for gathering national crime data that leaves them blind on such basic questions as how many murders happened last month.

A push by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to upgrade what one senior official calls "mediocre" national crime data has been hamstrung by resistance from local police departments, based in part on concerns over the potential extra expense involved.

That is making it harder to know how to deploy resources and alter policies in light of what officials fear could be an end to -- or a break in -- decades of falling crime.

The problem is increasingly under discussion at law-enforcement gatherings, such as a Justice Department summit this week on violent crime and a meeting of the International Association of Chiefs of Police in Chicago later this month.

FBI Executive Assistant Director Amy Hess, who is leading the agency's effort to modernize national crime-data collection, said in scrutinizing the national figure, what officials call summary data, "You realize, 'Wait a second, that data may not be 100% accurate -- or even close to that.'"

The FBI released its latest crime figures last month, showing violent offenses falling slightly. But the data only goes as far as 2014, and for months big-city police chiefs have been sounding alarms about the increases seen this year in murder and other violent crime.

The sooner the FBI knows for sure whether and how crime is beginning to rise, Ms. Hess said, the sooner law enforcement can determine how to stop it. "We really need to have that information now in order to draw national conclusions, and that's what we're unable to do," she said.

With real-time, in-depth data, officials believe they could focus more patrols and resources on whatever factors are fueling the jump in crime.

Most U.S. law-enforcement officials agree on the gaps plaguing the current system. First, it is slow; FBI officials complain they know how many people bought guns in America yesterday, but won't know how many were murdered this year until next September.

The system also underplays crime by counting only the most serious offense in any given incident. If a criminal enters a bank, attacks a teller, grabs cash, and kills a security guard, the only crime recorded would be the murder -- the robbery, assault, and weapons charges wouldn't appear.

"We really cannot tell what's going on in this country relative to crime," said Jim Bueermann, a former California police chief who now leads the Police Foundation, a research and training group.

In part because of such problems, the Major Cities Chiefs Association recently conducted its own survey, showing major crime increases in cities like Houston for the first six months of the year and alarming rises in

dozens more. Law-enforcement officials have offered multiple theories for what is happening, but say they don't really know.

The FBI actually created a faster, more detailed approach in 1987 called the National Incident-Based Reporting System. But today it still gathers data covering less than a third of the U.S. population, hardly a comprehensive picture.

Currently, only 16 states report all their crime data to NIBRS. Another 17 report some but not all of their data in NIBRS form. Fifteen states don't currently give the FBI any information for NIBRS, and two others don't even report data through the old system.

Crime data reporting has always been voluntary, and for many of the country's 18,000 police departments providing NIBRS data would mean changing computer systems, officer training and data management -- an onerous and possibly expensive proposition.

In Dallas, murders rose to 75 in the first half of this year from 54 a year earlier. Partly in response, Police Chief David Brown has volunteered his agency to be Texas' first big-city department to use NIBRS. Crime is still at a historic low in Dallas, but Mr. Brown is eager to quell any uptick. When Dallas joins NIBRS next year, he said, it will provide benefits like a description of victims, details that criminologists increasingly see as a key to understanding crime patterns.

But some police chiefs who participate in NIBRS aren't certain it is worth it, and that has prompted the FBI to launch a campaign to pitch the system to local police.

Patrick Berarducci, police chief of Medina, Ohio, a town of 28,000, said he has considered withdrawing from NIBRS, but will participate a while longer before deciding.

"I haven't seen any value to us," he said. "Most police chiefs in any town can tell you if their burglaries are up . . . Any benefit from NIBRS may come so far down the road that the chief who submitted the data will never recognize it."

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