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Future of U.S. Crime Data

NIBRS: The Future of U.S. Crime Data

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The National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) system for collecting and compiling crime data from across the United States. More detailed than the traditional summary reporting system (SRS), which agencies used to submit counts of offenses, clearances, and arrests made, NIBRS can fulfill the need for useful crime statistics as part of the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program. The FBI will use NIBRS data to address society's questions about when, where, how, and why crimes occur and help provide forward-thinking solutions. The FBI will make NIBRS data and analytics available to law enforcement personnel, researchers, and the general public.

To accomplish this goal, the FBI is working with the U.S. law enforcement community and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) to facilitate the transition of U.S. law enforcement to participation in NIBRS. By 2021, the FBI will retire SRS and collect crime data only through NIBRS. Also, the FBI has developed an online Crime Data Explorer (CDE) to make timely, nationwide

NIBRS data available to U.S. law enforcement professionals and average citizens alike, along with analytical tools to make the data immediately useful for answering questions.

SRS to NIBRS

Since 1930, SRS has been the main system for crime data collection in the United States. SRS has served law enforcement well for decades, but its technological and procedural limitations are outdated, compared to the functionalities of more modern data collection systems. In 1985, the BJS and the FBI produced a report called *Blueprint for the Future of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program*. The report called for the development of a modern reporting system to address the limitations of SRS and to utilize modern data technology.¹ NIBRS was the solution developed to meet those parameters, and the system began collecting data in 1991. In 1993, the BJS estimated that 40 percent of the U.S. law enforcement agencies would report data to NIBRS by the end of 1994.²

NIBRS has a number of advantages over the traditional SRS.

NIBRS collects offense and arrest data on 49 Group A offenses in 23 offense categories and arrest data on 10 Group B offenses. By collecting data about more types of criminal offenses than SRS, NIBRS provides a much broader picture of crime in the United States, including some types of crimes SRS does not report at all, such as extortion.

NIBRS entries can include as many as 10 criminal offenses per incident, avoiding the necessity of the SRS hierarchy rule. Under the SRS hierarchy rule, if a murder and three robberies happen in the same incident, SRS would count only the most serious offense—the one murder. In contrast, NIBRS would count all four offenses (the murder and the three robberies), providing a more accurate count of criminal offenses. Within the number of offenses NIBRS can track, it excludes counts only for mutually exclusive

offenses that cannot, by definition, be part of the same offense. An example of mutually exclusive offenses is murder and negligent manslaughter.³

NIBRS collects data on three major categories of crimes: Crimes Against Persons (such as murder and rape), Crimes Against Property (such as robbery and burglary), and Crimes Against Society (such as narcotics and prostitution). SRS does not collect data about Crimes Against Society, so NIBRS is more comprehensive and a better tool for understanding offenses that damage or offend the interests of society in general.

NIBRS collects data on victim-to-offender relationships in robberies and in all Crimes Against Persons categories, whereas SRS reports only victim-to-offender relationship data (e.g., whether the offender is unknown to the victim or a relative or acquaintance of some kind) in the case of homicides. This makes NIBRS more useful for identifying potential crime victims and types of persons who are particularly at risk, such as children. In addition to collecting data on Crimes Against Persons, NIBRS collects data on other victim types such as businesses, government agencies, religious organizations, financial institutions, law enforcement officers, and society.

NIBRS includes new, revised, and expanded definitions of offenses. The FBI UCR Program has revised several SRS definitions to make NIBRS more representative of modern criminal justice concepts. A significant example is the updated definition of rape that includes male victims, female offenders, nonforcible sexual victimization, and sexual assaults with objects. The UCR Program has been collecting NIBRS data with this new, enhanced definition of rape since 2013.⁴ The updates to the definitions of offenses help NIBRS collect crime data in a way that more fairly and rationally represents the concerns of modern society.

NIBRS can collect data on up to two circumstances per homicide or aggravated assault. For example, NIBRS can record the fact that a homicide included elements of both juvenile gang activity and assault on a law enforcement officer. Circumstantial data helps NIBRS capture data to provide insight about the causes of these crimes.⁵

To help gather more meaningful and complete information on drugs, NIBRS has the expanded capacity to capture data about drug offenses. In addition to capturing the traditional elements of sale, manufacture, and possession, NIBRS enables law enforcement agencies to report unlawful cultivation, distribution, use, purchase, transportation, or importation of controlled drugs or narcotics. With the expanded drug type categories in NIBRS, agencies can also report suspected drug types. If an agency makes a seizure of drugs, the agency can report the estimated quantities. In addition, NIBRS allows agencies to report the unlawful manufacture, purchase, sale, transportation, or possession of drug equipment or paraphernalia. Finally, agencies can report whether they suspect offenders were influenced by drugs or narcotics while committing other crimes. With the expanded details for drug reporting under NIBRS, agencies can capture more relevant data to help law enforcement contend with drugs and drug-related crimes.

Other advantages of NIBRS over SRS include the following:

- Distinction between attempted and completed crimes for all Group A offenses such as fraud
- Ability to capture computer-based crime data
- Mechanisms to associate any updated reports about offenses with the original reported offenses⁶

Breaking Free from the Past

Unfortunately, most law enforcement agencies continue to submit crime data only through SRS. In 2015, a total of 6,648 law enforcement agencies submitted NIBRS data, representing 96 million U.S. residents.⁷ Although the trend among U.S. law enforcement agencies is moving toward participation in NIBRS, it has been a slow progression. During 2015, the number of agencies participating in NIBRS increased by only 128.⁸ At the 2015 rate of increase, NIBRS participation among law enforcement agencies would not reach 100 percent until the year 2107. Clearly, an additional push was needed.

On December 2, 2015, the Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) Advisory Policy Board (APB) agreed on a recommendation to retire SRS by January 1, 2021. Thereafter, the FBI will collect crime statistics solely through NIBRS. The FBI director signed the recommendation on February 9, 2016, committing the FBI and the United States to bring crime data from the past into the future.⁹ As the FBI's letter to state UCR program managers said on June 10, 2016,

Once complete, the FBI will have faster access to more robust data that is necessary to show how safe our communities are and to help law enforcement and municipal leaders better allocate resources to prevent and combat crime. Through the NIBRS, law enforcement agencies can be more transparent and accountable to the communities they serve.¹⁰

Resistance to Change

Two commonly cited reasons that agencies do not participate in NIBRS are the costs of implementing a more technical system and the misperception that reporting to NIBRS will indicate an increase in crime rates. While facts and logic can refute the latter reason—because NIBRS delivers a more accurate measurement of crime than SRS, not an increase in crime—the former reason is a real challenge for many agencies. To deliver the benefits

of NIBRS, the FBI continues to address the misperceptions and challenges that keep crime data rooted in the past.

Another reason why many agencies do not participate in NIBRS is the belief that there is no need to do so. Most large agencies have crime analysts who provide a clear enough understanding of local crime. However, these large agencies are limited to using their own data, including data shared with other local agencies and SRS. The data is limited in its effectiveness because of the traditional shortcomings of SRS, and local agencies' criminal history information does not capture the level of detail of NIBRS. With NIBRS, even large local agencies can maintain, access, and share more data about crime than they could otherwise.¹¹

One of the biggest weaknesses of NIBRS is it currently represents crime data from only 31.2 percent of the U.S. population. The Department of Justice is working to change this. Following a scientific model, the Office of Justice Programs in the Department of Justice has formulated a plan to make NIBRS representative of all U.S. crime by recruiting an additional 400 law enforcement agencies, including the largest agencies in the United States.¹² Once NIBRS is a U.S.-wide representative sample of crime, it will be a scientifically useful tool for the U.S. law enforcement community, the general public, and community leaders to effectively combat crime. Ultimately, the FBI wishes to engage all 18,439 U.S. law enforcement agencies in NIBRS participation, including tribal, local, state, and federal agencies. Complete U.S.-wide participation in NIBRS would also include types of agencies most people might not think of as primarily being law enforcement agencies, such as universities, wildlife departments, and gaming commissions. The goal is feasible, as shown by the 16,643 agencies who reported to SRS in 2015, proving the U.S. law enforcement community can be highly cooperative in participating in the collection of crime data.¹³

Advancement and Evolution

The cost of implementing a NIBRS submission system might not be as prohibitive as some agencies believe. Financial assistance is available for some states or agencies in their transitions to NIBRS. In 2016, the FBI and the BJS awarded \$24.2 million to law enforcement agencies to support a U.S.-wide crime reporting infrastructure. Of these funds, \$18.7 million went to support the transition of large law enforcement agencies to state incident-based crime reporting programs that would share data with NIBRS, and \$5.5 million went to support UCR programs in seven states to develop or enhance their capacity to collect incident-based crime data.¹⁴

The transition to NIBRS is not only a federal objective; some states have also set their own goals for NIBRS transitions. In its 84th session, the Texas legislature resolved that the state should make a transition to NIBRS reporting, and the legislature issued a funding announcement for \$16.2 million for agencies to work toward NIBRS reporting.¹⁵ In 2016, Indiana went from being one of only two states without a UCR program to setting the goal for a statewide NIBRS program by 2020.¹⁶ In Wyoming, the Division of Criminal Investigation has set the goal of statewide transition to NIBRS by 2021.¹⁷

Cities have also recognized the need for NIBRS transition. The city of New Bedford, Massachusetts has been modernizing its crime data, setting the groundwork for NIBRS participation well ahead of the FBI's 2021 deadline. New Bedford expects the more accurate and detailed crime data of NIBRS to help the city identify patterns, maximizing its crime prevention efforts.¹⁸ The 128 cities that made the transition to NIBRS participation between 2014 and 2015 include larger jurisdictions such as the Louisville Metro Police Department in Louisville, Kentucky, with a reported 2015 population of 680,550, and small towns like Jamestown, South Carolina, with a reported 2015 population of 77.¹⁹

Some small towns and tribal law enforcement agencies have encountered difficulty in securing the technical and financial re-sources needed for NIBRS transition, but some agencies like the Salem Police Department in Salem, Oregon, have developed a solution: cooperation between larger and smaller agencies. Salem is one of several larger agencies in Oregon that have engaged in partnerships with smaller, nearby agencies to obtain NIBRS-compatible records management systems individual agencies could not afford on their own. Realizing NIBRS would replace SRS as the crime statistics reporting system of the future, Salem formed a partnership with several small town and tribal agencies to develop a NIBRS-participating system that would be collectively affordable and useful. Salem and its partner agencies have found the NIBRS-sharing system facilitates their interagency relations, keeps costs affordable, and supports smaller agencies with data and analytical resources they could not have on their own. The Oregon UCR Program has been receptive to this arrangement, and Salem has found it to be beneficial to investigations and working relationships among the agencies.²⁰

NIBRS continues to evolve to better represent society's interests and concerns about crime. For example, in 2016, NIBRS began to collect data about animal cruelty offenses. The data includes details about gross neglect, torture, organized abuse, and sexual abuse of animals. Previously, under SRS, the UCR Program could collect only data about animal abuse under a general "All Other Offenses" category. The National Sheriffs' Association led the advocacy to add animal cruelty to the NIBRS data collection, citing the connection between animal cruelty and other crimes, demonstrating how groups outside the FBI can successfully help NIBRS address contemporary societal concerns about different types of crimes.²¹

Another recent development of NIBRS is an interactive map that enables users to find crime statistics for 5,833 currently reporting agencies in the United States. Readers can find the interactive NIBRS map for 2015 on the FBI's website (<https://nibrs.fbi.gov>).²²

A Better Future with NIBRS

The FBI's CJIS APB has approved a plan to upgrade and update the list of NIBRS offenses and definitions to capture statistics about more specific data of several types of crimes. The following upgrades will begin in 2019:

- An added offense of domestic violence
- Modified definitions of vehicular or vessel negligent manslaughter and vehicular or vessel negligent assault to include incidents of driving under the influence
- Two new fraud offense variations of cargo theft involving identity theft and hacking or computer invasion

As previously mentioned, the FBI developed a CDE designed to make crime statistics available to the public online in an interactive format with built-in analytic tools. In the future, the CDE will become the primary way the FBI will publish NIBRS data. The CDE will provide a mechanism to depart from the traditional concept of annual or semiannual publications of statistics and, following the completion of technical and policy enhancements, will instead deliver crime data in a more timely fashion with frequent updates. This will bring some important advantages:

Public dissemination of crime data will be more frequent. Today, data about a given crime may not appear in an annual publication until 21 months after the crime occurred, but the CDE will eventually make NIBRS crime data available to the public in a much timelier manner. Because researchers, policy makers, and the public will not need to wait until the next year to assess crime trends, society can deal with crime more promptly.

Dissemination of data will not rely on complete numbers for publication. Currently, with a traditional model of annual publication of total numbers, the FBI frequently encounters delays when agencies are not

equally prompt or thorough in reporting data. The static publications must then contain caveats about gaps in the data, and the gaps are never filled in subsequent publications during the following years. The CDE can eliminate this kind of fragmented reporting by delivering the content of the NIBRS dataset directly to the public without delay. If some agencies are delayed in reporting some data, the data can still be integrated into the NIBRS dataset when reported.

The CDE will give the general public the tools to analyze crime.

Currently, in SRS and NIBRS publications, statistics are published in tables, selectively answering questions FBI writers and statisticians think will be of interest to researchers and the public. The tables published each year answer large questions commonly asked about crime, such as, "How many homicides happened in large cities?" or "How many homicides were committed with firearms?" These common questions may leave significant latent gaps in public awareness about crime. One example of how an uncommon question can reveal potentially important understanding about crime is a study by Jason M. Lindo and others at Texas A&M University. In the study, researchers used NIBRS data to detect a 28 percent increase in rapes on or near campuses on days when Division 1-A football games occur, with a 41 percent increase for home games.²³ When the CDE delivers NIBRS data and analytics to the general public, many more people will be able to contribute these kinds of surprising advances in understanding crime. For example, the CDE may make it possible to answer questions NIBRS publications currently cannot, such as, "How many homicides happen in the same incident as vehicle thefts?" NIBRS collects the data, but the traditional, static publication does not deliver the data in a flexible way that could provide an answer. With the CDE, NIBRS data could potentially answer such unconventional questions.

As NIBRS data becomes representative of more areas across the United States, the data can potentially benefit society in ways beyond current criminal justice applications. The BJS is planning a number of studies using

NIBRS data, including studies about crimes against children (a dataset only available in NIBRS), cybercrime, gun crimes, sexual assaults, and vehicle thefts.

NIBRS: The Future of Crime Data

The FBI will retire SRS on January 1, 2021, and thereafter solely collect crime data through NIBRS, a crime data system designed for the Information Age. Currently, the FBI is working with law enforcement agencies across the United States to prepare for the transition. The FBI is publishing its plans for a U.S.-wide transition to NIBRS and providing technical advice and funding assistance for agencies that are working toward NIBRS transition.

In the coming decades, NIBRS will provide the U.S. law enforcement community, researchers, public leaders, and general public with data to help them make better decisions about how to deal with crime. Through the FBI's CDE, professional and amateur researchers alike will be able to access NIBRS data and crime analytics to answer questions no one outside the FBI can currently answer. The FBI continues to work to make NIBRS data more powerful, interactive, and accessible to support public and private safety concerns and law enforcement tactical and budgetary applications on a local scale as well as across the United States.♦

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