

Developing Complete and Meaningful Statistics on Crime and Public Safety through NIBRS

Background

The growing national concern about transparency and accountability in criminal justice calls for more meaningful and complete national data on crime and public safety. In part due to changes in technology over the past several decades, the collection of detailed information about crime and its outcomes is more efficient and feasible today than ever before.



Each year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) collects and compiles crime data from nearly 18,000 law enforcement agencies (LEAs) across the country, including city, university/college, county, state, tribal, and some federal agencies as part of its Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program. The FBI currently allows law enforcement agencies to report crime data in one of two ways: (a) monthly counts of 10 specific crimes through its Summary Reporting System

(SRS), or (b) detailed records on each crime, with 29 different crime types, through the [National Incident-Based Reporting System](#) (NIBRS). Submitting crime data to the FBI through either program is voluntary, although some states have made such reporting mandatory, or tied reporting to police grant funding.

All data submitted to either the SRS and NIBRS is available to the public.

A Challenge

Because cities define and often count crimes differently, it is challenging to compare official statistics on crimes reported in different cities and states, or to accurately combine data from different cities or states for regional analysis. For example, crime reports from different law enforcement agencies may use different crime categories or different reporting periods. In addition, some jurisdictions legally define adults as anyone 16+ years old, while other jurisdictions define adults as 18+ years old. Or, a crime legally defined as a sexual assault in one jurisdiction may be interpreted and recorded as a simple assault in another. SRS and NIBRS both provide this needed standardization so that data can be broadly understood, combined, and compared across cities and states.

SRS versus NIBRS: Understanding Key Differences

SRS: How it works and limitations

To accurately gather and combine crime statistics, SRS uses a common set of crime definitions, irrespective of local or state laws. The crime data collected in this program are simple counts of only 10 reported crime types: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault,

burglary, larceny/theft, motor vehicle theft, arson, and two types of crime related to human trafficking¹. Few details about the circumstances or context of the crimes (e.g., location, victim information, offender demographics, relationship between the victim and the offender, type of weapon used, or whether an arrest was made) are collected or available for analysis². As a result, only summary counts of basic crime categories are possible in a jurisdiction, such as:

In 2013, the city of Smallville had 2 homicides, 4 sexual assaults, and 10 burglaries.

For crime counting purposes, SRS also applies a hierarchy rule. Generally speaking, only the most serious crime that occurred during an incident is recorded in the data³. If multiple offenses occurred during a single crime, (for example, a rape and a burglary), only the more serious crime is recorded (in this example, only the rape would be recorded). The hierarchy rule in SRS keeps incidents from being counted multiple times; however, many less-serious crimes end up being *under-counted*, leaving the public with an incomplete understanding the true nature of crime and public safety in a community.

NIBRS: More data, more detail

Recognizing these limitations to SRS, the FBI, in collaboration with state and local law enforcement and crime reporting experts, developed the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS).⁴ NIBRS is related to SRS, but it captures more details about each crime: victim and offender demographics and relationships, the time of day and location, weapons used, the nature of victim injuries and property stolen or damaged, and whether an arrest occurred. As with SRS data, NIBRS applies standard definitions across jurisdictions and states. Unlike SRS, NIBRS collects information on all crime within a jurisdiction without applying a hierarchy rule. NIBRS also expands the number of crime categories beyond the 10 classifications recorded in SRS. As a result, NIBRS data are more detailed and present a more complete picture of crime known to law enforcement in a given jurisdiction. In addition, NIBRS data can be combined in a meaningful and accurate way within and across cities, counties, regions, states, or nationally.

Detailed crime data collected through NIBRS can answer many important community and policy questions that the SRS cannot, such as:

- Who is most likely to be victimized by certain types of crime?
- Who are the primary offenders for specific types of crime?
- How is crime distributed along an Interstate corridor, or along a border region?
- Are assaults primarily stranger-related or does the victim know the offender?
- Where is crime occurring?
- What kinds of crime are committed with a firearm?

¹ See attachment to this document entitled “SRS and NIBRS” for a complete list.

² The only offense for which circumstantial evidence is collected is homicide. Data are reported on the victim/offender relationship, circumstance of the incident, and the weapon used.

³ There are some exceptions to this rule, but they are rare. For example, homicide and arson are counted without regard to the hierarchy rule.

⁴ The FBI Criminal Justice Information Systems Division recently published an article underlining its commitment to NIBRS which is available at

<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/cjis-link/april-2015/new-initiative-aims-to-increase-crime-reporting-in-nibrs>.

Which agencies report NIBRS data?

Whether an LEA reports data as SRS or NIBRS data is largely determined by the state in which the agency is located. In most cases, local agencies report crime data to a central state reporting office, which compiles the data for the state and forwards it to the FBI. Most states are currently able to collect, process, and report SRS

SRS and NIBRS Participation by State. According to the FBI, 16 states (Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Idaho, Iowa, Michigan, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia) submit data on all their crimes via NIBRS. *(Source: FBI, 2015)*

and/or NIBRS data to the FBI. As of 2015, only 16 states report all of their crime data through NIBRS. Many more LEAs, primarily those with modern management information systems, are capable of reporting NIBRS data to their state's UCR program but currently do not. As local LEAs discover the value of detailed NIBRS crime data to their jurisdiction, county, region, and state, the number of NIBRS reporters will likely increase, resulting in a deeper understanding of crime, its victims and offenders.

State-Level Benefits of Increased NIBRS Participation

States that have transitioned to NIBRS reporting have identified a number of benefits to participation. Some examples include:

- Improved crime data detail and quality
- Improved strategic crime analysis capabilities at county, region, and state levels
- Greater potential for data-driven policing
- Increased ability to monitor outcomes related to new policing strategies or targeted crime prevention programs

Community-Level Benefits of Increased NIBRS Participation

Local communities also derive benefits from improvements in crime data that come with increased NIBRS participation. For example, funding agencies, victim advocacy groups, and policy-makers can use the detailed NIBRS data to better target scarce resources for both victim assistance and crime prevention. As more LEAs transition to NIBRS, analysts can use the data to examine geographic and seasonal changes in crime across jurisdictions, counties, states, and at regional levels. Additional information on how crime victim advocates and others can harness the power of incident-based data may be found on the Office for Victims of Crime website at <http://www.ovc.gov/pubs/NIBRS/index.html>.

In the year that an LEA transitions to NIBRS, the crime rate for that agency may initially appear to increase when compared to crime counts reports previously in SRS. However, these differences may largely be attributed to data being reported differently. Because NIBRS reports every crime in an incident, not just the most serious, the total number of reported crimes may appear to increase. However, the actual number of crime incidents will not have changed.

For more details please see:

<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/nibrs/2013/resources/effects-of-nibrs-on-crime-statistics>

More information about the differences between SRS and NIBRS can be found:

- http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/frequently-asked-questions/ucr_faqs
- http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/frequently-asked-questions/nibrs_faqs

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