

**NCS-X:
BUILDING a SYSTEM of NATIONAL CRIME STATISTICS for the 21st CENTURY**
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The websites of law enforcement agencies in most large cities in the United States, and even in small towns, provide the public with detailed information on crimes that have come to their attention. Over the past two decades, as their management information systems have improved, law enforcement agencies have moved beyond simply reporting the eight Index crimes.² Now agencies are reporting more fine-grained and relevant crime categories, along with crime attributes that they believe are required to document the nature of crime in their communities. On many agency websites, users can now find counts, trends, and pin maps of such incidents as domestic violence, commercial robberies, shootings, gang-related crimes, vandalisms, hate crimes, crimes against the elderly, and daytime burglaries. However, the depth of information the public, policymakers, and researchers have at the local level on crime known to law enforcement is far superior to what is available at the national level. In addition, crime statistics at the local level may only be a week or day old, while nationally the available crime statistics are often based on last year's data. With a new initiative from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) called the **National Crime Statistics Exchange** (or NCS-X) that has the strong support of the FBI, the quality and utility of available national crime statistics should soon challenge what is available at the local level.

The work of collecting national crime statistics in the United States was initiated on January 1, 1930, by the Committee on Uniform Crime Reports of the International Association of Chiefs of Police. It had taken nearly 60 years to arrive at that point. As far back as 1871, the National Police Association had called for a national collection of crime statistics. In September 1930, nine months after the collection began, the Bureau of Investigation of the U.S. Department of Justice assumed the responsibility of producing uniform crime reports. (The name was not changed to the Federal Bureau of Investigation until 1935.) The Bureau furnished forms for tallying and compiling these data to local agencies monthly with return envelopes requiring no postage. These forms, and all correspondence dealing with criminal statistics work, were to be addressed directly to J. Edgar Hoover to emphasize the importance of this activity. The forms the FBI currently uses to collect aggregate crime statistics through the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program to document crime patterns in the United States in the 21st Century look remarkably similar to those sent to Hoover over 80 years ago.

By the 1980s, criticisms of the UCR Program's aggregate statistics were commonly heard from law enforcement agencies, researchers, government policy makers, and the media. Many thought that the system needed to be expanded to cover a wider range of offense types and provide more detailed information on the nature of criminal incidents. At the same time, the capabilities of the management information systems of local law enforcement agencies were increasing to service the agency's day-to-day information needs. Based on such criticism and the rapidly changing data processing environment, BJS and the FBI formed a joint task force to determine what, if any, changes should be made to the existing UCR Program. The result of this work was a report published in 1985 entitled *Blueprint for the Future of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program* (www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bjs/98348.pdf), which laid the framework for what has come to be known as the National Incident-Based Reporting System (or NIBRS).

The scope of the proposed change for the UCR Program, to move from an aggregate reporting system to an incident-based reporting system, was remarkable. While crime reporting in the aggregate UCR was limited to eight offense types, NIBRS expanded the range of reported crimes to include over 50 offense categories. While the aggregate system showed that a law enforcement agency reported one robbery, the incident-based system would report for the same incident all the offenses that occurred in the incident (and not just the most serious); the date, time, and location of the incident; the demographics of the victim; victim injury; the types of weapons involved; the value of property taken; the victim's perception of offender demographics; the victim's relationship to each offender; the date and type of clearance (if any); and the demographics of the arrestees.

While the benefits of the UCR's change from aggregate to incident-based data were clear, it was also understood that the implementation of NIBRS reporting in 18,000 law enforcement agencies would take time. Focusing on the need of sound national statistics, the *Blueprint* report argued that the NIBRS implementation should first focus on developing a national sample of agencies so that national estimates would be available soon. However, when NIBRS implementation began, the sampling notion was lost. Nearly 30 years later, NIBRS has not replaced the aggregate crime counts found in the forms sent to Hoover as the source of national crime statistics. While hundreds of millions of dollars and an unknown number of hours have been expended to enable NIBRS to replace traditional UCR aggregate data, NIBRS coverage still will not support the production of national statistics.

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Currently, about 5,000 of the nearly 19,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States report NIBRS data to the FBI. These data cannot be used to provide national statistics because the existing NIBRS data cannot be manipulated to represent all law enforcement agencies. Given the current situation, there are two paths that NIBRS could take to become nationally representative. One is the path to complete reporting (i.e., waiting until nearly all 19,000 agencies are reporting NIBRS data to the FBI). Based on history, complete reporting is many decades into the future. Harking back to the *Blueprint* recommendation, the second path establishes a representative sample of agencies to provide sufficient NIBRS data to produce national estimates of crime. Given the quality of existing police record management systems, and assuming agencies in the sample would agree to participate, this path should be able to generate national crime statistics with the detail found in the NIBRS data within a few years.

First Steps

In 2012, BJS launched the NCS-X initiative. Its goal is to develop a statistical system that can generate detailed national estimates of the volume and characteristics of crimes known to law enforcement by building on the strong foundation laid by NIBRS. After studying the NIBRS data currently reported by the approximately 5,000 agencies and the characteristics of the agencies that do not report NIBRS data, BJS determined that supplementing existing NIBRS data with data from a stratified cluster sample of 400 non-NIBRS agencies would produce a database capable of generating national estimates of crime. This is an achievable goal in a reasonable time period, and this path to national crime statistics based on NIBRS data has become the primary objective of NCS-X.

NCS-X is a collaborative undertaking, supported by the FBI and other Department of Justice agencies. To reach its goal, NCS-X will actively work with the selected 400 law enforcement agencies to initiate their reporting of NIBRS data to the FBI. NCS-X is designed to help local agencies implement efficient and minimally burdensome processes to extract incident-based data from their existing records management systems. When necessary, NCS-X will provide resources to enable the sampled agencies to contribute to NIBRS. These resources may include funding, training, technical support, or other customized incentives. In addition, NCS-X will provide funding and technical assistance to state UCR programs to enable them to pass on the growing volume of NIBRS data to the FBI.

A team of organizations—including RTI International, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), the Integrated Justice Information Systems Institute (IJIS), and the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics (SEARCH)—is responsible for developing the implementation plans for NCS-X. This includes coordinating efforts with local law enforcement, state UCR reporting programs, and the software industry. An NCS-X Executive Steering Committee will review possible design and implementation options to ensure the maximum benefit to both participants and key stakeholders.

NCS-X is reaching out to the 400 selected law enforcement agencies and to their state UCR programs to explain the program, to assess the capabilities of local record management systems, to learn of the barriers that have been in place to NIBRS reporting, and to determine what is needed to overcome these barriers. Through NCS-X, BJS is committed to building a national statistical system that generates detailed estimates of the volume and characteristics of crimes known to law enforcement. With its partners, BJS will raise the funds needed to accomplish this goal.

After nearly 30 years of working to make NIBRS a national information resource, BJS is aware of the problems NCS-X faces. NCS-X needs the guidance from, and the active support of, the law enforcement community to ensure its success. NCS-X also needs the help and support of others who need this information in their own work. For example, BJS is working with policy makers at the national level to demonstrate the value of the information that would flow from this expansion of NIBRS. Some (e.g., the Office of Victims of Crime) have already become active supporters of the NCS-X initiative. NCS-X also needs the support of advocacy groups, the media, and the research community at the local level. Local law enforcement agencies need to hear from persons in their own communities how important these data are to others. Even with the support NCS-X will provide to the sampled agencies, some agencies will need other encouragements to participate in the NCS-X initiative; for some, helping to produce detailed national crime statistics will not be enough of an incentive on its own. For these agencies, evidence of the value of NIBRS data to those outside of law enforcement community may tip the scales.

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A Call for Support

For its own self-interest, the work of NCS-X should be actively supported by the research community. Along with the obvious benefits of detailed national statistics, two additional aspects of the work should be valued.

- First, the sampling plan stratifies law enforcement agencies by size and then uses variable take-rates within strata. The stratum with the largest agencies (i.e., those with at least 750 officers) is a certainty stratum, meaning that NCS-X will work with all agencies in this group to become NIBRS reporters. When successful, researchers will have access to detailed crime data for all the major urban areas in the country.
- Second, an often overlooked benefit of NIBRS reporting for researchers is that it will provide a mechanism to combine data from various law enforcement agencies in a geographical area to study multi-jurisdictional patterns and trends. Most law enforcement agencies have their own unique information systems with their data structures and codes. NIBRS standardizes the data from different agencies so that they can be combined easily into a single database for multi-jurisdictional analyses. A law enforcement agency with a sophisticated information system will not need NIBRS to support its internal work; however, if its crime analysts are interested in what is happening in neighboring jurisdictions or in jurisdictions similar to it across the country, NIBRS data will expedite the research.

In summary, the United States needs better crime statistics to address the problems of the 21st Century. Such information could flow from NIBRS if the system were nationally representative. The wide-ranging value of such a national information resource is clear. BJS, the FBI, and other federal agencies are working to achieve this goal, but these efforts would benefit from the active support of the criminology and criminal justice research communities. We hope that each member of ASC will hear more about NCS-X and NIBRS over the next year from colleagues in the criminal justice system, local policy makers, advocates, and the media. When these opportunities arise, please take the time to express the need for better crime data and give examples of the benefits that NIBRS data would have for constituent groups in the local community.

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²The FBI's set of Index Crimes include the violent crimes of murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault and the property crimes of burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson