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Expanding Police Ability to Report Crime: The National Incident-Based Reporting System

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THE PROBLEM

The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) is the FBI's widely used system for recording crimes and making policy decisions. It has tracked data on seven crimes since 1930: murder, robbery, rape, aggravated assault, burglary, theft and vehicle theft. In 1979, the UCR started reporting on arson.

Today, nearly 17,000 law enforcement agencies report UCR data to the FBI.

UCR data have several limitations that make them unsuitable for analyzing local crime. For instance, the UCR does not provide specific information on each incident (e.g., location, characteristics of the victim and offender, and injuries they received). If multiple crimes occur at the same scene, only the

most serious is recorded. The UCR also does not allow police to report whether an arrest was made at the crime scene.

THE SOLUTION

In the 1980s, the FBI began to revise the UCR. The result was the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). As of 2004, NIBRS data came from 5,271 law enforcement agencies that represent about 20 percent of the total U.S. population.

NIBRS enhances the UCR data because it describes details about 46 types of criminal activity. Officers can record specific information about each incident, including unique descriptions of victims and offenders, a description of each crime that occurred at the scene, and whether an arrest was made.

Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)	National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)
Tracks eight crimes.	Tracks 46 crimes.
Does not report arrests in specific incidents.	Contains information about arrests in each incident.
Gives a tally of the incidents. Does not contain information on each reported incident.	Contains information on each incident reported to police, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics of victims and offenders. • Relationship between the victims and offenders. • Crimes committed. • Injuries at the incident scene. • Weapons used. • Arrests made. • Incident location.
Does not provide information about simple assault, which is the most commonly reported domestic violence offense.	Provides information about simple assault, which is the most commonly reported domestic violence offense.
Reports only the most serious crime committed in a single incident (e.g., if a murderer has raped his victim, only the murder is reported).	Requires officers to report multiple offenses, victims and offenders.

THE IMPACT

NIBRS significantly expands officers' ability to record data about a specific incident, which gives leaders a much fuller understanding of crime. As a result, a mayor's policy advisor or a police executive can look at NIBRS data alone or combine them with other citywide data, analyze them, and gain a more descriptive view of criminal activity in the community. NIBRS data help law enforcement gather better evidence to develop effective solutions and practices.

Researchers find NIBRS data useful and have successfully used NIBRS data to:

- **Assess dual arrest data.** Researchers used NIBRS data to examine the factors that influence police decisions to make arrests in domestic violence incidents and the prevalence of dual arrest¹ across the nation. They found that dual arrest occurs more in same-sex than in heterosexual relationships and in states that have mandatory arrest policies but no primary aggressor provisions.² The researchers suggest that if a state wants to minimize dual arrests, agencies may wish to institute primary aggressor provisions, change mandatory arrest policies to preferred arrest policies, and educate officers about relationship dynamics in same-sex relationships. (The full report "Explaining

the Prevalence, Context, and Consequences of Dual Arrest in Intimate Partner Violence Cases" is available at: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/218355.pdf>.)

- **Examine drug distribution.** A 1999 study used NIBRS data to examine rates of drug sales and distribution in three Virginia communities. Police identified drug sales that crossed jurisdictional boundaries and were able to develop policies and protocols to capture drug offenders.³

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about NIBRS, see the FBI's Frequently Asked Questions page at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/faqs.htm>, or find NIBRS statistics on the Bureau of Justice Statistics Web page at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/nibrs.htm#about>.

NOTES

1. Dual arrest occurs when an officer arrests multiple parties in an incident as mutual combatants.
2. A primary aggressor provision instructs officers to arrest only the main offender in an incident.
3. For more information, see Faggiani, D., and C. McLaughlin, "Using National Incident-Based Reporting System Data for Strategic Crime Analysis," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 15(2)(1999):181–191.

