

TRANSFER THE UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING PROGRAM FROM THE FBI TO THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS

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The United States does not monitor crime rates on a comprehensive and timely basis. The absence of up-to-date information on crime rates at the national and local level misinforms policy responses, impedes criminal justice planning and efficient resource allocation, and contributes to public ignorance of the crime problems in this country. Bringing the nation's capacity to monitor crime rates into the twenty-first century will require prodigious effort. But an important beginning step is to transfer the Uniform Crime Reporting program from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS).

In this essay, I offer a rationale for this policy proposal and outline the next steps necessary to improve crime monitoring at all levels of government. To make my case, I begin with a recent and very revealing example of our outmoded and ineffective methods of monitoring crime trends.

A NEW CRIME WAVE?

In August 2006, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) held a meeting in Washington, D.C. to call attention to crime increases occurring throughout the country. The meeting was attended by police chiefs and other officials from jurisdictions that had recorded sizable increases in homicides, robberies, and other violent crimes during 2005 and, in many cases, through the first half of 2006. The so-called PERF Violent Crime Summit was publicized widely and produced calls for greater federal assistance to combat local crime problems, particularly for hiring more police (Willing, 2006). U.S. Justice Department officials responded initially that resources for local crime fighting were scarce and asked for more systematic evidence of the putative crime rise (Associated Press, 2006).

The specter of a new crime wave remained in the news throughout the fall of 2006. In October, PERF produced a report documenting crime increases across the 56 cities represented at the August crime summit (PERF, 2006). Shortly afterward, the Justice Department announced that it would send investigators to selected cities around the country to examine local crime trends and anti-crime initiatives (Johnson, 2006).

In November 2006, Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton warned at a meeting of the American Society of Criminology that crime could

“increase exponentially” and become an issue in the 2008 presidential election (Crime and Justice News, 2006). At the end of the year, the FBI released preliminary crime figures for the first 6 months of 2006 showing a continuing increase in homicide and a sharp rise in robbery over the same period of 2005 (<http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/prelim06/index.html>). A few weeks later, the Justice Department announced that it would make small grants available to police departments to fight violent crime. The PERF executive director called the grants program “a step in the right direction” and said he was encouraged “that the Justice Department recognizes the significant change in violent crime across the country” (Johnson, 2007).

DELAYED RESPONSE

Local police chiefs had been complaining for months before the August 2006 PERF crime summit that violent crime was on the rise and that they lacked the resources to combat it. Were they right? Were we in the midst of a widespread and significant crime increase? It was difficult to know then and still is; the FBI report *Crime in the United States* (FBI, 2006) was not released until September 2006 and covered only the period through the end of 2005. But the chiefs were saying that violent crime was escalating through 2006, and no single source of systematic data was publicly available to evaluate their claims.

The Uniform Crime Reporting program (UCR) released a preliminary report for the first half of 2006 in December 2006—rapid dissemination by UCR standards, but in a sense it was too late. PERF had already published its own report on 2006 crime increases under the dramatic title *A Gathering Storm: Violent Crime in America* (PERF, 2006). An update of that report, published in April 2007, pointedly reminded readers that PERF encourages police agencies “not to wait” for the FBI to release its UCR crime figures and to send their data directly to PERF for compilation and early release (PERF, 2007). The second PERF report warns of continued violent crime increases through the end of 2006. The FBI is expected to release final UCR statistics for year-end 2006 in September 2007.

SPORADIC RESPONSE

At this point, we must count PERF as a significant component of the nation’s crime monitoring system, although the word “system” must be used advisedly. At the center of the system stand two long-standing data collection and dissemination programs, the FBI UCR and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The

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importance of the dual programs lies in their fundamental complementarities: Each provides information missing from the other. The UCR compiles crimes reported to the police and arrests, whereas the NCVS is based on accounts of crime by victims, whether or not the crimes were reported to the police. The bulwark of the nation's crime monitoring system, the two programs safeguard the reliability and integrity of crime information and document long-term crime trends (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003; see Lynch and Addington, 2007, for a recent review). But, as currently constituted, they are not sufficient to meet national and local needs for timely and detailed crime information and analysis.

Since the 1970s, the UCR program has provided detailed information on criminal homicides in its Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHRs). The SHR national summary data are published annually in *Crime in the United States*, and more detailed national-level and state-level SHR data, along with Web-based analysis tools, are maintained by the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ; <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/ezashr/>). The absence of critical detail about other criminal offenses in the summary UCR data (e.g., offender characteristics, victim-offender relationship, time of occurrence, and victim injury) prompted the development in the 1980s of the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which was sponsored jointly by the FBI and BJS (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/nibrs.htm>) and at one point or another was supported by the Justice Research and Statistics Association (JRSA) and the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics (SEARCH). In many states, NIBRS is implemented through a statistical analysis center (SAC) that is also responsible for compiling and verifying UCR data within the state. JRSA, SEARCH, and the state SACs also should be counted as components of the crime monitoring system, even though to date NIBRS covers only about 20% of the U. S. population and neither JRSA nor SEARCH publishes crime statistics or analyzes crime rates on a regular basis.

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) is also part of the crime monitoring system. NCHS compiles and disseminates national data on homicides and assaults, by demographic characteristics of victims and weapon use. Some data elements are available for states and counties. The NCHS data are based on hospital and medical examiner reports and therefore provide information on assault victims that may not be reflected in the UCR or NCVS. The key limitation of these data from the standpoint of crime monitoring, of course, is that they omit data on nonviolent offenses or violent offenses that do not produce a medical record.

A final and increasingly important facet of crime monitoring consists of the crime data made publicly available by local police departments. A growing number of departments post yearly, quarterly, or monthly crime counts on their websites, in some cases immediately after the collection

period. Several departments also disaggregate the data by local geographic areas, such as census tracts, zip codes, locally defined neighborhoods, or police districts. For example, the Dallas Police Department provides crime counts along with corresponding census information in tables and maps for census tracts, zip codes, city council districts, and other geographies (<http://www.dallaspolice.net/>). The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department provides crime data for the city dating back to 1929, monthly neighborhood-level summary counts, and incident-level data at the street-block level within 48 hours of occurrence.¹

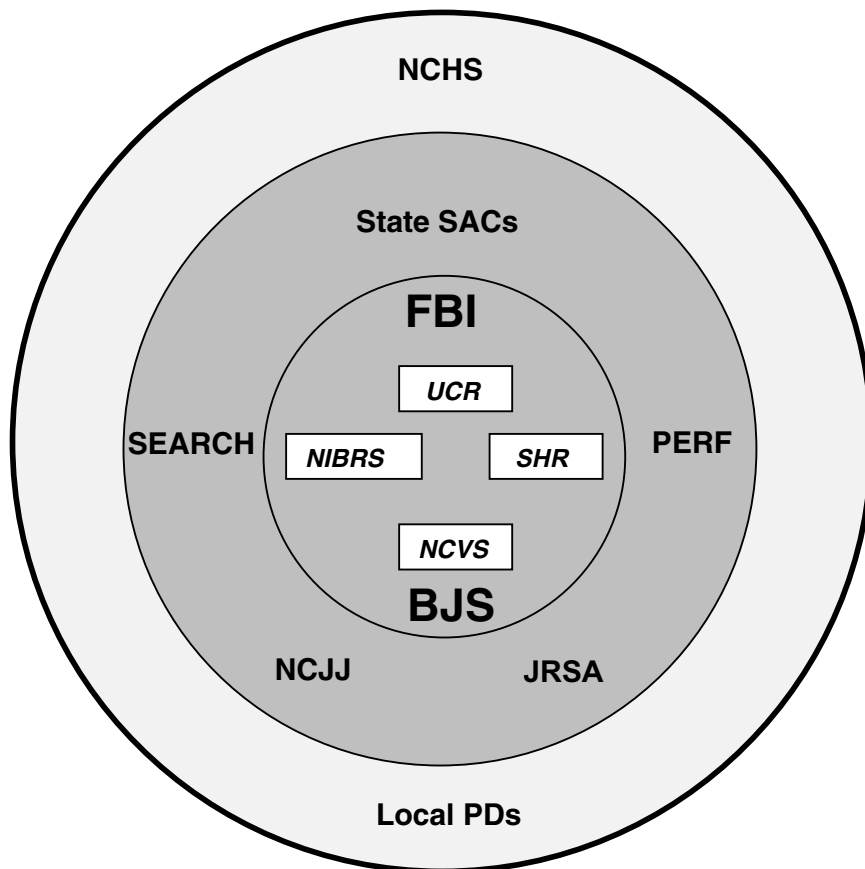
Figure 1 presents the primary public agencies and private organizations that constitute the nation's crime monitoring system. The system is information rich in that it provides data of several types (police, victim surveys, and public health) from diverse sources that can be used to track crime trends over relatively long time periods. But, as we have seen, the usefulness of the system in responding to *current* crime trends and patterns is limited by the time delays between data collection and dissemination. The result is that advocacy organizations such as PERF jump into the breach and disseminate timely crime data of uncertain reliability. Recall that the two PERF reports of a new crime wave are based on data provided by the 56 jurisdictions represented at its 2006 Violent Crime Summit. It is likely that cities experiencing crime increases, and therefore motivated to attend the crime summit, are over-represented in PERF's sample.

Now consider the official response to claims of a new rise in crime. The Department of Justice sent BJS investigators around the country to interview local officials and to examine local crime data. It is telling that the BJS and not the FBI was put in charge of responding to local concerns about the rising rates of violent crime. As of this writing (April 2007), the Justice Department has not released its report on the findings from the BJS investigations. When it is released, I suspect the report will contain valuable anecdotal information on the crime problems and responses in the communities the investigators visited. But this ad hoc official response reveals the serious information deficits of the nation's crime monitoring system.

Try this mental experiment. Imagine if local officials from around the country were reporting that unemployment was rising in their jurisdictions. How likely is it that the Department of Labor's first response would be to send investigators from the Bureau of Labor Statistics across the country to consult with local officials and examine their records? If the purpose of the investigation was to find out if unemployment rates were increasing, no need to proceed in this way would exist, because the Bureau

1. See <http://64.218.68.50/slmpdweb/index/index.htm> and <http://64.218.68.50/stlouis/news/impd/viewer.htm>.

FIGURE 1. CRIME MONITORING AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES



of Labor Statistics compiles detailed unemployment data for local areas, updates the data monthly, and posts the data on its website (<http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost?la>). Why, at least in the first instance, visit Miami or Minneapolis to learn that their unemployment rates dropped by 8.8% and increased by 7.1%, respectively, between February 2006 and February 2007? Eventually, you might want to visit Minneapolis to learn about conditions there, but not before investigating thoroughly the monthly labor force, employment, and earnings data for Minneapolis and other local areas that are already available and immediately accessible.

The nation's crime monitoring patchwork lags by decades in the sophistication, coherence, and capacity for rapid response of the information infrastructure that supports economic policy making. Is that because

crimes are inherently more difficult or time-consuming to classify, record, count, and track over time than goods, services, purchases, prices, wages, or job holders? No. In both cases, classification and counting rules must be established and applied uniformly to millions of individual events. No less difficult, contentious, and consequential judgments are involved to determine whether someone is “poor” or “unemployed” as they are to determine whether they have been the victim of a “simple” or “aggravated” assault, a “robbery,” or “theft.”

The essential distinction between the way we monitor crime and monitor the economy is not technical, but cultural and historical. Persisting traditions of popular justice and community control continue to encourage the belief that crime is fundamentally local in origin (Rosenfeld, 2006). That belief, in turn, has impeded the development of a comprehensive, centralized system of crime monitoring that, ironically, would have more immediate practical value for local jurisdictions than the current slow and sporadic manner in which crime information is collected, compiled, and disseminated. But progress has been made. The first great historical turn in crime monitoring came with the creation of the Uniform Crime Reporting program over 75 years ago (Rosen, 1995). The second, more than 40 years later, was the development of the National Crime Survey, now the NCVS. It is time for a third historical turn that updates crime monitoring with twenty-first-century information technologies and analysis capabilities. Step one is to transfer the Uniform Crime Reporting program from the FBI to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

IMPROVING CRIME MONITORING

The FBI is no longer the appropriate institutional home for the UCR program, if it ever was. Tracking conventional crime is not a high priority in the agency's post 9/11 focus on the “prevention of terrorist attacks, on countering foreign intelligence operations against the U.S., and on addressing cybercrime-based attacks and other high-technology crimes” (<http://www.fbi.gov/libref/historic/history/changeman.htm>). Although the FBI has pledged to upgrade its “technological infrastructure,” significant technical improvements are not evident in the UCR program, beyond the recent (and welcome) dissemination of the data in spreadsheets. But while the FBI has discovered spreadsheets, the rest of the developed world has moved well beyond its outmoded methods of compiling, analyzing, and disseminating crime and law enforcement data.

To be fair, the small UCR program never was intended to be a full-scale statistical analysis center, on par with the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics, Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis,

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Health and Human Services' National Center for Health Statistics, or Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics. The UCR was designed to ensure minimal uniformity across thousands of local law enforcement agencies in the classification and recording of crimes, to safeguard data integrity and reliability, and to serve as a secure and authoritative data repository and archive. Current FBI Director, Robert Mueller, has described the UCR function succinctly: "We collect, we announce, we pass on; we do not analyze" (Mueller, 2007).

Rather than press the FBI, against its central mission of combating terrorism and federal crimes, to develop the infrastructure needed to monitor locally recorded assaults, burglaries, robberies, and other conventional crimes, policy makers, researchers, and the public would be better served by moving the UCR to the agency in which the appropriate focus and necessary human and technical resources already exist, the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Had the BJS existed 75 years ago, the responsibility to compile local crime statistics would have been placed there and not in the enforcement agency. By the time the BJS was created in 1979, the UCR was well ensconced in the FBI, and few pressures or incentives existed, outside of BJS and the research community, to move it. But times have changed. The FBI's mission has shifted even further away from monitoring local crime data; the BJS has had nearly 30 years of experience managing a nationwide crime survey and many other major data collections, and local police departments have grown impatient with the FBI's sluggish response to their information needs. When pressed to act, the Justice Department did not send FBI agents or UCR civilian personnel to consult with local officials; it sent the BJS. The FBI simply was not up to the task.

Moving the UCR program to the BJS is a necessary but not sufficient condition to upgrade the nation's crime monitoring capabilities. The BJS must be given the resources needed for more rapid dissemination of crime data. As local law enforcement agencies move to real-time accumulation and use of aggregate crime information, the UCR program must as well, while retaining its essential quality control and archiving functions. Quarterly and eventually monthly dissemination of summary crime data should be the goal, with dissemination of the annual data within 3 months of the collection year a reasonable interim target. The oversight and support functions of the state SACs and allied organizations such as JRSA and SEARCH should be strengthened so that local law enforcement agencies have the administrative direction and technical resources they need to retrieve more rapidly information from the field, process it for completeness and accuracy, and send it up the line. Meanwhile, watch dogs such as PERF should keep a close eye on the process and sustain the pressure to move crime monitoring into the twenty-first century.

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