POLICY BRIEF | Center for Law and Justice

Modernizing National Crime Statistics

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TOPLINE POINTS

★ Criminal justice data is currently impaired by serious gaps and quality control issues. This compromises its capacity to inform decisions to improve public safety.

★ The America First approach to solving this problem emphasizes transparency, efficiency, and local control over crime data, while preventing partisan influence and ensuring taxpayer dollars are used efficiently.

★ The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) should publish official U.S. crime reports, ensuring a more transparent and standardized approach.

★ Federal and state partnerships should enhance funding, staffing, and the adoption of modern record-keeping systems to ensure smaller law enforcement agencies can report accurate data.

★ BJS should revamp its website for greater accessibility and should publish monthly national snapshots and an annual crime report covering major crimes, white-collar offenses, and emerging threats.

WHY THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

The United States relies on numerous government agencies to collect data on crime, victims, and the overall functioning of the criminal justice system. However, the absence of a centralized authority to oversee the standardization and dissemination of this critical information has led to inconsistencies, gaps, and inefficiencies. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) was established as the principal federal agency tasked with collecting, analyzing, publishing, and distributing crime data. However, bureaucratic fragmentation and funding issues have severely limited its ability to fulfill this role.

As a result, crime reports are often plagued by inaccuracies, omissions, delays, and discrepancies. For example:

★ **Conflicting Crime Trends**: In 2022, one report from a major city's police department showed a 10% decrease in violent crime, while the FBI's preliminary national data suggested a slight increase. The discrepancy arose because some jurisdictions failed to transition fully to the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), leading to incomplete data at the federal level.

★ **Delayed Reporting Skews Public Perception**: In 2021, an urban police department reported a significant spike in carjackings, but due to slow data processing at the federal level, the surge was not reflected in national crime statistics until nearly a year later—long after policymakers and law enforcement needed the information to respond effectively.

★ **Omissions in Gun Crime Data**: Some hospitals classify gun-related injuries as "assaults" without specifying firearm involvement, leading to underreporting of non-fatal shootings in crime data. This misclassification distorts discussions on firearm-related violence and the effectiveness of gun laws.

★ **Small Agencies Left Out**: Many small-town police departments lack the funding to submit NIBRS-compliant reports, meaning their crime data either gets excluded or delayed, leaving gaps in national crime trends, particularly in rural areas.

Federal, state, and local agencies collect and report crime data independently, using different methodologies, timeframes, and classification systems. The lack of timely, accurate, complete, and consistent data can produce contradictory conclusions, as one report may indicate a decline in crime, while another suggests an uptick. These discrepancies undermine public trust and make it difficult for policymakers to craft data-driven solutions. Law enforcement agencies, legislators, and the public are left navigating a fragmented system that offers a confusing and sometimes misleading picture of crime trends and justice outcomes.

The Council on Criminal Justice's working group on crime data developed multiple recommendations for improving this system. From their work, we can adopt and stimulate solutions that positively affect the collection and distribution of crime statistics. Establishing a clear chain of command for data collection and dissemination is crucial, as well as ensuring uniform standards and reporting across all agencies and levels of government to address the shortcomings. Additionally, updating crime classification methods, enhancing data collection processes, and investing in modern technology—such as a user-friendly public database—would improve transparency and accessibility.

HOW CRIME DATA IS COLLECTED AND PROCESSED

★ **Local Law Enforcement Crime Reports**

- Police departments, sheriff's offices, and other local agencies record crime incidents using their own **records management systems (RMS)**.

- Data collection varies by jurisdiction—some agencies use detailed digital systems, while others still rely on paper reports.

★ **State-Level Aggregation (Varies by State)**

- Some states have **Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) programs** that act as intermediaries, collecting and standardizing local agency reports before submitting them to the federal level.
- Not all states require law enforcement agencies to report crime data monthly, leading to *inconsistencies* in data frequency.

★ **Federal Crime Data Collection**

- The **FBI's NIBRS** collects detailed crime data from law enforcement agencies.
- Participation in NIBRS is not mandatory, and many smaller agencies lack the resources to transition to the system, leaving gaps in national crime statistics.

★ **Victimization Data Collection (Separate Process)**

- The **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)**, conducted by the BJS, collects data directly from households, covering crimes that *may not have been reported to police*.
- This creates a parallel dataset that often *conflicts* with law enforcement-reported data, as many crimes affecting citizens go unreported to the police.

★ **Standardization Issues**

- Some agencies do not report crimes in real time, leading to delays in national crime trends.
- Federal agencies (e.g., BJS, FBI, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) often *do not coordinate* their crime-related data collection efforts, causing duplication and mismatches.

★ **Public Release of Data (Delayed and Fragmented)**

- The **FBI publishes NIBRS-based reports**, but these are often *delayed* and incomplete due to gaps in law enforcement reporting.
- The BJS publishes separate reports based on the NCVS, leading to discrepancies between survey-based crime data and police-reported crime data.
- There is no single, centralized database where policymakers or the public can easily access all crime statistics in real time.

Strengthening the BJS's authority and resources is not just a bureaucratic necessity; it is essential for ensuring that policymakers, law enforcement, and the public have access to accurate and reliable crime data to inform decision-making and uphold the integrity of the criminal justice system. Trust in the information gathered and shared with the public fosters government transparency, ensuring that crime data remains an objective tool for informed decision-making rather than a political instrument.

PROPOSED CHANGES

1. The **U.S. Department of Justice** (DOJ) should facilitate the creation of a structured collaboration between the FBI and BJS to ensure the production of accurate, timely, and **comprehensive crime trend reports**. While the FBI would continue to collect data through the [NIBRS](#), the responsibility for publishing official U.S. crime trend statistics should be entrusted to BJS starting in 2025.

   - Designating BJS as the **lead agency** in the public dissemination of national crime statistics would establish a clear and direct chain of command. This would allow BJS to harmonize the release of NIBRS data (gathered by the FBI from law enforcement authorities) and the NCVS, an annual survey of 150,000 households. As a statistical agency, BJS reports include detailed methodologies, which would make original releases and revisions of crime data more **transparent**, if required. Adequate funding must be allocated to develop and maintain this structure.

2. The **Office of Justice Programs** at the DOJ should issue a formal request for proposals to conduct a thorough evaluation of the funding and staffing levels within state [UCR](#) programs. In partnership with justice system stakeholders at the state and local levels, the initiative should establish clear standards for adequate funding and staffing. The request should also include a projection of the long-term financial requirements for maintaining and expanding NIBRS participation at the state, local, and tribal agency levels.

   - Government spending at all levels must be **closely monitored**, which would ensure that taxpayer funds are allocated to programs that are managed effectively and efficiently.

3. Congress should allocate sufficient resources to BJS to aid states in developing **low- or no-cost records management systems** specifically designed for smaller law enforcement agencies, thereby improving their ability to manage and report crime data effectively.

   - Empowering states to develop and implement their own records management systems would enable state policymakers to craft more effective and informed policies, while also preserving a **state-centered approach** in line with federalism.

4. States that do not currently submit crime data monthly should enact or strengthen legislative measures encouraging local law enforcement agencies to report **NIBRS-compliant data** to state UCR programs each month, ensuring the provision of more frequent and reliable data.

   - This would guarantee that all agencies were using a **unified system**, facilitating the continuous generation of consistent data that could be published monthly by BJS, enhancing real-time understanding of crime trends by citizens, policymakers, and law enforcement personnel.

5. BJS should undertake a comprehensive redesign of its website to **prioritize providing accessible**, **clear**, and **complete time series data**. It should seek to aggregate data from a wide range of reputable sources, including the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis'

Federal Reserve Economic Data platform. Where such aggregation is not feasible, the website should include links to other **federal agencies that offer criminal justice–related data and resources**, facilitating easier access for users seeking information on how the criminal justice system functions.

- A user-friendly website would provide efficient access to statistics while enabling users to cross-reference data with other statistical organizations and promoting greater accessibility and ease of use across platforms.

6. BJS should publish an annual, comprehensive report on crime in the United States, with the inaugural report scheduled for release in 2025. This report should encompass **major violent** and **property crimes** (as defined by Group A and Group B offenses in NIBRS), as well as other critical issues, such as intellectual property theft, cybercrime, hate crimes, animal cruelty, environmental violations, campaign finance offenses, securities fraud, embezzlement, and other forms of white-collar crime. These crimes have not been properly reported, and this would enable the creation of an accurate and comprehensive report on which both **citizens** and **law enforcement agencies** could rely.

- An annual comprehensive report would provide citizens and law enforcement with a clear view of areas showing improvement or decline. It also would offer valuable insights to guide policymakers in crafting informed decisions, particularly given the enhanced accuracy of the data.

7. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should direct the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) to develop a comprehensive strategy to address the persistent misclassification of firearm-related assaults and injuries in hospital discharge data, ensuring that this plan aligns with the stipulations of H.R. 4174, the **Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018.**

- As the responsibility for categorizing firearm-related assaults lies with the CDC, it is imperative that NCHS address the **misclassification of data**. Correcting this information would not only ensure more accurate reporting of whether a firearm was actually used but would help safeguard the rights protected under the Second Amendment by providing clearer, more precise data.

8. BJS should establish standardized methods and processes for consistently capturing data on firearm fatalities, non-fatal firearm assaults (including cases where firearms were used as blunt instruments and were brandished in the commission of a crime), incidents of fatal and non-fatal defensive firearm use, and incidents involving firearms in intimate partner violence. The use of **stolen firearms** in criminal activity also should be documented. Demographic data—disaggregated by sex, race, and other relevant factors—should be prioritized to

facilitate a nuanced understanding of how gun violence disproportionately affects various population groups.

- Collaborating with the CDC to address the misclassification of firearm use would **enhance the protection of the Second Amendment**, while also providing citizens and law enforcement with a clearer understanding of how firearms are being used unlawfully in their communities.

CONCRETE STEPS STATES CAN TAKE

By combining funding incentives, reporting requirements, technical support, and streamlined processes, state and local authorities could more quickly comply with monthly NIBRS reporting.

★ **Tie Federal Grants to Compliance**
- The DOJ should condition certain federal law enforcement grants (e.g., Byrne JAG grants) on mandatory monthly NIBRS reporting.
- States that did not comply would receive reduced funding, while compliant states would receive priority access to additional resources.

★ **Provide Funding for Records Management Systems**
- Many small and rural agencies lack the technology to report monthly.
- Congress should appropriate funding for the BJS to help states provide low- or no-cost records management systems for smaller agencies.
- A grant-matching program could encourage states to invest in long-term reporting infrastructure.

★ **Enact State Laws to Require Monthly Reporting**
- States should legislate mandatory monthly crime reporting for all local law enforcement agencies, ensuring uniform compliance.
- This could be modeled after successful **state-led UCR mandates**, where agencies must report crime data as a condition of state funding.

★ **Reduce Reporting Burdens for Smaller Agencies**
- Some departments struggle with staffing and technology constraints.
- BJS should develop a **streamlined reporting system**, potentially using mobile-friendly or automated reporting tools, so that compliance is not overly burdensome.

★ **Establish State-Level Oversight and Compliance Mechanisms**
- States should designate a **central crime data office** to monitor compliance and assist local agencies.
- This office could provide technical support, training, and real-time troubleshooting to ensure smooth data submission.

★ **Encourage Regional Collaboration**

- Rural areas with small police departments could be allowed to share reporting resources through regional crime data hubs, thus reducing the administrative burden.

HOW TO MAKE THIS WORK WITHOUT OVERBURDENING LAW ENFORCEMENT

Many law enforcement agencies, especially smaller ones, are already stretched thin. These recommendations will simplify and support agencies in more efficiently collecting and sharing critical crime data that helps them, other states, and national policymakers shape proactive strategies to combat violent crime, motor vehicle theft, retail theft, and other crime trends as they emerge.

★ **Provide Technology That Reduces Workload**

- Instead of forcing officers to spend extra hours on data entry, states should offer user-friendly RMS that automate NIBRS compliance.
- Federal funding should help departments **upgrade outdated systems***, so crime data are logged automatically as reports are written instead of requiring a separate submission process.

★ **Make Reporting Benefit Law Enforcement Directly**

- Ensure police agencies get something in return for better data reporting, such as:
  - **Access to more federal/state grants** for crime prevention and officer safety programs.
  - **Better crime trend analysis tools** to help departments allocate resources more effectively.
  - **State-funded analysts** who can assist with crime data processing so officers don't have to.

★ **Reduce Redundant Reporting**

- Many agencies already report crime data in multiple ways (to local governments, states, and various federal databases).
- Standardizing crime reporting and making NIBRS the *single* streamlined method would reduce duplicative paperwork, making officers' jobs easier in the long run.

★ **Use Civilian Crime Analysts for Data Processing**

- States should help fund dedicated crime analysts at the regional or state level who could handle data reporting so officers could focus on law enforcement.
- Some states already have regional data hubs, where smaller departments pool resources and share a single reporting unit instead of each department handling it individually.

★ **Phase in Compliance with a Grace Period**

- Instead of an immediate mandate, states should implement a multi-year transition period with clear benchmarks and support to help agencies adjust gradually.
- Agencies demonstrating good faith efforts to improve reporting should be rewarded rather than punished.

These policies will help modernize crime data collection and reporting, reduce redundant work, and better calibrate strategies to control and prevent crime.

AN AMERICA FIRST APPROACH

★ A government that serves the American people must be accountable to them, and that begins with providing clear, accurate, and timely crime data. An *America First* approach to criminal justice statistics prioritizes **transparency, efficiency, and local control**—ensuring that data collection and dissemination are driven by the interests of citizens, not bureaucratic inertia or political manipulation.

★ By strengthening the BJS and ensuring crime data is published **free from partisan influence**, we safeguard the public's right to truth and reinforce trust in our institutions. Empowering state and local law enforcement with resources to report crime accurately would ensure that communities, not Washington bureaucrats, drive policy decisions.

★ Additionally, **fiscal responsibility** would remain paramount, ensuring that taxpayer dollars were spent wisely by eliminating redundant government programs, improving reporting efficiency, and prioritizing law enforcement needs over political agendas.

★ Crime statistics should serve the American people, not be weaponized to fit political narratives. By modernizing our data systems, enforcing consistent reporting standards, and ensuring accountability in government agencies, we reaffirm the fundamental principle that **public safety and national security must always come first.**

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