

# Developing Complete and Meaningful Statistics on Crime and Public Safety Through NIBRS

## ***Background***

The growing national concern about transparency and accountability in policing calls for more meaningful and complete national data on crime and public safety. In part because of changes in technology over the past several decades, collecting detailed information about crime and its outcomes is more 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. LEAs report crime data to the FBI in one of two ways: (a) monthly counts of 10 specific crimes through the Summary Reporting System (SRS) or (b) detailed records on each of 29 different crime types through the

National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS).<sup>1</sup> 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 through either the SRS or the NIBRS is available to the public.

## ***Need For Standardized Reporting***

Because cities define and often count crimes differently, it is challenging to accurately combine data from different cities or states for regional analysis. For example, crime reports from different LEAs 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. The SRS and the NIBRS both provide standard crime definitions and counting rules so that data can be broadly understood and reported consistently across cities and states.

## **Comparing the SRS and the NIBRS: Understanding Key Differences**

### ***SRS: How It Works and Limitations***

To accurately gather and combine crime statistics at levels above the local jurisdiction (e.g., state or national), the 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 trafficking.<sup>2</sup> Few details

<sup>1</sup> The NIBRS home page is <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/nibrs>.

<sup>2</sup> See attachment to this document entitled "SRS and NIBRS" for a complete list.

about the circumstances or context of the crimes.<sup>3</sup> As a result, only summary counts of basic crime categories are possible in a jurisdiction, such as this:

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

For crime counting purposes, the SRS also applies a hierarchy rule. Generally speaking, only the most serious crime offense that occurred during an incident is recorded in the data.<sup>4</sup> If multiple offenses occurred during a single crime incident (for example, a rape and a burglary), only the more serious crime offense is recorded (in this example, only the rape would be recorded). The hierarchy rule in the SRS keeps multiple offenses from being counted in a single incident. As a result, many less-serious crimes end up being *undercounted*, leaving the public with an incomplete understanding the true nature of crime and public safety in a community.

### ***NIBRS: More Data, More Detail***

Recognizing the limitations of the SRS, the FBI, in collaboration with state and local law enforcement and crime reporting experts, developed the NIBRS.<sup>5</sup> The NIBRS is similar to the SRS in that it applies standard definitions across jurisdictions and states. However, the NIBRS 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. Unlike the SRS, the NIBRS is designed to collect information on all crime within a jurisdiction without applying a hierarchy rule. The NIBRS also expands the number of crime categories beyond the 10 classifications recorded in the 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. Here is an example of this additional detail:

*In 2013, the city of Smallville had 2 homicides, 4 sexual assaults, and 10 burglaries. One homicide was in a residential area where the victim (female, age 24) knew the offender (male, age 36). The weapon used was a knife. The other homicide also included a sexual assault (victim was female, age 70) by a 50-year-old male offender. The weapon used was a handgun....<sup>6</sup>*

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

- 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 highway corridor or in a border region?
- Are assaults primarily committed by strangers or does the victim usually know the offender?
- Where is crime occurring?
- What kinds of crime are committed with a firearm?

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<sup>3</sup> The only offense for which the SRS collects circumstantial evidence is homicide. Data are reported on the victim/offender relationship, circumstance of the incident, and the weapon used.

<sup>4</sup> There are some exceptions to this rule, but they are rare. For example, homicide and arson are counted without regard to the hierarchy rule.

<sup>5</sup> The FBI Criminal Justice Information Systems Division recently published an article underlining its commitment to the NIBRS. See <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/cjis-link/april-2015/new-initiative-aims-to-increase-crime-reporting-in-nibrs>.

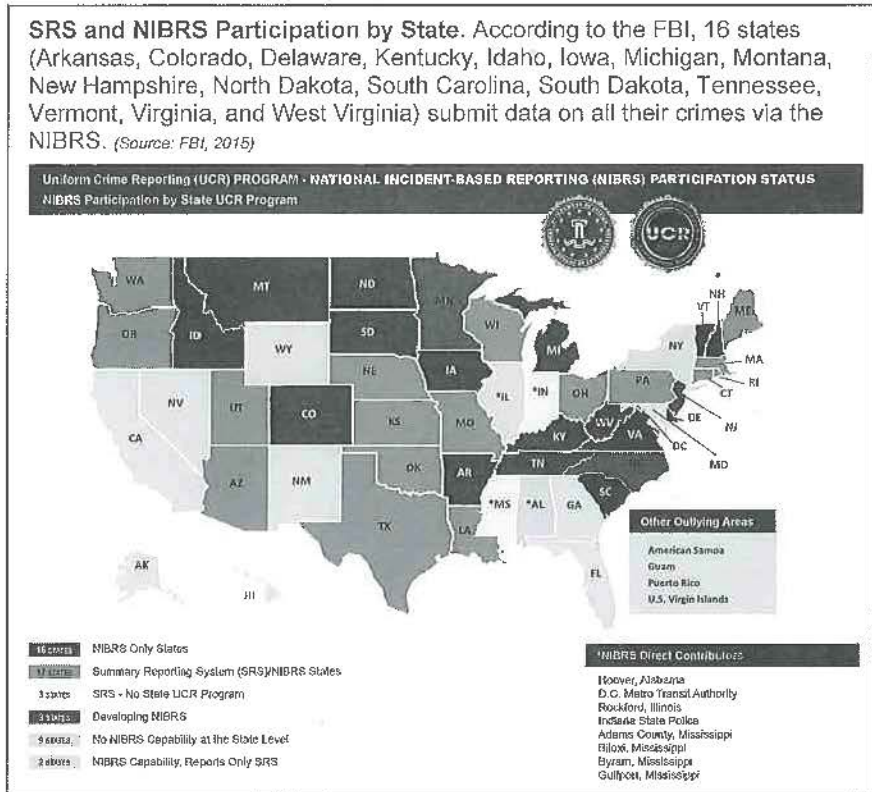
<sup>6</sup> Additional detail could be provided for other reported crimes as well. (For this example, sexual assaults and burglaries in the fictitious town of Smallville could be described in more detail.)



## Which Agencies Report NIBRS Data?

Whether an LEA reports data to the SRS or the NIBRS 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 and/or NIBRS data to the FBI. As of 2015, only 16 states report all of their crime data through the 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 for 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; and
- 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 widespread NIBRS

participation. For example, agency leaders, 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 the 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 Web site at <http://www.ovc.gov/pubs/NIBRS/index.html>.

### Switching to NIBRS?

Many LEAs that currently submit crime counts to the SRS program may be changing to NIBRS.

In the year that an LEA transitions to NIBRS, the crime rate for that agency may initially appear to increase compared with crime counts reported previously in the 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.

Some LEAs may experience other challenges in their transition to NIBRS. Many LEAs may have costs associated with obtaining new technology or upgrading software and hardware to support the transition. A transition to NIBRS may require additional staff time or redirection of other in-kind resources.

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 the SRS and the NIBRS can be found at

- <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/nibrs-overview>
- <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/nibrs-quick-facts>
- <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr-program-data-collections#Summary>

# SRS and NIBRS

## *Differences between SRS and NIBRS offenses*

SRS	NIBRS
<u>Part I Offenses *</u>	<u>Group A offenses (Part I offenses italicized)</u>
1. Criminal homicide	1. <i>Arson</i>
2. Forcible rape	2. <i>Assault offenses</i>
3. Robbery	3. Bribery
4. Aggravated assault	4. <i>Burglary/breaking and entering</i>
5. Human Trafficking – Commercial Sex Acts	5. Counterfeiting/forgery
6. Human Trafficking – Involuntary Servitude	6. Destruction/damage/vandalism of property
7. Burglary	7. Drug/narcotic offenses
8. Larceny-theft (except motor vehicle theft)	8. Embezzlement
9. Motor vehicle theft	9. Extortion/blackmail
10. Arson	10. Fraud offenses
	11. Gambling offenses
	12. <i>Homicide offenses</i>
	13. Kidnapping/abduction
	14. <i>Larceny/theft offenses</i>
	15. <i>Motor vehicle theft</i>
	16. Pornography/obscene materials
	17. Prostitution offenses
	18. <i>Robbery</i>
	19. <i>Sex offenses, forcible</i>
	20. Sex offenses, nonforcible
	21. Stolen property offenses (receiving, etc)
	22. Weapons laws violations
	23. Human Trafficking offenses
	24. Animal Cruelty
	<u>Group B offenses</u>
	1. Bad checks
	2. Curfew/loitering/vagrancy violations
	3. Disorderly conduct
	4. Driving under the influence
	5. Drunkenness
	6. Family offenses, nonviolent
	7. Liquor law violations
	8. Peeping tom
	9. Trespass of real property
	10. All other offenses

Source: Adapted from GAO analysis of DOJ information.

\* Each month, participating law enforcement agencies submit information on the number of **Part I** offenses that become known to them; those offenses cleared by arrest or exceptional means; and the age, sex, and race of persons arrested for each of the offenses. There are also **Part II** offenses, for which contributors provide only arrest data.