

CRIME STATISTICS WILL BE MORE DETAILED

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Abstract:

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Full text:

The robbery happens something like this: A man enters a store and points a gun at the cashier, demanding money. On his way out the door, he punches a bystander in the face and then gets into a scuffle with the officer who arrives to arrest him.

Until a few weeks ago, the whole incident would count as one robbery. Now, it will be counted as three crimes: one robbery and two assaults.

The Spokane Police Department, Spokane County Sheriff's Office and Spokane Valley Police Department switched over to a new, more detailed method of collecting and reporting crime statistics earlier this month. That means police and the public will have more in-depth and specific information about trends in crime. But it also means crimes will appear to be on the rise, making comparisons to previous years much more difficult.

"We're going to basically kind of start fresh with this," Spokane police crime analyst Ryan Shaw said.

Under the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System, law enforcement agencies collect data on more than 50 types of crimes: everything from murder to animal cruelty.

Previously, they counted just eight: murder, rape, robbery, assault, arson, burglary, vehicle theft and other theft.

"We're looking at more things, but we're also looking at the same things with more specificity," Spokane police Assistant Chief Justin Lundgren said.

Under the old summary system, an incident was recorded once, based on the most serious crime committed.

Murders are more serious than rapes, which are more serious than assaults, and so on.

The hypothetical robbery would have been recorded as a single robbery, even if the suspect also assaulted two people. Under NIBRS, a robbery and two assaults in a single incident count as three crimes. If the robber was arrested with methamphetamine in his pockets, a fourth crime, drug possession, would also be added.

Using the new reporting will make it easier for leaders in the department to pinpoint crime trends or gather information about specific types of crime. Earlier, a precinct captain concerned about a wave of forgeries would have to ask a crime analyst to create a custom report. Now, that captain will be able to easily see all forgeries by looking at reports under that category.

Data should also be more uniform because the entry system won't allow officers to enter incomplete or inconsistent information. If an officer enters a crime as a robbery, for instance, they won't be able to submit the report until they also identify the weapon used.

Spokane County agencies are among the last in the state to switch to the new system: The King County Sheriff's Office is the last holdout, according to Joan Smith, a program manager for the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs, which is overseeing the switch. WASPC originally set a goal of all agencies using NIBRS by 2012, but granted extensions to mostly larger agencies that had to upgrade report management systems to make the change happen.

"Everybody was committed to doing it. It was just a matter of getting their systems upgraded," Smith said. The shift for Spokane County agencies finally happened when they launched a new records management system

earlier this month.

Washington is ahead of the curve: The FBI is mandating all law enforcement agencies start using NIBRS by 2021, and many states haven't begun the conversion process yet.

In the next few weeks, the city and county will have a revamped crime map that adds new incidents within a few hours of officers finishing a report. That will make it easier for citizens to see real-time crime data in their neighborhoods and help precinct captains spot trends earlier and respond accordingly.

"It's going to be a lot more frequent updates," Shaw said.

The department's weekly Compstat reports, which include statistics on the eight crimes reported under the old system, will not be published for several months as crime analysts come up with a new report format that captures the expanded data available.

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