



Bureau of Justice Statistics

Implementing the National Incident-Based Reporting System: A Project Status Report

Implementation of NIBRS

*Impediments to local agency
implementation*

Findings

Recommendations

A joint project of the Bureau of Justice Statistics
and the Federal Bureau of Investigation



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and the Federal Bureau of Investigation**

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U.S. Department of Justice
Bureau of Justice Statistics

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Preface

SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, produced this report. SEARCH undertook the project under a grant awarded by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), U.S. Department of Justice, and under the joint direction of BJS and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This project was designed to identify the most significant impediments to NIBRS participation in large local law enforcement agencies nationwide and to identify promising and cost-effective approaches to encouraging wider adoption of NIBRS. Together with BJS and the FBI, SEARCH convened a Steering Committee to provide guidance and direction throughout the project.

In this project, SEARCH:

- Surveyed each State agency responsible for collecting and reporting Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) and incident-based reporting data — supplementing that data with information from BJS, the FBI and the Association of State UCR Programs — to help determine each State's NIBRS implementation status. SEARCH used the surveys to produce detailed NIBRS State Profiles of all 50 States and the District of Columbia.
- Surveyed vendors to collect information about the capabilities of their IBR-compatible software systems. These surveys were used to produce NIBRS Vendor Profiles, which list detailed product information, such as support services, product features and references to current system users.
- Surveyed key technical staff in the 64 largest police and sheriffs' departments in the Nation (those serving jurisdictions of over 300,000 in population) to assess the technical capacity of those agencies to meet the national NIBRS standards.
- Convened 5 regional "Focus Group" meetings in October 1996, at which key policy representatives of the 64 large agencies discussed experiences and exchanged views regarding operational and policy impediments that, from their perspective, hinder NIBRS implementation. The UCR/NIBRS program manager from the agency's respective State also attended each meeting, as did SEARCH staff, and BJS and FBI representatives. Steering Committee members helped facilitate each of the meetings, which were attended by representatives from a total of 28 States and the District of Columbia. The meetings were held in Sacramento, California; Austin, Texas; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Orlando, Florida; and Chicago, Illinois.
- Contracted with a cost analyst to create a defensible protocol of estimating the costs of NIBRS implementation in local agencies and States.

The staff summarized the results of the Focus Group meetings and drafted recommendations for presentation to the Steering Committee at an October 29, 1996, meeting in Phoenix, Arizona. The committee reviewed the findings and recommendations, suggested changes, and unanimously endorsed the revised recommendations.

The findings and recommendations were also presented to the UCR Subcommittee of the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Advisory Policy Board (CJIS APB) at a meeting in Austin, Texas, on November 7, 1996. The subcommittee suggested wording changes, ranked the recommendations in priority, and unanimously endorsed the recommendations with the suggested changes.

The findings and recommendations, together with the subcommittee's suggested changes, were then presented to the full CJIS APB at their meeting in San Diego, California, on December 12, 1996, where they were unanimously endorsed.

The revised recommendations were reaffirmed by the NIBRS Project Steering Committee at their meeting in Washington, D.C., on February 13, 1997.

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Project overview

The way we count crime in the United States is changing in fundamental respects. We are shifting from monthly aggregate reporting of summary crime and arrest statistics to detailed reporting of crime and arrest activities at the incident level.

This shift in reporting practice better reflects the fundamental nature of police recordkeeping practices, and has important implications for police information management and operations. Incident-based reporting promises significantly richer data regarding the nature of crime and our response, and this should greatly expand our analytic capabilities at the local, State, and Federal levels.

It has been over a decade since the publication of the *Blueprint for the Future of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program*. As Chairman of the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Study Steering Committee that resulted in the publication of the *Blueprint*, I should note that our recommendations in that project were to convert the Summary UCR Program to 1) a two-level reporting program in which most agencies would report basic offense and arrest information similar to that reported in the Summary UCR Program, and in which only a relatively small sample of agencies would report more extensive information, and 2) a unit-record reporting system in which local law enforcement agencies at either level would submit reports on each individual criminal incident and arrest.

The National Incident-Based Reporting System Program (NIBRS) that emerged out of the *Blueprint* recommendations, however, is being implemented throughout the Nation as a single-level reporting program with all agencies being asked to submit the more extensive information.

Significant progress has been made in the implementation of the NIBRS Program since publication of the data reporting specifications by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1988. Ten States are currently certified for reporting NIBRS data to the FBI, and the FBI received NIBRS data from 1,550 departments for 1996. In addition, NIBRS data from 1993 through 1995 are now available to researchers for analysis.

Notwithstanding these advances, NIBRS implementation nationally has been slow, particularly in larger law enforcement agencies. At present, NIBRS reporting agencies represent approximately 5.7 percent of the United States population, and the Austin (Texas) Police Department is the only law enforcement agency serving a jurisdiction over 500,000 in population that is reporting NIBRS data to the FBI. Implementation of a program of this scope is an enormous undertaking, particularly so in that it relies so heavily on the internal information processing and reporting capabilities of local law enforcement agencies.

In an effort to better understand the challenges that face local agencies in their implementation of NIBRS, BJS, in partnership with the FBI, awarded a cooperative agreement to SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, to undertake a comprehensive study of the impediments facing local law enforcement agencies in NIBRS implementation, and to develop recommendations to overcome these impediments. A steering committee and technical working group, comprised of representatives of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), National Sheriffs' Association (NSA), Association of State UCR Programs (ASUCRP), the academic and research communities, practitioners and subject matter experts, guided the project throughout this initial phase of work. Our primary objectives during this first phase of the project were to identify the most significant impediments to full NIBRS participation, examine the most promising and cost-effective approaches to implementing the system, and develop a reasonable set of recommendations to specifically address those impediments.

Among our many tasks during this past 18 months, our committees held regional meetings throughout the Nation with policy representatives from 65 of the largest law enforcement agencies, State UCR/NIBRS program managers, BJS, FBI and SEARCH. I am especially pleased with the candor with which representatives from law enforcement agencies throughout the country participating in our meetings shared their ideas, experiences, frustrations and successes with incident-based reporting. It gave us true insight into the obstacles (both real and perceived) facing agencies in their implementation of NIBRS, and I am encouraged that those obstacles can be successfully addressed.

I would like to extend my personal thanks to each of the committee members who participated in this initial phase of the project. As co-chairman of the NIBRS project steering committee, it has been my distinct pleasure to work with representatives of the BJS, FBI, IACP, NSA, Major City Chiefs Association, Criminal Justice Information Services Division Advisory Policy Board, and ASUCRP, and the practitioners and subject matter experts who generously gave their time and knowledge in guiding this project. Thanks also are due to the SEARCH staff, who coordinated the work of the committees, organized and facilitated the regional meetings, and drafted the project reports.

This report presents our findings regarding the impediments to NIBRS implementation in major law enforcement agencies throughout the country, and proposes recommendations that we feel will successfully address the challenges faced by agencies in their move to implement incident-based reporting. During the past 18 months, we have made significant progress in understanding these challenges facing local law enforcement agencies in their implementation of NIBRS and in developing a course of action to address these impediments. I look forward to the coming 18 months and our plans to put our recommendations into action. The BJS, FBI, and SEARCH have committed to continuing work in this area and will now move onto the next phase of the project.

Dr. Charles M. Friel
Co-Chair, NIBRS Project Steering Committee

Project status report

Introduction

In 1995 the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), United States Department of Justice, awarded a cooperative agreement to SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, to identify impediments to National Incident-based Reporting System program (NIBRS) implementation among large law enforcement agencies. This project, which is under the joint direction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and BJS, is guided by a Steering Committee.

The NIBRS Project Steering Committee is comprised of representatives of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), National Sheriffs' Association (NSA), Major City Chiefs Association, the Association of State Uniform Crime Reporting Programs (ASUCRP), the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division Advisory Policy Board (CJIS APB), and the research community. Dr. Charles M. Friel, Professor, Sam Houston State University, and Phillip J. Renninger, Director, Bureau of Statistics and Policy Research, Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, cochair the NIBRS Project Steering Committee.

The primary focus of this initial phase of research was the identification of impediments that hinder NIBRS implementation at the local level, particularly among larger law enforcement agencies. Data collection strategies included surveys of State UCR/NIBRS agencies, developers of NIBRS compatible software applications and larger law enforcement agencies. In addition, regional focus group meetings were organized, which brought together local, State and Federal agency practitioners and subject matter experts for candid discussions regarding the nature of impediments and recommendations.

This report presents the principal findings of the initial phase of research, and includes recommendations for action that have been unanimously endorsed by the Steering Committee, the UCR Subcommittee of the CJIS APB, and the full CJIS APB.¹ SEARCH, in concert with BJS and the FBI, will be undertaking activities in the coming 18 months to implement the recommendations, and other projects will be initiated through BJS and the FBI.

¹David J. Roberts, NIBRS Project Staff Director, SEARCH, prepared this report.

Background

The Uniform Crime Reporting program (UCR) is the Nation's primary source of information about crime and arrest activities of local law enforcement agencies. From its initiation by the IACP in 1929 until the mid-1980's, the scope of the UCR program remained largely unchanged, although the scale of operations has increased. Today, more than 16,000 law enforcement agencies, representing over 97% of the Nation's population, contribute data to the FBI either directly or through State UCR programs.² While the program has remained true to its origins as a measure of the incidence of crime and the performance of the local law enforcement agencies, it has also become a significant social indicator used in planning and program evaluation, and is broadly relied upon by the general public as an indicator of community safety.

As an aggregate reporting program, the summary UCR program produces counts of specific types of offenses, but is incapable of permitting the examination of complex relationships among characteristics of criminal events. Moreover, as a consequence of its aggregate reporting structure, there is no process by which an offense can be linked to its associated arrest, so that offense clearance information is not linked to information about arrestees. In the Summary UCR Program, detailed offense information is collected only on the eight Index offenses³ and even among these offenses, reporting provisions of the summary UCR program mask or obscure a potentially substantial volume of crime through the "hierarchy rule" and the "hotel rule."⁴

²FBI, *Crime in the United States, 1995 Uniform Crime Reports* (Washington, D.C.: FBI, 1996)

³The initial Crime Index consisted of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft of \$50 and over, and motor vehicle theft. An eighth offense, arson, was added to the Index by congressional mandate in 1979.

⁴See FBI, *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: FBI, 1991).

Level of UCR participation by States, May 14, 1997

State	NIBRS status						State UCR program participation			
	Percent representation of:			Testing	Plans to test	Develop-mental	No formal plan	Participant	Man-datory reporting	Non-participant
Certified	Population	Reported crime								
Alabama						■		■	■	
Alaska							■	■		
Arizona							■	■		
Arkansas				■				■		
California							■	■	■	
Colorado	■	1%	0%					■	■	
Connecticut				■				■	■	
Delaware				■				■	■	
District of Columbia					■			■		
Florida							■	■	■	
Georgia							■	■	■	
Hawaii						■		■		
Idaho	■	99	98					■		
Illinois ^a						■		■	■	
Indiana				■				■		■
Iowa	■	100	100					■	■	
Kansas				■				■	■	
Kentucky						■		■		
Louisiana				■				■		
Maine				■				■	■	
Maryland						■		■		
Massachusetts	■	20	17					■		
Michigan	■	37	35					■	■	
Minnesota						■		■	■	
Mississippi							■			■
Missouri							■			■
Montana				■				■		
Nebraska				■				■	■	
Nevada					■			■	■	
New Hampshire				■				■		
New Jersey				■				■	■	
New Mexico				■				■		■
New York				■				■	■	
North Carolina						■		■		
North Dakota	■	84	63					■		
Ohio				■				■		■
Oklahoma				■				■	■	
Oregon				■				■		
Pennsylvania				■				■		
Rhode Island				■				■		
South Carolina ^b	■	100	83					■	■	
South Dakota				■				■		
Tennessee				■						■
Texas ^c		3	4	■				■		
Utah	■	37	28					■		
Vermont	■	56	35					■	■	
Virginia	■	8	3					■	■	
Washington				■				■		
West Virginia				■				■	■	
Wisconsin				■				■	■	
Wyoming						■		■	■	
U.S. total		5.7%	4.0%							
Guam				■				■		
Federal Incident-Based Reporting System										
U.S. Air Force				■						
Department of Commerce				■						
FBI				■						
Federal Protective Service				■						

Note: See the box on page 5 for definitions of NIBRS status categories.

^aIllinois was previously certified to submit NIBRS but returned to developmental status because of computer design problems.

^bSouth Carolina is a NIBRS State that reported summary data for some jurisdictions in the last quarter of 1996.

^cTexas is not certified, but 3 independent agencies submit NIBRS data.

Table definitions

The FBI provides the following definitions for terms used to describe NIBRS status:

Certified — NIBRS data are accepted by the FBI.

Testing — Various agencies within a State are submitting test data to the FBI.

Plans to test — Agency or State has employed a consulting firm to design software or is conducting interstate testing of data.

Developmental — Agency or State is in the process of designing and implementing various levels of data collection.

No formal plan — Agency or State has indicated that there is no formal plan and/or no current interest in participating in NIBRS.

In 1982 BJS and the FBI funded a three-phased UCR redesign effort that ultimately yielded a new philosophy and revised specifications for data gathering.⁵ NIBRS moves beyond aggregate statistics and raw counts of crimes and arrests that comprise the summary UCR program, to individual records for each reported crime incident and its associated arrest. NIBRS looks at detailed offense, offender, victim, property, and arrest data.

In addition to changing the fundamental reporting structure underlying crime and arrest information, NIBRS collects offense and arrest data on 22 crime categories, spanning 46 offenses (as compared to the 8 UCR Index offenses), and additional offenses for which only arrest information is reported. Moreover, NIBRS eliminates the need for the "hierarchy rule" (because multiple types of crimes can be reported within a single incident) and collects an expanded array of attributes involved in the commis-

⁵In 1982 BJS provided funding to Abt Associates for an examination of the UCR program, its history, objectives, data elements, and relationships with other systems. See E. Poggio, S. Kennedy, J. Chaiken, and K. Carlson, *Blueprint for the Future of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program: Final Report of the UCR Study* (Washington, D.C.: BJS, May 1985), hereafter referred to as the *Blueprint*. In 1984 the FBI began the second phase, the goal of which was to identify available options and recommend changes. In 1988 the FBI's third phase produced specifications for data collection and submission and system implementation.

sion of offenses, including whether the offender is suspected of using alcohol, drugs or narcotics, and/or a computer in the commission of the offense, and whether the arrestee was armed with a weapon.

The original BJS-funded study, which produced the *Blueprint for the Future of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program*, recommended a two-tiered implementation strategy for NIBRS nationally.⁶ This strategy contemplated that only a sample of perhaps 3% to 7% of law enforcement agencies nationwide would report comprehensive incident-based data, consistent with the reporting requirements of today's NIBRS, then called "Level II reporting." The remaining 93% to 97% of law enforcement agencies would report incident-based data, but in a much more abbreviated format, focusing on Part I offenses only with a limited range of victim, offender, and more detailed incident data. This would be "Level I reporting." Arrest data for both Part I and Part II crimes were to have been captured in both levels, with linkages to cleared offenses. In spite of these recommendations, the law enforcement community elected full NIBRS implementation, effectively endorsing Level II reporting for every agency.

Although it has been a full decade since publication of the *Blueprint* recommending incident-based reporting, less than 6% of the U.S. population is represented by NIBRS contributing agencies (table, page 4). While considerable progress has been made in many States, and the program has been implemented in numerous small and medium-sized law enforcement agencies throughout the Nation, Austin, Texas, is the only "major" department (that is, one serving a jurisdiction of over 500,000 in population) that initiated reporting NIBRS data to the FBI. The SEARCH project is designed to identify impediments to NIBRS reporting among larger local law enforcement agencies, and to recommend strategies to overcome or counteract these impediments.

Implementation of NIBRS

Following publication of the *Blueprint*, the FBI embarked on the development of NIBRS data reporting standards and requirements. In developing the reporting specifications, the FBI worked closely with contributors at both the local and State levels, as

⁶See *Blueprint*, pp. 43-48.

well as with a broad constituency of users and consumers of the data.⁷ The complete standards were published in 1988 and 1992 by the FBI and are available in both paper form and electronically via the Internet.⁸

In the years immediately following publication of the *Blueprint* and the NIBRS reporting standards, BJS has assisted State agencies in planning and implementing NIBRS at the State and local levels through a series of grants, and through conferences and publications highlighting the value of incident-based reporting (IBR) data for a variety of analyses.⁹

⁷In addition to State and local law enforcement agency contributors, Federal law enforcement agencies also are implementing NIBRS reporting, referred to as the Federal Incident-Based Reporting System, FIBRS. See the table for current status of FIBRS implementation. The focus of this report, however, is State and local agency implementation of NIBRS and, accordingly, little attention is paid to the status of Federal agency implementation.

⁸See FBI, *National Incident-Based Reporting System: Volume 1, Data Collection Guidelines* (Washington, D.C.: FBI, September 1996); *National Incident-Based Reporting System: Volume 2, Data Submission Specifications* (Washington, D.C.: FBI, May 1992); *National Incident-Based Reporting System: Volume 3, Approaches to Implementing an Incident-Based Reporting (IBR) System* (Washington, D.C.: FBI, July 1, 1992); *National Incident-Based Reporting System: Volume 4, Error Message Manual* (Washington, D.C.: FBI, May 1992); and *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook, NIBRS Edition* (Washington, D.C.: FBI, 1992). These publications are available as portable electronic documents (PDF files) at <http://www.nibrs.search.org>.

⁹Approximately \$12 million were awarded by BJS to State UCR/NIBRS programs to facilitate the planning and implementation of NIBRS systems at the State level. Also, see W. Spelman, *Beyond Bean Counting: New Approaches for Managing Crime Data* (Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum, January 1988); K. Coyle, J. Schaaf, and J. Coldren, Jr. *Futures in Crime Analysis: Exploring Applications of Incident-based Crime Data* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, January 1991, NCJ-127201); D. Roberts and S. Jacobs, *Demonstrating the Operational Utility of Incident-Based Data for Local Crime Analysis: Reporting Systems in Tacoma, Washington, and New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, June 1994, NCJ-145860); and JRSA, *Domestic and Sexual Violence Data Collection: A Report to Congress under the Violence Against Women Act* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, July 1996, NCJ-161405).

Current status of NIBRS

NIBRS implementation at the national level relies heavily on the State UCR/NIBRS programs that define the reporting requirements in nearly every State. The State UCR/NIBRS programs operate as the central data collection points within their respective States, typically providing training and technical assistance to local agencies, while compiling statistics on crime and arrests for analysis at the State level.

State implementations of NIBRS

Most State programs have expanded the reporting requirements for incident-based reporting within their States beyond the requirements for the NIBRS program, often in response to, or in anticipation of, the growing mandate for additional information by State legislatures on such topics as domestic violence and bias motivation.

States vary widely in the range of additional data they have incorporated into their IBR programs. Some have stayed with the 53 data elements required by NIBRS and have added few, if any, additional data elements, while others have incorporated as many as 75 additional data elements. These changes reflect the different approaches States have taken in their implementation of NIBRS.

In most jurisdictions, IBR or NIBRS reporting is designed as a statistical reporting program with few, if any, operational configurations. The systems are not designed to serve as information systems that support local agency operations, but rather to serve as a repository of statistical data for analysis at the State level, and in some cases at the regional and/or local levels. In Oregon, however, IBR is being implemented as part of a statewide operational law enforcement system that will provide investigative leads to local law enforcement agencies. Accordingly, the State has added 75 data elements beyond the NIBRS reporting requirements to meet the needs of State and local agencies.

In the SEARCH project, State UCR/ NIBRS programs were surveyed to —

- a) assess the current status of IBR implementation within the State
- b) identify what enhancements, if any, they had incorporated into their State IBR requirements

c) determine the status of IBR implementation among large law enforcement agencies (those serving jurisdictions over 250,000 in population)

d) identify software developers that have been certified, either directly or indirectly, by the State programs.¹⁰

From these surveys, profiles were created summarizing the status of IBR implementation in each State.¹¹ Given the central role that State programs play in submitting NIBRS data to the FBI, it was critical that the structure and content of IBR requirements at the State level be understood, since these requirements often differ from the national program.

The State profiles reveal the nature and extent to which the State programs have expanded IBR requirements beyond NIBRS. The profiles present a description of the State IBR requirements compared to NIBRS, including the specific additional data elements by segment that are required for State IBR reporting. The profiles also identify the status of IBR implementation among local law enforcement agencies statewide, with particular focus on large jurisdictions (those serving jurisdictions over 250,000 in population), as well as the developers of software applications that have been certified. The developers of software applications who provide software to the local law enforcement agencies that have achieved certification were also surveyed, and these data are available in the same report.

¹⁰The surveys were administered by SEARCH and the data were shared with the Association of State UCR Programs, which in turn shared data from a separate survey they conducted of their membership. With regard to the State certification of IBR-compatible software, most States do not certify vendor applications directly, since accurate submission of IBR data is so dependent on proper data entry and case processing. Instead, States typically certify individual law enforcement contributors once they have demonstrated a consistent ability to report error-free data in an acceptable format. Nevertheless, the State UCR/NIBRS programs are generally familiar with the software applications that contributing agencies are using and can provide some assistance to local agencies in identifying applications that are used by other certified agencies.

¹¹SEARCH, *NIBRS Project Staff Report 1: Report on State Incident-Based Reporting Profiles and Certified Software Applications* (Sacramento, Calif.: SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, February 1997). Available electronically as a PDF file at —

<http://www.nibrs.search.org>

FBI certification of State UCR/NIBRS programs

To begin regular submission of NIBRS data to the FBI, the State UCR/NIBRS program must be certified by the FBI. The FBI has developed a State certification policy that evaluates State submissions on the following criteria:

a) error rate, which requires that fewer than 4% of the incident reports submitted by the State be in error for 3 consecutive months;

b) statistical reasonableness, which evaluates the reasonableness of the data based on analyses of trends, volumes, and monthly fluctuations;

c) updating capability and responsiveness, which refers to the ability of the State program to update its window records, meet deadlines, and respond in a timely manner to error messages from the national program; and

d) system appropriateness, which refers to the "systemic compatibility of a prospective State NIBRS program with the [national] NIBRS guidelines."¹²

Once the State has become certified, it can regularly report NIBRS data directly to the FBI. Although the State is certified, that does not necessarily mean that every law enforcement agency within the State is reporting IBR/NIBRS data; rather, it means that the State program is capable of processing NIBRS data at the State level and submitting a tape of virtually error-free data to the FBI in an acceptable format.

Ten States are currently NIBRS certified, while an additional 24 States are in the testing phase with the FBI (table on page 4).

Impediments to local agency implementation

In an effort to understand impediments to NIBRS reporting that directly face large local law enforcement agencies throughout the Nation, project staff undertook a two-part data collection effort. In the first stage, a detailed survey was mailed to each of the 64 largest local law enforcement agencies (those

¹²FBI, "NIBRS State Certification Policy" (Washington, D.C.: FBI, no date).

servicing jurisdictions over 300,000 in population); 61 agencies, 95.3%, responded. The objective of the survey was to assess the technical capacity of the agencies to report incident-based offense and arrest data in a format consistent with NIBRS. The survey covered basic NIBRS definitions and data structure issues, as well as detailed information regarding the agencies' present ability to capture and report each of the 53 NIBRS data elements.

In the second stage, policy representatives from each of these 64 agencies were invited to attend regional focus groups hosted by SEARCH for a day and a half during October 1996 in 5 locations to discuss real and perceived impediments to NIBRS implementation. In addition to local agency representatives, a representative from the respective State UCR/NIBRS program was invited to participate in the meetings. The meetings were facilitated by representatives of the NIBRS Project Steering Committee and SEARCH project staff, and attended by representatives of BJS and the FBI.¹³ The focus group meetings were designed to give local agencies an opportunity to discuss their concerns and perceptions regarding NIBRS implementation, and allowed the FBI and the State UCR/NIBRS programs to discuss the current status of the programs and to correct misperceptions when raised.

Survey of local law enforcement agencies

Survey findings indicate that two-thirds of the largest agencies comply with the acting-in-concert principle and are able to link arrests to incident reports, both

¹³Detailed findings from the survey and the regional focus groups can be found in SEARCH, *NIBRS Project Staff Report 2: Report of Regional Focus Group Meetings, Findings and Recommendations* (Sacramento, Calif.: SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, February 1997). This report also contains listings of participants at the regional focus group meetings, and a summary of project activities and findings, as well as project recommendations. The report is available electronically as a PDF file on the Internet (<http://www.nibrs.search.org>).

of which are required procedures for NIBRS reporting.¹⁴ Conversely, less than a third (29.5%) of respondents indicate that they follow NIBRS and collect information on all crimes involved in an incident, while over two-thirds (70.5%) continue to follow the "hierarchy rule" and record only the most serious crime within an incident.¹⁵ The survey findings also indicate that while most of the mandatory data elements for NIBRS reporting are captured specifically in the local agency records management systems, they are often not in full compliance with NIBRS reporting; that is, the agency may capture the same or similarly named variable as used in NIBRS, but it is not coded to be consistent with NIBRS.

Regional focus group meetings

Regional focus group meetings were organized during the first half of October 1996 in Sacramento, California; Austin, Texas; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Orlando, Florida; and Chicago, Illinois. A key policy representative from each of the major local law enforcement agencies across the Nation was invited to participate in the day-and-a-half meeting. The meeting focused on identifying the operational impediments that have hindered local agency participation in NIBRS. Since most States have an IBR program in place to report NIBRS data to the FBI, or are active in development or testing of such a program, the State UCR/NIBRS program directors were also invited to participate in the respective meetings in which the affiliate local agencies participated.

The focus groups were organized to —

- a) give participants an overview of the NIBRS program from the national perspective,
- b) discuss the uses of crime and incident data in law enforcement agencies,

¹⁴In NIBRS, an "incident" is defined as one or more offenses committed by the same offender or group of offenders acting in concert at the same time and place. Acting in concert requires that the offenders actually commit or assist in the commission of the crime(s). This is important because all of the offenders in an incident are considered to have committed all of the offenses in the incident.

¹⁵See FBI, *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook* (Washington, DC: FBI, 1984), pp.33-34, for a discussion of the "hierarchy rule."

c) review the status of NIBRS implementation at the State and local level throughout the Nation, and

d) identify the key impediments that hinder or preclude local law enforcement agencies from participating in the program.

Following general plenary session discussion of the nature of impediments facing local agencies, the focus group split into two working groups to further refine and prioritize the impediments. Participants were asked to review and comment on the impediments identified by the two working groups, and to recommend actions to overcome or otherwise address the impediments identified.

Findings

Most States that have implemented NIBRS have added data elements or edits to the national reporting standards published by the FBI. In some cases these are relatively minor with little impact on local agencies. In other jurisdictions, however, the changes are substantial with considerable potential impact on local agencies. Although many States that require significant additional data beyond what is required for NIBRS participation have made many of these data optional for reporting purposes, the potential effect this may have on local law enforcement participation is nevertheless a concern.

Many local law enforcement agencies have existing records management systems (RMS) that are unable to report NIBRS data, either because the data are in an incompatible format (for example, they continue to follow the hierarchy rule and fail to capture multiple offenses and victims), or they do not capture sufficient mandatory data elements or code the data in a NIBRS-compliant manner. Some of the local agencies have antiquated systems that are fragmented and urgently in need of upgrade or replacement simply to do their job effectively. In contrast, others have automated incident-based systems that effectively meet their agency's operational needs but fail to capture the necessary data in an appropriate format for NIBRS reporting.

There was a considerable degree of consensus among participants of the five regional focus group meetings regarding the nature and priority of impediments to NIBRS reporting. The general categories of the impediments collectively identified in the focus groups were (in priority order):

1. Funding
2. Uncertainty of benefits
3. Policy concerns
4. Administrative issues
5. Federal and State reporting
6. Data elements
7. Education

Each of these impediments is discussed below in greater detail, followed by references to specific recommendations for action.

Funding

There is a general and widespread perception that implementing NIBRS is very costly for local law enforcement agencies. The costs pertain to forms redesign, developing or acquiring new or upgrading existing hardware and software, upgrading legacy information or records management systems to fourth-generation language relational databases, implementing automated incident-based reporting at the street level, reprogramming existing records systems to capture and report NIBRS-compliant data, and upgrading the communications infrastructure necessary to support IBR reporting.

In addition, there is a broad perception that implementing NIBRS will mean that agencies must have a significantly larger data entry staff to accommodate the additional data that will be captured for incident-based reporting. In a similar vein, local agencies anticipate the need to exercise more comprehensive quality control on the data that are entered, significant increases in the volume and complexity of training needed both initially and on an ongoing basis, and substantive increases in the data processing support staff to enable automated reporting of NIBRS-compliant data. Assessing the costs of NIBRS implementation for local law enforcement agencies is a complex task. A separate staff report identifies the cost factors associated with NIBRS implementation, and additional research is planned in order to estimate with greater specificity implementation costs for a variety of scenarios.¹⁶

¹⁶SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, *NIBRS Project Staff Report 3: Cost Issues of Implementing the National Incident-Based Reporting System in Local Law Enforcement Agencies* (Sacramento, Calif.: SEARCH, February 1997).

The focus group participants expressed concern that NIBRS is not perceived as a funding priority among key decisionmakers and stakeholders in the local community. Policymakers, it was believed, are more willing to support "visible" solutions, such as additional officers, more cars, or more powerful weapons. Representatives of several large agencies also expressed concern that since NIBRS participation is entirely voluntary and there is no tangible incentive at the local level to move to NIBRS, agencies lack leverage with mayors, city councils, county commissioners, and other key decisionmakers to commit the necessary funds to enable the move to NIBRS. Agency representatives were careful to explain, however, that they were not suggesting a tactical change to mandate NIBRS reporting by local agencies; they were simply commenting that a tangible incentive to reporting can also be used as leverage to obtain the necessary resources.

Reference Recommendation(s): 20.

Uncertainty of benefits

There was considerable discussion at each of the regional focus group meetings that no clear operational value has been demonstrated for reporting of NIBRS data at the local, State, or Federal levels. Absent such a demonstration, participants felt that NIBRS is of more value to researchers than to law enforcement agencies, and had a general concern that NIBRS is only of value in macrolevel analyses. Participants consistently expressed an interest in understanding the potential value of incident-based offense and arrest data at the local level, beyond what use is currently made for general crime analysis, and expressed interest in knowing the kinds of analyses that will be conducted at State and Federal levels.

Participants also suggested the development of prototype reports to demonstrate the utility of IBR data at the local, State, and Federal levels; the operational value of IBR systems generally to local agencies; and how the data will and should be used for analysis at the State and Federal levels. There was general concern that key decisionmakers within and outside of the local department must understand the benefits of NIBRS participation if the agency is to report the data.

Reference Recommendation(s): 1, 2, and 7.

Policy concerns

There is a widespread perception that reported crime will increase with the adoption of NIBRS, largely as a result of the elimination of the hierarchy rule, and this represents a potential public relations disaster for local law enforcement agencies and government officials. Although there is anecdotal evidence from some sites that have implemented NIBRS and experienced large increases in certain crimes, these increases are typically an artifact of past reporting inaccuracies. Since NIBRS captures detailed incident-based data and incorporates extensive data quality edits, inaccurate past reporting practices or offense misclassifications are quickly highlighted and corrected. Law enforcement officials are very concerned that crime will appear to increase if they implement NIBRS if for no other reason that NIBRS allows the reporting of multiple offenses within an incident, which was generally not the case under the Summary UCR Program.¹⁷

Agencies also expressed concern that no definitive policies have been adopted at the State and Federal levels regarding the presentation of comparative UCR and NIBRS data. FBI representatives repeatedly stated throughout the course of the regional focus group meetings that the agency will not compare UCR crime incidence figures with NIBRS data, since the programs differ so dramatically, and representatives of the State UCR/NIBRS programs expressed similar sentiments.

Reference Recommendation(s): 3, 4, 5, 7, and 15.

¹⁷The "hierarchy rule" of the UCR program generally limited the reporting of offenses to the single most serious offense in a series of offenses. For person offenses, however, one offense was scored for each person victim, regardless of the number of victims. Nevertheless, if multiple person offenses are committed against a single individual, only the most serious of those offenses will be reported in UCR. FBI, *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: FBI, 1984) pp.33-34.

Administrative issues

Law enforcement administrators are concerned that the detailed, incident-level reporting required for NIBRS participation will require street officers to spend substantial additional time completing incident reports rather than responding to the needs of the public. This potential loss of patrol time looms as a major impediment to some large law enforcement agencies that already face an overwhelming demand for priority services. Agency representatives attending the regional focus groups discussed a range of data collection strategies that have proven successful in implementing incident-based reporting and have actually reduced the reporting time for the officer on the street. These strategies include the use of forced-choice incident report forms, re-engineering to eliminate duplicate data entry, and the growing adoption of laptops and other portable computers. Administrators were also concerned about the level of training that will be required for NIBRS participation, and the technical support that is necessary for ongoing operations.

Under UCR, local agencies submit monthly aggregate figures summarizing the crime and arrest activities of their jurisdiction. Agency representatives expressed concern that with NIBRS, local agencies submit detailed incident-level data which are then compiled at the State and Federal levels. Local agencies do not, as a consequence, generally know the results of the State compilations until they are published or otherwise released, and this may put the agency in the difficult position of explaining a shift in crime without sufficient information.

Reference Recommendation(s): 5, 16, 17, 18, and 19.

Federal and State reporting

Focus group participants raised questions about the current status of the NIBRS program itself and whether the FBI continues to support this national statistical reporting program. This concern coincided with remarks that the program has not been effectively marketed or the benefits sufficiently explained, and that too much emphasis has been placed on coordination at the State program level without adequate education at the local level. Participants expressed concern about the perceived "all or nothing" policy for NIBRS participation, which for local agencies meant that if they could not meet every NIBRS reporting element, they would not be allowed to participate in the program. Those attending the meetings argued for greater flexibility as a way of encouraging broader implementation, and the FBI indicated its willingness to work with agencies in this regard.

Participants also discussed the burden local agencies often face in meeting the reporting requirements of State programs, which have often expanded the State reporting requirements well beyond NIBRS. Once again, participants questioned the nature and utility of reports from the State level, particularly given the costs associated with the expanded data collection.

Reference Recommendation(s): 8, 9, and 11.

Data elements

Police chiefs, sheriffs, street officers and data processing personnel provided an array of comments about the structure and definition of specific NIBRS data elements. Some elements, such as the victim-offender relationship, multiple offenses and multiple victims, were characterized as lacking investigative value. Others were viewed as being largely subjective (for example, bias motivation and victim ethnicity). The residential status of an arrestee and the nature of suspected substance abuse were seen as being largely irrelevant to the police mission. Participants were also troubled by differences in definitions between UCR, NIBRS, State statutes, and definitions used for the National Crime Information Center (NCIC).

Reference Recommendation(s): 6 and 8.

Education

There was strong agreement among focus group participants that key agency decisionmakers and stakeholders do not have sufficient or accurate information regarding the nature and objectives of NIBRS. Participants suggested that extensive education is needed to demonstrate the utility of NIBRS for justice agencies at the State and local levels, as well as to address questions that agencies throughout the Nation have regarding this program. The program of education should focus on law enforcement agencies, but also on the media, legislative bodies, the business community, and the general public.

Reference Recommendation(s): 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14.

Recommendations and endorsements

Following the regional focus group meetings, SEARCH project staff organized a meeting of the NIBRS Project Steering Committee on October 29, 1996, in Phoenix, Arizona. Staff summarized the findings of the surveys and the regional focus group meetings, and drafted a series of recommendations for consideration. The steering committee reviewed the recommendations, revising them where necessary, and unanimously endorsed them.

The committee's recommendations were presented to the Uniform Crime Reporting Subcommittee of the CJIS APB at their meeting on November 7, 1996, in Austin, Texas. The UCR subcommittee suggested two wording changes and unanimously endorsed the recommendations. The subcommittee also conducted a straw poll ranking of the top five recommendations.

The revised recommendations were subsequently presented to the full CJIS APB at their meeting in San Diego, California, on December 10, 1996. The CJIS APB unanimously endorsed the recommendations and the priority ranking suggested by the UCR Subcommittee. The recommendations were unanimously reaffirmed by the NIBRS Project Steering Committee on February 13, 1997, in Washington, D.C., and will serve as the basis for continued project activities in the coming year. (See pages 14 and 15 for the text of the recommendations.)

Conclusion

Since as early as 1985, the Nation has been moving toward incident-based reporting of crime and arrest data. This marks a significant shift in the manner in which law enforcement data are collected, the level of detail captured, and the research potential of the underlying data. Rather than simply forwarding monthly tallies for a handful of offenses, with incident-based reporting local law enforcement agencies are expected to collect and transmit comprehensive data on an expanded array of criminal activities.

To date, however, NIBRS contributing agencies represent only approximately 6% of the U.S. population. Although considerable progress in NIBRS participation has been made in many States and local agencies throughout the Nation, Austin, Texas, is the only major department (one serving a jurisdiction over 500,000 in population) currently reporting NIBRS data.

This project was designed to identify impediments that face large agencies in their implementation of NIBRS, and to recommend strategies to overcome these limitations. Several general observations will demonstrate the impediments identified by local agency representatives during the regional focus group meetings, and in other forums.

From the perspective of the local contributor, a fundamental principle underlying the logic of the NIBRS system is that NIBRS is a statistical derivative of operational law enforcement recordkeeping systems. NIBRS captures data in an incident-based format, which mirrors the conceptual structure of law enforcement activities and recordkeeping programs. Moreover, it is designed to capture data that are essential to the crime reporting and investigative processes of local police and sheriff's departments.

The NIBRS program itself, however, and the many State implementations of NIBRS, enforce a reporting structure and data element coding scheme that exceed the ability of the legacy records systems currently in place in many of the larger law enforcement agencies throughout the Nation. Many small and medium-sized law enforcement agencies have adopted automation more recently than the large departments. In doing so, they have implemented applications that are more flexible, but they have less invested in the technology; consequently, they can adopt new applications that are NIBRS-compliant more readily and without the significant costs that face large departments.

As noted earlier, many local law enforcement agencies have records management systems that are incapable of reporting NIBRS data because the data are in an incompatible format (as, for example, following the hierarchy rule and failing to capture multiple offenses and victims). Some of these local agencies have antiquated, fragmented records systems urgently in need of upgrade or replacement to meet effectively the department's needs. In these agencies the priority is on upgrading the records management systems to meet operational responsibilities, and IBR reporting for State or Federal statistical purposes is viewed as a secondary priority.

In all likelihood, NIBRS implementation in these agencies will occur only in the context of a comprehensive systems upgrade, where NIBRS (or State IBR) reporting requirements can be built into the agency's functional requirements definition. Clearly the agency must also address forms redesign and training issues, but the basic information system will enable NIBRS reporting.

In contrast, other agencies currently have automated, incident-based systems that effectively meet their operational needs, but fail to capture the necessary data in an appropriate format for NIBRS reporting. In these agencies, NIBRS represents changing their recordkeeping systems in order to generate statistical data for use at State and Federal levels, without any perceived benefit at the local level. For these agencies, the costs of implementing changes in reporting practices to make their systems NIBRS-compliant (for example, revising offense reporting forms, department-wide training, and software reprogramming), compounded by concerns over the impact NIBRS will have on the department's reported crime rate and a lack of understanding on how the data will be used at State and Federal levels, create formidable impediments to NIBRS implementation.

If NIBRS is to be implemented broadly, its purpose must be relevant to the operational records management systems of the local law enforcement agencies responsible for contributing the data, and it must demonstrate utility in State and Federal analyses of the data. In addition, it must not represent an undue burden on the law enforcement officers who capture the data at the street level. Technologies that assist in the collection and recording of incident data should be encouraged and funding assistance should be made available to law enforcement agencies to facilitate their adoption of NIBRS-compliant systems.

Final recommendations of the NIBRS Project Steering Committee

The development of standard analytic methodologies

1. Demonstrate how NIBRS data can and will be used in Federal and State reports and analyses. Develop report protocols and analytic methodologies that demonstrate the use and value of the data.
2. Demonstrate how local agencies can or are using NIBRS and NIBRS-like data at the local level, for crime analysis, management and administrative reporting, resource allocation, *etc.*
3. Undertake research to demonstrate, from the experiences of other jurisdictions, the existence and nature of any changes in the volume of reported crime under NIBRS, contrasting UCR reporting practices.
4. Develop conversion formats that assist local agencies in converting their incident-based data into UCR reports and statistical summaries.

Data elements, software, and data input strategies

5. Undertake research that will assess the impact of various data input strategies for offense/incident reports.
6. Clarify the relationship of the coding of data elements between NIBRS and NCIC, especially the extent to which there is, or could be, consistency between these two.
7. Document the experience of local law enforcement agencies that have implemented incident-based manual and automated records in which not all of the data elements or report sections must be completed for each and every offense or incident.
8. Develop details of reconciliation of key elements, codes, and reporting requirements for NIBRS participation to determine whether some of the current mandatory data elements and/or reporting requirements could be made optional as a means of bringing additional agencies into the NIBRS program.

Communication, benefits, coordination, and developing momentum

9. Provide better communication between FBI, State programs and locals.
10. Provide basic education regarding the nature of NIBRS for local programs.
11. Continue hosting regional workshops for State and local programs assessing the status of the programs and giving them an opportunity to exchange information regarding the uses of the data and how agencies have implemented the program. Involve key technical and policy people from major departments, as well as smaller agencies and State program representatives.
12. Profile jurisdictions that have successfully implemented NIBRS.
13. Publish reports and undertake other publicity initiatives that focus on NIBRS and IBR systems generally, and how they have and are being used by police departments, FBI and State programs. In addition to publications, also meet with chiefs and sheriffs at State Association meetings.
14. Produce a videotape to demonstrate new and emerging technologies associated with law enforcement record management systems (RMS), the benefits of new generation RMS systems, and highlight the use of NIBRS data and police information systems.
15. Undertake research that will help law enforcement administrators understand and explain changes in reported levels of crime that can be anticipated when converting from summary UCR to NIBRS reporting.

Technical assistance to local agencies in RMS upgrades and NIBRS implementation

16. Provide assistance to local departments in the development of RFPs for RMS and NIBRS systems.
17. Provide technical assistance with local departments in their transition to and adoption of IBR systems.
18. Create and maintain a database of RFPs/RFIs for local law enforcement RMS.
19. Develop a formal methodology for analyzing records systems to assist police departments and create a mechanism to share this methodology and to provide peer consulting.

Funding

20. Seek Congressional support to:
 - a) Assist local agencies in their efforts to redesign and upgrade their RMS and incorporate NIBRS reporting;
 - b) Provide assistance to State programs for additional staffing to analyze IBR data once captured from local law enforcement agencies;
 - c) Assist local agencies in initial planning for systems upgrades, data conversion, purchase of equipment, development or purchase of records management systems that are IBR compliant, *etc.*;
 - d) Assist in the redesign of forms, software development, *etc.*;
 - e) Assist States without a NIBRS/IBR program in the development and implementation of IBR standards; and
 - f) Identify and support NIBRS pilot projects currently in existence; in areas with no pilot projects, one should be established and funded.

Source of the recommendations

The NIBRS Project Steering Committee on October 29, 1996, in Phoenix, Arizona, unanimously endorsed the first draft of these recommendations.

The committee's recommendations were presented to the Uniform Crime Reporting Subcommittee of the Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) Advisory Policy Board (APB) at their meeting on November 7, 1996, in Austin, Texas. The UCR subcommittee suggested two wording changes and unanimously endorsed them. The revised recommendations were unanimously endorsed by the full CJIS APB at their meeting in San Diego, California, on December 10, 1996.

The NIBRS Project Steering Committee unanimously reaffirmed the recommendations on February 13, 1997, in Washington, D.C.