

National Incident-Based Reporting System Focus Group and Interviews: Key Themes

Sources: CCJ interviews with the executive committee of the Association of State Uniform Crime Reporting Programs; one-on-one interviews with law enforcement and crime data leaders in three geographically dispersed states with substantial criminal justice populations; and a focus group with state Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program managers and local law enforcement liaisons from four states representing regional and population size and composition diversity.

1. Federal support for the transition to [NIBRS](#) has played a key role in helping state and local law enforcement agencies transition to NIBRS, but it has not been large enough to encourage the biggest agencies to move more quickly.

All participants pointed to funding constraints as their biggest obstacle, underlying all other challenges they face. State and local law enforcement agencies that have completed the transition to NIBRS said the [approximately \\$120 million](#) in federal grants provided by BJS and the FBI to 120 state Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) programs and local law enforcement agencies played an important role in their transition processes. However, federal support has not been large enough to persuade the nation's largest law enforcement agencies to move more quickly. One police chief described federal funding for the NIBRS transition as helpful but "incremental":

"It's 10 percent of the overall cost," said this chief. "It's an incentive. Maybe \$5 million for a \$50 million system. So, the agency has to really support it."

Transitioning to NIBRS often requires local agencies to move to new records management systems (RMS). Those transitions are expensive and often come with implementation challenges.

2. State UCR programs and the data units of local law enforcement agencies are understaffed.

All participants, including those representing states that have almost or entirely transitioned to NIBRS, highlighted staffing limitations. Several states have only a few staff devoted to NIBRS. (For instance, one large northeastern state whose implementation is lagging has just two positions in the state UCR office to support the transition – and one of those positions is currently vacant.) In states that are still transitioning, these staff must keep their SRS programs running while implementing NIBRS.

Participants emphasized the need for staff dedicated to training and data quality assurance (see below). One state with eight staff – compared to other states' one to three – has two dedicated to NIBRS training for local law enforcement agencies, which, according to the state's representative, falls far short of the need:

“[My state] is not a large state, but it’s a lot to cover for just two staff ... It’s not the right level, especially if you want to make one-on-one contact and make on-site visits.”

In contrast, a state with nearly 100% of its local law enforcement agencies reporting to NIBRS since 2021 has a “mix of data folks ... four or five developers ... and a product manager [who oversees] technical changes [and] keeps [their] system up to date [with] new tech specs coming in from the FBI.” The state’s representative reported that such support ensures they “stay on top of [everything] pretty well.”

Yet while there is a widespread belief that many, if not most, state UCR programs are understaffed, there are no guidelines on what constitutes adequate levels of staffing.

3. Data integrity is jeopardized by insufficient resources and data quality will remain poor until agencies gain more experience reporting to NIBRS.

Regardless of their current level of success in transitioning to NIBRS, all participants expressed a concern regarding data quality. As one participant stated, “Going from UCR summary to NIBRS ... is an exponential leap in terms of the data being captured.” It also significantly increases the reporting demands on rank-and-file officers. The increased complexity of reporting can lead to an increase in mistakes and omissions. As a result, overburdened auditing teams worry about whether the total incident count is accurate and whether officers are capturing all of the characteristics of an incident – information that, in theory, should allow law enforcement to better understand crime patterns and dynamics (such as the relationship between the victim and offender.)

Funding and staffing constraints limit state UCR programs’ ability to conduct data quality assessments and provide feedback to local law enforcement agencies before the data are sent to the FBI. At a time of [rising concern about crime](#) levels, local law enforcement agencies also have a hard time making the case for assigning police officers to review police reports instead of deploying them on the streets. Both state UCR programs and local law enforcement personnel engaging in reviewing crime data believe more personnel are needed.

One participant noted that it’s an ongoing “fight internally for resources, but at the same time, you have a lot of gun violence in the city ... they’re trying to put more cops on the street [while] I’m just pushing hard to get more bodies assigned to that quality control.”

Several participants noted data quality control is especially challenging among smaller, non-metropolitan departments, which make up [nearly half](#) of all law enforcement agencies in the United States. These agencies often struggle to attract and retain staff with

technology skills. Many state UCR programs do not have the staff to fully meet the needs of these smaller agencies.

One participant emphasized that because NIBRS is very different from and inherently more complex than UCR's SRS, the transition itself and subsequent experience with NIBRS are requisite for quality data:

"NIBRS isn't as simple as it appears to be. There are a lot of dependency rules written in and things that the layperson just simply isn't going to understand. So, until an agency has converted [to NIBRS] and has a couple years [of training on how to fill out reports correctly] under their belt, you're not [necessarily] going to get meaningful data."

4. Record Management Systems continue to be an obstacle to adoption and adaptation.

Participants from states that have mostly or completely transitioned identified good records management systems (RMS) and RMS vendors as integral to their success. States that are struggling to transition pointed to challenges with RMS and vendor partnerships.

Agencies with RMS that are not NIBRS-compatible [must upgrade to new systems in order to transition to NIBRS](#). Yet, adopting a new RMS system is expensive, cumbersome, and fraught. As one police executive described the problem:

"Information systems in American policing are one of the [most] underfunded areas. Police officers cost a lot of money. When it comes to tech, if it is flashy and razzmatazz, people will invest – maybe. But RMS are boring. It has really had a lack of emphasis. No one pays a lot of attention to the back office."

Moreover, this chief continued, "When you change an RMS, you are guaranteed to have problems."

Upgrading an RMS for a large agency can take years – even decades. One state took an additional six years past its goal date to get certified because the transition "required several large agencies to go through RMS upgrades and replace [their] systems because they weren't NIBRS-compatible."

One participant also highlighted challenges with their RMS vendor:

"Our vendor ... will read one thing and implement in a way where we were not exactly expecting that type of implementation. So, it's been kind of a back and forth [to make sure] what we're actually asking for is produced."

In one certified state that has most of its local law enforcement agencies reporting, one agency has been working for two years to transition and continues to be delayed because of problems with its RMS vendor.

Additionally, there is often not a single RMS vendor serving all agencies within a state. Agencies within a state may face the aforementioned challenges to differing degrees. This also prevents state programs from offering standardized support or training to their agencies.

Some states have their own, statewide RMS for use by smaller law enforcement agencies that do not have the resources to procure their own. These are often “bare bones” systems, offered to local agencies to orient them to such systems. But the hope is the agencies will obtain funding to purchase better systems.

5. Many police chiefs see few tangible and immediate benefits in reporting to NIBRS or believe that the costs of transitioning to the new system outweigh the benefits.

NIBRS has a value-proposition problem. The cost and potential complications of procuring and moving to a new RMS are high; yet, the benefits of reporting to NIBRS are often unclear. Said one leading police executive, “Right now no one is saying, ‘In terms of our understanding of crime, disorder, victims, look at how much richer it is with NIBRS than with the UCR system’”

“Have you really seen an improvement in solving crime [as a result of transitioning to NIBRS]? I don’t know that anybody [has],” this police executive continued. Instead, some chiefs believe that moving from a summary reporting system to an implementation-based system will also increase overall crime rates.

Set against these disadvantages is the possibility of [better understanding crime and victimization dynamics](#). NIBRS’ ability to shed light on victimization patterns mean it could emerge as a tool for preventing and combatting crime. However, the benefits still seem abstruse and theoretical.

6. The FBI and state agencies that collect crime data from local law enforcement need to publish and share crime trends information much more quickly. Local law enforcement agencies should be able to see how their crime trends compare to neighboring or peer cities in a timely fashion.

Participants expressed a strong desire to see crime trends data published much closer to when it was submitted. Participants discussed several potential benefits of having timely information.

First, sharing information earlier would help local law enforcement agencies identify data problems. As one participant put it, “the quicker it’s out, more eyes on it.” When the press and the public uncover data problems, for instance, agencies will feel pressure to improve data capacity. And the timely “comparison of the top cities side-by-side,” another participant noted, will “bring a training issue to light.” The participant continued:

“You start seeing where ... something [is] out of sync ... Why is [another city] so high on this and we’re so low? I think we’re underreporting human trafficking ... I can go to my bosses and say, look, [another city] has a ton of these and we don’t. Maybe something’s off kilter.”

A second potential benefit is the faster identification of crime patterns, allowing law enforcement and communities to respond more quickly and effectively to emerging trends. The FBI’s current schedule is so slow that crime data, in the words of one participant, is “almost irrelevant by the time it gets pushed out by feds.”

7. There is tension between accelerating the adoption of NIBRS and improving NIBRS.

State UCR program managers saw the need for a renewed push to help certain states and local law enforcement agencies transition to NIBRS. Until that transition is complete, they felt that the FBI should pause making further changes to NIBRS specifications until after law enforcement agencies currently using NIBRS implement the 30+ changes already approved by the FBI’s Advisory Policy Board:

Focus on “getting those states that are not at 100% ... into the game so that we can start talking about what the next step is. That [next step] is making improvements to NIBRS to simplify it for not only the state repositories but our local agencies ... Let’s talk with the FBI, let’s talk with users of the data, let’s find out how to simplify and go forward with improving this process.”

8. Transitioning from SRS to NIBRS will result in higher crime numbers because SRS does not include lesser offenses that occurred as part of the same event. Authorities would need to explain this increase to the public.

Under UCR’s SRS, law enforcement agencies reported only the most serious crime. In contrast, under NIBRS, local agencies report all crimes. As a result, police departments transitioning to NIBRS generally expect their crime numbers to increase. The FBI has sought to document the extent to which the transition to NIBRS increases crime rates for specific types of crime trends. Its [analysis](#) found that transitioning to NIBRS had only a small impact on crime rates for most types of crime.

Crime Type	Projected Statistical “Increase”
Rape	No effect
Robbery	0.6 percent increase
Aggravated Assault	0.6 percent increase
Burglary	1.0 percent increase
Motor vehicle theft	2.6 percent increase
Larceny	2.6 percent increase
Total Summary Reporting System Increases	2.1 percent

Source: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/nibrs/2014/resource-pages/effects-of-nibrs-on-crime-statistics-final.pdf>

Nevertheless, participants expressed:

“It will look like our stats are all higher because of NIBRS compared to [the] UCR [SRS] ... We need to educate our citizens about why stats look different and the difference between NIBRS and UCR.”

9. State UCR program representatives expressed strong support for state mandates requiring local law enforcement to report incident-based crime data to the states in a timely fashion.

Though many states have implemented reporting mandates for their local law enforcement agencies, participants emphasized the importance of instituting mandates in all states while recognizing that jurisdictions often are opposed to mandates on principle, especially those that are unfunded. One representative pointed out that “timely data submissions are not universal across the board, regardless of any ... state mandates,” and lack of funding and understaffing continue to inhibit timely—and accurate—reporting. However, when asked about where additional federal funding would be the most beneficial, this participant identified two changes that would make a striking difference.

“Money and mandates,” this participant said. “If you really want to improve NIBRS data, it’s money and mandates ... at the state level ... That would change everything overnight.”