

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

October 2023

The key themes presented below were distilled from CCJ interviews with the executive committee of the Association of State Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) 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 conducted with state UCR Program managers and local law enforcement liaisons from four states representing regional and population size and composition diversity. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in August, 2023.

THEME 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 law enforcement executive described federal funding for the NIBRS transition as helpful but "incremental." They said,

It's 10% of the overall cost. 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.

THEME 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 one to three staff members devoted to NIBRS. For example, one large northeastern state whose implementation is lagging has just two positions in the state UCR Program office to support the transition, one of which is currently vacant. In states that are still transitioning, these staff must keep their Summary Reporting System collection running while implementing NIBRS.

Participants emphasized the need for dedicated staff for training and data quality assurance (see below). A representative from a state with little staff coverage said,

[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.

One state with eight staff members has two dedicated to NIBRS training for local law enforcement agencies, which, according to the state's representative, still falls far short of the need. A representative from a state with nearly 100% of its local law enforcement agencies reporting to NIBRS since 2021 said that they have,

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 technical specifications coming in from the FBI.

Such support, the representative continues, ensures they "stay on top of [everything] pretty well."

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.

THEME 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 described,

Going from UCR Summary Reporting to NIBRS ... is an exponential leap in terms of the data being captured.

The transition also increased the reporting demands on rank-and-file officers

substantially. 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 the ability of state UCR Programs to conduct data quality assessments and provide feedback to local law enforcement agencies before 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 officers to review police reports instead of deploying them on the streets. Both state UCR Program staff and local law enforcement personnel engaging in reviewing crime data believe more personnel are needed. One participant described the tension succinctly. They said,

It's a 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 for smaller, non-metropolitan departments, which make up [nearly half](#) of all law enforcement agencies in the U.S. 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 different from and more complex than the Summary Reporting System, agencies need time to adjust and adapt to the new system. They said,

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.

THEME 4: Records management systems are an obstacle to NIBRS adoption and adaptation.

Participants from states that have mostly or completely transitioned described how good records management systems and systems vendors have been integral to their success. States that are struggling to transition pointed to challenges with

records management systems and vendor partnerships.

Agencies with records management systems that are not NIBRS-compatible **must upgrade to new systems to transition to NIBRS**. Yet, adopting a new records management systems system is expensive, cumbersome, and fraught with logistical challenges. As one law enforcement 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 records management systems are boring. It has really had a lack of emphasis. No one pays a lot of attention to the back office.

This executive continued, “When you change a records management systems, you are guaranteed to have problems.”

Upgrading a records management systems 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 records management systems upgrades and replace [their] systems because they weren’t NIBRS-compatible.”

One participant also highlighted challenges with their records management systems vendor. They said,

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 a NIBRS-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 records management systems vendor.

Typically, multiple records management systems vendors serve the different agencies within a state. Therefore, some agencies may face additional hurdles based on their vendor. The lack of standardization also prevents state UCR Programs from offering standardized support or training to their agencies.

Some states have a records management system that smaller law enforcement agencies without resources to purchase one on the open market can use for no cost. These are typically “bare bones” systems, offered to help orient smaller agencies to incident-level data collection. Participants underscored that the hope was for agencies to obtain funding to purchase better systems.

THEME 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. One chief said,

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 Summary Reporting System Has anyone really seen an improvement in solving crime [as a result of transitioning to NIBRS]? I don't know that anybody [has].

Instead, some chiefs believe that moving from a Summary Reporting System to an incident-based system will increase overall crime rates.

As NIBRS data can be used to [better understand crime and victimization dynamics](#), it is well positioned as a tool for preventing and combatting crime. However, the benefits to police chiefs and other law enforcement executives seem too theoretical to warrant spending money, time, and personnel on transitioning to NIBRS.

THEME 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 timely data.

First, sharing information sooner would help local law enforcement agencies identify data problems. As one participant said, "the quicker it's out, the more eyes on it." When the press and the public uncover data problems, for instance, agencies 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." This 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 cases and we don't. Maybe something's off kilter.

A second potential identified benefit of timely data was the faster identification of

crime patterns, allowing law enforcement and communities to respond more quickly and effectively to emerging trends. The FBI's current reporting schedule results in significant data lags – exceeding a calendar year. For example, crime trends data for January through December 2023 won't be published until September or October of 2024. One participant said, “the trends are almost irrelevant by the time it gets pushed out by feds.”

THEME 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 states and local law enforcement agencies transition to NIBRS. They expressed that the FBI should pause making changes to NIBRS technical specifications until the more than 30 changes already approved by the FBI's Advisory Policy Board were implemented. One participant said,

We need to 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.

THEME 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 the UCR Summary Reporting System, law enforcement agencies reported only the most serious crime that occurred in any given incident. In contrast, under NIBRS, local agencies report all crimes that occur during an incident. As a result, law enforcement agencies transitioning to NIBRS generally expect their crime numbers to increase. The FBI has documented the extent to which the transition to NIBRS increased crime rates for specific crime types. Its [analysis](#) found that transitioning to NIBRS had only a small impact on crime rates for most crime types.

Crime Type	Projected Effect
Rape	No effect
Robbery	+ 0.6%
Aggravated Assault	+ 0.6%
Burglary	+ 1%
Motor Vehicle Theft	+ 2.6%
Larceny	+ 2.6%
Total Projected Increase	+ 2.1%

Participants, however, remained skeptical. One participant said,

It will look like our stats are all higher because of NIBRS compared to the Summary Report ... We need to educate our citizens about why our stats start to look different all of the sudden and the difference between NIBRS and the Summary Reporting System.

THEME 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 had 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 unfunded mandates. One participant pointed out that “timely data submissions are not universal across the board, regardless of any state mandates.” Another participant noted how lack of funding and understaffing continued to inhibit timely—and accurate—reporting. When asked about where federal funding could be deployed to maximize impact, participants were clear. One described this succinctly,

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