



August 19, 2025

Federal Support for Law Enforcement Agencies' Transition to the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)

Since 1930, The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has been the curator of national crime data voluntarily reported through their Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program. For decades, the FBI collected crime data from federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies (LEAs) through a Summary Reporting System (SRS) and disseminated these data in annual reports. More recently, the FBI has been transitioning LEAs to the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which is intended to address certain limitations of the SRS format. On January 1, 2021, the FBI attempted to fully transition all LEAs from SRS to NIBRS; however, only about 66% of LEAs had made the necessary changes to be able to report 2020 crime data in the NIBRS format. As such, crime data from thousands of LEAs were not included in the 2020 data. In 2022, the FBI went back to accepting both SRS and NIBRS data submissions for the UCR program. Both types of data were accepted for the 2024 data released on August 5, 2025, though it is not clear how long SRS data will continue to be accepted. This In Focus describes why the FBI is transitioning from SRS to NIBRS, how the federal government has facilitated the transition, factors preventing some LEAs from making this transition, and issues for congressional consideration.

Benefits of NIBRS

The FBI made the NIBRS submission process available to law enforcement in the late 1980s to address several shortcomings of SRS. First, with NIBRS LEAs can report on a greater number of offenses compared to what they could with SRS (81 offenses vs. 30 offenses, respectively), allowing for greater specificity and range in crime reporting. For instance, whereas SRS only had the option to report larceny-theft, under NIBRS LEAs can report eight different types of theft (e.g., purse-snatching, theft from motor vehicle).

Second, NIBRS allows for reporting up to 10 offenses per incident, which allows for a more accurate accounting of crime (particularly where multiple offenses were committed during a single crime incident). Under the SRS system, agencies had to apply a hierarchy rule when reporting crime, which meant that only the most serious offense in any given incident would be recorded. Additionally, NIBRS allows LEAs to record more information about the *circumstances* surrounding the incident (if known and applicable), such as the relationship between the victim and offender, the types of property damaged, and bias motivation (e.g., race, sexual orientation).

Federal Assistance

Though the federal government may not be able to require state, local, and tribal LEAs to adopt NIBRS, it can

incentivize and aid the transition. The two major approaches the federal government has used to promote LEAs' transition to NIBRS have been through U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) grants and the provision of training.

Grant Funds to Assist with NIBRS Transition

In recent years, federal funds have been allocated for aiding LEAs with NIBRS implementation. For instance, the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) program, administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), allowed grantees to use funds to help cover the cost of conversion. From FY2018 to FY2021, LEAs that received a JAG grant but were not already reporting crime data using NIBRS were required to use 3% of any JAG award toward becoming NIBRS compliant. Though there has not been an explicit set-aside amount for implementing NIBRS from FY2022 onward, BJA states in the FY2024 JAG solicitation that "JAG recipients are encouraged to continue working toward and/or maintaining NIBRS compliance to ensure that JAG eligibility is not affected in future fiscal years."

In addition to the JAG program, other grant programs targeting NIBRS implementation have been released by DOJ. For instance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) has offered specialized grants such as the *Law Enforcement Transition to the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) to Improve Hate Crime Reporting* grant in FY2023, which awarded a total of \$6.8 million to two recipients. As stated in the grant solicitation, the purpose of this grant was to aid recipients' implementation of NIBRS to "increase and enhance their reporting of crimes in general and hate crimes specifically."

Another grant opportunity administered by BJS is the National Crime Statistics Exchange (NCS-X) NIBRS estimation project. Grants awarded under this program were a part of a larger collaborative effort from BJS and the FBI aimed at expanding NIBRS coverage and developing a statistical estimation methodology for NIBRS data during the nationwide transition. Since its inception in 2010, 11 different grant opportunities totaling \$121.3 million have been announced in conjunction with NCS-X. Individual awards from these grant opportunities aided 33 state-level UCR programs and 93 individual LEAs with transition efforts. Of the 93 LEAs that received funds, 64 (68.8%) successfully transferred to NIBRS by the FBI's originally slated deadline of January 1, 2021.

NIBRS Training and Resources

Several DOJ agencies have provided training for LEAs attempting to transition to NIBRS. From 2016 to 2022, the

FBI trained approximately 19,500 participants from over 9,500 LEAs. These trainings and related outreach activities support the transition to NIBRS while also attempting to assist with any technical roadblocks agencies encounter along the way. The FBI also posts updated NIBRS manuals and FAQ guides to their website (along with contact information) as aids for law enforcement.

BJS has also developed tools and other resources to increase access and usability of NIBRS data. For instance, it recently launched the Law Enforcement Agency Reported Crime Analysis Tool (LEARCAT), an online dashboard that allows users to intuitively query and visualize NIBRS crime data information from around the United States. Data-based resources like this help to promote the practical utility of NIBRS to LEAs, policymakers, and the general public.

Current Status of and Barriers to NIBRS Transition

As of the end of 2024, approximately 76% of LEAs, covering about 87% of the U.S. population, across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia (DC) report NIBRS data to the FBI's UCR program. According to BJS, 18 states have achieved 100% NIBRS compliance (i.e., all LEAs in the state are reporting NIBRS data to the FBI) and the remaining 32 states and DC range in participation from 11% to 99% of agencies. The five most populous states (California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania) have a cumulative NIBRS LEA participation rate of 48%, which is nearly 30 percentage points lower than the national rate. At their current participation rates, 67% of these five states' cumulative population is covered by a NIBRS-compliant LEA, which is 20 percentage points lower than the national coverage rate. While there has been a general trend of the number of NIBRS-compliant agencies in the United States increasing each year since the FBI announced the transition in 2016, approximately 25% have yet to transition. Several barriers may contribute to this.

The most frequently cited barrier is funding. Transitioning from SRS to NIBRS often involves an agency replacing their Record Management System (RMS). This often involves contracting with a private vendor. Costs can vary greatly, but in one example cited by BJS, a small agency in South Carolina with 101 sworn officers representing 27,130 residents at the time was quoted up to \$200,000 in initial costs, plus annual maintenance costs thereafter. In addition to these vendor costs, agencies may need to account for training staff to use the new RMS and potential increased labor hours it can sometimes take to enter NIBRS data due to the greater number of data elements (e.g., victim information) compared to SRS. To address such issues as cost and manpower, the FBI recommends in their online NIBRS guides that smaller LEAs consider collaborating with other agencies to pool the cost and resources for updating a single, shared RMS.

One hesitation that some LEAs may have with adopting NIBRS is the concern that the elimination of the hierarchy rule may make it appear that there has been an increase in

crime because, unlike SRS, up to 10 offenses can be recorded under one incident. The belief is that, with more offenses (particularly comparatively less serious offenses that would be suppressed under the hierarchy rule) being reported, the public might mistakenly believe crime is on the rise. It is important to note that research comparing SRS to NIBRS has found that this concern is, to date, mostly unfounded and that NIBRS, particularly in larger or higher-crime jurisdictions, produces similar crime counts to SRS (for more information on this topic, see CRS Report R46668, *The National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS): Benefits and Issues*).

Considerations for Congress

There are several options policymakers might consider if Congress chooses to take up legislation to further facilitate the nationwide transition to NIBRS. One option would be to appropriate grant funds specifically for aiding LEAs with updating their RMS systems to become NIBRS-compliant. For instance, Congress could stipulate that BJA reinstate a set-aside percentage of the JAG grant that non-NIBRS-compliant agencies must use to adopt NIBRS.

Policymakers could also consider requiring that DOJ withhold funding for states or localities that are not fully NIBRS-compliant. For example, under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) of 2003 (P.L. 108-79), a state that does not adopt the required standards DOJ published pursuant to the law can lose up to 5% of funds under JAG and Part B formula grants under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-415). Congress could require a similar approach that withholds a percentage of certain federal grant funds for not being NIBRS compliant by a certain deadline.

If policymakers are interested in consolidating or streamlining criminal justice data collection activities within the federal government, Congress could also shift UCR data collection responsibilities from the FBI to BJS. BJS is the primary statistical agency within DOJ and one of 13 principal federal statistical agencies. Such a reorganization would make BJS the single nexus point for NIBRS and other UCR data. However, the migration of the UCR program from the FBI to BJS might temporarily slow NIBRS progress, especially given the expertise the FBI has built over decades of crime data collection that would need to be passed on to BJS.

Congress could also decide to leave this matter up to DOJ, the states, and local LEAs to determine a solution among themselves. With further specialized grant opportunities, such as the NCS-X program, collaboration among jurisdictions, and support from the DOJ, it is possible that virtually all LEAs will ultimately make the transition from SRS to NIBRS. A primary consideration, then, is how long completing this process will take and how problematic are the potential gaps in crime information until then?

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IF13087

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