

Police Records Accuracy and Efficiency: The Benefit of Using Outside Resources

Edward Cloughton, President
PRI Management Group

When police departments produce crime statistics which are inaccurate, whether through UCR or in-house reports, the impact can be felt on various levels (that is if the inaccuracy is discovered). Questions may come from the public, challenges can arise when seeking grant funding (often based in part on local crime statistics), and the criminal investigations unit can be second guessed on how cases are being cleared. Usually the records unit is scrutinized first. The long-term effect of inaccurate statistics can be devastating, particularly when they go undiscovered for long periods of time. Learning years after the fact that crime was either much higher or lower than previously reported may lead a department to reevaluate and significantly change how resources are being deployed but first, it must find why such a disparity occurred.

Empowering Records Employees

Finding the cause of problematic crime statistics can be very difficult since errors can occur during the creation, processing, or maintenance phase of police reports. The task of sorting through vast amounts of data as well as report processing performance and procedures can be overwhelming. Errors can occur from the moment a report is written. Officers can make mistakes which result in the improper classification of reports and when this occurs because of a lack of training, non-existent reporting manuals, or improper policy, the problem becomes a systemic issue that is compounded over time. Problems can also occur during the time that reports are reviewed and processed.

All reports should go through two levels of thorough review- once with the sergeant, and then by records personnel. If the reviewing sergeant misses a mistake it is incumbent upon the records unit to find it and ensure its correction. No police department should take the stance that records personnel should not be reviewing the reports it produces. This is the very reason police records personnel exist- to not only maintain and disseminate information but also to process it and ensure its correctness. The records unit is the agency's body of expertise and personnel should be trained, empowered, and relied upon to produce valid statistics.

Why Use an Outside Resource?

By virtue of the fact erroneous crime figures are caused by any number of factors, including technological problems, police departments benefit greatly from turning to outside resources for assistance. Since the day to day operations of any organization must continue, the interruption of normal processes by spending time researching the cause of errors leads to a decrease in productivity, customer service, and employee morale. For a police department, this interruption of records operations translates into longer report turnaround times, backlogged tasks, crime statistics which are dated, and citizens who can't get copies of their reports in a timely manner.

Furthermore, faulty data which is the result of technical problems with records management systems require a level of expertise often not found within police or even I.T. departments. While technology personnel may be the source of expertise in computer and systems maintenance and repair, they sometimes are not well versed in the complexities of UCR and its guidelines. States typically have thousands of statutes on the books and police records management systems have databases which should contain the majority of them. Each of these statutes should have a corresponding unique UCR code which is what enables statistical crime reporting via UCR standards across the nation or "state to state".

The sheer number alone of state statutes, along with complicated UCR rules, makes plenty of room for errors. If just one code is off in a system's code table, the statistics for that particular crime category will be invalid. The crime of burglary for example typically has various sub-sections for the type of forced entry, whether occupied or unoccupied, armed or unarmed offenders, etc. A one digit error in the master UCR code for the burglary chapter could potentially cause reporting errors in all categories of burglary.

This problem is compounded immensely when police departments borrow or cut and paste code tables from other departments as a matter of convenience. The result: tables with thousands of statutes which inevitably contain errors get passed along from agency to agency as they procure new RMS systems, update existing tables, or want to replace tables in their entirety. The accumulation of junk data is a real concern. Getting rid of it is an even bigger problem. Very few police departments have the internal resources or time to scour the vast amount of electronic data made up of code tables, pick lists, UCR coding, and prior police reports in general in order to determine the source of errors and the correction thereof. Validating an entire code table requires extremely meticulous work and painstaking care so as to ensure every statute, sub section, title, and UCR code are properly listed.

Utilizing the services of an outside consultant with specific expertise in law enforcement reporting ensures the agency can continue efficient operations without consuming valuable employee time, increasing overtime, and risking future problematic crime statistics.

PRI Management Group was formed by police personnel who have worked in records, IT, investigations and administration. The company specializes in records management solutions designed to relieve agencies of the challenges inherent in this area of police work that personnel typically shy away from. We have the experience and expertise to alleviate agencies of the burden of assessing and correcting the most common and the most difficult problems that occur in police records management and technology operations.

How We Can Help

PRI is a highly specialized management consulting firm that provides public safety agencies records management, IT and crime data consulting, training, and project management services. With core competencies in public records compliance, UCR/NIBRS, CJIS, RMS/CAD systems and records operations, PRI has proudly served over 1400 agencies since 2008.

Focus on your work while we get your records in order, your people on board, and your systems working right.

- Records management assessments
- IT project management
- UCR audits and NIBRS conversion
- Training