

*Public Safety Records and
Technology Compliance Solutions*

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When looking at NIBRS implementation and the ability to handle it successfully, agencies should ask the following:

- ⇒ *Have we prepared for the reporting and quality control changes which are required for NIBRS?*
- ⇒ *Does our policy establish what corrections to reports Records personnel are authorized to make?*
- ⇒ *Have officers, supervisors, and records personnel received the necessary training for NIBRS reporting?*
- ⇒ *Has the vendor successfully updated our RMS?*
- ⇒ *What other agencies can we speak to regarding NIBRS lessons learned?*

Unfortunately, many agencies have yet to ask these questions and are still experiencing the repercussions. The requirements of transitioning to NIBRS was not a “black swan” event – something highly improbable and hard to predict. Instead, it was a gray rhino – a big issue, staring us in the face that many agencies and some vendors have yet to do.

EXECUTIVE TRAINING NEEDED

Misunderstanding of how NIBRS works is prevalent. In a February 2023 [AL.com article](#) titled “*Mobile, Birmingham police chiefs blast study showing cities most violent in nation*”, Mobile Chief Prine said “The problem is (the FBI, though NIBRS) are overcounting,” Prine said. “It’s overreporting and we knew this would be a problem.” Not true says Ed Cloughton, President of [PRI](#). “NIBRS actually counts crime more accurately since it includes all offenses committed in an incident”.

Nearly eight years ago, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) made an announcement regarding the future of crime statistics reporting. In 2015 it announced that effective January 1, 2021, the summary reporting system would be sunsetted, requiring agencies to change to the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) for reporting crime statistics. Ample resources for law enforcement to help prepare for the transition, and understand NIBRS data, has been published online.

NIBRS allows for increased specificity in reporting and allows the agency to report all crimes occurring within an incident instead of merely reporting based on a hierarchy of crimes.

It was reported that this increased specificity would allow agencies to better allocate resources due to “greater analytic flexibility.”¹

At the time, the FBI estimated an agency participation rate of 75%, which is significantly greater than actual participation thus far. About 7,000 of the nation’s law enforcement agencies did not report any data to the FBI in 2021.² Only about 52% of agencies were able to successfully report a full year’s worth of crime data.³ In fact, in California, only 14 of the 740 law enforcement agencies sent in any data in 2021. Unfortunately, the rollout of NIBRS has been less than expected...and needed, despite claims to the contrary.

The FBI announced the transition well in advance, providing ample time for agencies to prepare. The federal government also allocated millions of dollars in grant funding. However, even with the time, money, and training, a significant number of agencies are struggling to report correctly or are not reporting at all. Sensational stories abound about the struggles with NIBRS and include attention grabbing headlines such as:

“Sweeping reporting failures may compromise the FBI’s 2021 crime data” <https://www.axios.com/2022/06/14/fbi-crime-data-2021-police-reporting-failures>

“Was Crime Up or Down in 2021? Why the FBI Can’t Tell Us” <https://thecrimereport.org/2022/10/11/was-crime-up-or-down-in-2021-why-the-fbi-cant-tell-us/>

“The FBI released its crime report for 2021 - but it tells us less about the overall state of crime in the US than ever” <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/05/us/fbi-national-crime-report-2021-data/index.html>

“Cities nationwide are failing to report crime data to the FBI.” <https://www.audacy.com/kywnnewsradio/news/national/cities-are-failing-to-report-crime-data-to-the-fbi>

Crime

One of the reasons touted as to why the reporting has been lax or nonexistent stems from law enforcement's misinformed fear of an expected increase in crime statistics due to the NIBRS counting methodology. However, this is an inaccurate way of viewing the data, and with a little foresight, an agency can easily address this issue. The Summary UCR counted only the most serious offense in an incident, even if multiple offenses were committed. The NIBRS standard does not employ the hierarchy rule, so multiple offenses can be reported within a single criminal incident. This means the data is more accurate and reflective of what actually occurred, rather than merely reporting the most serious offense.

¹NIBRS – How we can help you. FBI.gov

²Barry, Lauren. Cities nationwide are failing to report data to the FBI. www.audacy.com

³Renaud, Josh. How much crime is in St. Louis? FBI gets numbers wrong after city fell behind on reporting. St. Louis Post Dispatch.

Agencies can easily justify a change in the numbers, and should take a proactive marketing approach to prepare their constituents. The FBI even provided a [report](#) showing that the statistical impact of NIBRS implementation was minimal. An up front and honest assessment of crime will reveal that NIBRS implementation does not increase crime rates; it allows for detailed, high-quality data that provides a complete and more accurate picture of crime.

Training

Another likely reason for delayed implementation is insufficient training. Law enforcement agencies point to NIBRS data inaccuracy and failing to transition as the consequence, in part, of a lack of [training](#) necessary for officers and records personnel. NIBRS is quite complicated and its diversion from criminal statutes confuses police officers.

A basic overview of how the NIBRS system works is a must, including why reports are coded as they are, and how to apply the requirements at the reporting level. An inconsistent level of knowledge in NIBRS, and report writing standards, is what leads to the inconsistent interpretation in the reporting of criminal incidents, and in the supervisory approval of reports. This results in crime statistics that are inaccurate or not submitted at all. [Training for report review](#) is essential. Basic training in these areas should also be incorporated into the new employee orientation process, academy classes, and in-service classes.

Errors

In order for NIBRS data to be accepted by the State, and FBI, and published, agencies must consistently submit the monthly NIBRS report with a 3% or less error-rate. Many agencies struggle to achieve this due to a combination of the aforementioned lack of training, and technical problems with the agency's RMS. Agencies can alleviate these issues through sufficient training, and by holding agency personnel accountable for completing accurate, comprehensive reports. Monthly "Report Correction Lists" which include a listing of reports reviewed by records containing errors even after supervisory review are a standard way of achieving accountability. Listing this information in a spreadsheet will quickly reveal who is listed the most frequently, and each person's individual error rates can be determined. This tool will identify personnel needing additional training and/or effort in their report writing and review/approval activities.

Agencies can enhance internal auditing by conducting monthly audits in a controlled and centralized fashion which include detailed analysis of report error-rates agency-wide, per-shift, per-supervisor, per-officer, and per-crime classification.

Processes like these significantly reduce error rates and help agencies report correctly.

The Time Is Now

While NIBRS implementation is a challenge, it is not an insurmountable one.

Law enforcement can accurately report crime statistics if they implement the right levels of accountability, training, and planning. However, failing to meet a challenge is nothing new. History is replete with numerous examples.

John Haldon (Princeton University), and his co-authors looked at risk assessment and resiliency when they viewed major historical events of the past. They posited that entities response to stress depends on the combination of “complexity, flexibility, and systemic redundancy.” While their work is a discussion of the resiliency of society as a whole, the same thought processes can be applied to law enforcement agencies when viewing how they handle pending change or challenge. That means law enforcement agencies which are robust and adaptable enough can survive a challenge.

An agency which has the combination of these three traits can be challenged without failing entirely. Transitioning to NIBRS is a simultaneous test of planning, reporting, data gathering, and training capabilities. Only those agencies with multifaceted processes, flexible procedures, and vigorous training and reporting systems have been able to meet the challenge. While the NIBRS transition is not necessarily viewed as a historical event, it was, and is a major challenge for most of the law enforcement profession.

How PRI Can Help

As your guide, we enable you and your agency to achieve NIBRS reporting successfully. From needs assessments and business process re-engineering, to vendor management, training, and implementation, PRI positions you for success. We are a law enforcement records and technology consulting and training firm, with extensive subject matter expertise in crime reporting, records management, and public records. Since 2008, PRI has been exclusively helping law enforcement agencies procure, manage, and implement systems, records, digital evidence, and data in the most cost-effective and efficient manner while ensuring their compliance with the maze of governing public records, NIBRS, and technology standards.

Contact us for assistance with your NIBRS reporting and training needs at info@policerecordsmanagement.com, or 305-460-0096.