



Crime Reporting System in Transition

The Transition from Summary-Based to Incident-Based Reporting

The State of Vermont's Uniform Crime Reporting system is in transition. The system is changing from a summary-based to an incident-based reporting system. The current summary-based system provides information on only a limited number of crimes referred to as Part I and Part II crimes¹. The incident-based system reports a much broader range of crimes and includes data on the circumstances of the crime, the victim, and the defendant. Vermont's transition mirrors similar changes in other states as law enforcement agencies across the country begin to implement the Federal Bureau of Investigation's new incident-based crime reporting system.

The Advantages of Incident-Based Crime Reporting

The advantage of the incident-based system lies in enhanced data quality – more data and more accurate data. For example, the summary-based system collects crime data on 25 crimes while the incident-based system will collect data on 91 crimes. In addition, the incident-based system will report for the first time information on:

1. age, gender, and race of both the victim and the defendant;
2. the relationship between the victim and the defendant;
3. where and when the crime took place;
4. what type of injury may have occurred;
5. what type of weapon may have been used;
6. whether there were drugs or alcohol involved;
7. whether there was bias motivation; and
8. the disposition of the case.

In cases involving property crime the incident-based system will report on the:

1. type and description of the article;
2. its value;
3. type of loss (e.g., stolen, vandalized);
4. type of victim (e.g., individual, business);
5. and location of crime (e.g., convenience store, residence).

Enhanced accuracy of incident-based data stems from the manner in which it is collected. In the summary-based system, crime reporting was a separate function from dispatching and report writing. Once a call was dispatched and a report written, the summary-crime statistics were an additional duty to be performed. Under the incident-based system, dispatching, report writing, and crime reporting are all the same function. With the advent of computer-assisted dispatching systems, when dispatchers enter the data required to dispatch a call, they simultaneously provide the data points for incident-based reporting. The information required for the responding officer's report of the incident are the same codes required for incident-based reporting. Consequently, the incidence of crime in a community will be more completely reported because every time a crime is reported to a dispatcher, the incident is automatically counted by the incident-based system.

Benefits of Incident-Based Crime Reporting

The enhanced data quality of the incident-based reporting system will be of significant benefit for both state and local governing bodies, criminal justice agencies, and the public. Data from the incident-based system will enhance both strategic and tactical decision making in criminal justice. Because incident-based data will provide a more accurate picture of a community's crime patterns, decisions regarding law enforcement, judicial, and correctional resources can be made based on empirical data. Similarly, the level of detail provided by incident-based data can assist law enforcement and the community to identify crime problems in their community such as

1. "crime hot spots";
2. populations who are at risk; and
3. drug and alcohol problems.

Crime prevention strategies may then be developed and evaluated based on empirical evidence.

History

The transition from summary-based to incident-based crime reporting began in 1992, when the Department of Public Safety began to phase out the Vermont Law Enforcement Information System (VLEIS) and established the Vermont Incident-Based Reporting System (VIBRS). By 1993, all Vermont State Police barracks and several municipal police departments had joined the Department's VIBRS Network – a wide area law enforcement computer network which utilizes incident-based crime reporting software. In addition, a number of municipal and sheriff departments had implemented incident-based reporting systems on stand alone computer systems. Between 1994 and 1997, additional agencies joined the VIBRS Network. The transition will continue through 1998 as more agencies join the VIBRS Network or become VIBRS compliant using other submission methods.

The Transition and Data Quality

The transition has caused problems for data quality. While some agencies are reporting VIBRS compliant data, other agencies are still reporting summary based data, and some agencies in 1992 and 1993 did not report any crime data at all. The following problems have developed from this pattern of reporting:

1. under reporting;
2. inconsistent reporting; and
3. enhanced reporting.

Under Reporting

Under reporting occurred in both 1992 and 1993 when a number of agencies did not report any crime statistics to the Vermont Criminal Information Center (VCIC). The result was that the data in the 1992 and 1993 versions of the Vermont Crime Report under reported the actual amount of reported crime in some towns and cities.

In 1994, VCIC improved the quality of statewide reporting by undertaking a proactive campaign to ensure that all state and municipal police departments contributed their crime statistics. In 1995 and again in 1996, reports were received for the first time from all sheriff departments and all other state agencies which have law enforcement responsibilities (e.g., Attorney General, Department of Liquor Control, Department of Motor Vehicles, and the Department of Social Welfare). The 1997 edition continues to report crime data from 100% of all law enforcement agencies statewide.

Inconsistent Reporting

Inconsistent reporting occurs when some agencies report in the enhanced VIBRS format while other agencies continue to report summary-based data. Though the VIBRS data can be collapsed into the more general summary-based reporting categories, without VIBRS-compliant data from all reporting agencies, it would be misleading to report incomplete enhanced victim and defendant data as well as incomplete crime circumstance data. Reporting the enhanced data from a non-random sample of reporting agencies could result in mistaken conclusions about the nature of certain crimes statewide.

Enhanced Reporting

As more and more agencies become VIBRS compliant, the accuracy of their reporting will increase and they will be reporting an increased number of types of crime. It is likely that the crime rate in their jurisdiction will appear to increase as will the crime rate in their county as well as statewide.

Solutions

The solution to these problems is consistent data reporting standards statewide – that is, full implementation of the VIBRS standard. The transition, however, is likely to continue through 2000. Until full VIBRS compliance is achieved, the following strategies will be employed to bring some level of consistency to the data reported in the Vermont Crime Report:

1. The Vermont Crime Report will continue to report crime patterns using the summary based reporting format.
2. The Vermont Crime Report will publish only a single year's data in each edition. Year-to-year comparison's of crime data, except in the case of homicide, will be discouraged as being unreliable due to changes in reporting formats and procedures.