Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics: Their Proper Use

Since 1930, participating local, county, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies have voluntarily provided the nation with a reliable set of crime statistics through the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which administers the program, periodically releases the crime statistics to the public.

Usefulness of UCR Data

UCR crime statistics are used in many ways and serve many purposes. They provide law enforcement with data for uses that include, but are not limited to budget formulation, planning, resource allocation, and assessment of police operations to help address the crime problem at various levels. Chambers of commerce and tourism agencies examine these data to see how they impact the particular geographic jurisdictions they represent. Criminal justice researchers study the nature, cause, and movement of crime over time. Legislators draft anti-crime measures using the research findings and recommendations of law enforcement administrators and planners, as well as public and private entities concerned with crime problems. The news media use the crime statistics provided by the UCR Program to inform the public about the state of crime as it compares to the national level.

Pitfalls of Ranking

UCR data are sometimes used to compile rankings of individual jurisdictions and institutions of higher learning. These incomplete analyses have often created misleading perceptions, which adversely affect geographic entities and their residents. For this reason, the FBI has a long-standing policy against ranking participating law enforcement agencies on the basis of crime data alone. Despite repeated warnings against these practices, some data users continue to challenge and misunderstand this position.

Data users should not rank locales because there are many factors that cause the nature and type of crime to vary from place to place. UCR statistics include only jurisdictional population figures along with reported crime, clearance, or arrest data. Rankings ignore the uniqueness of each locale. Some factors that are known to affect the volume and type of crime occurring from place to place are:

- Population density and degree of urbanization.
- Variations in composition of the population, particularly youth concentration.
- Stability of the population with respect to residents; mobility, commuting patterns, and transient factors.
- Economic conditions, including median income, poverty level and job availability.
- Modes of transportation and highway systems.
- Cultural factors and educational, recreational, and religious characteristics.

- Family conditions with respect to divorce and family cohesiveness.
- Climate.
- Effective strength of law enforcement agencies.
- Administrative and investigative emphases on law enforcement.
- Policies of other components of the criminal justice system (i.e., prosecutorial, judicial, correctional, and probational).
- Citizens' attitudes toward crime.
- Crime reporting practices of the citizenry.

Ranking agencies based solely on UCR data has serious implications. For example, if a user wants to measure the effectiveness of a law enforcement agency, these measurements are not available. As a substitute, a user might list UCR clearance rates, rank them by agency, and attempt to infer the effectiveness of individual law enforcement agencies. This inference is flawed because all the other measures of police effectiveness were ignored. The nature of the offenses that were cleared must be considered as those cleared may not have been the most serious, like murder or rape. The agency's clearances may or may not result in conviction, the ultimate goal. The agency may make many arrests for Part II offenses, like drug abuse violations, which demonstrate police activity but are not considered in the clearance rate. The agency's available resources are also critical to successful operation, so its rate of officers to population and budget should be considered. The UCR clearance rate was simply not designed to provide a complete assessment of law enforcement effectiveness. In order to obtain a valid picture of an agency's effectiveness, data users must consider an agency's emphases and resources; and its crime, clearance, and arrest rates along with other appropriate factors.

Because of concern regarding the proper use of UCR data, the FBI has the following policies:

- The FBI does not analyze, interpret, or publish crime statistics based solely on a single-dimension interagency ranking.
- The FBI does not provide agency-based crime statistics to data users in a ranked format.
- When providing/using agency-oriented statistics, the FBI cautions and strongly discourages data users against using rankings to evaluate locales or the effectiveness of their law enforcement agencies.

Promoting Responsible Crime Analysis

For more information about the UCR Program, visit https://ucr.fbi.gov. For web assistance, please contact the Crime Statistics Management Unit of the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division at (304) 625-4830.