POLICE CHIEF
IACP

Technology

Are You Ready? How Norman, Oklahoma, Uses NIBRS

Jeffrey Fisher, Writer-Editor, Crime Data Modernization Team, FBI

The Norman, Oklahoma, Police Department (PD) has proactively upgraded its crime data from the Summary Reporting System (SRS) to the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and begun to submit NIBRS data. This move readies the Norman PD for the U.S.-wide transition to NIBRS-only data collection.

The Norman PD employs 168 officers and 63 civilian personnel.[1] Several crime analysts work for the Norman PD, including Jason Redden and Sergeant Gary Schmidt. Redden has analyzed crime data for the Norman PD for about 6 years; Schmidt is a crime analyst and computer forensics examiner who has worked in law enforcement for more than 20 years.

The Norman PD has searched for ways to make better policing decisions, reduce crime, and address challenges particular to its local community of approximately 120,000 residents and the large number of visitors to the area who attend the University of Oklahoma Sooners' home sports events. One challenge for Norman is the seasonally changing nature of crime in the area. Norman and its surrounding areas contain a large number of lakes and parks, which are recreational attractions. Especially during the summer months, Norman experiences an increase in visitor population drawn to nearby attractions like Little River State Park and Lake Thunderbird. Crimes in these recreational areas that involve visitors to the community increase in the summer, and NIBRS can help provide data for tracking the crime trends.

Upgrading to NIBRS

During the years Schmidt has been with the Norman PD, he has seen Norman make multiple upgrades to its crime data capabilities and hoped for the day when comprehensive incident-based reporting (IBR) could make better analysis of crime data possible. IBR is a method of compiling crime data into a database format, making it useful for searching, matching, and filtering data elements to answer a multitude of possible questions about crime. By contrast, the traditional SRS method of crime data is a simplistic tally of numbers of crimes, based on concepts and methods largely developed for paper systems in the 1920s and 1930s. Although IBR methods have an almost incalculably greater number of possible applications, the SRS method of crime data has historically remained popular because of its affordability and simplicity.

For years, the Norman PD had wanted to do better than SRS reporting but encountered challenges from its own technical capabilities and state-level systems. Schmidt had helped convert the Norman PD to an IBR-type system, but he still needed to manually convert the IBR data into SRS format for reporting to the state. In 2013, the Oklahoma Uniform Crime Reporting System had become ready to accept NIBRS data. Redden had begun to work for the Norman PD at about this time, and the Norman PD had begun to systematically use NIBRS data. At last, beginning in 2015, the Norman PD became able to submit NIBRS data through the state UCR Program.[2] That year, among the agencies the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) tracks as part of the Most in Population (MIP) group, the Norman PD was the first MIP agency in Oklahoma to transition to a new NIBRS-compatible records management system (RMS) and submit NIBRS data through the state.

These advances positioned the Norman PD to be a leader among law enforcement agencies in the area. As of the 2016 reporting year, within about 25 miles of Norman, 15 smaller cities like Noble and Purcell and six other agencies like Oklahoma City University and the McClain County Sheriff's Department also participated in NIBRS.[3]

Schmidt noted a challenge associated with the greater data detail capacity of NIBRS: A NIBRS-compatible RMS interface can contain many details. For officers or other personnel tasked with completing NIBRS reports, it is easy to overlook data inputs if they are not all visible onscreen or if the data entry screens all look alike. In addition, if data entry personnel need to manipulate the forms to enter data, users tend to forget to enter the necessary data elements, and, if data inputs are all the same color and layout, they may be easy to overlook. Schmidt's solution to this challenge was to use the customization features of the RMS software to make the interface easy, interactive, and interesting to use.

Benefiting from NIBRS

Research and Reporting

Analysts at the Norman PD use NIBRS data for several general types of functions, such as

- **weekly reports** about current patterns and emerging trends,
- **monthly staff briefings** to give perspective and situational awareness to leaders and administrators,
- **monthly forecasting reports** to project crime fluctuations and locations based on past data, and
- **tactical reports** about suspects and crime trends.

Redden sees value in NIBRS data for showing links between multiple offenses within an incident. Under SRS, the Hierarchy Rule counts only one offense—the most serious one— within a criminal incident. This means SRS cannot show links between different offenses. For example, if an offender begins to commit a robbery and then commits a homicide along with the robbery, then SRS would count only the homicide and ignore the fact that the incident began as a robbery. This prevents SRS from being useful in showing the link between the two offenses. But NIBRS can count up to 10 offenses per incident, making it useful for analyzing links between offenses. The strategic value of finding such links is that law enforcement agencies can potentially prevent some crimes by deterring others. In the example of homicides that result from robberies, police can potentially prevent homicides by deterring robberies with activities like routine targeted patrols. Thus, an agency can potentially double its effectiveness in such cases with strategies guided by NIBRS data.

Another way NIBRS has helped Norman PD is by making the police force more informed. The city has a limited staff for law enforcement, but NIBRS data can guide the police force to be more effective per officer. And even with the Norman PD's staffing limitations, some data show a reduction in crime under NIBRS. According to Redden and Schmidt, during the time Norman PD has been participating in NIBRS, the city has experienced an estimated reduction in crime by 8–13 percent per year for Part I crimes (homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson) and 4 percent for all crimes.

Real Examples

For the Norman PD, the main purpose of participating in NIBRS is to prevent crime. One example of how NIBRS has served this purpose is in helping Norman PD address a recent crime trend of thefts from unlocked vehicles. NIBRS data showed an increase in thefts from vehicles, plus incident-related details about when and where the thefts from vehicles were occurring. Based on these data, the Norman PD took a proactive approach to dealing with the problem by engaging with volunteers in the community, distributing informative flyers to tell residents to keep vehicles locked, and increasing targeted patrols. With these activities informed by NIBRS data, the Norman PD successfully impacted this crime trend.

NIBRS is not only useful for tracking large crime trends; it is helpful in resolving specific cases. In early 2018, Norman experienced a string of robberies. Based on NIBRS data, the Norman PD detected a set of common elements—such as items stolen, times of offenses, and location types targeted—to find a probable link between at least three of the robberies. And based on the data elements for offender characteristics like gender and height, the Norman PD was able to use NIBRS data to narrow the list of suspects.[4]

One example of the kind of crime trend Redden looks for is what kinds of offenses happen in different locations. A recent example of how NIBRS data help identify and address crime trends is a spike in the number of vehicle thefts from residential garages. Residents of Norman were leaving their cars unlocked inside their garages, and car thieves were using garage door remotes to access the garages and steal the cars. NIBRS helped reveal this trend through data elements pertaining to location types, offense types, and stolen property. Based on this knowledge, the Norman PD increased patrols in residential neighborhoods and engaged in public awareness activities to tell residents to keep their cars locked. The result was a decrease in the number of vehicle thefts. Under SRS, data would have revealed how many vehicle thefts

were happening—but not what the relevant factors and circumstances were. But with NIBRS data, the Norman PD was able to strategically deal with the situation and detect links between the offenses.

The Norman PD has also used NIBRS data to show how groups such as gangs can escalate the seriousness of their offenses over time. For example, a new gang may begin with burglaries and later escalate to robberies or homicides. NIBRS can help an agency identify and analyze this kind of trend with data elements related to gang involvement and offense types. In Norman, a new juvenile gang began committing nonviolent thefts but escalated to violent robberies. The Norman PD was able to use NIBRS data to demonstrate to the district attorney how such a progression of crimes can occur and gain the district attorney's agreement for strategies to deal with such crime-escalating groups.

Routine Uses

Not all strategic uses of NIBRS require complex, long-term analyses; some are more immediately useful. In Norman, Redden uses NIBRS data on a daily basis to help make routine police patrols more strategically effective by identifying neighborhoods troubled by crime.

NIBRS has also helped provide the Norman PD with information useful for daily tactical and operational planning, crime prevention, and public awareness. NIBRS does this by compiling crime data that analysts can use for identifying patterns and trends, information that is potentially useful for patrols and other types of police activities.

The Norman PD also uses NIBRS data to enhance its community engagement activities. Each year, the Norman PD conducts crime prevention socials with the community, and NIBRS data help residents understand the risks and accomplishments of crime prevention efforts. NIBRS data also enhance community awareness of crime and encourage community members to partner with the Norman PD to address crime. Additionally, Norman PD uses NIBRS data to inform and enhance the effectiveness of initiatives like the Crime Free Multi-Housing Program that develops partnerships between police and apartment communities and the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design strategy that considers environmental features like lighting and landscaping as factors in crime deterrence.[5]

The Time to Decide

The time for U.S. law enforcement agencies to transition to NIBRS is now. Agencies commonly need one to two years to make the transition from SRS reporting to NIBRS, and the FBI plans to transition to a NIBRS-only data collection in January 2021. If an agency does not transition to NIBRS by January 2021, the agency will not be able to have its crime statistics included in the FBI's annual publications of crime figures. Also, agencies should be aware that if they receive funding assistance based on SRS reporting and do not make the transition to NIBRS by 2021, they could lose the funding. The Norman PD has proactively placed itself ahead of this timetable and can be confident it will not experience gaps in its crime statistics and funding eligibility.

The FBI strongly encourages all other U.S. law enforcement agencies to make sure they are prepared for the NIBRS transition. Agencies can cooperate with each other to share resources and advice about the NIBRS transition, and agencies can contact their state UCR Program or find helpful resources at www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/nibrs.

Jeffrey Fisher is a writer-editor with the FBI's Crime Data Modernization Team. He has a master of science degree from West Virginia University, and he has worked for the FBI for 21 years as a forensics expert, manager, and writer. He can be reached by email through the FBI's NIBRS unit at UCR-NIBRS@fbi.gov.

Notes:

[1] FBI, "2017 Crime in the United States: Tables: Oklahoma Full-Time Law Enforcement Employees by City," (Clarksburg, WV: Department of Justice, 2018).

[2] Gary Schmidt (sergeant, Norman Police Department), NIBRS Training Seminar (St. Louis, MO: September 21, 2017).

[3] FBI, "NIBRS 2016" (Clarksburg, WV: Department of Justice, November 27, 2017).

[4] Gary Schmidt and Jason Redden (analyst, Norman Police Department), teleconference with author, May 21, 2018.

[5] Norman Police Department, "Crime Free Multi-Housing" (Norman, OK: City of Norman, 2016).

Please cite as

Jeffrey Fisher, "Are You Ready? How Norman, Oklahoma, Uses NIBRS," *Police Chief Online*, September 4, 2019.