

Report of the Bureau of Justice Statistics Subcommittee to the OJP Science Advisory Board

Subcommittee Members: Richard Rosenfeld, Chair; William Barron; James Lepkowsky; Colin Loftin; Elizabeth Stasny

The subcommittee has held several conference calls and face-to-face meetings over the past year and-a-half. Initial meetings established an agenda for the committee's work centering on the following issues:

- (1) the current redesign of the National Crime Victimization Survey and prospects for the development of small-area estimates;
- (2) several initiatives regarding UCR crime and arrest data;
- (3) enhancing the use of BJS datasets by graduate students and early-career researchers; and
- (4) BJS staffing needs.

This report summarizes the subcommittee's general overview of BJS functions and quality and developments in the issue areas enumerated above. We conclude with a statement regarding the critical need to appraise the resources needed for the BJS to maintain its quality and essential scientific functions in a highly uncertain fiscal climate.

OVERVIEW

The core mission of the BJS is to compile and disseminate statistical data on the several components of the criminal justice system in the United States. The BJS currently maintains a large portfolio of criminal justice data series encompassing criminal victimization, law enforcement, adjudication, and corrections. In addition, the agency supports state-level data collections and, through the National Criminal History Improvement Program, provides direct awards and technical assistance to improve state criminal history registries and related records. The BJS also routinely responds to data inquiries and requests from other federal agencies, state and local criminal justice officials, Congress, and the White House. In the subcommittee's view, the BJS performs its statistical mission efficiently and effectively. Under the agency's current administration, it has expanded its functions in vital areas, such as enhancing the utility of data compiled by the FBI's UCR program, while maintaining the quality and timeliness of its other data products. The expanded scope of BJS programs is especially noteworthy given the budgetary and resource constraints the agency faces. The subcommittee therefore proposes no fundamental changes in BJS functions or programs. The challenge to the agency and the OJP is to maintain the high quality of these functions and programs overtime through transitions in leadership and given the prospect of continuing budgetary constraints.

NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMIZATION SURVEY

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is the nation's major source of data on criminal victimization compiled from representative population surveys. Pursuant to recommendations from a National Research Council study of the NCVS,¹ the BJS has embarked on several research projects to identify ways to control the costs of the survey while maintaining its statistical integrity and utility. In April of 2012, the BJS added to its public website an interactive analysis tool allowing users to explore NCVS data by victim, household, and incident characteristics.² The subcommittee has asked the BJS to consider the prospects for releasing subnational estimates of criminal victimization and related data, in line with a study commissioned by the BJS to explore options for local area estimates.³ The subcommittee will continue to monitor BJS activities to produce subnational estimates of criminal victimization.

UNIFORM CRIME REPORT INITIATIVES

In coordination with the FBI, the BJS has embarked on several initiatives to improve the accessibility and analytic utility UCR crime and arrest data. The BJS has for several years provided an interactive tool on its public website, recently added to the FBI's UCR website, enabling users to explore UCR summary crime data for the nation, states, and cities. It has added a comparable tool for analyzing national and local arrest counts and trends, by demographic characteristics of arrestees.⁴ The subcommittee applauds these efforts and has urged the BJS to consider providing timely national UCR crime rate estimates on a sub-annual basis, perhaps for a representative sample of agencies with a record of timely and complete data reporting. We will continue to monitor BJS activities regarding this and related uses of UCR data.

ENHANCING DATA USE

Early in its deliberations, the subcommittee asked the BJS to consider expanding access to its datasets for research by advanced graduate students and early-career researchers. In concert with BJS staff, the subcommittee submitted a proposal to the American Society of Criminology to establish a joint ASC-BJS program enabling students and early-career researchers to conduct research using BJS in-house data under the guidance of BJS personnel. The proposal was approved on a one-year trial basis by the ASC Executive Board in May, 2012, and a committee consisting of Colin Loftin (chair), Rick Rosenfeld, and Ronet Bachman was established to develop application procedures and recruit applicants for the coming academic year. The committee is currently conferring with BJS staff on application guidelines.

BJS STAFFING NEEDS

¹ NORC, 2008, *Surveying Victims: Options for Conducting the National Crime Victimization Survey* (http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12090).

² NCVS Victimization Analysis Tool (<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=nvat>).

³ Westat, 2010, *NCVS Task 4 Report: Summary of Options Relating to Local Area Estimation* (http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/westat_lae_5-19-10.pdf).

⁴ Uniform Crime Reports Data Tool (<http://www.bjs.gov/ucrdata/>); Arrest Data Analysis Tool (<http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=datool&surl=/arrests/index.cfm>).

At the January, 2012, meeting of the SAB the subcommittee raised concerns about staffing needs at the senior statistician level at the BJS. Since then, the BJS has been permitted to search for a senior statistician. The subcommittee will continue to monitor BJS staffing needs, especially at critical senior positions, and alert the SAB if staffing shortages begin to compromise the ability of the agency to carry out its core functions.

Like other federal agencies, the BJS faces the prospect of budget cuts that may undermine its ability to effectively execute its mission of maintaining and improving the nation's criminal justice statistical infrastructure. Under its current leadership, the BJS has undertaken important new initiatives while enhancing many of its ongoing programs. The subcommittee regards the quality and scope of these efforts as a model of scientific enterprise, integrity, and independence. The challenge is to sustain the current level and quality of effort as the OJP and BJS acquire new leadership and must contend with an uncertain fiscal future. The subcommittee will continue to monitor the agency's operations and plans in light of possible reductions in resources that could jeopardize its vitally important scientific mission, and stands ready to offer assistance as needed.