

DAAG Jim Burch interview with outgoing Bureau of Justice Statistics Director Jim Lynch transcript.

Hello friends and colleagues. I'm Jim Burch for the Office of Justice Programs. And welcome to another edition of OJP's Justice Podcast Series. Today, we invite all of you to join in our conversation with Director James Lynch of the Bureau of Justice Statistics as we discuss with him a new initiative called the National Crime Statistics Exchange or NCS-X. NCS-X is designed to build a statistical system that can generate detailed national estimates of the volume and characteristics of crimes known to law enforcement and to return meaningful analytic information to law enforcement policymakers and criminal justice planners on topics that are important in 21st century justice. At the core of the NCS-X concept is improved use of the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System, otherwise known as NIBRS, which has capabilities that far exceed those of the traditional uniform crime reporting processes and system.

Jim, early on in your tenure here as the Bureau of Justice Statistics Director, you said that one of your priorities was to be able to use police administrative records systems or police records systems to improve data collection on incidents of crime and recidivism. Using these systems could improve the data that we have, reduce reporting burden on the local agencies, and reduce collection cost at the national level. Can you tell us a little bit about where do we stand today on implementing that approach?

Jim, really it's been not just in police administrative records but in administrative records generally throughout the criminal justice system. I think we've passed the day where we can collect statistical data in the traditional manner. We have dedicated data collectors, dedicated interviewers and so on, going out and extracting information from records systems. So, I think we just--we just can't afford that anymore. And the good the news is that--is that after years of effort by OJP and others, there's been a measurable increase in the quality and availability of operational data, automated operational data in criminal justice agencies. And I think generally, that's where BJS has, in the recent past and I hope in the future will continue to build. And I think one of the areas is recidivism data with the criminal history data which is derived from the police. But that's an operational data system that's used for the gun checks and other purposes. And this is going to be a tremendous improvement in our ability to look at recidivism of state, federal, and local prisoners. And so I think we've got strong efforts there that I can explain in more detail, if you want. The second area is obviously the police administrative records both in the booking statistics, which are in the criminal history records. But also in NCS-X, which is a new program that we've begun to create an incident level system of police administrative records on crimes known to the police. I think there's efforts in the court area where we're trying to do the National Judicial Reporting Program, where we're going to use extracting from information systems in the court, we're assessing the feasibility of that. And the same thing with the National Corrections Reporting Program where we have actual data flowing from the Management Information Systems in correctional agencies to look at admissions and releases to prisons. So, there's a whole panoply of sort of efforts to take operational data and use them for statistical purposes.

Well, that sounds exciting. So, one of the things that you said that the operational data or operations data has improved substantially in recent years, and I assume that goes hand in hand with improved systems as well, and the system's capabilities.

Yes, I mean, this is--at this point this is my--this is my assumption and I rely on people like Paul Wormeli and others who've great experience in this area. But as part of the NCS-X which hopefully we'll talk later on, we're actually going to go out and start documenting some of that. I mean, some of it's documented in the Law Enforcement Management and Information Administration statistics that we keep, where there have been a tremendous increase in the availability of information systems of all kinds especially among the police. But I think that in the NCS-X, we're going to really have to go out and seriously assess the improvements that have been made. So we'll have a lot more information. But all that we know at this point is that these information systems have increased in their accuracy and their availability and so on. So, I think we're in pretty safe grounds on that.

Yeah. We've got some powerful tools that are at our disposal today that we didn't have years ago. But one of the things that you mentioned is, I think, one of the most innovative and exciting ideas that I've heard in many years here, and that is the National Crime Statistics Exchange or NCS-X for short and you mentioned just briefly what that was. Can you talk a little bit more about what that is for our listeners?

Yeah, I think, NCS-X is a program that we began to explore, I guess, about a year and a half ago. And it's basically a program that will give us a nationally representative system of police administrative records on offenses known to the police. It completes NIBRS, which was an effort that was undertaken by the FBI in the '90s, actually it began in the '80s. But the FBI realized that we did not have the kind of information on crimes known to the police that we needed as a nation. The Uniform Crime Report Summary System is just aggregated counts of crimes at a jurisdiction level. And there's very strong documentation way back in the blueprint of 1985 which basically said we need much more detailed information. We have that information at the local level, we just need to aggregate that at the national level. I think, what we're trying to do is restart that process again with a few tweaks, that is to say, one of them being sample-based implementation. It's very hard to implement this kind of system in 18,000 police agencies, which is what we have. And I think that what we really want to do and what NIBRS prescribed way back in the 1980s was that you take a sample of agencies, you concentrate on recruiting those agencies into this incident-based system, you extract the information from their management information systems, and you give them a reason to participate. So, we're going back to this effort with these goals in mind. And I think that we stand a much better chance in taking this approach to getting a nationally representative system. Once we have that, I have no doubt that people will recognize the importance of this and that it'll go to much broader implementation beyond that sample in pretty quick order, I think. Certainly, the responses we've gotten from the Hill and other places when we've actually showed them the NIBRS data for the jurisdictions that it's available. And they're very impressed and they just say, why don't we have this everywhere? And we don't have it everywhere because the implementation stalled at some point and now, NCS-X is an opportunity to revive that, I think, and show people what we can do.

Well, that's fantastic. So, you've talked a little bit here about how this--the NCS-X system is really, as I understand it, is totally complementary to the FBI's National Incident-Based

Reporting System or NIBRS. But can you talk for a minute about how this is similar to or different from your agency's National Crime Victimization Survey or NCVS, as we know it? Yeah, that's a good point. I think that the NCVS or the National Crime Surveys when it started 30 years ago or 40 years ago at this point. I think that this is our only source of incident-level data on crime. Because we can disaggregate it, we know things about the victim, we know things about the offender, we know things about the follow-up and response that had occurred to these crimes, where it occurred, when it occurred. And all this kind of detailed information is the only source that we've had because the Uniform Crimes Summary Report is just that count. So, I think bringing on something like NIBRS or I should say NCS-X is a tremendous benefit because now you have an additional source of data that has a lot of rich information on the incident itself that can be aggregated and disaggregated. For instance, you know, OVW is being reauthorized and people couldn't tell you really how many victims were women. You could tell it from the National Crime Survey, but when--the NCVS is a sample-based survey, so it's only going to include a sample. And for very rare crimes that people are interested in, you know, crimes that involved, for instance, an assault that involved an elderly person, for example, there are not that many of them. So, when you sample--when you use a sample-based, you'll get a representation of that, but it'll be--there will only be a few hundred cases or 60 or 70 cases. And what you get from the NIBRS and what you get from NCS-X would be thousands of those cases. So, your ability to look at it is much--is much greater. You know and so--and I think so you really need that rich source of incident-level data that is not restrained by the sample. And this is really important now that crime has dropped so low. 1993 crime was 9.5 per thousand violent crime, now it's two per thousand, that's how much crime has dropped. Now that's great news for the society, but it's not wonderful for sample-based data collection like the NCVS. So, we need this incident-level data from the police to really give us a robust picture. And eventually the two should merge, so that we should be able to have an estimate that comes from both the NCVS and from NCS-X. Because what you'll be able to do is essentially in the--in the technical aspects, a dual-frame sample where you interview the victims from the police records, from an incident level and you interview the ones from the household survey and you put them together. So much stronger sort of. So, eventually as the survey industry becomes more and more difficult, as the idea of getting responses from--gets more and more difficult and it will, I think we need to rely on a composite and that's what we're moving towards with this. Not next year, and not the next 10 years but the next 15 years. So, it's more important than most people realize that we get this robust incident-level data from the police. It's important for our entire statistical system. It will bolster the NCVS.

Right. And just to make sure that our listeners are following this and you mentioned that we should merge the two and then later you talked about a composite measure. The way I understand that is that you're not suggesting that one becomes the other or overtakes the other, you're suggesting we use them both because...

Oh, absolutely.

...they're two different types of measures, they're both...

Absolutely.

...needed, right.

Absolutely. And that's what you want. Just like the unemployment, you know, they have a survey-based indicator from the current population survey which gets unemployment. And they also have an administrative data collection which--on filings for unemployment. It's the same kind of thing. They use them both, because the errors that affect one don't affect the other. You know, and each has a sort of capability that the other one doesn't have. So, the NCVS will always include crimes not reported to the police which we need to know. But we need this help in the crimes that are reported to the police. So, I think they'll not replace each other. You don't want to go back to the days where you have only one indicator of something as complex as crime. You want at least--at least two or maybe more.

One of the things that I heard you mention briefly here already and I know from reading a little bit about NCS-X that--I think, one of the things that's most exciting about this is that it has a dual purpose. And the other part of the purpose that we have not talked a lot about yet is that it's to return meaningful analytic information to law enforcement agencies that provide data into NIBRS, policymakers and criminal justice planners. Can you talk a little bit about how you expect that to happen within NCS-X.

Yeah, I think this is--in some ways this is projection on my part. I think we have some work under way which hopefully we'll talk about in a minute, as part of NCS-X that will explore this particular issue in much greater detail. But if you think about it, there are a variety of ways we think that NCS-X will help this analytical capability. One is that it will provide incident-level data across a much wider array of police agencies so that analysts who want to think about, well how do--how do jurisdictions with different policies and approaches, how do they respond and what success have they had? They'll be able to use that so that they'll not only have their own data, but they'll have data from other places in a similar format that they can begin to use and explore. I think also there's the idea of adding value to the data. So in some cases, we'll be able to add value, so for example, crimereports.org takes small agency data and geocodes it basically. There may be some possibility for that kind of thing, or just merging it with other data that we have ourselves, like LIMS or the Census of Law Enforcement, all of this stuff adds value to this information for the analyst. And finally, I think that the other way we would do is actually improving analytical capability in a sense of developing sort of templates. Things that, especially for small organizations, software and other things that would give them routine reports that large agencies have because of their ability and staff that these small agencies might not get, so templates for certain types of reporting, certain types of analysis. This kind of thing could be provided more centrally in a cloud or in some other aspect that we could develop, I think, as part of this. Because we need those quid pro quos to keep people engaged. And so, the other thing is--in building capability and I think this is for large organizations as well as small, is the idea of trained crime analysts. I know that BJA has got some efforts underway to do that. I think we--that would fit full square in terms of what we're thinking about, in terms of quid pro quos, that people who participate in NCS-X get scholarships or other sort of opportunity to go to these training opportunities. I know when I was talking to Commissioner Ramsey a few months ago, he was saying--he's having a hard time. That's Philly, that's a major city. He's having a hard time finding crime analysts. So I think all of those things are possibilities, I think, for building

analysis in the process of building NCS-X. Some of it is direct information use, other is just building capacity.

Yeah, and you mentioned that you had talked to Chief Ramsey about this, or you've talked to him about related issues. Have you talked to other national law enforcement organizations about this concept and are they supporting it?

Yeah, yeah, I think that--I think we've talked about--actually, the way we've approached the other law enforcement agencies has been not so much from the exchange end at this point, but from the conceptual end. You know, because we realized that when we get a system of nationality representative incident-level data from police administrative records, describing offenses known to the police, we're not ready to use them. You know, for 83 years we've been using the index crime classification so that the--when we get the opportunity to have much more detailed information on crime we're not--we haven't given a thought to, how do you use it? You know, I mean if somebody will say, oh, we'll do the Uniform Crime classification again, that's what they did with NIBRS that's--nothing has come out of that. No new indicators have come out of that, even though it's been partially in existence for 20 years. So it's time to think about what do you do with this information once you have it, that makes it meaningful and so after talking to Commissioner Ramsey and some other folks at PERF and IACP, it became clear that we need to do some conceptual work and that's why we've created this crime indicators working group which is--has representation from IACP, from major city chiefs, from PERF, from major county sheriffs I think in that--where they'll begin to discuss the idea of what do we do with incident-level data in terms of indicators of crime? What's important to them? You know, it's easy to say let a thousand flowers bloom and we can do all sorts of analysis with it, and you can. But the question is what 10 or 12 indicators, what 7 indicators would you want? What tells you that the crime problem in your jurisdiction is going up, getting worse, getting better, getting different? So I think it's kind of exciting to get the chiefs involved and there is representation from the major organizations to finally try and get some consistency between our national indicators, which are the Uniform Crime Reports, and what they do in localities. I mean that's--they have much more information. They've had it for a long time. And so I think in a lot of ways the inconsistency between our national indicators and the local indicators are really causing the chiefs pain. You know, they're asked to explain themselves against a standard that has very little relevance.

Right.

Well, not very little. It's--homicide is homicide. But I mean not as much relevance as it could have. So, that's how we're bringing the organizations in. I think that--I'm very excited to see what kind of wisdom they have. It's been a long time since they've been asked. And so--and that lays the groundwork. That's the way, I think, we get the chiefs to say, okay maybe this can do me some good, especially the large city chiefs, to begin at that conceptual level. And then as that progresses, as that--those discussions--well this is the first meeting, I hope to have three of the chiefs, then at the same time we do our feasibility testing in NCS-X so that when the chiefs are done with their work, we're ready with our work saying we promise this kind of system. We made these assumptions, now we've tested them and they're viable or we had to change them and here's what it looks like now. So about 18 months out, I think those two tracks will converge.

We have reached out to the--to the--to the chiefs to get their feedback at this conceptual level where I think it's--at this point in time, that's the place where they can contribute. Also the FBI is coming as well so that's--everybody is in the tent.

Good. And it sounds like you've engaged folks about as early as you possibly could on this, which is a great sign. And you--I heard that or maybe even read in some of the NCS-X materials that you've been working with Global Justice Information Sharing Advisory Committee, which is the federal advisory committee that OJP supports for information sharing recommendations to the department.

You know, and I think, you know, they understand the problems, and they understand the potential and they understand that it's essential I think...

You can't get a better sounding board than the men and women that are serving on the Global Advisory Committee represented, as I understand it almost 40 national criminal justice organizations. So we can't do--we can't do much better than that. But let me--let me ask you, what--you've talked a little bit about some of the steps that you anticipate in the next several months, 18 months at one point but at what point do you expect NCS-X to become operational?

I think we can do this in about 3 years, around 2015, 2016 depending upon the, you know, accuracy of our estimates and we'll know that pretty quickly. I think that if management information systems are as available as we think they are, if the software is available and I think it is, then I think this can move pretty quickly. I understood you to say that, you know, we've got to make sure that we do this upfront work correctly and that we conceptualize this correctly and get the input that's needed. But once we do that, we anticipate a 3-year horizon for implementation is reasonable.

Right.

So, how--this is--we've got great information here today on the NCS-X and the use of administrative records systems to complete some of the national data collections that you've worked on. How do these types of initiatives foreshadow the future of the Bureau of Justice Statistics as a statistical agency?

Well, I think that, you know, for many years BJS was flat funded at \$34 million forever and the cost went up, the funds did not, you know. I came here in a small window when--because of the National Academy Report and other forces set aside that Laurie was able to put in place and other things, that we had an opportunity to do some things. We had an opportunity to fill in the gaps in the funnel that we haven't adequately--and one of them is the police administrative records, others are the pretrial process in the courts. We have these--this process, I think. So, I think that we had this opportunity to do some things and we've taken it. You know, how long that will last, no one knows. You know, and hopefully for a long time because we have a lot of work to do. But I think that BJS is--as a statistical agency is going to keep its eye on this business of filling in the funnel that's--I mean and I think one of the most important things for a statistical agency is to look down the road and I think we're--we've done that and I think we're going to continue to do that. Always taking the opportunity, you know, whatever the immediate contingency is to use that to complement our long-term plan, I think, and so, that's one of the

things. I think the other thing is that we're always going to be more and more reliant on operational data as we've--as we've seen and so, we have to save our resources for NCVS and other traditional collections, but I think we need these operational data. And that means that we're going to have to develop technology which I think Howard Snyder is already doing in the recidivism area. We--where we automatically code these data so we don't have to reinvent the wheel or we--and I think we have to establish a relationship with operational agencies that will allow us to collaborate with them in improving the quality of those operational data. When you see criminal history data with very funny things in them and you will only see them if you do statistical analysis comparing across cases, as opposed to operational use of those data, you'll find errors. Those errors affect people's lives, I think. So, I think that there's an opportunity here for--instead of these two systems statistical and operational passing each other, to really get together and be mutually beneficial to one other. I think these are the kinds of things that BJS is going to have to work out in the future and I think we're already thinking about that. So, I think in a lot of ways BJS going forward, if we have the kind of support that we've had which has been unusual, I think we will be able to fill in a lot of those gaps and also become much more efficient. That's how we'll be able to do it, by taking advantage of these operational data, by making sure they're of good quality, by establishing the institutional arrangements with the police and with the corrections people, so that we can work together as opposed to sort of at odds.

Sure. Because I think it's a--it's a great point. We have to--we have to be thoughtful about how we do these things so that we can ensure that if it--if it does offer the potential, that we'll see that success and we won't jeopardize it.

Absolutely. That's it.

And so--and this has been fascinating to hear about your use of administrative records systems and about, I think, what is truly an innovation in NCS-X and how it relates to the FBI's National Incident-Based--Incident-Based Reporting System. I would imagine that if folks want to learn more about NCS-X and follow the progress of it, they can do that on your website [bjs.gov](http://bjs.gov).

So, Director James Lynch, thank you very much and wish you all the best in your future endeavors at the University of Maryland.

Thanks, Jim. I appreciate it.

Thanks.

Well, thank you for taking the time to join us in this conversation. If you found the discussion interesting we encourage you to visit the OJP website for further information and additional podcasts at [www.ojp.gov](http://www.ojp.gov). Additionally, please note that the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the National Institute of Justice also offer podcasts on their own websites, which are [www.bja.gov](http://www.bja.gov) and [www.nij.gov](http://www.nij.gov), respectively. Both of these websites can also be linked to from the Office of Justice Programs' main website. From all of us here at OJP, thank you for tuning in to today's podcast. We hope you'll join us again for another edition of OJP's Justice Podcast Series.