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Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Role in Criminal Justice Data Collection and Dissemination

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), established in 1979, is an agency within the Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Justice Programs (OJP). Its mission is “to collect, analyze, publish, and disseminate information on crime, criminal offenders, victims of crime, and the operation of justice systems at all levels of government. These data are critical to federal, state, and local policymakers in combating crime and ensuring that justice is both efficient and evenhanded.” BJS facilitates its mission by operating statistical, grant-making, and dissemination activities. Many BJS projects involve a combination of these activities. As debates over criminal justice in the United States continue to unfold, policymakers may further examine BJS’ role in data collection and dissemination to help inform these discussions.

Statistical Activities

BJS publishes *annual data* on crime victimization, corrections populations, and federal criminal offenders and case processing. The Criminal Justice Statistics Program is the base program through which BJS seeks to achieve its mission.

BJS also publishes *periodic data* on issues such as the administration of law enforcement agencies and correctional facilities, state court case processing, prosecutorial practices and policies, characteristics of correctional populations, justice-system expenditures and employment, and special studies on criminal justice issues. For instance, the Survey of State Attorneys General Offices was specifically designed to collect data on special topics over which state Attorneys General have jurisdiction, such as human trafficking and white collar crime.

Grant Activities

BJS administers a number of grant programs broadly aimed at enhancing the completeness, timeliness, accuracy, and dissemination of criminal justice data. These include grants to support programs for data collection and processing as well as statistical and methodological research. Grants can support state, local, or tribal governments, for profit and nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher education. For instance, the State Justice Statistics Program for Statistical Analysis Centers supports collection, analysis, and dissemination of statistical information on crime and criminal justice at the state and local levels, and the National Census of Victim Service Providers funds data collection with research partners on the availability and use of services targeted at supporting victims of crime or abuse.

Dissemination Activities

BJS supports several programs, in some cases in partnership with agencies such as the National Institute of

Justice, that facilitate its mission to disseminate information on crime and criminal justice.

The National Criminal Justice Reference Service provides access to BJS and other OJP reports as well as to information specialists who can assist with criminal justice statistics and data.

The National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD) is a source of archived datasets (from DOJ agencies as well as from scholars and researchers) on crime and criminal justice. It highlights data relating to national criminal justice statistics, such as data from the National Crime Victimization Survey and the Annual Survey of Jails, as well as to special topics such as gangs, terrorism, and hate crimes.

The Federal Justice Statistics Resource Center compiles data from BJS’ Federal Justice Statistics Program on suspects, defendants, and federal prisoners processed in the federal criminal justice system. It also has a Federal Criminal Case Processing Statistics data tool to help users analyze these data.

BJS also supports the Infobase of State Activities and Research, which is maintained by the Justice Research and Statistics Association. It contains information about the research, activities, and publications of the various state Statistical Analysis Centers, which conduct research and analyze statistics on criminal justice issues at the state and local levels.

Cross-Cutting Data Efforts

As noted, BJS’ base program is the Criminal Justice Statistics Program, which collects data on corrections, the federal justice system, tribal crime and justice, law enforcement, prosecution and the judiciary, and victimization. BJS also participates in activities related to data collection and improvement outside of its base program. These activities may include collaborations or grants with outside entities, such as the National Crime Statistics Exchange Initiative (NCS-X), the National Criminal History Improvement Program (NCHIP), the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), the Record Improvement Program (NARIP), and the Prison Rape Prevention and Prosecution Program.

As part of these programs, BJS uses several modes of data collection including both BJS-managed collections and those completed by outside agencies and grantees. BJS directly administers several studies; some of these are conducted annually (e.g., the Annual Survey of Jails) and others periodically (e.g., Census of Local Jails). BJS also

receives and analyzes data collected by outside agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys, the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, the U.S. Sentencing Commission, and the Bureau of Prisons.

BJS publications often lag by a year or more after data collection, which is typical for work with large datasets that require careful cleaning and analysis. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) collects nationwide crime statistics each year—starting in 2021, this is conducted through its National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)—and the publication of these data typically occurs by the fall of the following year. The delay on data releases and publications vary at BJS. For instance, BJS’ releases during the first five months of 2021 have reported on data collected between 2000 and 2020. During the remainder of 2021, BJS expects to publish products and third-party reports from data collections that occurred between 2012 and 2020.

Potential Barriers to Data Collection

BJS has broad authority to collect, analyze, and disseminate information and statistics on crime and criminal justice. It may also make grants to or contract with outside entities to help carry out these activities. Nonetheless, BJS has received criticism that its data collection efforts do not capture the full scope of crime and functions of the criminal justice system and that data and related analyses might not be made available in a timely manner. Statutory authorities do not appear to be the barrier to data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Rather, some barriers may include funding, priorities, and hurdles to establishing memoranda of agreement (MOA) with relevant entities.

Funding

Although annual BJS funding has fluctuated, it has remained around \$44.0 million annually over the past decade. Congress provided \$45.0 million for BJS for FY2021 through the Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260). A report from the Institute for Excellence in Government concluded that federal investment in BJS is not sufficient to meet its responsibilities and assessed that this investment is not equal to that made in other federal statistical agencies such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In addition to BJS’ own budget, those of partner agencies and organizations may ultimately affect the availability and completeness of BJS statistics on crime and criminal justice. Many federal crime data collections, including those directed by BJS, rely on the voluntary participation of state, local, and tribal governments and agencies. Data collection activities, specifically those that are perceived by these entities to be difficult or costly, can take a back seat to state and local concerns.

Data Collection Priorities

BJS collects data about a broad array of topics related to the criminal justice system in the United States and Indian country. This includes information on incidences of crime; offenders and victims of crime; operations of criminal

justice agencies, courts, and law enforcement; jails and other correctional facilities; capital punishment and deaths while in the custody of juvenile and criminal justice entities; parole and recidivism; firearms; appeals; juvenile justice; and tribal justice.

BJS notes that it prioritizes using its base funding to accomplish the following goals: collecting, analyzing, and disseminating reliable and objective statistics on the United States’ criminal justice system; supporting state and local jurisdictions in improving their justice information systems; collaborating with other government agencies and organizations to develop standards for justice statistics; and assessing the availability and adequacy of crime-related data as well as opportunities to improve data collection and analyses.

BJS does not collect, analyze, and disseminate data on every criminal justice topic. And, initiating or expanding BJS’ work in particular criminal justice areas to fill these gaps could be a significant undertaking that may require additional funding or a diversion of resources from existing projects. Some have expressed concern that BJS funding is already insufficient to carry out current data collection, analysis, and dissemination duties in a timely manner and that reported staffing shortages may contribute to this lag.

MOA Challenges

As noted, BJS may make grants to or enter into contracts or agreements with outside entities to help carry out data collection and analysis. BJS may also request information and data from federal agencies as needed to carry out the agency’s duties, and these agencies are required to provide the necessary information to BJS. For instance, under this authority BJS entered into an MOA with the FBI to establish a BJS website containing the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program data. The agreement allowed for a publicly available UCR Data Tool that facilitates the analysis of UCR data in furtherance of BJS’ mission.

Some have suggested that BJS establish MOA with federal agencies other than those with a traditional criminal justice role in order to get a more comprehensive view of specific criminal justice issue areas, such as white collar crime. Certain crimes can involve criminal, civil, and regulatory violations, and a comprehensive understanding of these crimes might benefit from enforcement data in these various realms. Establishing MOAs with agencies for sharing data could run up against certain hurdles such as agencies’ reluctance to share data, agencies’ concerns over risk from external analysis of their data, prioritization of the data sharing project, concerns about budgetary costs involved in a data sharing project, challenges surrounding establishing a BJS database to receive and analyze the data, and concerns over data security, among others.

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