

# Crime Measurement in the United States

Janet Lauritsen  
University of Missouri-St. Louis

## TWO KEY SOURCES OF DATA

**1. Uniform Crime Reporting Program** - Data from local police departments forwarded to FBI (voluntary system)

- Summary Reporting System (1930-2020) - Total counts for 10 offense categories, arrest counts for 22 additional offenses

- National Incident Based Reporting System (1991-present; NIBRS only beginning January 1, 2021) – Incident details for 52 offense categories, arrest for 10 additional offenses

**2. National Crime Victimization Surveys** (1973-present) – Data from nationally-representative, ongoing sample survey (ages 12+). Measures violent and property crime victimization, plus additional victimizations, including crimes not reported to law enforcement.

# Advantages and Disadvantages of Key Crime Data Sources

## 1. Uniform Crime Reporting Program

**Advantages:** Jurisdictional-level information, permits comparisons across cities, states, etc.

**Disadvantages:** Limited to crimes that are reported to, and recorded by police; participation varies across agencies; timeliness

## 2. National Crime Victimization Surveys

**Advantages:** Includes crimes reported and not reported to police; includes types of crime not in the former UCR (e.g., stalking, identity theft); incorporates periodic supplements on topics such as school crime, and police-public contacts; includes more detailed sociodemographic information about victims

**Disadvantages:** Sample design excludes some population groups; jurisdictional-level comparisons not readily available; timeliness

## Beyond the Two Key Data Sources

Much less data is available for non-“street” crimes such as:

- Crimes against businesses or organizations
- Crimes by businesses
- Crimes against the environment or animals
- Fraud against government agencies
- Illegal acts by persons in positions of authority
- Crimes associated with other criminal activities
- Unlawful possession, use, or trafficking of weapons, drugs
- Customs and revenue violations.
- Prostitution and pornography offenses.
- Terrorism-related actions
- Illegal disruptions of infrastructure

# Crime measurement challenges vary by type of crime

## - Violent incident



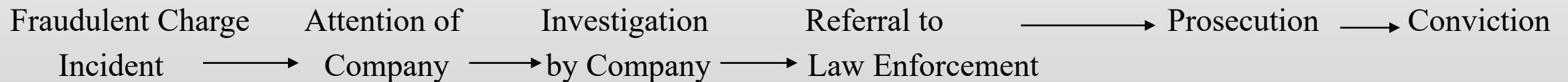
## - Healthcare fraud



## - Illegal dumping/pollution



## - Credit card fraud



# Alternative Data Beyond Administrative Records and Surveys

## **Global Terrorism Database** (<https://start.umd.edu/gtd/>)

- Open-source data from media outlets used as first-step input, not added to the database until verified by staff.

## **The Gun Violence Archive** (<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>)

- Lethal and nonlethal shootings (though not necessarily “crime”)

## **The Guardian** (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/series/counted-us-police-killings>)

- Persons killed by police (though not necessarily “crime”)

Crowd-sourced data can be useful for these types of incidents because most terrorists seek publicity, and because many shootings become known to media.

Modernizing the  
Nation's Crime  
Statistics  
Report 1: Defining  
and Classifying  
Crime  
Report 2: New  
Systems for  
Measuring Crime

Selected  
conclusions

- Depiction of “Crime in the United States” is incomplete without reference to *all* offense types.
- No single database/data collection type can cover full range of crime (or measure it well). A system of data collection efforts is necessary.
- Different “counting” rules will be needed for some crime types (e.g., stalking, computer attacks, environmental crimes).
- Stronger federal coordination and governance is necessary for measuring crime beyond UCR and NCVS crime types.



## Data Equity Issues

- Neglect of measuring many crime types beyond those available in the UCR and NCVS has produced an incomplete and biased picture of who commits offenses and who experiences the greatest harms from violations of the law.
- NCVS redesign currently underway will offer more detail about victims that will further inform the experiences of vulnerable groups.
- NIBRS data will offer more detail about victims and offenses than the prior UCR summary system allowing valuable comparisons of new offenses across jurisdictions.