

The Center for Just Journalism

A Journalist's  
Guide to the  
*FBI's 2021 Crime  
Statistics*

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**This fall, the FBI will release data on 2021 crime trends. This release will come at a critical time, just a few weeks before an election in which political candidates are using scare tactics about crime in their campaigns, misinformation about crime abounds, and people are looking for effective solutions to address violence in their communities.**

This release would be high-stakes no matter what, but some aspects of this year's data heighten the need for careful media coverage. This year's data will be different from previous years' because of a recent transition to a new data reporting system. Some of these differences could drive further confusion and misperceptions about crime trends. Media coverage of the data can provide the information that people need to accurately interpret the data and situate it in a historic context. This guide provides background on the changes to this year's FBI crime data, along with bigger picture context on the challenges associated with using crime data as a public safety metric.

## The New Reporting System

Through the Uniform Crime Reporting program, the FBI collects data on particular crimes from local police agencies and compiles them into national estimates. Since it launched the program in 1930, the FBI has relied on the Summary Reporting System (SRS). In 1991, the FBI launched a second reporting system called the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), but allowed local police agencies to submit data using either system. In 2016, the FBI [announced](#) that it would phase out SRS and only accept data through NIBRS beginning in 2021. Here's a bit more about each system:

**1** Below is the hierarchy, in descending order:

- Criminal homicide /Murder.
- Rape.
- Robbery.
- Aggravated assault.
- Burglary.
- Larceny/Theft.
- Motor vehicle theft.

There is one exception to the hierarchy rule. If a larceny and a motor vehicle theft occurred in the same incident, the motor vehicle theft would be recorded and the larceny would not be. See pages 23-25 of [this manual](#) for more.

- *The Summary Reporting System* followed the hierarchy rule. If multiple crimes were reported in a single incident, only the most severe crime, according to a hierarchy of seven “index crimes” developed by the FBI<sup>1</sup>, was counted. For example, if a person assaulted another individual and then stole a nearby car to leave the scene, the assault would be recorded but the motor vehicle theft would not be.
- *The National Incident Based Reporting System* records the number of offenses, not incidents. To return to the example above, if this situation were recorded with NIBRS, both the assault and the motor vehicle theft would be counted. NIBRS also tracks data on more crimes and includes more demographic and situational data, such as the race and gender of both the person accused of the crime and victim, the relationship between the person accused of the crime and the victim, and the date, hour, and type of location (i.e. home, bar, store) of the reported incident. ©

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What Will Be Different  
About This Year's  
*Crime Statistics Report*

## There is going to be a lot of missing data, reducing the reliability of the estimates.

Many local police agencies have not yet made the switch from SRS to NIBRS, and their data will not be included in the FBI's 2021 crime statistics. In fact, [34% of police agencies](#) across the country did not submit any crime data to the FBI in 2021, including agencies in [some of the country's largest cities](#) like Los Angeles and New York City. Other agencies submitted data from some months but not others. (Local police agencies are not required to submit their data to the FBI; reporting is voluntary.)

The FBI still plans to estimate national<sup>2</sup>-, regional-, and state-level crime rates with this data. To do that, it is using a variety of estimation processes to account for three types of missing data: 1) specific items that are missing<sup>3</sup> from otherwise complete records, 2) agencies that reported some months of data but not others, and 3) agencies that did not report any data at all. The FBI uses data from agencies it deems similar to the agencies whose data is missing to create these estimates.

Because there is significant error associated with these estimates, the reported crime rates will be presented with confidence intervals around each measure—essentially a range of possible values. Ranges will be smaller when there is a lot of data available on which to base the estimate and wider when there is less data available.

The FBI published [this memo](#) about the estimation procedures it plans to use, but the memo does not include technical documentation of the variables included in its models or any other specifics. This technical documentation may be published with the crime data this fall. Only at that point will statisticians be able to weigh in on the reliability of the estimates, and journalists should seek out these opinions, given the unusual and high-stakes nature of the data.

## The new system will capture more reports of the standard crimes tracked by the FBI than the old system did.

Comparing 2021 data with data from previous years should only be done if that data has been adjusted to account for the differences between SRS and NIBRS. Because NIBRS can record multiple offenses per incident, the 2021 crime

<sup>2</sup> The information published by the FBI about the data it plans to release has been somewhat contradictory in nature. Some materials say that no national estimates will be provided, while others say they will be. This document assumes that the FBI will release national-level estimates in keeping with the methodology described in [this memo](#).

<sup>3</sup> This estimation procedure is sometimes used to predict the race of the person accused of the crime when it is missing from otherwise complete records. Before reporting information about race, journalists can compare data from the aggregated tables published by the FBI (which include predictions for missing data) with the raw data tables (which leave missing fields blank). If a large share of data on race (or any demographic metric) is predicted, it should not be reported as fact by journalists, given the potential for bias.

**4** Some agencies have been using NIBRS for years, and the data they submitted in 2021 can be compared with their NIBRS submissions from previous years. However, this is only possible at the agency level, because all state-, regional-, and national-level estimates in the past have been calculated in the SRS format.

**5** For many years, the FBI has also collected arrest data on a longer list of offenses, called "Part II" crimes, but those crimes are not included in their overall estimates of reported total, violent, or property crime.

**6** Arson, human trafficking for commercial sex acts, and human trafficking for involuntary servitude were added to this list more recently, but they are rarely included in national crime statistics published by the FBI. These offenses do not follow the hierarchy rule; all instances of these offenses are counted, regardless of what other offenses occur in the incident.

**7** These four offenses have traditionally comprised the FBI's measure of violent crime.

**8** These three offenses have traditionally comprised the FBI's measure of property crime.

**9** The list of offenses can be found on page 4 of [this report](#). Nineteen of these offenses can only be reported by federal or tribal agencies.

statistics will show a higher reported crime count than they would have if the data had been recorded using SRS. This could lead to perceptions that reports of certain crimes increased more than they actually did.

In 2019, the FBI compared data recorded with SRS to data recorded with NIBRS to estimate how many additional offenses NIBRS captures. The list below, taken from [this report](#), summarizes their findings.

### Crimes Against Persons

- Murder: No change. (All offenses are reported under both data systems.)
- Rape: Increased 2.2 percent.
- Aggravated Assault: Increased 1.2 percent.

### Crimes Against Property

- Robbery: Increased 0.6 percent.
- Burglary: Decreased 2.2 percent. (When the location of an incident is a storage facility, SRS counts the number of storage units, while NIBRS counts one offense of burglary. Therefore, the number of burglaries experienced a decrease under NIBRS in 2019.)
- Larceny: Increased 3.5 percent.
- Motor Vehicle Theft: Increased 4.5 percent.

The FBI [says that](#) it will publish 2021 estimates that are directly comparable with previous years' estimates reported through SRS. When making comparisons across years, these are the best estimates to use<sup>4</sup>. Comparing NIBRS data that has not been adjusted in this way with prior years will lead to artificially inflated estimates of crime increases.

## The FBI plans to release estimates for many more crimes than the standard seven they have traditionally tracked, and data on some of the new crimes is particularly fraught with bias.

For most of its history, the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program has used seven offenses, often called "index crimes" or "Part I" crimes<sup>5</sup> as the primary metric by which to measure the country's crime rate. Those seven offenses<sup>6</sup> are murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault<sup>7</sup>, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft<sup>8</sup>.

NIBRS makes it possible for police agencies to track reports of 71 crimes<sup>9</sup>, called “Group A” offenses<sup>10</sup>, so the FBI's 2021 crime data release will include information about a much longer list of crimes than it has in years past. While it is not totally clear from the information the FBI has released thus far, it seems that there will still be estimates of reported violent and property crime using the traditional seven index crimes, and information on the additional crimes tracked by NIBRS will be presented separately.

The expansion to tracking 71 offenses will exacerbate pre-existing issues with crime data reported by police agencies. For a particular incident of crime to show up in crime data from police agencies, the police must be aware of it and take it seriously enough to create a record of it. This is true of all crime data from police agencies (and is discussed in much more detail in the final section of this guide). It is a particularly serious issue for some Group A offenses, like drug-related crimes, prostitution, and some weapons offenses. Discretionary policing practices, like where police choose to do foot patrols and which pedestrians and drivers they choose to stop, determine detection and enforcement of these laws more than many traditional index crimes, like murder or robbery, which typically come to the attention of police when a person reports the crime. These policing practices lead to [selective](#) and [racially biased enforcement](#) of [particular laws](#).

We'll use drug offenses as an example to illustrate this point. [Data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) shows that 20.90% of U.S. residents over the age of 12, or roughly 57.5 million people, used an illicit drug in 2019. This means that the number of drug crimes committed that year likely totaled in the hundreds of millions, once all acts of drug possession, drug sale, and drug manufacturing are accounted for. Data from [8,497 local police agencies](#) covering approximately 45% of the U.S. population counted roughly [1,039,000 total drug offenses](#) in 2019. Even though this data does not cover the entire U.S. population, it is clear that police data captures only a small fraction of actual drug offenses. Further, a [large body of research](#)<sup>11</sup> shows that Black and Hispanic people are more likely to be [stopped](#) and [searched](#) for drugs, even though they are [less likely to be found with contraband](#) than white people. Black and Hispanic people are also more likely to be [arrested](#) for [drug possession](#) than white people, despite their roughly [equal rates of drug use](#).

To read more about the issues with this year's FBI crime statistics, see these pieces in [The Marshall Project](#) and [The Atlantic](#). ©

**10** The data will also include information about arrests for 10 additional offenses, called Group B offenses.

**11** For more evidence, see this compendium maintained by Radley Balko at [The Washington Post](#).

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Covering  
Crime Data *During*  
*Election Season*



## The FBI's crime data release will come less than two months before a national election in which crime is a politicized issue surrounded by a lot of misinformation.

There are several steps journalists can take to inject nuance and context into the conversation about this data:

- **Note that the data is old, and highlight what is known about 2022.**

By the time the FBI releases national crime statistics each year, the data is months out of date. Many local and state police agencies publish reported crime statistics much more regularly, and, if not, the statistics can often be obtained through public records requests, making it possible for journalists in many jurisdictions to include more up-to-date information about their communities' reported crime trends in their stories.

- **Place the data in historical and geographic context.**

- The number of reported crimes will always fluctuate from one year to another, so it is important to compare reported crime rates not just with the previous year but with several other points in the past (i.e. 5 years ago, 10 years ago, 30 years ago, etc.). This is particularly important in 2021, when some [politicians claim](#), and many people [believe](#), that crime is at record highs. While there have been real increases in some types of crime, including some of the most devastating crimes like homicide and other types of gun violence, overall reported crime rates, and even murder rates, in [2020](#), [2021](#), and thus far in [2022](#) have remained well below the historic highs of the [1980s](#) and [1990s](#).
- The FBI's national-level crime estimates generate a lot of attention, but local, state, and regional trends are equally important. This additional geographic context helps news consumers understand if a trend is happening across the country or whether increases or decreases in reported crime are concentrated in particular places. This type of analysis is also useful for fact-checking claims about the link between local policies and crime increases. For example, the fact that the increase in murder in 2020 happened [across the country in rural, suburban, and urban areas](#) is critical context to include when public officials blame local increases in gun homicide on a [DA's practices](#), [bail reform](#), or any other geographically-limited policy.

- **Include evidence about the causes of crime and the most effective solutions.** Journalists covering the FBI's crime data release have the opportunity to inject evidence into the current political debate about crime that is rife with misinformation. Many political candidates are, without evidence, blaming increases in some crimes on local policies, like bail reform in [New York](#) and [Wisconsin](#), [arrest practices for non-violent misdemeanors in Nevada](#), [pardons in Pennsylvania](#), and [reducing penalties for some thefts in California](#). However, study after study demonstrates [these](#) and [other criminal legal reforms](#) do not increase crime. These politicians' claims also belie the vast body of research proving that societal and environmental factors, like [income inequality](#); [access to firearms](#); limited availability of [high-quality education](#), [affordable housing](#), and [healthcare](#); lack of access to [substance abuse treatment](#); and exposure to toxins like [lead](#), are major drivers of violence and other types of interpersonal harm. Hiring more [police officers](#), [jailing more people before trial](#), and [sentencing more people to prison](#) are ineffective approaches to reducing crime and violence [relative to solutions](#) that more directly target the actual root causes of those issues, particularly when the [harms associated with common policing practices](#) are considered. As they have in the past, politicians will almost certainly respond to the FBI's crime data release with claims about the causes of any reported increases or decreases in crime and calls for punitive policy changes. Journalists are uniquely positioned to contextualize their claims with the evidence about what causes crime and what works to reduce it.
- **Use caution with how numbers are presented.**
  - Rates<sup>13</sup> are better metrics than gross numbers for tracking trends over time. Because the total population of the United States is growing, growth in the rate of reported crimes is a more meaningful indicator than growth in the number of reported crimes.
  - Percentages can be misleading in some contexts. Reported rates of many crimes remain [at or near historic lows](#), so it is important to note that percentage increases or decreases appear larger today than they would have in the 1980s or '90s because the baseline is lower. This is particularly important in the context of homicide. Murder remains the rarest index crime tracked by police, and the murder rate, prior to 2020, was near its lowest point in decades. Both of these factors make numerical changes appear large in percentage form. This is especially true in rural areas and small cities where homicides often number in the tens, not hundreds, each

**13** Crime rates are typically calculated as the number of reported crimes per 100,000 residents of the area in question.

year. For example, stating that the number of homicides increased from 10 to 12 may make more sense than saying the number of increased by 20%.

- **Reach out to experts.** This guide links to the work of many experts on crime data and related issues. Do not hesitate to contact the Center to be connected with these and other relevant experts, including academics, researchers, crime survivors, prosecutors, public defenders, local officials, and other journalists who have experience with these issues. ©

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Evergreen Considerations  
About Crime Data  
*From Police Departments*

## Crime data from police departments is not a comprehensive measure of public safety, and it is often misleading.

For one thing, there are many omissions in the data that follow predictable patterns. But even if data on the crimes tracked by police departments were perfectly accurate, it would still be missing many of the most important factors that impact people's safety on a daily basis.

- **The definition of crime varies across time and place and is inherently political.** Decisions about which activities are legal and which are not are made by elected or appointed government officials, usually legislators but sometimes governors, presidents, judges, etc. Some things, like murder, have been deemed criminal across most societies in most time periods. Others, like which substances are considered legal and employment law (e.g. the minimum wage, hiring discrimination, safety standards), reflect ever-changing political priorities. Things that are legal in some parts of the U.S., such as marijuana possession and sale, [prostitution](#), or gambling, are illegal in others. And new things are criminalized (or, more rarely, decriminalized) every year. For example, in 2021, most abortions were not a crime throughout the U.S., but today abortion is illegal in [more than a dozen states](#).
- **Most crimes are not tracked by police departments.** Even with the FBI's shift to collecting information on 71 offenses through NIBRS and more extensive reporting done by some local agencies, crime data published by most police departments does not include information about the vast majority of crimes. There is no official count of the number of crimes in the United States, but a [1982 effort by the Department of Justice](#) found roughly 3,000 criminal offenses in federal statute alone, and that estimate does not include any state laws. A glance at [any state penal or criminal code](#) will show far more than 71 offenses on the books.
- **It's not just obscure crimes that are missing from the data.** Workplace crimes, violations of environmental laws, and financial crimes impact the physical and financial security of millions of people in the U.S. each year. Below are three examples of highly impactful and frequently-committed crimes that are not included in crime data from the FBI and most police departments.

- The Economic Policy Institute [found](#) that workers in the 10 most populous states lose \$8 billion to minimum wage violations each year. Because this type of violation is not limited to those 10 states alone, total losses to minimum wage violations in the U.S. likely number in the tens of billions of dollars each year.
  - An [investigation](#) by the New York Times found that 23,000 companies and facilities violated the Clean Water Act more than 506,000 times between 2004 and 2009, and roughly 40% of community water systems violated the Safe Drinking Water Act in 2008. More than [7 million people](#) in the U.S. get sick each year from diseases spread through water, and that estimate does not include many long-term or chronic illnesses associated with exposure to toxins that are found in [many sources](#) of [drinking water](#).
  - Tax evasion costs the U.S. government [hundreds of billions of dollars](#) each year, or roughly [one of out every six tax dollars owed](#).
- **Data from police departments is not a comprehensive count of even the crimes that they do track.** As discussed above, the FBI and many local police departments have historically emphasized seven offenses (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft) in their data collection and reporting. However, the vast majority of [rapes, household burglaries, and personal thefts](#)<sup>14</sup> are not reported to the police. An increase or decrease in the crime rates published by police departments could actually reflect a change in reporting rates, not an objective change in the prevalence of those crimes. Moreover, many index [crimes committed by the police](#) themselves are not included in the data, nor are the majority of those [committed inside](#) the more than [5,000](#) local, state, and federal jails, prisons, immigrant detention centers, and juvenile facilities across the United States. One Department of Justice [investigation](#) into the Newark Police Department, for example, found that the department underreported officers' unconstitutional use of excessive force and failed to investigate and penalize acts of theft committed by officers from people in custody. When these acts are not reported or investigated by the department, they do not show up in the department's crime data as assaults or thefts.
  - **Crime data from police departments does not undergo rigorous third-party verification and has a history of being manipulated.** The FBI [reviews data](#) submitted by local agencies to check for "consistency," "reasonableness," and adherence to FBI estimation standards, but its

<sup>14</sup> The National Crime Victimization Survey collects data on the rate at which people claim that they report crimes to the police. To see that data using this link, select "Reporting to the police" from the "Comparison Characteristic" dropdown menu and use the "Crime Type" dropdown to select the offense of interest.

analysts do not independently verify the data by reviewing the underlying police reports. While there is a [Quality Assurance Review process](#) that could provide more rigorous verification, it is voluntary and infrequent. A 2012 [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation](#) found that data from less than 1% of local police departments had been reviewed by FBI auditors in each of the previous five years. Police officers in [New York](#), [Los Angeles](#), [Chicago](#), and [Milwaukee](#) have been caught falsifying crime statistics in recent years, and, even after those high-profile instances of fraud, the methods police use to calculate, classify, and report crime data remain opaque. ©

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Promoting journalistic  
practices that *enhance public  
understanding of safety*

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