

# A Journalist's Guide to FBI Crime Statistics:

## *Background on the Data*

Every fall, the FBI releases national crime statistics that have become the most prominent measure of public safety in the United States. While there is plenty of valuable information in them, the statistics have many shortcomings that are necessary context for anyone trying to interpret, or report on, them. This brief is not a point-in-time analysis of FBI crime statistics but rather an evergreen resource for journalists interested in better understanding what this data can and can't tell us about public safety in the United States.

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Through its Uniform Crime Reporting program, the FBI collects data on a standard set of crimes—called “index crimes”<sup>1</sup>—from local police agencies and compiles them into national estimates. The FBI publishes those national estimates each fall for the prior year (for example, data from 2017 was published in the fall of 2018, etc...). Recently, the FBI has begun to publish more timely quarterly estimates, but the annual data released in the fall remains the marquee publication. Historically, the statistics were released in report format, but the agency discontinued publication of standalone reports in 2020 and now posts all of the information directly to its [Crime Data Explorer](#) website.

Since it launched the Uniform Crime Reporting program in 1930, the FBI has relied on the Summary Reporting System. 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.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the FBI [announced](#) that it would phase out SRS and only accept data through NIBRS beginning in 2021, but many local police

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<sup>1</sup> These crimes are murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny/theft, and motor vehicle theft. 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 index crimes developed by the FBI, 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.

agencies had not made the switch by that deadline. In fact, the FBI only [received](#) data from police agencies covering roughly two-thirds of the U.S. population in 2021, down from an average of 95% or more. (Local police agencies are not required to submit their data to the FBI; reporting is voluntary.) The FBI used a variety of [estimation processes](#) to account for the missing data, but, because there is significant error associated with these estimates, the reported crime rates were presented with confidence intervals around each measure—essentially a range of possible values. In 2022, the FBI began allowing police agencies to submit data using the old system again, and the annual crime statistics returned to their pre-2021 form, covering 94% of the population. Data from 2023, 2024, and beyond is expected to remain far more complete than the anomalous 2021 statistics.

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## *Recommendations for Reporting*

**Note that the data is old, and highlight what we know about the current year.** By the time the FBI releases national crime statistics each year, the data is months out of date. However, the FBI has begun to release more timely quarterly estimates, and many local and state police agencies publish reported crime statistics much more regularly, 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 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 at a time of stark public misperceptions about crime. Seventy-seven percent of Americans [believe](#) crime increased in 2023, even though nearly all categories of the crimes tracked by police departments [decreased](#), including a [record-breaking decline](#) in murders.

**Place the data in geographic context.** 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 audiences 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 2020-21 increase in murder 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.

### **Use caution when presenting the numbers.**

- Rates<sup>3</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

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<sup>3</sup> Crime rates are typically calculated as the number of reported crimes per 100,000 residents of the area in question.

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

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## *Evergreen Considerations About Crime Data*

**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 government officials, usually legislators but sometimes governors, presidents, judges, etc... Some things, like murder, have been deemed criminal in most places most of the time. Others, like which substances are considered legal and what rules employers have to follow (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](#), and 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 recent 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>4</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. And 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.

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<sup>4</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.

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## *Additional Resources*

- [National Crime Victimization Survey](#): Rather than collecting data on crimes reported to the police, the NCVS, published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, measures crime by asking a nationally representative sample of people in the United States whether they were the victim of certain crimes during the previous year. This survey is able to capture crimes not tracked in the FBI statistics (like identity theft) and crimes that are not reported to the police (as many sexual assaults are not), but it does not have information about homicide or crimes that take place in commercial spaces, like shoplifting. Like the FBI data, it is typically released in the fall with data from the previous year. This [brief](#) compares FBI and NCVS data.
- [Real-Time Crime Index](#): This new dataset is a compilation of index crime data from hundreds of local police agencies. According to its creators, “[d]ata is updated roughly a month and a half after the end of the reporting month, so data through June is available in mid-August.”
- [Brennan Center for Justice](#): The Brennan Center typically publishes an analysis of the FBI's crime data each year, with a focus on the causes behind the trends.
- [CJJ's Resource Bank](#): Our team compiled a list of sources that publish information on crimes and other forms of harm not captured by crime data from police departments.

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