Bureau of Justice Statistics: Data to Keep Our Communities Safe

Priorities for the 117th Congress and 2021-2025 Administration

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) is the principal federal statistical agency providing wide-ranging statistics on criminal justice topics in the United States.

BJS needs strong leadership structure to —
- Modernize and strengthen its data collections and publish data and reports in a timely manner
- Produce new products that are more timely and specific to communities
- Build partnerships to achieve these needs and relationships with stakeholders

The BJS needs attention to its budget and budget structure.

Mission, Scope, and Products

The BJS in the Department of Justice provides objective, reliable, and trustworthy statistics on a variety of justice-related issues, including "crime, criminal offenders, victims of crime, and the operation of justice systems at all levels of government."[1] The mission of BJS 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. Established in 1979, its existing principal products cover the following nine topics: corrections, courts, crime type, criminal justice data improvement program, employment and expenditure, federal processing of criminal cases, Indian country justice statistics, law enforcement, and victims.

Challenges

The Bureau of Justice Statistics faces several challenges. In recent years, numerous regularly released publications—as well as some special projects—have fallen substantially behind schedule or not been published at all. The agency has also not

> "As a nation, we know much less about crime than we should."
> -National Academy of Sciences 2018 Report

been as proactive as other federal statistical agencies with strategic planning and taking advantage of open source data and data linkage to address the broader criminal justice questions. It would also benefit BJS to be more engaged with the broader federal statistical agencies; local, state, and federal partners; and stakeholders. Finally, BJS has lost a substantial portion of its purchasing power over the past decade hampering modernization and implementation work.

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[1] https://www.bjs.gov/
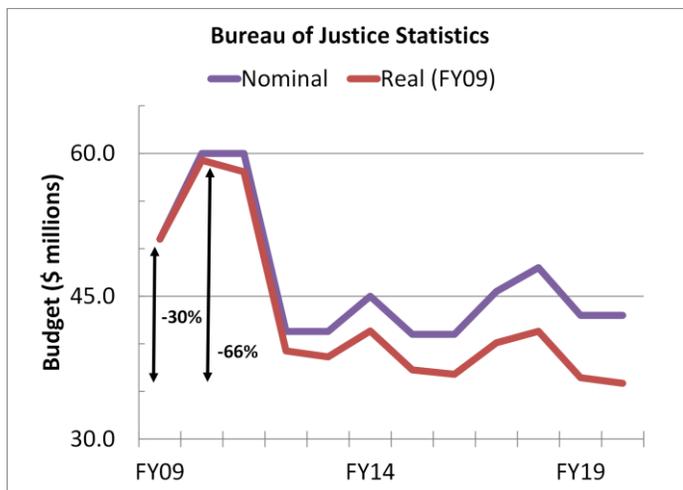
Priorities

- ➢ Leadership:
    - • BJS' organizational structure should be evaluated and optimized to best leverage its resources and ensure it can address its challenges and many opportunities in fulfilling its mission—which 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." Two immediate considerations should be to reinstate the Principal Deputy Director at the SES career level and transitioning the Senior Level position to a chief statistician with the requisite education and experience requirements.
    - • Appoint a director who has "strong leadership, management, and scientific skills; experience with federal statistical agencies; familiarity with BJS and its products; visibility in the nation's statistical community; ability to interact productively with Congress and senior DOJ staff; and acceptance of the National Academies' Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency." (Quote from 2017 letter to AG Sessions; https://www.amstat.org/asa/files/pdfs/POL-2017BJS_Director.pdf.)
    - • Restore Senate Confirmation of BJS director, which was removed in 2012, and change the director's term from serving at the will of the president to a fixed, renewable term of at least four years, staggered from the presidential elections. Senate confirmation and fixed term appointment help achieve the following: (i) ensures a well qualified, capable, and independent director; (ii) provides the director more standing and a strong voice with the department to ensure objective and reliable justice statistics, the more than 60 national statistical programs on crime and justice and the nearly 50,000 agencies, offices, and institutions from which data must be collected.
- ➢ Strengthen and modernize BJS collections, data acquisitions, and data linkages through expanding the use of administrative and open source data. Develop and document plans for research and development efforts on these sources, examining their fitness for use in creating new statistical series, creating more granular data for subnational geographies and subgroups within the population.
    - • Develop and document plans for research, development, and implementation of statistical series.
        - o Assess coverage and gaps in coverage of criminal justice statistics;
        - o Determine the feasibility of obtaining data to cover the gaps;
        - o Develop strategies for coverage that take into account the costs of obtaining data.
    - • Support sole and collaborative methodological research and development efforts to assess the fitness for criminal justice statistical uses of the new sources of public and private sector administrative and open source data, and document the findings of these efforts for the Federal statistical system.
    - • Enhance existing and develop new strategic data sharing partnerships with federal, state, and local criminal justice agencies.
    - • Establish university and private-sector partnerships to obtain capacity to assess open source data.
- ➢ Re-invigorate existing capacities and relationships that have been moribund.

- Strengthen the relationship with the Federal Bureau of Investigation in implementing the transition to the National Incident-Based Reporting System by relying upon each agency's comparative advantage in collecting and reporting what agencies submit (FBI) vs. quality assessments and estimation (BJS).
- Strengthen relationships with grant-making agencies within the Department of Justice Programs to increase their use of criminal justice statistical information in funding state and local law enforcement and victims' services.
- Expand the use of "statistical support centers" that can provide methodological capacity that BJS's comparatively small staff cannot provide.

➢ Establish new and timely statistical products that take advantage of technology to improve production, review, and dissemination processes.

➢ Clear-up the backlog of unreleased or delayed-release statistical products, including reports, datasets, and methodological reports. For the NCVS: Plan for and release the methodology research, the state-level estimates, and the redesigned survey instrument.

➢ Revamp BJS data products, schedules, and dissemination approaches:
- Develop and adhere to a publication schedule that is publicly available on the BJS website. This will require protocols and procedures be developed to ensure this happens. Currently the schedule is by season and has frequently not been followed.
- Release unpublished reports that have been backlogged or sidelined. For example, as noted above, BJS has yet to publish reports or data relating to rape and sexual assault for which they contracted approximately $13 million.
- Create modern ways to access and display the data, such as data visualizations, maps, or real-time dashboards. Bring in some data science techniques and methods.
- Move to a digital first publication approach for data products, including data reports and data access.

➢ Develop strategic partnerships. Such partnerships have been discussed above under the modernization bullet but emphasized and expanded here:
- The strategic partnerships should be at the Federal, state, and local levels.
- BJS would benefit from strengthening its ties to institutions of higher education in the areas of criminal justice, statistics, and data science. They need to strengthen and broaden beyond just criminal justice.
- Work collaboratively with other Federal statistical agencies to gain access to such areas as health, economic, education, and transportation data.

➢ Develop a culture of transparency and engagement across government and with stakeholders.
- Rethink how the data and methods are accessed and provided to the public and researchers.
- Be an active member of the OMB Interagency Council on Statistical Policy and other interagency councils set up by OMB. This should include actively working as an agency and with the broader community on implementation of the Evidence Act and the follow-up work to further evidence-based policymaking.
- Institute an advisory board with FACA status and additional staff to support it. Meetings and minutes are announced and open to the public. Such a panel ensures BJS is hearing directly from data users and consulting top experts so that BJS is always improving its

products and their relevance, as well as the methods to provide the products. These boards also provide transparency into the workings of the agency which, had they been in place previously, may have prevented the major issues of recent years.

➢ Budget
- Address budget chronic shortfalls that go back at least a decade. In its 2009 report, the National Academies noted the problem in the following statement: "the methodological challenges involved in filling these major gaps preclude doing so under BJS's current funding; it would require increased and sustained support in terms of staff and fiscal resources." The BJS budget has lost 30% in purchasing power since FY09, hampering the agency's ability to execute some of the initiatives noted above.

Bureau of Justice Statistics

- Consider separating the BJS budget from the OJP budget mantel and process. The BJS budget is under the OJP mantel and BJS has not always been able to meet separately with OMB officials or Congressional budget staff regarding specific needs of BJS. BJS should have access to these officials. BJS is subject to the OJP budget process, which hinders its ability to be agile and creative.

➢ Assuming BJS is meeting its current obligations, leadership could work with DOJ and stakeholders to expand its scope and should consider blue-sky ideas in the process. Possible projects include the following:
- Explore linking criminal justice data with non-criminal justice data to address fundamental societal issues, such as education, health, transportation, and economic data. For example, BJS could explore the drivers of criminal activity and how they can be better mitigated.
- Revisit court and prosecution statistics as a priority area. These data collections were suspended following a 2009 National Academies report and subsequent efforts to restore the collections have not succeeded. The partnership and open-source methods discussed above may work well here.
- BJS could provide more statistics on civil cases addressing such issues such as how much this nation spends on civil cases, how they impact lives, and their load on— and duration in—the court system. BJS could also more regularly produce statistics on white collar crime.
- BJS could become the source for data on justice-related issues. Currently such data are in myriad locations, without links between them. BJS could serve as a clearinghouse for such data, linking back to the original sources for the data collected, providing a foundation for understanding the overall picture of justice-related trends.

Endorsing Organizations

American Statistical Association
Consortium of Social Science Associations
Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics
Crime and Justice Research Alliance
Justice Research and Statistics Association

Resources

- [Modernizing Crime Statistics: Report 1: Defining and Classifying Crime](#) (2016), National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- [Modernizing Crime Statistics: Report 2: New Systems for Measuring Crime](#) (2018)
- [Ensuring the Quality, Credibility, and Relevance of U.S. Justice Statistics](#) (2009), Committee on National Statistics and Committee on Law and Justice, Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- [BJS website](#)
- [*Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency: Sixth Edition*](#). National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2017.

For other federal statistical agency priorities, please visit https://www.amstat.org/ASA/Science-Policy-and-Advocacy/home.aspx#resources or https://copafs.org/activities-initiatives/. For any questions on these documents, or to have your organization added as an endorsing or supporting organization, please contact Steve Pierson (pierson@amstat.org) or Paul Schroeder (paul.schroeder@copafs.org).