Evaluation of New Mexico's State Criminal History Data and Replication of the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Study of Sex Offender Recidivism

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By
Kristine Denman M.A., Senior Research Assistant
Lisa Broidy Ph.D., Director, SAC and ISR
Tim Wadsworth Ph.D., Co-director, SAC
Danielle Albright M.A., Research Assistant

Statistical Analysis Center
Institute for Social Research
University of New Mexico

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Executive Summary

This report documents findings from a two part Justice Research and Statistics Association (JRSA) funded study. Part one is an evaluation of the utility of New Mexico criminal history data, for aggregate-level research. Part two utilizes these data to examine sex offender recidivism among offenders released from prison in 2001.

Part I: New Mexico criminal history data are maintained by the State's Department of Public Safety (DPS) and are typically used at the case-level to conduct criminal background checks or provide detailed arrest data on individuals for law enforcement investigations. These data are not generally used for research purposes, such as describing long-term arrest trends for individuals convicted of specific types of crimes. However, they have the potential to be utilized in this way. Our analyses were conducted with the aim of assessing the quality and completeness of these data to determine whether they could serve as a useful research tool for conducting aggregate level crime analyses. Our findings indicate both strengths and weaknesses in these data, which have implications for their research utility and for their utility in relation to the kind of case-level analysis for which the state currently uses them.

Key strengths of DPS data:

- Most municipal and state agencies have reported some arrests to DPS between 2003 and 2006
- In general, the number of arrests recorded by DPS originating from law enforcement agencies between 2001 and 2005 for Part I violent offenses exceeded the number of arrests reported in the Crime in the United States annual Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) published by the FBI, suggesting that these data are more complete than those available at the national level.

Key weaknesses:
- Specific comparisons of APD/BCSO and DPS homicide offenses between 2001 and 2005 indicate DPS arrest records are incomplete and/or recorded differently than APD/BCSO arrest records. As a result, a significant number of homicide offenders do not have a homicide offense in the DPS criminal history database. We suspect this problem extends to other offenses as well.
- Aggregate level comparisons of Albuquerque Police Department/Bernalillo County Sherriff's Office (APD/BCSO) Part I violent offense arrests with recorded DPS Part I violent arrests originating in the Bernalillo County area suggest that arrests from this locale are under-represented in the DPS data. This could be a problem that extends beyond the Bernalillo County data, and it will be important to identify the sources of this disparity.
- Some fields in the dataset are rarely populated or values primarily consist of "unknown", including the time the arrest occurred, jail booking number, arrest location and others.

Part II: We then merged these data with 2001 release data provided by the New Mexico Corrections Department (NMCD) in order to evaluate recidivism among released sex offenders. Weaknesses found with the DPS data were compounded when merging with the NMCD data. The most serious difficulties are summarized next.

- Joining data from different agencies is not easy due to lack of a common unique identifier despite a protocol which would provide that identifier.
- In combination, missing and erroneous data from the two sources lead to inaccurate data analysis results.

Recommendations and future use of data
- Where possible, DPS should encourage all state and local agencies to use a common unique person identifier, such as FBI number or the State Identification Number and enforce the consistency and accuracy of its use.
- Enforce the use of the originating case agency number (a common unique case identifier) in the DPS data as this number could be used to definitively link the local data with the statewide data. This would provide more information for research purposes and for determining whether DPS is receiving case-level data at all key points in the system (intake/arrest, court processing/sentencing, corrections, etc.).
- The switch to the AFIS by DPS will allow researchers to analyze particular offenses with more accuracy; this in turn allows for more accurate research results to guide policy making.
- We, as researchers, need to encourage and promote the use of research in policy formation by increasing dialogue with various state and local agencies regarding their data, its accuracy, and its potential utility for research and policy related questions.