State Criminal Records Repositories

A State central repository is a State agency that maintains comprehensive files of criminal history record information covering persons who are processed by the criminal justice system. For 15 years the repositories have been the focus of a data-gathering effort more massive and more coordinated than any other in criminal justice. There has been extensive Federal involvement in the planning and financing of the development of repositories, automation of their data bases, interstate exchange and indexing of criminal record information, and development of statistical capabilities.

This report presents the results of a survey of the administrators of State central repositories conducted in December of 1984 by NCJRS Group Inc. Fifty-three jurisdictions were asked for information about their central repositories: the 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Responses were received from 47 States. Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and the three non-State jurisdictions did not respond. Nevada had no central repository in November 1984.

State and growth of data bases

Forty-four States were asked to provide counts or estimates of the number of subject records held and of the number of arrests and final dispositions reported by the central repository in the years 1961-84. A "subject record" is a record pertaining to a specific person who has entered the criminal justice system.

Nine years ago in the "Privacy and Security Planning Handbook" issued by the National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service (the predecessor agency of the Bureau of Justice Statistics), the Federal Government provided guidelines to the States recommending the establishment of centralized criminal history record repositories to serve the needs of all criminal justice agencies in the States. The purpose was to single out the problem of disposition reporting and to ensure that criminal justice agencies used and disseminated the most current and accurate data available. Completeness and accuracy of criminal history record information are important both for operational criminal justice use and for offense-based transaction statistics reported to BJS.

For 15 years the repositories have been the focus of a data-gathering effort more massive and more coordinated than any other in criminal justice. There has been extensive Federal involvement in the planning and financing of the development of repositories, the number of arrests and final dispositions reported each year, the extent of information on repository data bases, the legal requirements on law enforcement agencies for disposition reporting, and the production of statistical reports by the repositories. Such information should be useful to those who administer the State repositories, to criminal justice practitioners generally, to those who influence State policy on repositories, and to the research community.

Steven R. Schlesinger
Director

October 1985

This BJS technical report presents findings of a survey of State repository administrators conducted in December of 1984 by NCJRS Group Inc. This survey provides the first composite picture of the number of subject records in State repositories, the number of arrests and final dispositions reported each year, the extent of information on repository data bases, the legal requirements on law enforcement agencies for disposition reporting, and the production of statistical reports on the repositories. Such information should be useful to those who administer the State repositories, to criminal justice practitioners generally, to those who influence State policy on repositories, and to the research community.

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data, covering 59% of the Nation's states.

Arizona 500,449
California 439,223
Florida 432,000
Georgia 413,471
Hawaii 199,382
Idaho 118,772
Illinois 323,694
Indiana 265,703
Iowa 213,557
Kansas 400,000*
Kentucky 77,000 76,800
Louisiana 63,085
Maine 66,202
Maryland 15,400
Massachusetts 56,189
Michigan 131,929
Minnesota 15,697
Mississippi 135,000*
Missouri 61,980
Montana 7,630
New Hampshire 1,164
New Jersey 26,067
New Mexico 21,600
New York 351,665
North Carolina 52,241
North Dakota 22,060
Ohio 222,918
Oklahoma 13,495
Oregon 27,566
Pennsylvania 49,030
Rhode Island 27,768
South Carolina 115,365
South Dakota 1,144
Tennessee 239,686
Texas 329,738
Utah 24,782
Vermont 14,009
Virginia 17,800
Washington 21,811
West Virginia 5,147
Wisconsin 16,391
Wyoming 15,117
NOTE: In addition to the responding States and territories (the District of Columbia, Alaska, Hawaii, and the outlying areas), the data were also reported by survey respondents who did not report the number of arrests.

miscellaneous information:

reported to repositories showed a slight increase between 1981 and 1983.

A very large majority of the records in State central repositories are of adults. More than half of the reporting States (16%) indicated that they currently have only manual methods for maintaining records of the subjects of the new arrest. Of the other 28 respondents, two indicated that no juveniles records or that records pertaining to juveniles are maintained as such as of 1983.

Data base automation

Much of the information contained in central repository data bases, and more particularly, much of the information pertaining to offenders who are currently active, is contained in automated files. Thirty-five States now have at least some automated criminal history record information (CHRI) (table 4).


Twenty-six States have fully automated their CHRI. In addition, 26 States use report generation programs and, in addition, have one or more automated conversion procedures for specific purposes, "first one" conversion of records from one or more automated conversion of a portion of the mass manual records.

Two States perform only partial conversion of existing manual records. These States have automated systems and maintain automated records for only certain categories of subjects, Alabama, Minnesota, and New Hampshire automate new arrests only for subjects who have no prior manual record. If a manual record exists, it is maintained and is updated by adding the new arrest. Ohio follows a similar policy, but prior manual records may be automated if they are short. Iowa automates subject records only where an FBI number is available; records of other subjects are maintained manually. In 1983, Iowa did not automate records of first arrests. Such records were maintained manually; they would be automated when a second arrest occurred. In 1985 Iowa began to automate record of all new arrests.

reporting of dispositions

Much of the data that is maintained by a State central repository consists of dispositions that are reported to the repository by the various agencies that comprise the criminal justice system. There are differences among the States in the reporting of dispositions by the various parts of the criminal justice system, both in the scope of reporting and in whether such prior manual record. If a manual record exists, it is maintained and is updated by adding the new arrest. Ohio follows a similar policy, but prior manual records may be automated if they are short. Iowa automates subject records only where an FBI number is available; records of other subjects are maintained manually. In 1983, Iowa did not automate records of first arrests. Such records were maintained manually; they would be automated when a second arrest occurred. In 1985 Iowa began to automate record of all new arrests.

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Thirty-one States mandate reporting of State corrections admissions. Twenty-three States report data on releases from State corrections. Forty-four States report the disposition of criminal offenses, and some 26 States report on data accuracy. The reporting categories of data are listed in Table 6. While the reporting categories are often specified by the reporting States, they are not necessarily reported by the repository. The repository data are derived from the responses of the source agencies. Data quality is an important factor in determining the reliability of the repository data. To ensure data accuracy, the repository collects data from the source agencies through the use of questionnaires. The data collected are then compiled and analyzed to provide a comprehensive picture of the data accuracy. The repository data are used to identify areas where improvements are needed and to evaluate the effectiveness of the reporting processes. The repository data are regularly updated to reflect the most current information available. The repository data are made available to the public through various means, including online access and printed reports. The repository data are widely used by researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to inform decisions and initiatives related to corrections and criminal justice. The repository data are an important resource for understanding and improving the system of corrections and criminal justice. The repository data are a valuable tool for promoting transparency and accountability in the system of corrections and criminal justice.
collection agency for court dispositions existed eight times as the reason for difficulty in both quantity and quality of disposition reporting. Accumulation of different State-level data bases with overlapping content was cited in four responses.

Periodic audits were noted as a source of improvement a total of 12 times, with 6 responses mentioning audits of source agencies. Other frequently cited reasons for improvement included increased editing and quality control at the repository, systematic flagging and solicitation of missing dispositions, training of source agency personnel, changes in reporting laws, and implementation of a tracking number system for arrest and disposition reporting.

Statistical utilization

The survey requested information about the utilization of criminal history data bases for statistical purposes. The responses indicated that 11 central repositories currently produce statistical outputs on a routine basis, and 11 repositories have current capabilities of producing, or have at some time produced, nonroutine statistical outputs (Table 6). Twelve repositories reported plans for future statistical activities utilizing criminal history records. Overall, the central repositories in 21 States are producing or have produced statistical outputs derived in some way from criminal history records. Eight of these repositories report plans for expanded activity in the future. Four central repositories that have not to date undertaken statistical activities noted future plans in this area.

Although nearly half of the responding repositories noted current or past statistical activity, the reported overall level of activity was quite low. Of the repositories reporting routine statistical outputs, most identified only one or two such reports. Of 31 routine statistical reports identified in the responses, 25 consist of management and administrative statistics for use in direct support of repository operations, rather than for analysis of the data's substance. They include such reports as activity volume by type of transaction, contributing agency, or individual employee; counts of receipts and rejections (fingerprints, dispositions), and data base size and growth. In addition, a number of error listings, missing data listings, and exception reports were identified.

Table 6. Statistical reports from State criminal history repositories, 1982

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responding States</th>
<th>Statistical data produced</th>
<th>Statistical data requested</th>
<th>Statistical data special</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Alaska</td>
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NOTE: The District of Columbia, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and the Virgin Islands did not respond to the questionnaire. A complete listing of central repositories is available at all stated that they are generally available to all categories of potential users.

Part of the reason why there is not greater use of central repository data for substantive statistical analysis is because the primary function of the repository is to collect, organize, and disseminate information pertaining to individuals. Where resources are limited, as is often the case, this work must be given priority. A number of repositories indicated that maintenance of general operations, automation of records, and improvement of reporting and response take precedence over the development of specific statistical capabilities.

Because the administrators were asked to describe only statistical reports produced by the repository itself and not those produced by others from the repository's data base, it seems likely that the responses do not present a complete picture of statistical utilization of repository data. In this regard, it is noteworthy that those repositories reporting the most extensive statistical activities are in "those where the central repository and the State Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) are parts of the same agency and where SAC activities are included in the repository's response. Also, four repositories that reported on statistical products at all noted specifically that in their States, statistical work is done by the SAC, not the repository.

These reports suggest a greater potential for substantive statistical analysis based on repository data than might at first appear from the survey's findings. Because many States still lack automation of criminal history data bases and even those with automation suffer from incomplete disposition reporting, the development of a State-wide statistical base appears to be many years off. For the near future, a more fruitful approach will be studies that take data from a small number of States with reliable and comparable data.