

Joseph D. McNamara

FBI Statistics

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"Serious Crime Up 11 Per Cent Here, According to FBI," screamed the headline recently in a big city newspaper.

Headlines like this have been common during the past two decades. Unfortunately, public and governmental reactions to such stories frequently verged on panic. Mayors across the country rushed to hire more police officers, buy more equipment and show as much well-publicized concern as possible about "crime in the streets" and "law and order." Washington, too, responded to the widespread fears, dispensing some \$4 billion since 1968 through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. Despite all these efforts, however, the fears grew, the flight of the middle-class population

Mr. McNamara, police chief of Kansas City, Mo., is a member of the newly formed Police Executive Research Forum.

from city to suburb accelerated and the scare headlines continued with remarkably little discussion about their factual accuracy.

Yet, for a long time, a number of police professionals have been unhappy with the manner in which FBI crime reports have been used to alarm the public. The Federal Bureau of Investigation began compiling voluntary crime reports from local police in 1930, defining serious crime as seven felonies: murder, aggravated assault, forcible rape, robbery, burglary, larceny-theft and motor vehicle theft. Within a few years J. Edgar Hoover was solemnly warning Americans that "serious" crime was about to overwhelm them. The message was clear: More money was needed for police and law enforcement.

Last year, a study funded by the LEAA disclosed that the annual FBI crime report was indeed a dubious document to use as the basis for important public policy decisions. The survey, relying on victim accounts rather than police reports, revealed that in one major city, for example, five times more robberies were reported than were listed in the FBI report. Interestingly, police departments with stringent reporting systems looked bad when the FBI report was used to compare them with cities where casual police reporting caused less crime to be recorded.

The FBI, of course, is not to blame since it could hardly rate the quality of local police reporting systems without impairing its ability to get along with local police. And it is important to point out that the FBI never claimed that it screened the police reports; the bureau cautions against inappropriate comparisons.

Concentrating on the wrong data usually means that meaningful data get neglected. Thus, for years, the emphasis on wrong data obscured the fact that a relatively small number of violent people terrorized urban neighborhoods. Accurate crime data would have prompted the criminal justice agencies to identify, apprehend, convict and incarcerate more readily such individuals. By concentrating on ill-defined terms such as "serious crime" and "law and order," we failed to set the proper priorities and lost opportunities to reduce violence.

The newspaper story cited earlier illustrates the problem. The reporter, citing the FBI report as his authority, said "serious crime was up 11 per cent for the year—an all-time high." Yet local police officials believed serious crime was on the downturn. In a city with a daily population fluctuating between half a million and a million, there had

been reported only 5 more murders, 7 fewer rapes and 99 fewer burglaries.

Was the headline wrong? Had the FBI made an error in addition? Were they trying to make the local police look bad? Were the police distorting the facts in order to cover their own ineptness?

Not at all. Local police knew that the public feared most an unprovoked attack by a stranger and based their definition of seriousness on that public concern. On the other hand, the 11 per cent increase resulted entirely from an epidemic of thefts of CB radios—a new phenomenon in the area and one that did not involve a violent, personal encounter between the criminal and victim, yet, as a larceny, fell into the FBI's definition of "serious" crime.

The news media, under pressure of deadlines, understandably rely upon the FBI's index of serious crime, although this index is increasingly doubted by experts as being statistically sound or methodologically cor-

rect. The index definition of what constitutes serious crime is especially suspect. When the FBI started its reporting system in 1930, the theft of an auto may indeed have been serious, even bizarre, since there were so few autos. But today, auto thefts, and even the rising theft of CB radios, while annoying to the victims and insurance companies, should not be equated with shootings, stabbings and forcible rapes. These high-volume thefts cause statistical distortions in the FBI reports, often creating the erroneous impression that dangerous crime is increasing. For example, fewer than 10 per cent of the "serious crimes" the reporter was so alarmed about were violent or potentially violent. Ironically, the FBI crime index figures, swollen by thefts of autos and CB radios, have probably caused people who don't even own cars or CB radios to stay home, locked in by their own fears.

Not only do the nonviolent crimes in the reports distort the totals, even the violent crimes are too broadly described to give the average citizen the information needed to intelligently assess chances of victimization.

For example, two-thirds of all murder victims in some manner precipitate their demise and thus are not average, typical citizens. Close to half are killed in alcohol or drug-related quarrels, and another third because of questionable, even illegal activities, such as drug dealing. The picture is much the same when it comes to aggravated assault. This is not to say that these crimes should be ignored. It does mean that some decisions Americans have made and continue to make—to lock themselves in, to move to the suburbs, to keep a loaded handgun in the house—are largely based on misperceptions of actual danger resulting from press coverage of FBI crime releases.

The FBI, by reputation, is a fine investigative agency, but it is not in a position to guarantee the accuracy of local police crime reports. The public would be better served if national crime surveys were compiled by another agency, using sampling techniques to supplement and validate local police and FBI reports.

The first priority should be to devise methods of determining the average citizen's probability of being victimized by a stranger in a serious crime—murder, robbery, aggravated assault, forcible rape or burglary. This information would allow mayors, police chiefs and heads of other criminal justice agencies to make informed decisions on how best to fulfill their fundamental duty to provide for the safety of those they serve. For the citizen, the same information on his vulnerability would permit him to make rational judgments on how well he is being protected by his government.