

Crime Statistics Unit Backed

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The Justice Department wants to take from the FBI the job of collecting national crime statistics and give it to a centralized new office under control of the Attorney General.

The department is preparing a legislative proposal that is certain to cause controversy because of its provision relieving the FBI of control over the Uniform Crime Reports—a statistical device that for 46 years has made the FBI the leading authority on the scope and level of crime in the United States.

Justice Department officials insist, though, that their plan is not aimed at undermining the FBI. Their proposed new office, tentatively called the Bureau of Criminal Justice Statistics, also would take over 53 other statistical programs now

scattered through the Justice Department and other federal law enforcement agencies.

One Justice official said such a consolidation would correct "a fundamental problem impeding the fight against crime. We simply don't have statistics of a quantity and quality capable of giving us a good picture of what crimes are being committed and how effective are the federal and state responses to them."

This shortcoming has been a matter of particular concern to Deputy Attorney General Harold R. Tyler Jr., who has spoken out several times in recent months about the need for improved collection of crime statistics.

Now, in response to directives from Tyler and his boss, Attorney General Edward H. Levi, the department's Office

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of Policy and Planning, directed by Ronald L. Gainer, is drafting a comprehensive proposal for the consideration of Congress.

Justice sources said that although the statistical office probably could be created through an administrative reorganization, Levi and Tyler feel that its controversial features make it imperative that the plan have the backing of Congress.

Gainer's office is expected to have the proposal ready early in 1977. Although it is uncertain whether Levi and Tyler will still be in office next year, Justice officials feel that the arguments in favor of improved statistical methods are so strong that a new Attorney General also would want to move ahead with the plan.

The idea of a centralized, professionally staffed office to deal with crime statistics is not new. Its cause has been pleaded for years by lawyers and criminologists who argue that existing methods of collection produce figures susceptible to manipulation by headline-seeking politicians and budget-justifying police officials.

For years reform proposals were defeated by the influence that the FBI's late director, J. Edgar Hoover, exerted in Congress. Hoover was determined that the FBI be recognized as the country's foremost spokesman on law enforcement issues, and he regarded control of the Uniform Crime Reports as essential to the bureau's ability to play this role.

However, Hoover has been dead since 1972; the FBI has seen its prestige eroded by a succession of internal scandals, and, as a consequence, the bureau, under Director Clarence M. Kelley, has lost most of its freewheeling independence and come under strict policy control by the Attorney General.

The bureau is known to be unhappy about the prospect of losing control over crime statistics and will not give the function up without resistance. For example, in a move that Justice sources believe was inspired by FBI pressure, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, an organization with close ties to the FBI, recently went on record as opposed to the idea of a new statistics office.

Justice officials profess sympathy for the FBI's concern, noting that the bureau pioneered the collecting of crime statistics in the 1930s. The problem now, the sources said, is that the Uniform Crime Reports are, in their present form, no longer an adequate gauge of trends in criminal activity.

FBI statistics are based on the number of crimes reported annually to the bureau by 9,160 state and local law enforcement agencies. They measure seven categories of crime: murder, forcible rape, aggravated assault, robbery, larceny-theft, burglary and motor vehicle theft.

They do not measure such law-breaking categories of current national interest as white-collar crime. More importantly, critics charge, the FBI's figures are inaccurate and misleading because they cover only reported incidents of crime.

Some recent studies by another Justice Department agency, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, for example, indicate that in many categories the number of unreported crimes is greater than the tally officially recorded by police departments.

The result, Justice sources noted, is that two federal agencies are doing statistical studies that can produce widely differing views on the extent of the crime problem. And, the sources added, that is why the Justice Department believes that studies now done by the FBI and LEAA and other agencies should be controlled by a single office capable of using sound, uniform

methods that avoid duplication and confusion.

In recent speech, Tyler sketched the outlines of the proposed solution now being drafted by Justice Department planners. He said:

"Instead of creating an entirely new bureaucracy, I would place all the scattered information-gathering efforts in this bureau, which would be responsible for collecting information about victims, police, prosecutions and prisoners.

"... The data should be neutral and of greater general use. And, I would have this Bureau of Criminal Justice Statistics produce a series of regular publications about developments in crime and justice. In that way, not just the Justice Department, but all criminal justice planners in federal, state and local governments, and in the universities, may benefit from this wealth of information."