

Attorney General Bell setting up new system of measuring nation's crime

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Atty. Gen. Griffin Bell is creating a new Bureau of Criminal Justice Statistics to replace a much-criticized "horse and buggy" system of measuring crime in the nation.

The new Justice Department agency would take over the crime statistics work of the FBI, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and several other department offices.

Various commissions and study groups have proposed the idea in one form or another for more than 100 years. But Bell has become the first attorney general to take steps to accomplish it.

The project could give the public and government officials at all levels important information about crime trends and fresh insight about the causes of crime and ways to combat it.

Currently, about 17 department units produce 54 different sets of statistics dealing with crime, the courts, prosecutors, prisons or other aspects of the criminal justice system.

The best-known statistics are the FBI's annual and quarterly figures on the number of crimes reported to state and local police. But those reports include only seven crime categories — murder, rape, assault, robbery, burglary, larceny and motor vehicle theft — and say nothing about white-collar offenses and numerous other crimes.

LEAA sponsors regular polls of citizens to determine how many have

been victims of what kinds of crimes. But those reports say nothing about who is committing the crimes and whether they were arrested and convicted.

Department officials and private researchers have complained for decades that the government produces no reliable measurement of crime in the nation. Ten years ago, a presidential commission said crime figures were collected through a "system that was less than adequate in the days of the horse and buggy."

"Nationwide, information about crime is so fragmented, unreliable and varied that it is impossible to state, with any reasonable degree of confidence, conclusions about the state of the nation's crime problem," said a department staff report on the problem.

Without reliable and comprehensive crime statistics, "any overall effort to control crime must base its strategy on hunch, opinion, prejudice, and occasional fragments of information totally inadequate to the magnitude of the problem," the report continued.

Under the direction of Dr. Harry A. Scarr, a department review group has been drafting plans to combine all the statistical functions in one agency.

In a recent speech, Scarr noted that Congress in 1870 asked the attorney general for annual reports on the nation's crime problem. Three years later, "that effort was abandoned because the attorney general reported he was unable

to collect the data to include in such a report," Scarr said.

The proposal has surfaced periodically since then, but has never gotten very far.

But in 1975, Scarr and his staff began work on a fresh proposal and presented it to Bell shortly after he took office in January.

In a memo July 26, Bell authorized the staff "to assume primary responsibility for the creation of a central statistical capability for the department."

In an interview, Scarr said the new bureau could begin limited operations early next year if Bell approves final details.

But it will take new legislation from Congress before the bureau could take over all the department's crime statistics work and go into full operation.

Scarr said he hopes a complete proposal could be presented next spring to the Office of Management and Budget to be included in the department's budget request for the 1980 fiscal year.

He said the cost of the statistics bureau, during its first year, probably would not exceed the estimated \$40 million the department already spends on collecting various crime statistics and financing state crime statistics programs.

Under the proposal, the new bureau would coordinate its efforts with the state programs and would continue to finance them partially.