

NIBRS Dissemination in Maine: Findings from Three Pilot Sites

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INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the Maine Department of Public Safety received a grant from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) to facilitate the conversion of Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data to incident based reporting (IBRS) in three law enforcement jurisdictions. The grant included the creation of a Repository at the Maine State Police (MSP) to receive both national incident based reporting system (NIBRS) and Maine IBRS data and support for three law enforcement jurisdictions with a strong desire to use incident based data.¹

The Maine State Police had made an earlier attempt (1994) to manage the state's adoption of NIBRS but was unable to accomplish that goal because of its own insufficient resources (i.e., limited data available from submitting agencies). In addition they did not have the staff to follow-up with vendors, provide technical assistance to local law enforcement agencies who wished to convert or coordinate training, manuals or other resources to assist local law enforcement with adopting and learning how to use incident based data.

"I think that with any mandatory reporting system, if users are not educated in the importance of the system, you will get very limited data and only data that is mandatory to complete the process. If you don't give some training to people inputting the data, the data will be impure and not representative of what you are looking for."

- Sergeant, general user

METHODS

The Maine Statistics Analysis Center (SAC) was hired to document the implementation process of NIBRS in three law enforcement jurisdictions: (1) Lewiston/Auburn 911 Emergency Systems, (2) Penobscot County Law Enforcement System (PCLES), and (3) the Waterville Police Department.² The SAC adapted a "learning history" approach, where key participants (e.g., local law enforcement data and records managers and Maine State Police Records Management Services Unit staff) are interviewed to identify how process elements may have affected implementation of the conversion from UCR to IBR. The learning history was to be used as a forum for all participants' assessments of the IBRS diffusion and adoption process in the three jurisdictions. The learning history approach enabled SAC staff to record both objective (e.g. implementation plan, vendor training plan) and subjective information. The subjective information was shared with participants to elicit their feedback.

Given the constraints of vendor delays, limited numbers of available staff, workloads, funding, and day-to-day obligations in several other areas, SAC staff could not conduct a classic learning history process. As a result, we are reporting results based on several interviews with local law enforcement staff who have been involved with adopting NIBRS or with Maine's Records

¹ The 3 jurisdictions are: (1) Lewiston/Auburn 911 Emergency Systems (includes the Auburn and Lewiston Police Departments, the Androscoggin County Sheriff's Department and the 911 System; (2) Penobscot County Law Enforcement System (includes Penobscot County Sheriff's Department, Bangor Police Department, Brewer Police Department, Hampden Public Safety, Old Town Police Department, Orono Police Department, and the University of Maine Police) and (3) the Waterville Police Department.

² Under separate contract, the Maine SAC is also providing the Maine State Police with a Manual and Marketing Plan to facilitate the adoption of incident based reporting.

Management Systems Unit staff who have been assigned to lead the effort to adopt NIBRS and Maine IBRS as the preferred data collection approach.

FINDINGS

Respondents from the three sites and from the Maine State Police Records Management Services Unit (RMSU) all identified the following themes as critical to facilitating the adoption of NIBRS and the Maine-specific IBRS system:

- Adequacy of training and documentation
- Adequacy of technical support and assistance
- Data entry and the importance of police officers
- Data quality

Adequacy of training and documentation

This category refers to the:

- Orientation to the system as a whole
- Quality and quantity of instruction
- The instructional design
- The availability and accessibility of follow-up assistance by the vendor
- Relevance to user – i.e., the patrolman’s - needs and priorities
- Utility of documentation such as manuals and on-line support, and
- In-context support provided by vendors and RMSU staff.

Each law enforcement jurisdiction hired a different vendor. Each vendor has a different relationship with its partner agency and a different approach to training. Both quality and quantity of training were identified as key obstacles to the adoption of NIBRS during the first aborted attempt in 1994 and the current effort.

The Lewiston-Auburn 911 consortium was fortunate in having a former police officer, who had an interest in automation and in fact had gone on to get a bachelor’s degree in computer science. He was able to connect system needs with data collection concerns so that training and support are predicated on the priorities of the patrolman – the person who actually collects the data and determines its quality at the very beginning. Hence at this LEA, the vendor will use a “train-the-trainer” approach where a person from each agency in the consortium will be trained to become the in-house expert and on-site trainer. In addition, the vendor will be on-site and follow each step of the process with the learners who will then return to their respective sites to work with the patrolman. A critical component of the training includes the importance of NIBRS as a tool for tracking patterns, trends, and locations of crimes. In Waterville, training on the vendor’s system was conducted three months before the system was finally installed. In addition, the vendor provided Waterville respondents with pages containing screen shots and rudimentary

“One of the big elements that you throw into NIBRS is that the street-level cop hates paperwork, thinks it’s a waste of time and will do as little as possible. That to me is the biggest hurdle in collecting NIBRS data across the spectrum.”

- respondent

“I want to stress what they have to gain. ...the trainer [will] not only...teach this person...but train him as to what the advantages will be to the data collection down the line. They need to see that the person that comes in behind them, like an investigator, may need the data... They need to look at the whole picture.”

*-Lewiston-Auburn 911
Coordinator*

“The non-predictable, huge element of the project is whether or not patrolmen go into it kicking and biting. ..If you get buy-in from them and they are willing to give the system a chance, it’s much better. After some time, you should give them feedback on how the data collection is making a difference. Don’t disappoint them. They need to see the results of their work.”

-Lewiston-Auburn 911

keyboard instructions. In effect, Waterville staff was not provided with the means to understand or use procedures associated with submitting and analyzing NIBRS data. During the time of the initial start-up Waterville staff made frequent phone calls for technical assistance. They found that the increasing frequency and simplicity of the questions led to an increase as well in disinterest by the vendor in the problems reported. Inadequacy of reference materials plus poor timing of training created obstacles to application and communication between the vendor and the user.

The Penobscot County Law Enforcement System (PCLES) had not yet received training from its vendor, who refused to begin development until they received funds from the Department of Public Safety. Once they received a payment, PCLES was placed on a waiting list with a lower priority than those assigned to larger and generally more urban law enforcement agencies. The vendor proposed four days of training, a technician, manuals and technical support for a set price. However, there is a twelve- month waiting period, so the only training that has been delivered thus far has been on report writing and data collection

In summary, vendors appear to be critical to training. In turn, both the terms of the arrangements and the history between local law enforcement agencies and the vendors are critical to the quantity, quality and timing of the training. The training design and implementation skills of the law enforcement agencies themselves are also critical.

The degree to which vendors provide training, manuals, and on-site technical support during the initial phases of implementation has much to do with the ease of adopting NIBRS systems. There might also be value to bringing in technical support staff to assess and inventory end users’ capacity to use the proposed system, which invests users in the project at an early stage. Users – in this case, the police officer – are critical to both the collection and quality of data. To the degree that they see that there is something in it for them and that it benefits their work as well as the FBI, they will collect the data. However, if they are not nurtured and provided with an easy-to-use data collection instrument, they will not provide reliable data to the Repository.

Adequacy of technical support and assistance

Technical support refers to:

- Assistance with code tables to insure consistency
- Ongoing assistance during the early stages of implementation
- Continuing assistance to insure data quality, and
- Assistance with the collection and transmission of standardized NIBRS and Maine-IBRS data.

The Maine State Police Records Management Services Unit (the home of the IBRS Repository), vendors and contractors, depending upon need, provide

technical support. In general, the quality and history of the relationship between the vendor and the law enforcement agency conditions the nature and usefulness of the technical support.

The Lewiston-Auburn 911 coordinator has a long history with the vendor, and provides user feedback. He is a sophisticated technology –trained manager, and is able to seek out and understand the meaning and implications of the support he gets from the vendor.

The PCLES technology coordinator negotiates the contract but does not provide technical assistance. Instead, PCLES pays an additional cost to the vendor to get help.

In Waterville, the vendor did not include a vendor representative on-site, although Waterville staff assumed the vendor would provide for some on-site assistance during the early stages of the NIBRS implementation. The vendor has provided a web site that functions as a remote technical assistance service. In general, Waterville has been dissatisfied with the quality of its technical assistance from the vendor ranging from the ir apparent lack of knowledge of their own product to the brusque treatment they receive from the help center.

“Run your old and new systems parallel for at least a week. This is a 24-hour a day, 7 day a week environment with lots of practical applications. ... When you go live with a system like that, make sure someone from the vendor company is there for 2 or 3 days on-site so when something comes up, they are there to fix it or explain the system. Real time.”

- User, Waterville Police Dept.

In Lewiston/Auburn 911 and PCLES, the relationship with the respective vendor is good, so that the agency is able to get manuals that are useful, training that is “hands-on,” follow-up that is on-site during the critical beginning weeks of implementation, and technical assistance/customer service that is immediate, respectful and accurate. On the other hand, Waterville has not received similar support.

In summary, as with training, the history and terms of the negotiated contracts help determine the quality and responsiveness of the vendor. The success or difficulty with vendors appears to be in part, a function of relationships, the degree of technological sophistication possessed by the agency, and the agency’s clarity of purpose, need, intention, and experience. It remains to be seen how the Maine State Police fare as they have contracted with yet another vendor for their IBRS. A performance-based approach to contracting may be helpful to holding the vendor and the agency accountable for specific intermediate and outcome-based performance indicators based on a clear work plan.

Data entry and the importance of police officers

This refers to the critical importance of patrolmen for data entry, documentation, and their willingness and ability to contribute information to and coordinate with the larger law enforcement system.

In Lewiston-Auburn, the coordinator emphasized how important the patrolman was to the success of NIBRS. As a result, he has spent much time designing and redesigning an intake form to facilitate data entry. In his opinion, the most

“Patrolmen know it is coming and we have tried to reinforce their report-writing skills so that... we got them used to collecting data and we expect that from them so that when we give them a new data set to collect, it won’t be shocking.”

*- Penobscot County Sheriff’s
Dept. respondent*

important function he could perform was to design a form that both (a) collected the information that each agency wanted and (b) facilitated the collection of data by the street-level police officer.

In Waterville, respondents pointed out the need for police officers to understand why NIBRS and Maine-IBRS were important tools and what the tool could do for them if they provided accurate and timely data. Respondents recommended training at the Maine Criminal Justice Academy on the benefits of NIBRS to their work.

In PCLES, respondents also acknowledged that patrolmen would have to be trained on what to collect and what reports to use to report the incident. As with Lewiston-Auburn 911, PCLES was acutely aware of the importance of data collection and proper use of the reporting form.

In summary, users are critical to the successful conversion to an incident-based reporting system. The degree to which they are prepared, involved, reinforced and provided with short-term feedback that adds value to their work, the more likely there will be a successful adoption of incident-based reporting.

Data quality

Data quality refers to the accuracy, reliability and validity of the data collected by patrolmen and forwarded to the state Repository and then to the FBI. The importance of data quality is that its value will be diminished if the data cannot be assured. Quality begins in the field at the data collection stage and is then re-checked as it gets stored at the local level, examined and then forwarded to the Repository where it is again evaluated for accuracy and compliance before it is forwarded to the FBI.

In Lewiston-Auburn, the coordinator observed that better quality means more legitimacy and use as a tool to help police work by identifying patterns, density, location “hot spots,” and types of criminal activities.³ In Waterville, respondents pointed out the need for data consistency (e.g. the need to code events similarly), another component of quality.

In summary, data quality is critical to the future use of NIBRS and its early adoption by patrolmen who will be asked to collect this data. The importance of data quality should be included as part of training, technical assistance and vendor contracts. Hence, training serves the multiple purposes of standardization, skill development, quality assurance and analysis. The role of the Maine State Police’s Records Management Systems Unit will be central to

³ In Maine, there is an emphasis on reporting and reducing the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence. NIBRS has been shown to be an effective tool for analyzing DV patterns and trends (Bureau of Justice Statistics: Crime in the US, 1998).

insuring that NIBRS data is collected, “cleaned,” and standardized before it is forwarded to the FBI.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The relationship with the vendor is critical. They supply the initial training and technical assistance. It is therefore important for local law enforcement agencies to negotiate a performance-based contract with the vendor to insure that deliverables and agency expectations match. Respondents also recommended “shopping around” among vendors and checking other installations before making a final selection.
2. The role of the user, i.e., the patrolman, is crucial because he/she collects the data. Therefore, police officers need to be trained not only in the “nuts and bolts” of collecting and reporting the data, but what that data means to the larger law enforcement system in which he/she works. In addition, police officers need a simple data collection tool to facilitate local analysis, reporting to the state Repository and subsequent transfer to the FBI.
3. Training and technical assistance are essential and set the stage for either a successful or difficult implementation of NIBRS and Maine IBRS. Quality and timeliness of training and follow-up through technical assistance is critical to effective implementation of NIBRS. The issue of data quality can be addressed during training, so that patrolmen can see how important their role is to the later evaluation of the department’s performance and needs for staffing, equipment, space, and professional development.
4. The Maine State Police Records Management System Unit needs additional staff to provide ongoing and field-based technical support to these jurisdictions in matters of data quality, implementation questions, troubleshooting software problems, training and performance contracting with the various vendors involved with incident based reporting.

“If you don’t give some training to people inputting the data, the data will be impure and not representative of what you are looking for...If you don’t show users the importance of what they are doing, human nature is that they will find the easy path, do what they have to do to get by.”
-Waterville PD respondent

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

DATE:
NAME:
TITLE:
PHONE #:
ORGANIZATION:

1. What did you know about the IBR implementation in your department?
2. How was that information conveyed to you and by whom?
3. What is your understanding of how IBR works?
4. How would you compare the new IBR system to your old system?
5. What motivated your department to participate in the conversion to IBR?
6. What kind of information and support do you need to learn and continue to use IBRS?
7. How has the new IBR system affected your job?
8. How has the new IBR system affected your department (things like supervision, morale, procedures, policies and staffing issues)?
9. Describe the training process?
10. Was the training sufficient to meet your needs? Please explain.
11. Is there a system in place to provide ongoing training and technical support?
12. Describe your relationship with your vendor and their role in the IBRS implementation. (Response time, competence, technical assistance)
13. Did you get all the tools you needed to use IBRS?
14. If not, what did you need that you didn't get?
15. What went well in the process of converting to IBRS?
16. What didn't work well?
17. What could be done differently?
18. How does your department plan on maintaining and upgrading the IBR system as needed?
19. What advice do you have for other departments that are considering the conversion to IBR?
20. Any additional comments?

Additional Questions:

1. What is the history of implementing IBR systems in the state of Maine?
2. What happened to the IBR implementation in 1994?
3. How is the 2001 implementation different from the 1994 effort?