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Discovering Crime and Justice Data on Government Websites

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Introduction

The U.S. government provides information related to crime and justice through many different agencies and websites. Navigating through this information can be a complicated process, especially without knowing where to start. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and other agencies have unique missions and collect and share valuable data in different formats that can often be difficult to locate and use.

Looking for data related to crime and justice can be challenging for everyone. Often there is a specific question in mind that might or might not be possible to answer exactly with the available data. For example, someone looking for a new house or apartment might want to know how safe different neighborhoods are, but depending on the area, Google searches on this will possibly only bring up news media articles about specific, isolated events. Google might also return descriptions of neighborhood life from real estate sites (whose main purpose is to get you interested in buying or renting in that location), or information designed for visitors or tourists, not necessarily locals. If you do not know anyone who already lives there, you might be left asking for advice from strangers on social media or other online forums (which could inspire a need for even more fact checking). The qualities that make a neighborhood safe might vary from person to person—one person might be worried most about robbery, while someone else worries more about hate crimes, illegal drugs, or even just whether there are enough sidewalks and

crosswalks and streetlights. For example, a Google search for “how many houses were robbed in x city last year?” will most likely only find other news articles, if anything at all. This is because most crime data, like other kinds of data, live on what librarians call the “deep web.” The deep web has been defined as “publicly accessible information available via the World Wide Web but not retrievable using search engines that rely on crawlers or spiders...” (Reitz 2014). Searching the internet might not help an information seeker come away with a good idea of whether or not there is something to worry about. The data collected by law enforcement or other government agencies can be a better way to get a glimpse at the scope of the problem, but you must know where to look and realize that the exact data you expect might not be there at all. There may be other data you could take into consideration. A general search of Google does not do a good job finding it because to really work with it and use it, you need to go directly to the government agency that collects those statistics and start looking there instead.

This chapter will outline different federal agencies that collect and distribute data related to crime and justice. It will offer some strategies for finding, navigating, and getting the most out of that data.

Department of Justice

The mission of the Department of Justice, <https://www.justice.gov/>, includes law enforcement, public safety, crime prevention, punishment, and “fair and impartial administration of justice for all Americans.” The Department of Justice oversees agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). These are all places where crime and justice data can be found. Some of this data is distributed through the Bureau of Justice Statistics, but in many cases can also be found on the agency website that collects the

data. Figure 1 is a chart detailing the different types of statistical information that might be of interest from some of these agencies.

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Federal Bureau of Investigation

The FBI, <https://www.fbi.gov/>, is an intelligence and law enforcement agency that gathers and disseminates data relating to terrorism, espionage, cyberattacks, and major criminal justice threats. Its website includes data sets on a wide variety of topics.

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/>, releases current data in its Crime Data Explorer, while historical data is kept on the UCR Publications page. FBI databases reporting this data include:

- National Use-of-Force Data Collections, <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/use-of-force/>, for death or serious injuries resulting from law enforcement use of force
- Crime Data Explorer, <https://crime-data-explorer.app.cloud.gov/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend>, for:
 - Violent crime statistics
 - Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter
 - Rape
 - Robbery
 - Aggravated assault
 - Property crime statistics
 - Burglary
 - Larceny/theft
 - Motor vehicle theft
 - Arson

Demographic information is provided about both the victims and the offenders.

- Hate Crime Statistics, <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/hate-crime>, for crimes motivated by bias.

The FBI also publishes topical reports such as cargo theft, human trafficking, active shooter incidents, missing and unidentified persons, and bank crime statistics.

UCR provides current data, but the years vary by database. Historical data also varies. Their *Crime in the United States* report and *Hate Crime Statistics* data are available to the mid-1990s, while the National Incident-Based Reporting System only dates back to 2011. The FBI transitioned to a new data collection system in January 2021. While the intent is to provide more robust data, it may make comparing current and historic crimes difficult.

The FBI's website is easy to navigate. However, all agency data is reported together so users cannot search specifically by street or ZIP code but must read through larger data sets to retrieve the needed information. The Crime Data Explorer offers searching by location, dataset, reporting agency, and year. Depending on data type, the national, state, and local data may be available. To search for local crimes, choose the reporting agency closest to your neighborhood (there may be more than one) and the year.

Drug Enforcement Administration

The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), <https://www.dea.gov/>, is responsible for enforcing the nation's controlled substances laws. The Agency reports crime data related to drug labs and domestic arrests. The National Clandestine Laboratory Register Data (NCLRD), <https://www.dea.gov/clan-lab>, provides lists of locations where law enforcement agencies reported finding items indicating the presence of either clandestine drug laboratories or

dumpsites. The Domestic Arrests database, <https://www.dea.gov/data-and-statistics/domestic-arrests>, is a single list that provides annual, national-level data on DEA arrests.

The DEA does not have much data, but what is available is easy to find through the agency's Resources page. The NCLRD links to a downloadable CSV file with the raw data. Data in the NCLRD can be filtered by state or by year, but the reporting of this data varies widely by both categories. Some states have significant reporting going back to the twentieth century, while others have only a handful of recent incident reports. The Domestic Arrests data is reported annually from 1986 to the present.

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosive's (ATF) Resource Center provides data and statistics related to explosives and arson, firearms commerce, manufacture, trace data (national and international), and reported firearm thefts and losses. Highlights of both explosives and arson data are summarized in annual PDF reports but the raw data for these categories is not available on the website. Data about firearms commerce, manufacture, trace data, and thefts and losses, however, are provided at the state and national levels.

The ATF website is easy to navigate. Most data is searchable by year, and by location within those years. While data does not go back very far, it is easy to compare data from the available years. Publication dates vary by database and location, but all data goes back at least five years.

Bureau of Justice Statistics

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) is the primary statistical agency of the Department of Justice, tasked with collecting, analyzing, publishing, and disseminating information about crime, criminal offenders, victims of crime, and the operation of justice systems at all levels of government. The website can be searched by topic:

- Corrections
 - Courts
 - Crime
 - Federal justice system
 - Forensic sciences
 - Law enforcement
 - Recidivism and reentry
 - Tribal crime and justice
 - Crime victims
- Publications
- Database
 - Arrests
 - Parolees
 - Prisoners
 - Probation
 - Juvenile justice
 - Federal processing
 - Crime victimization
 - Prisoner recidivism

Depending on the collection, data may be available at the national, state, and/or local level.

Topics and databases are both linked from the BJS's home page. Topical data links out to the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD), <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/NACJD/index.html>, housed at the University of

Michigan's Institute for Social Research. For example, each topic can be searched by subject term, data file format, and geography. Data analysis tools are located on the BJS website; data can be downloaded as XLS or CSV files, depending on the database. All of the data analysis tools include resource links with user guides, FAQs, and glossaries. Most data are collected annually and range from the late twentieth century to present, depending on the data set.

Federal Bureau of Prisons

The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), <https://www.bop.gov>, provides for the welfare of prisoners. The Bureau conducts research about correctional topics such as drug treatment, vocational training, and prison management. The BOP's website includes a list of federal prison locations and a directory of past and present inmates.

Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics

The *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, <https://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/>, is unique, but worth mentioning, even though it is not technically hosted by a federal government agency. It "brings together data from more than 100 published and unpublished sources about many aspects of criminal justice in the United States" (University at Albany, n.d.), many of which are from federal and state government agencies. Although this is not a government agency website but instead hosted by the University at Albany School of Criminal Justice, it is good to know about if you are looking for government data, especially as it includes a lot of older, historical data than other sources. The Bureau of Justice previously published the *Sourcebook* in print, so many libraries may have older print copies of this source. While this is a good way to navigate older government data about crime and justice, unfortunately, it is not currently up to date on the data it includes, making it a better source for older information.

The *Sourcebook* is broken down into six different categories of information:

- characteristics of criminal justice
- public opinion
- crime and victims
- arrests and seizures
- courts, prosecution, and sentencing
- parole, jails, prisons, and the death penalty

For each broad category, the *Sourcebook* online dates back to 2003; an archive section covering 1994-2002 is temporarily unavailable at the time of this writing. The *Sourcebook* is further broken down into topical sections with links to tables of data within each section. The *Sourcebook* can also be searched by keywords, but there are no advanced search features other than sorting results by date. Tables are PDF files and easy to open in most internet browsers. Each table gives a citation for where the data came from, as well as the URL of the page in the *Sourcebook* displaying the data. This makes it easy for students to create citations.

National Crime Victimization Survey

An interesting data set related to crime and justice that might be easy to overlook is from the Bureau of Justice's *National Crime Victimization Survey* (NCVS), <https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs>. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts this survey annually, starting in 1973 to the present. Each year, a nationally representative sample of people and households is surveyed on the "frequency, characteristics, and consequences of criminal victimization in the United States", including information on personal crimes like rape and sexual assault as well as property crimes

like burglary, motor vehicle theft, and other types of crime both reported and unreported to authorities (U.S. Bureau of Justice 2009).

This survey data is valuable because it helps bridge the gap between what is known about crimes reported to authorities and what is not known about crimes never reported at all. It also gives insight into who are the victims of crimes, rather than focusing on who are the perpetrators of crime. Demographic data including age, race, and relationship to offenders is also collected as part of the survey. To help gain critical insights, questions are also asked about crime victims' experiences with the criminal justice system. The documentation for the survey, including the questionnaire, is also available on the website.

A general "Criminal Victimization" report is published each year the survey is conducted, but periodically reports will also be issued on specific topics or trends over time. For example, recent reports include *Crime against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2019*, *Hate Crime Victimization, 2005-2019*, *Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2020*, and *Financial Fraud in the United States, 2017*. Recent reports are available on the Bureau of Justice Statistics website. Older reports do not seem to be available online but may be available in libraries with Federal Documents collections.

Department of Homeland Security

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), <https://www.dhs.gov/>, is separate from the Department of Justice, but with a mission that is related to "secure the nation from the many threats we face" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2021). It is composed of different agencies that work together to carry out this mission, including the Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA), <https://www.fema.gov/>, and the Office of Immigration Statistics, <https://www.dhs.gov/office-immigration-statistics>.

Types of data provided by DHS varies by agency; each individual agency has its own data on their website, and there is no way to search data from all agencies under the department at the same time. However, there is a lot of useful information to be found and little, if any, duplication between agencies. For example, the Office of Immigration Statistics publishes reports about immigration, border security, and refugees while the Customs and Border Protection office maintains a database of intellectual property rights violations.

The DHS also operates the Department of Homeland Security Digital Library, <https://www.hsdl.org/c/>. This site is the “the nation's collection of documents and resources related to homeland security policy, strategy, and organizational management.” The information is divided into three collections, <https://www.hsdl.org/c/about/>. The first is freely available to the public. The second is open to government officials at the local, state, tribal, territorial, or federal levels as well as the U.S. military. It is also available to eligible research and educational institutions. The third collection - the Restricted Collection – “is a repository of sensitive materials collected from national, state, and local fusion centers, threat analysis centers, and law enforcement organizations. It is available only to U.S. government officials or active members of the U.S. military.” Data and statistics in the DHS Digital Library are primarily links out to those data sets and reports on other government websites, which makes sense. The library collects and provides access to reports and documents from many different places rather than creating its own content. For example, searching for information about active shooters will return documents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the United States Department of Defense, but also reports and analysis from city and state police and fire departments, emergency

response protocols and drills from organizations like the National Retail Federation, and academic theses written by students at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the Naval Post Graduate School.

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Some of the most useful data available through DHS agencies include the *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) open data. The *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook>, includes data on how many foreign nationals DHS granted permanent or temporary residency in the United States each year, how many applied for asylum or refugee status, and how many became naturalized citizens. The *Yearbook* also compiles data about actions taken to enforce immigration laws each year. Currently, the years available are 1996-2019.

The OpenFEMA Data Sets website, <https://www.fema.gov/about/openfema/data-sets>, includes information about disasters and disaster assistance, the FEMA flood insurance program, hazard mitigation programs, and other data related to the mission of FEMA. Datasets include disaster declarations areas, housing assistance program data for both renters and homeowners, and hazard mitigation projects.

Because the data is presented in data sets rather than charts, graphs, or tables, it can be difficult to navigate, especially for those not familiar with using Excel or other common data management programs. FEMA even cautions that several of its data sets exceed the capabilities of commonly used spreadsheet applications. This will require more advanced techniques to work with the data and some are recommended on the website.

Conclusion

While looking for data related to crime and justice can be challenging, a good first step is being able to figure out which government agency would collect data related to the topic that is of interest to you. It is important to consider the topic first, rather than the specific question, since data is often reported differently than might be assumed. While it may not be possible to answer the exact question you have, you should be able to find information related to your topic that may help.

Because the way agencies collect data can change over time and might affect the data itself, it is also good to take a look at this when you are using data from agency websites. One recent example is the changes to the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System, <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/nibrs>. The agency website notes that getting all reporting agencies to switch over to the new data reporting system takes time, and that because the system is changing, care must be taken when trying to compare older data to newer data.

Finally, whenever there might be overlap in where data on a topic is being collected, it is worth looking at all of those places. While the exact data probably will not repeat itself, you may be able to uncover a more nuanced look at your original questions. For example, if you are looking for data about crime, you might check both the FBI's Crime Data Explorer (<https://crime-data-explorer.app.cloud.gov/pages/home>) and the *National Criminal Victimization Survey*. These sources look at similar issues, but from different angles, and taken together can provide a broader view. Searching for government data is a challenge but it can be a fun one, if you know where to look and if you understand the ways data can be manipulated and reported.

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