

On Good Authority

Illinois
Criminal Justice
Information
Authority



An Executive Briefing on Trends and Issues in Criminal Justice

April 1996

Timeliness, Accuracy and Completeness of Criminal History Records

Overview

Although advancements have recently been made to the criminal history records information system, there is still room for improvement. That is the conclusion of an Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority study using an assortment of record information and audit techniques. Criminal history record information is of critical importance to law enforcement officers, courts, custodial personnel and others. When the record information is not timely, accurate and complete, criminal justice officials may be led to make incorrect decisions that affect both the accused and society.

About the Study

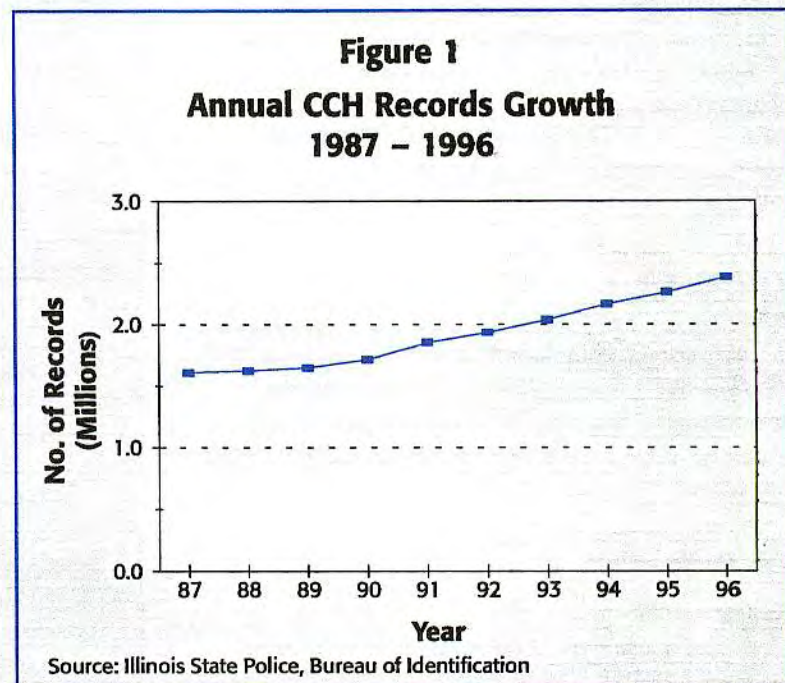
A Comprehensive Examination of the Illinois Criminal History Records Information (CHRI) System: Final Report of the 1993-94 Criminal History Records Audit provides a detailed analysis of the policies and practices used to obtain, maintain and disseminate criminal history record information. It also examines how well agencies such as police departments, state's attorneys, courts, jails and prisons report CHRI to the Illinois State Police and how well the ISP processes CHRI. A primary focus was the Computerized Criminal History records data base maintained by the ISP's Bureau of Identification in Joliet, which is the state's central repository for storing CHRI. Rap sheets used by criminal justice practitioners are produced from information stored in the data base. Future studies will use this baseline data to measure system changes and improvements.

Record Timeliness

Researchers found that it is difficult for the ISP to keep pace with the huge number of records it must process. There

are nearly 2.4 million records of individuals in the CCH data base, an increase of 48 percent since 1987 (see Figure 1). In addition, there are more than 12 million events on the data base (each individual may have several events on his/her record). Events have been added at a rate of nearly 600,000 per year over the last 10 years.

The state is turning to electronic means to report arrest and subsequent filing, disposition and custodial information. Livescan, or direct electronic fingerprinting, is one means



being used to quickly transfer record information.

Even with advanced means of relaying information to the ISP, many records often do not arrive in time to meet statutory regulations (Figure 2). For example, a large sample of records arriving at the ISP indicated that 91 percent of livescan arrests arrived on time, compared to only about 26

percent of mailed arrests. The percentage of other submission types meeting statutory regulations for timeliness fell between these two figures: state's attorney's submissions, 47 percent; court dispositions, 40 percent; custodial receipts, 72 percent; and custodial status changes (such as prison releases), 60 percent.

Researchers discovered that the ISP enters about 75 percent of the submissions it receives within 90 days, and posts — or makes available — about 58 percent (Figure 3). During one study period, the ISP was without a data entry vendor. Had the vendor service been in place during the study period, the figures probably would have been substantially higher. Other factors contributed to these figures. For example, many submissions contained fatal errors that prevented the ISP from posting them. Also, state's attorney charge information or court dispositions cannot be posted to the data base unless preceded by an arrest submission. When no arrest information is received before the disposition, the disposition is placed in a pending file. Finally, 40 percent of the submissions that were not posted to the CCH data base after the 90-day study period were posted before the study was released.

Record Accuracy

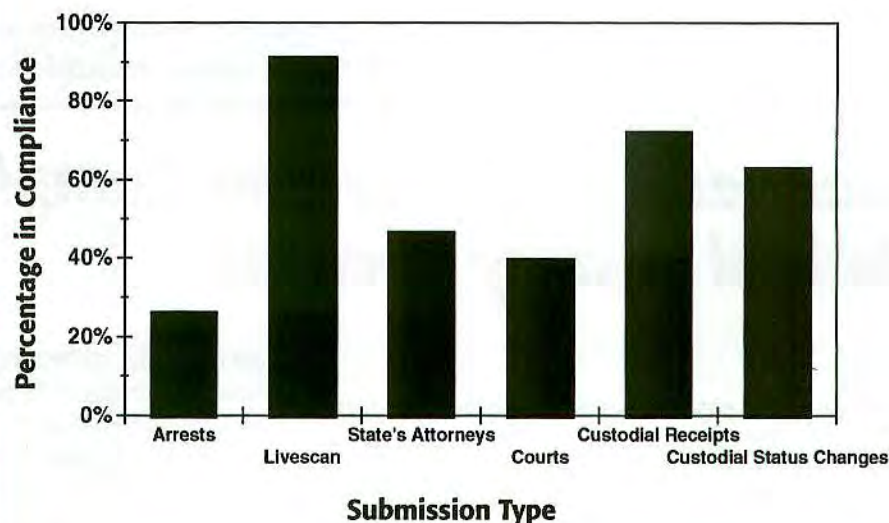
Researchers determined that most agencies accurately transfer information from their files to forms submitted to the ISP. However, some of the information is inaccurate and/or incomplete. Also, the ISP usually accurately and completely transfers information from the state form to the CCH data base.

Missing Information

Rap Sheets

Researchers also found that agencies requesting rap sheets may receive information that no record exists even though the person had previously committed a reportable offense. In one sample of known offenders, rap sheets were not located for 28 percent of the offenders. Some of the missing rap sheets could be caused by agencies that never reported the arrest to the ISP, or because the searches were name-based and not based on a verified state identification number (SID), the number that uniquely identifies people

Figure 2
Statutory Compliance of Event Submissions by Submission Type



Criminal History Records Audit Center

The Final Report of the 1993-94 Criminal History Records Audit, published in August 1995, was supported with formula grant funds from the Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance Program, which is administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice. Federal requirements stipulate that states receiving Byrne funds must set aside at least 5 percent of their awards for the improvement of criminal justice records.

In August 1993, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority created the Criminal History Records Audit Center using a portion of its Byrne funds. The center's central purpose is to audit the state's CHRI system and offer recommendations to improve it.

In December 1994, the Authority published *An Overview of the Illinois Criminal History Records Information System: Part I of the 1993-94 Criminal History Records Audit*. The report detailed how records are processed; the tremendous growth in records and the challenges this presents; how the system has changed in recent years; and how Illinois' records compare to those of other states.

Whereas the 1994 report examined the degree to which the system has grown, the final report examines the quality of the CCH records, identifies weaknesses in the system and makes recommendations.

in the CCH data base.

Court Dispositions

Past Authority audits indicated that court dispositions are often missing from rap sheets. The present analysis also examined this issue and found that there is still ample room for improvement. Researchers found that corresponding court dispositions were missing for about 70 percent of a sample of more than 5,600 arrests. Among the things being looked at in the 1996 audit, which is currently underway, is why court dispositions are often missing.

Custodial Receipts

In a sample of rap sheets whose court dispositions listed a sentence of incarceration, researchers found less than half of the rap sheets contained custodial receipt information (Table 1). This was especially problematic for people sentenced to jail. In a sample of 132 sentences to jail, 20 (15.2 percent) of the rap sheets indicated the jail receipt. In another sample of 110 sentences to jail, eight (7.3 percent) listed the corresponding custodial receipt.

Rap Sheets of Inmates in IDOC Custody

In a sample of 929 inmates scheduled for release from the custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections, researchers found 81 percent had rap sheets that accurately reflected the inmates currently were

incarcerated. Of those rap sheets, 58 percent also showed the arrest, while 41 percent showed the arrest, the state’s attorney charge and the court disposition indicating a sentence of incarceration.

This part of the study replicated work conducted in a 1992 audit. The 1993–94 analysis indicates that although rap sheet information is still missing, there has been significant improvement since 1992.

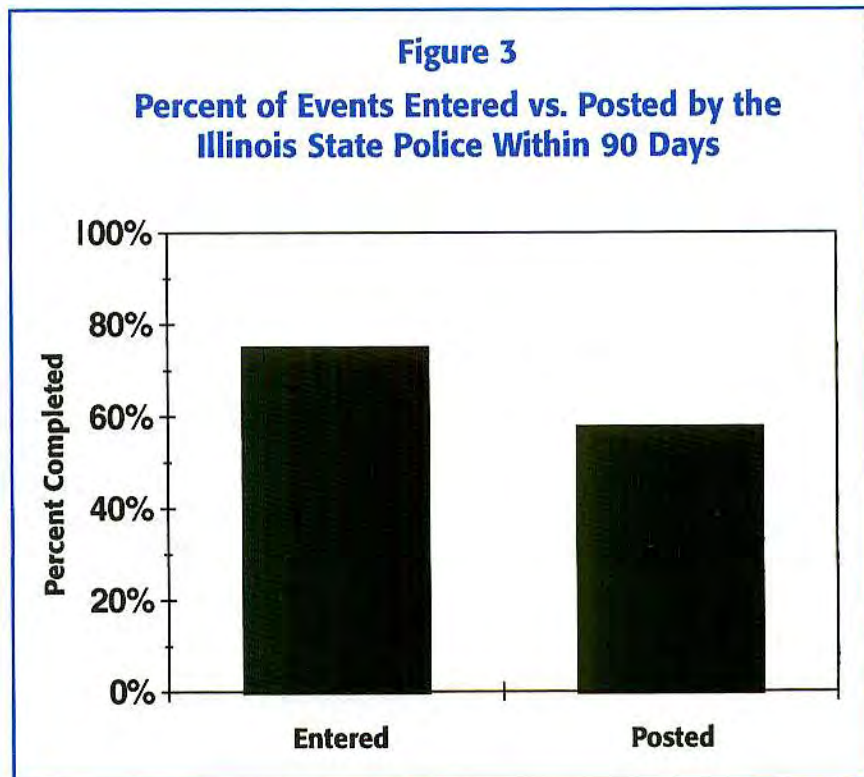
Other Issues

Rap sheets were often difficult to read and connecting related events was time-consuming and frustrating. Linking related events was especially problematic as there is no common number used to connect custodial events to other events. Furthermore, most state’s attorney charge submissions may be unnecessary as they duplicate information submitted during

the arrest. They could be eliminated except when charges are modified or added.

Police Department Policies and Practices

Finally, the study found that although most police departments are aware of statutory regulations and other requirements for maintaining, reporting and storing criminal history record information, some are not. Two agencies were not aware of the statutory requirement to send arrest information to the ISP; many do not have policies/



Incarceration Type	Sample 1	Sample 2
Prison	76.7 %	59.3 %
Jail	15.2 %	7.3 %
Total	48.8 %	42.3 %

practices in place to report certain offense types, such as minors tried as adults; and several do not follow adequate security measures in preserving their CHRI.

Recommendations

Recommendations to improve the system are offered throughout the report. The Authority recommends that:

- Criminal justice personnel receive more training regarding criminal history record information;
- The ISP implements strong policies regarding record timeliness;
- Local agencies enter more critical information on their own records;
- Rap sheet requests include fingerprints whenever possible;
- Rap sheet information be streamlined and made easier to read;
- The arrest/disposition/custodial card configuration be revised;
- Efforts to obtain missing or delinquent court disposition and custodial receipt information continue;
- The ISP implements a strategy for updating inmates' criminal histories while they are incarcerated;
- The ISP attaches news bulletins to rap sheets as a way of communicating with agencies that receive them; and
- The Authority and the ISP continue to audit the CHRI system.

Ad Hoc Committee

The Ad Hoc Committee on Dispositional Reporting — a committee comprised of officials from various criminal justice disciplines — has been working for several years to improve the criminal history records information system through a variety of strategies. The audit report should assist Committee members in their endeavor to enhance this important and growing system.

— *This On Good Authority was written by Leonard P. Wojciechowicz, director, Criminal History Records Audit Center. It was edited by Daniel Dighton of the Office of Public Information.*

For more information, extra copies of this report, or copies of previous On Good Authority reports, write the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 120 S. Riverside Plaza, Suite 1016, Chicago IL 60606, or call (312) 793-8550. Copies of the audits mentioned in this report also are available from the Authority.

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