#1: An Overview of Findings from the 2016 Survey of State Criminal History Records Repository Administrators

By Becki Goggins

The United States Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) recently published the latest findings of a biennial national survey that represents the most current and detailed snapshot of the data, trends, policies, practices, and operations of criminal history records repositories nationwide.

The Survey of State Criminal History Information Systems, 2016 was conducted by SEARCH, The National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, with support of BJS, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. As part of its National Criminal History Improvement Program, BJS has supported these biennial surveys since 1989, together with substantial direct funding to states and territories to improve the quality, timeliness, and accessibility of criminal history and related records, and a host of other research, conferences, workshops, and technical assistance.

The 2016 report provides results from a survey of the administrators of the state criminal history records repositories conducted March–June 2017. SEARCH surveyed 56 jurisdictions, including the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories. All 50 states, Guam, and Puerto Rico submitted survey responses.

The survey findings are very detailed and provide insight into the volume of records and transactions processed by repositories, policies and practices, levels of automation, measures of data quality and timeliness, types of records and systems maintained, information sharing capabilities, and more.

In an effort to make these detailed findings more accessible, and to provide operational context for these findings, SEARCH is publishing a series of blogs that highlight key findings from the survey. This first blog provides an overview of key findings over the past 10 years on the growth of criminal history records and the expanding use and accelerating demand for these records.
Expanded Focus in 2016

SEARCH and BJS have conducted the Survey of State Criminal History Information Systems since 1989 and have periodically introduced new topics to explore emerging trends and to gain insight into new initiatives.

This most recent survey—the 14th in the series—was expanded to address several issues based on user feedback, including:

- business process time measurements;
- flagging misdemeanor domestic violence convictions and active protection orders;
- the use of livescan and cardscan fingerprint automation technologies; and
- state plans to refresh and/or replace aging criminal history systems and automated fingerprint identification systems.

10-year Snapshot

Criminal history records are intended to provide a complete and accurate portrayal of a person’s involvement in the criminal justice system, including arrests, indictments, prosecutions, court dispositions, probation or other community supervision details, jail or prison commitments, releases from supervision, and more.

The criminal justice system uses criminal history records to make determinations concerning bail, pretrial diversion, sentencing, parole eligibility, and a host of other decisions affecting those who have committed a crime. Increasingly, criminal history records are also used by employers, volunteer organizations, licensing boards, and a wide array of regulatory agencies when making suitability and/or hiring decisions.

Because criminal history record information (CHRI) is a fingerprint-based, longitudinal record of an individual’s interaction with the justice system, it offers greater value than information contained in individual case management systems, such as those maintained by the courts, jails, prosecutor’s offices, etc. Additionally, since CHRI is fingerprint-based, those who depend on the information to make critical decisions that impact public and workplace safety can be assured that the identity of the subject has been established with biometric precision.

SEARCH staff continue to analyze the results of the 2016 Survey with the intention of making the data more accessible by creating dashboards and interactive displays. If you have suggestions for topics you would like to see highlighted, or if you have specific questions about survey findings, please contact Becki Goggins (becki@search.org) or Dennis DeBacco (dennis@search.org).
— **Offender Records Increase by 36%**

Between 2006 and 2016, the number of subjects (i.e., individual offenders) in state criminal history records repositories has continued to increase, growing by 36.6 percent, from 80.7 million records to more than 110 million records. Moreover, in efforts to improve the quality and timeliness of criminal history records, states are increasingly automating older manual criminal history records, which have declined nearly 40 percent in the past decade, dropping from 7.1 million manual records in 2006 to just 4.3 million records in 2016.
— Background Check Demand Surges

As the number of records in criminal history records repositories continues to grow, so too does the demand for background checks. **States have witnessed a 30.8 percent increase in the number of criminal history background checks conducted over the past decade (from 19.8 million to 25.9 million), with substantial growth in the number of noncriminal justice requests.**

Since 2006—

- the number of fingerprints processed for noncriminal justice purposes increased by 89.6 percent (7.7 million to 14.6 million), while
- the number processed for criminal justice purposes actually decreased by 6.6 percent (12.1 million to 11.3 million).

The number of noncriminal justice checks exceeded the number of criminal justice checks for the first time in 2014, and this trend has escalated in 2016, with noncriminal justice requests exceeding criminal justice requests by 3.3 million (14.6 million compared to 11.3 million). Given the expansive growth of using CHRI to support decisions regarding licensing, employment, volunteer work, and other authorized uses, this trend is likely to continue—and it underscores the importance of accurate, timely, and complete criminal history records.

![Volume of Fingerprinted Processed for Criminal and Noncriminal Justice Purposes](chart.png)
— Changes in Noncriminal Justice Background Checks

We have also witnessed changes in the way noncriminal justice records background checks are completed. Name-based checks increased by 50.3 percent (from 15.5 million to 23.3 million) over the past decade, while fingerprint-based checks increased 89.6 percent (from 7.7 million to 14.6 million). These changes have implications for state criminal history records repositories, which face expanding volumes of records and growing technical demands for fingerprint processing.

States Planning on CCH/AFIS Replacement

It is worth noting that in a subsequent section of the survey, 21 states indicated that they are planning to replace their computerized criminal history (CCH) systems, including 11 by the end of 2018, and 19 states plan to replace their Automated Fingerprint Identification Systems (AFIS), including 9 by the end of 2018. Both CCH and AFIS replacements are major information technology initiatives that require significant planning and effort to implement, typically cost millions of dollars, and take several years of development, testing, and data migration before launching production.

About the Author

Ms. Becki Goggins is Director of Law and Policy at SEARCH. She oversees our work in the areas of criminal history records, development of laws and policies concerning the use of justice information and protection of privacy, implementation of evidence-based practices, and the use of technology to improve justice information sharing. As an organization, SEARCH was originally founded to facilitate the exchange of criminal history record information (CHRI) between the states. Learn more about SEARCH’s work with criminal history records and the surveys we conduct on CHRI issues.