

Is Florida Ready for a Standardized Crime Report? (A Northeast Florida Perspective)

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Abstract

The primary method of communication between police agencies, the crime or incident report, is a growing impediment in today's justice system. This study originated with the compilation of law enforcement crime reports from twelve agencies in the North Florida area. Although all contain similar information, these reports differ in content and form. These various reports were then reviewed as part of a series of interviews conducted with several groups working in this general area, including law enforcement personnel, state attorneys, insurance agents, reporters, and the general public. It was determined from the interviews that standardization of these reports would be beneficial to the Criminal Justice System and others who utilize them.

Introduction

The State of Florida has 259 municipal police departments and 67 sheriff's offices (National Directory of Law Enforcement Administrators, 1997), as well as dozens of other state agencies, which are included in crime-reporting agencies. At the current time, over 1,000,000 crimes are reported annually in Florida (Hoffmann, 1997). A majority of these agencies are reporting crimes through the use of the Uniform Crime Report, but each agency may use its own reporting format to initially document the incident or crime.

Research Problem

Because each agency may use its own individualized format, reports can be different in appearance, content and title. These diversifications may pose problems to users who read and gather information from the reports at a subsequent date. After all, these reports are not written only for the agency which completes the report; they can be and are used by various offices which are investigating similar crimes. The reports are often read by others in the criminal justice field such as State Attorneys, whose daily task is to read and review cases from various police agencies in their jurisdictions to prepare cases against suspects. These reports are also read by other individuals such as insurance agents, who gather information to settle claims, and reporters, who report crimes and incidents to the public. The format discrepancies, no matter how subtle, result in loss of time and information to the users. The reports, although generally inclusive of the same information, document such information by different methods and in different locations. Therefore each reader must become acquainted with each agency's report style to function in his or her daily job.

The author sought to answer two basic questions through a survey of critical users and an analysis of crime reporting formats in the northeast Florida area. These questions are:

- (1) Would Florida law enforcement personnel derive any benefit from the standardization of its crime reports?, and

- (2) Would a standardized crime report prove helpful to those users who utilize such reports on a regular basis?

What is a crime report?

A crime report is the primary source document for police activities and findings of events requiring investigation that could result in a criminal arrest. Police crime reporting is one of the most significant processes in modern police communications. It contains information that is necessary to document the incident and to satisfy such basic inquiries as to who, what, where, when, why, and how the incident occurred. The purpose of the report is to communicate the results of every investigation in a manner that satisfies the needs of those who work in the criminal justice system (Miller, 1993). Police crime reports are generally divided into two basic areas: the face sheet, sometimes called a cover sheet, and the narrative (Miller, 1993). The face sheet usually contains boxes that are checked or filled in. The primary purpose of this documentation is to provide quick access to necessary information common in all cases. This area is valuable for crime-reporting purposes: compiling statistics; computer data entry; filing; cross-referencing; and, crime-analysis work (Miller, 1993). The face sheet is a collection of facts. Face sheets have styles that vary from agency to agency, county to county, and state to state (Miller, 1993). There is little uniformity among these formats. The next section, commonly called the narrative section, contains the entire police investigation effort written in sentence and paragraph form.

Why are police reports written?

Police reports result from the fact that someone has asked for them and needs them for immediate or future use. They are designed to be read and used, and are the principle source of information in the department's effort to assist other agencies. Every police department is frequently called upon to assist others. This pooling of information is a "must" in combating the modern criminal who moves rapidly from one area to another (Gammage, 1978). Crime reports aid the criminal justice system, which depends to a great extent on this form of written communication. These reports are also important to today's society, as criminal cases are often news worthy and prove to be a common topic of daily discussions. Crime reports are also written for victims of crime and private citizens who might later appear as witnesses in court. These people, who the laws were designed to protect and serve, are often the last ones given consideration by the criminal justice system (Miller, 1993).

Why does law enforcement need a standardized crime report?

Crime reports are the documentation of the police officer's field investigation and, as such, are the single link with the end user of the report. These reports should be written to satisfy any person who must read them and make decisions based on his findings. "These reports are the lifeblood of a healthy criminal justice system" (Miller, 1993). They carry important information to every component, thus enabling everyone in the system to do his or her job more accurately and efficiently.

Does Florida law enforcement currently use any standardized reports?

Florida law enforcement uses two standardized forms at this time. They are the Florida Uniform Traffic Crash Report and the Florida Uniform Traffic Citation. These

forms are used by every law enforcement agency throughout the state which reports traffic crashes or issues traffic citations. The reports are produced by the state and issued to each agency for its use. After the forms are completed, they are sent back to the state where information is gathered and disseminated for further use. These reports were first mandated by the Federal Government to track traffic fatalities and statistics. Each state has these similar type reports, but the format can be different from state to state. Standardizing these reports was no easy task. Many states did not want to have to compile this information to give to the Federal Government, but with the threat of losing Federal Highway money each state complied (F. Atkinson, personal communication, July 7, 1997).

Has there ever been an attempt to make a standardized crime report?

In the 1920's, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) believed there was a need to gather crime data and analyze it for further use. The IACP lobbied Congress to authorize the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to collect and compile nationwide crime statistics. On June 11, 1930, this legislation was passed and the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) was founded.

In 1967, the Florida Legislature established its own UCR statute, which was subsequently revised in 1971. This statute mandated the responsibility to gather and disseminate UCR information to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE). In 1985 and 1986, legislation was introduced to have FDLE design a standardized crime report which could be used throughout the state by law enforcement agencies. After a backlash from local sheriffs and chiefs (J. Moses, personal communication, September 10, 1997), this legislation was revised in 1987. The forms are complete and can be used by any agency in the state. Some of the complaints about this state form were that they were too lengthy, too time consuming, too costly to change over to and did not capture the information that some agencies wanted (J. Moses, personal communications, September 10, 1997).

In 1973, a federal grant was made available to the California Crime Technology Research Group out of California that conducted a research project named "Project Search." The primary focus of the group's research was to develop a conceptual crime reporting system that could be implemented, tested and evaluated. Although the group stated that its major goal was not to design a standardized crime report, after completing the research it did develop a prototype formatted crime report. The conclusion was that if this format was adopted by law enforcement agencies, it would allow interagency exchange of information, both in the single-case form and in the statistical by-product form. It was also concluded that implementation of such a report would minimize report preparation time by reporting officers, ensure that all required crime data was collected, allow increased crime analysis by making available appropriate and standardized data, create a basic source document for preparation of the Uniform Crime Report, provide for easy editing and review, improve communications between officers and detectives as well as between police and prosecutors, and assure that the prosecution function would be better supported by the receipt of adequate, standardized information from law enforcement agencies. Although Project Search met all its goals, the project apparently was not validated in reality (Project Search, 1973).

Methods

Two basic methods were utilized for this research project--literature review and personal interviews. Literature on standardized crime reports is scarce and extremely difficult to find. The issue has been discussed for many years but has never been addressed in the manner in which this paper addresses it. Many sources were found on the topic of crime reports themselves, such as what one is and how to write one.

Due to time constraints, information was gathered through personal interviews with people who read or write police crime reports on a daily basis. Five study groups were interviewed. They consisted of the following groups:

Law enforcement agencies located in the Northeast Florida area. This consisted of every agency in and around Duval County, and also agencies in St. Johns, Clay, and Nassau Counties. In all, representatives from twelve agencies were interviewed; they are listed in Appendix F. The only criteria for each person interviewed was that he or she was a representative of the agency and that he/she wrote and read police crime reports on a daily basis. Twenty-eight questions were compiled for interviewees of this group (see Appendix A). A majority of these questions required yes and no answers, with some necessitating further explanation. Crime reports were also collected from each agency to illustrate the differences between reporting formats of each agency. This compilation of reports was assimilated before the personal interviews were conducted, so that the participants would have an opportunity to view the variety of reporting formats firsthand. Of the twelve reports gathered, only two were similar in format. It was later learned during the interviews that one of the smaller agencies in the focused research group actually receives its reports from one of the larger agencies.

State Attorneys who work in the Northeast Florida district. In total three interviews were conducted. A representative from the felony division, the county division (misdemeanors) and a special prosecutor were interviewed. This group fit the same criteria as the earlier group in that they read police reports on a daily basis. Fifteen questions were compiled for interviewees of this group with most requiring only yes and no answers, but some required further explanation (see Appendix B). This group was also shown the law enforcement crime reports that had been gathered from the surrounding agencies.

Television and newspaper reporters who work in the North Florida area. This group consisted of representatives from three television stations and two newspapers who read crime reports on a daily basis. Twelve questions were compiled for the participants of this group (see Appendix C). They consisted predominantly of yes and no questions, with some requiring detailed responses. Five individuals were interviewed and each was given an opportunity to see the crime reports that were obtained from area law enforcement agencies.

Insurance agents from two of the statewide agencies located in Northeast Florida. One representative from each agency was interviewed. The only criteria necessary was that the individual was a representative of the related insurance company and he/she read reports on a daily basis. Twelve questions were compiled for this group; most

consisted of yes and no questions with some requiring further explanations (see Appendix D).

The general public of Northeast Florida. Interviews were conducted at the Jacksonville Beach City Hall. A date was selected and a time frame of one hour was chosen. A total of eight people came to this location at the specified time and consented to being interviewed. Each individual was given the opportunity to look at the compiled crime reports and eleven questions were asked (see Appendix E). Most questions consisted of yes and no answers with some needing further explanation from the participant.

Time played a major factor in the weaknesses of this survey. If more time and manpower had been available, more agencies and individuals could have been interviewed. Time constraints limited the research area to the Northeast Florida region.

Results

The data gathered from the in-person interviews are discussed in the following subheadings. They follow the same order in which the groups were interviewed or were listed in the Methods section of this paper.

Law Enforcement Agencies

These interviewees consisted of people working for the twelve agencies in the Northeast Florida region, whose tenure ranged from two and one-half to twenty-seven years. The person with the least amount of time in an agency was two and a half years. The average tenure at the current agency was 11 years.

Fifty percent of the people interviewed had worked for different law enforcement agencies before working for the one at which they are currently employed. All read and wrote police crime reports daily. Ninety-two percent stated that they have read other law enforcement agency's reports. Of these 92%, all stated that the other agencies had differently formatted reports. All stated that the other agency's reports were more difficult to read than their own. One hundred percent of the interviewees in this category stated that if they were investigating crimes from other jurisdictions and had to read a differently formatted report, that it would take more time. One hundred percent of those interviewed stated that they were taught to write police crime reports in the academy, but that it was different when they started working and had to become familiar with the different formats being used at their current agency. They felt it would have been easier if the format they are currently using had been taught at the academy. When asked how long it took to familiarize themselves with the format they are currently using, the average response was thirteen weeks. Seventy-five percent of the agencies questioned do not use computers to write reports, but the representatives responded that they felt they would be doing so in the future. The average number of crime reports written per agency was 23,687 a year. One hundred percent of those interviewed thought standardizing the crime report was a good idea and that law enforcement was ready for just such a report. Ninety-two percent said this type of report would make their job easier. One hundred percent of those interviewed said that a standardized crime report would not hinder their job in any way.

States Attorneys

This group consisted of state attorneys in the northeast Florida region. The average time in service was 4.6 years. The average number of crime reports read in a single day by an individual was 30. These reports were from different agencies and differed in format. One hundred percent responded that a standardized report would make their job easier. One hundred percent said that it would help the criminal justice system to have just such a report. One hundred percent stated that hardened criminals move from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and the type of reports currently being used hinders investigation from different jurisdictions.

News Reporters

This group consisted of the five major news agencies in the Northeast Florida area. Of those interviewed, the average time in service was 6.6 years. The interviewees in this group averaged reading 26 crime reports a day. One hundred percent said that each agency's report format is different. One hundred percent said these different reports make their job more difficult. One hundred percent said that utilization of a standardized crime report would make their job easier and was a good idea.

Insurance Agencies

This group consisted of two of the major insurance agencies located in Florida which have regional offices in Northeast Florida. Both subjects interviewed had been doing their job for 10 years. Each reads an average of 6.5 crime reports a day. Both agreed that the reports from different agencies differ in format which makes them difficult to read and gather information from, and both said that a standardized crime report would aid them in doing their jobs and would be good for law enforcement.

Citizens from the community

Of the eight people interviewed, 37% said that they had been a victim of crime and had requested a crime report. Seventy-five percent of those interviewed said they had read a crime report. Fifty percent of those interviewed said they had difficulty understanding the whole report. One hundred percent of the interviewees in this category said that a standardized crime report is a good idea and that law enforcement should have and use one. All interviewees in this group also responded that they were unaware that law enforcement agencies do not currently use a standardized reporting form.

Discussion

Of the thirty people interviewed during the course of this study, 100% thought that law enforcement is ready for a standardized crime report. Several felt that this type of report was overdue. One respondent actually said that law enforcement was ready 10 years ago when computers were becoming more accessible, making the storage and recovery of multitudes of information more cost effective and much easier to retrieve and manipulate. Of the law enforcement agencies interviewed, 25% were already using computers to write their crime reports. The other 75% said it was just a matter of time before they were doing the same. The accessibility of the computer should be the main reason law enforcement goes to a standardized crime report. The necessary technology

which will allow agencies to gather and share information simultaneously is readily available, and the importance of sharing the vital information found in crime reports in order to prevent further criminal actions and to apprehend criminal suspects is immeasurable. As one author noted, "Today's law enforcement is about information, and the police department that manages and shares information the best may just get a leg up on the bad guys" (Strandberg, 1996, p. 2). There seems to be a tendency for law enforcement to want to continue to utilize old and proven methods of accomplishing tasks (Brockelman, 1997). Law enforcement management must begin to anticipate "change" by re-evaluating old ways of doing things and plan future operations accordingly (Strandberg, 1996). The computer, with its capabilities of high speed communications, has introduced new ideas and concepts into law enforcement. Cooperation and exchange of information with law enforcement agencies many miles apart may result in achieving efficiencies to an extent not previously dreamed of (Brockelman, 1996).

A disturbing fact learned during the interviews with law enforcement was that they are not currently sharing information with any degree of adequacy. When asked how many different agency's reports the interviewee reads in a year, the average was 32 reports. Although this might sound like a high number, the average number of reports each agency was writing was 23,687. This would seem to fuel the idea that a standardized crime report may be necessary to assist these agencies in exchanging information in a more expedient manner.

When interviewing the State Attorneys, several stated that although various agencies had different reporting formats, virtually all included the same information. The discrepancies therefore caused them to waste time looking for information. Bintliff (1991) states that a reader should never be allowed to waste valuable time in decoding a report, since there is limited time to make decisions. The author stated that one prosecutor that he interviewed stated that 50 percent of the cases that should get prosecuted don't because crime reports are so complicated and poorly written. If information is not organized in a usable format, where others can utilize it to its potential, then it is useless.

Fifty percent of the agencies interviewed for this study were either accredited by the State or Nationally. One goal of the accreditation process is that each agency must use standardized forms and report the crime information through the UCR system. The goal of each accreditation system is to enhance professionalism in law enforcement through the synchronization of the various counterparts by standardization of job tasks. Yet nowhere in the accreditation standards do they address a standardized crime report for all of the accredited agencies.

Conclusion

It is the author's conclusion that a standardized crime report is needed and will be utilized. If for some reason the administrators of law enforcement agencies fear this type of report being designed and utilized, their fears must be met and dispelled. If they continue to oppose this type of report, maybe the legislature should take the same stand the federal government did on the Uniform Traffic Crash report and mandate it so that agencies are forced to comply or lose grant money in the future.

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Appendix A

Standardized Crime Report Interview Questions for Officers in Law Enforcement Agencies

1. Current Title? _____
Response: 1 chief, 1 lieutenant, 1 sergeant, 1 corporal, 3 detectives, 2 deputies, 3 patrol officers
2. How long have you been in law enforcement?
Response: Average, 11 years
3. Have you ever worked for a different agency?
Response: 50% yes, 50% no
4. Do you write police crime reports?
Response: 100% yes
5. Do you read police crime reports?
Response: 100% yes
6. Have you ever read a police crime report from a different agency?
Response: 92% yes, 8% no
7. If you have, do these other agency's reports use the same format that your agency does?
Response: 92% no, 8% yes
8. How many times in a year would you say you have read another agency's reports?
Response: Average, 32 times a year
9. Are these other agency's reports as easy to read and find information as your agency's reports?
Response: 100% no
10. If you were investigating a crime and had to read another agency's report, would it take you more or less time to find information that if you only had to use your own agency's report?
Response: 100% more time
11. When you graduated from the police academy, did they teach you police report writing?
Response: 100% yes
12. If so, did they use the same format that you are currently using at your agency?
Response: 100% no
13. Was what you were taught (such as who, what, when, where, why and how) in the academy, the same information you document on your agency's report?
Response: 100% yes
14. Do you think that if the police academy taught you how to write police reports on your agency's current report form, would transition into your department have been easier or harder?
Response: 100% easier

15. If you have worked for another agency, do you think a standardized format would have made your transition into your current agency easier or harder?
Response: 100% easier
16. How long did it take you to learn how to fill out your agency's report?
Response: Average, 13 weeks
17. Does your agency use computers to write their reports?
Response: 25% yes, 75% no
18. If they don't, do you think your agency ever will adopt computers for this task?
Response: 100% yes
19. Why are police crime reports written?
Response: Average answer was to document information
20. How many of these type of reports does your agency write in a year?
Response: 33% N/A, Average of 66% that knew was 23,687
21. Do you think a standardized crime report is a good idea for Florida law enforcement?
Response: 100% yes
22. Do you think Florida law enforcement is ready for a standardized crime report?
Response: 100% yes, of those 16% said overdue and 8% said the state was ready 10 years ago.
23. Would a standardized crime report make your job any easier or harder?
Response: 92% easier, 8% said neither.
24. Would a standardized crime report hinder your job in any way?
Response: 100% no
25. Have you ever filed a crime report with another state agency and received any remarks about your report being different than another agency's?
Response: 42% yes, 58% no
26. If so, was it a good or bad comment?
Response: Of those responding 80% bad, 20% good.
27. If you think a standardized crime report is a good idea, how do you think the state should go about implementing one?
Response: Average response was to have state make one.
28. Is your agency accredited?
Response: 50% yes, 50% no

Appendix B

Standardized Crime Report Interview Questions for State Attorneys

1. Current title? _____
Response: 1 director and 2 assistant state attorneys
2. How long have you been doing your current job?
Response: Average is 4.6 years.
3. Do you read police crime reports to accomplish your job?
Response: 100% yes
4. How many of these reports do you read in a day?
Response: Average was 30 a day.
5. Are these reports all from the same law enforcement agencies?
Response: 100% no
6. If there not, do all these agencies use the same formatted reports?
Response: 100% no
7. If they don't, have you ever noticed if any of them have any different information?
Response: 100% said no, but information was found in different locations of the reports and some might have more detail.
8. Do you think it would make your job easier if every law enforcement agency had a standardized formatted police report?
Response: 100% yes
9. Do you think a standardized police report is a good idea?
Response: 100% yes
10. Do you think a standardized police crime report would help the criminal justice system?
Response: 100% yes
11. Do you think a standardized crime report would make criminal investigation easier when investigations are conducted by several law enforcement agencies?
Response: 100% yes
12. Why do you think law enforcement agencies would be against this type of report?
Response: 33% did not know, 33% said agencies were territorial and 33% said inefficient administrations.
13. In your experience, do you think hardened criminals stay in one jurisdiction to commit crimes or do you think they move around?
Response: 100% said they felt these type of criminals were transient.
14. If you think they move around, do you think the type reports that law enforcement is currently using, help or hinder investigations and the capture of these criminals?
Response: 100% said they hinder them.
15. If you think a standardized crime report is a good idea, how do you think the state should go about getting every agency to adopt one?
Response: 33% said FDLE should handle, 66% said pass a law.

Appendix C

Standardized Crime Report Interview Questions for Television and Newspaper Reporters

1. Current title. _____
Response: 2 assignment editors, 2 reports and 1 staff writer
2. How long have you been doing your current job?
Response: Average 6.6 years
3. In your line of work, do you read police crime reports?
Response: 100% yes
4. How many would you say you read in a day?
Response: Average read a day was 26 reports.
5. Are all these reports from the same law enforcement agency?
Response: 100% no
6. If there not, do you find reading different agencies' reports difficult? Elaborate?
Response: 100% yes, hard to read and find information, time consuming
7. Do you think a standardized crime report is a good idea? Why?
Response: 100% yes, make their job easier, save time searching
8. Do you think this type of report would help law enforcement in any way?
Response: 100% yes, help in communications
9. Would a standardized crime report help you in your line of work?
Response: 100% yes
10. If you think a standardized crime report is a good idea, why do you think law enforcement has not adopted one?
Response: 40% did not know, 60% said tradition and they don't want change.
11. If you think a standardized crime report is a good idea, how do you think law enforcement should go about adopting one?
Response: 100% said the state should force law enforcement to adopt one.
12. Why do you think police crime reports are written?
Response: 100% say for recording information, of that 100%, 20% said this document was a form of communication as to what had occurred.

Appendix D

Standardized Crime Report Interview Questions for Insurance Agencies

1. Current title. _____
Response: 1 claims adjuster and 1 claims specialist
2. How long have you been doing your current job?
Response: Average 10 years
3. In your line of work, do you read police crime reports?
Response: 100% yes
4. How many would you say you read in a day?
Response: Average 6.5 a day
5. Are all these reports from the same law enforcement agency?
Response: 100% no
6. If there not, do you find reading different agencies' reports difficult? Elaborate?
Response: 100% yes, finding information is difficult, different locations
7. Do you think a standardized crime report is a good idea? Why?
Response: 100% yes, help them in their job
8. Do you think this type of report would help law enforcement in any way?
Response: 100% yes, communications and working relationships
9. Would a standardized crime report help you in your line of work?
Response: 100% yes
10. If you think a standardized crime report is a good idea, why do you think law enforcement has not adopted one?
Response: 50% said tradition and 50% said they don't want to change.
11. If you think a standardized crime report is a good idea, how do you think law enforcement should go about adopting one?
Response: 50% said Washington should pass a law and 50% said police should get together and make one.
12. Why do you think police crime reports are written?
Response: 100% said record information.

Appendix E

Standardized Crime Report Interview Questions for the General Public

1. Have you ever been a victim of a crime?
Response: 37% yes, 63% no
2. Have you ever requested a police agency to write a police crime report for you, if so how many times?
Response: 37% yes, 63% no, Average of 2.6 times
3. Have you ever read a police crime report?
Response: 75% yes, 25% no
4. If you have, did you understand the whole report?
Response: 50% said yes, 50 % said no
5. Did you know that law enforcement did not have a standardized crime report?
Response: 100% no
6. Why do you think these type reports are written?
Response: 100% said to gather information of crimes
7. Do you think a standardized crime report is a good idea for law enforcement?
Response: 100% yes
8. Do you think finding information one standardized crime report would be easier then having to find information on several differently formatted reports?
Response: 100% yes
9. Do you think one standardized crime report would work in Florida?
Response: 100% yes
10. Do you think law enforcement agencies would be for or against just such a report?
Response: 100% said for this type of report
11. If you think this type of report would be good for law enforcement, how do you think we should go about adopting one?
Response: 37% did not know, 37% said force them by a law and 25% said chiefs should get together and make one.

Appendix F

Crime Reports Collected from Law Enforcement Agencies in Order of Appearance

Duval County Police Departments

Atlantic Beach Police Department

Baldwin Police Department

Jacksonville Beach Police Department

Neptune Beach Police Department

St. Johns County Police Department

St. Augustine Police Department

Clay County Police Departments

Green Cove Springs Police Department

Orange Park Police Department

Nassau County Police Department

Fernandina Beach Police Department

Sheriff's Offices

Jacksonville Sheriff's Office

St. Johns County Sheriff's Office

Clay County Sheriff's Office

Nassau County Sheriff's Office