

# There are *two* national crime numbers, and they disagree

*One mechanism of official statistics — why crimes reported to police and crimes measured by household survey diverge, and why “crime is up/down” depends on which you cite.*

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## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

### *How This Guide Works*

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to the official statistics the government publishes — jobs, prices, crime, output, deaths — the numbers themselves and the way they are read, examined the same way regardless of which party the figure happens to help or hurt. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with agency methodology, official records, and nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

#### INCOGNATI CIVICS — OFFICIAL DATA REPORTING

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# Reported Crime vs. Victimization Survey

## Duo Numeri

**Governing precedent / case** FBI UCR/NIBRS vs. BJS NCVS **Status** Recurring in every crime debate

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

ANNUAL FBI AND BJS RELEASES

*The FBI's figures count crimes **reported to police**; the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey asks households directly, capturing crimes never reported. Because reporting rates change, the two can move in opposite directions in the same year. The FBI's 2021 switch from the old Summary Reporting System to **NIBRS** also left many agencies missing from that year's tally, making comparisons across the transition unreliable. A confident “crime is up” or “down” usually rests on one source without saying which.*

### THE HOOK

A single crime trend is asserted, though two official measures exist and can point different ways.

### THE MECHANISM

The UCR/NIBRS counts offenses known to police; the NCVS surveys victims and counts unreported crime. Reporting rates, coverage gaps, and the 2021 NIBRS transition all drive divergence.

**Field mark:** when you see a national crime trend, ask whether it is FBI (reported to police) or NCVS (household survey) — and, for years around 2021, whether the NIBRS coverage gap makes the comparison sound.

See the full references page for complete citations.

# References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

AGENCY DATA · FBI

Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Crime Data Explorer” and NIBRS transition documentation.

<https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/>

*The FBI's data portal and its notes on the 2021 shift to NIBRS and associated agency coverage gaps.*

AGENCY DATA · BJS

Bureau of Justice Statistics, “National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).”

<https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs>

*The household survey measuring both reported and unreported criminal victimization.*

## ***Reading a Crime Statistic: A Gut Check***

*four questions before a crime trend changes what you think is happening on the street*

- 1 Name the source**  
FBI counts crimes reported to police; NCVS surveys victims directly.
- 2 Expect divergence**  
Reporting rates shift, so the two measures can move opposite ways.
- 3 Mind the 2021 break**  
The NIBRS transition left coverage gaps that distort cross-year comparisons.
- 4 Match like with like**  
Compare the same source and definition across years, not one to the other.

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INCOGNATI CIVICS

### ***The Series Continues***

This is Specimen No. 6 of the Official Data Reporting section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins Elections and Federal Laws within Civics, with local government and institutional communications planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.