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Professor of Criminology
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October 18, 2019

Katharine T. Sullivan
Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General
Office of Justice Programs
U.S. Department of Justice
810 7th St NW
Washington DC 20001

Dear Deputy AAG Sullivan:

On behalf of the undersigned, we write to express concern about several important BJS data reports that have not been released.

The Crime & Justice Research Alliance (<http://crimeandjusticeresearchalliance.org>) is a collaborative partnership between the nation's two leading criminal justice scholar associations, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) and the American Society of Criminology (ASC), which represents more than 5,000 criminal justice practitioners, scholars, and research experts. Formed in 2015, the Alliance is non-partisan and does not take positions on policy, but does advocate for funding to support criminal justice research, and for access to crime and justice data.

COSSA, a nonprofit advocacy organization, works to promote sustainable federal funding for social and behavioral science research and federal policies that positively affect research and its conduct. COSSA serves as a united voice for a broad, diverse network of organizations, institutions, communities, and stakeholders who care about a productive and vibrant social science research enterprise. COSSA membership includes professional and disciplinary associations, scientific societies, research centers and institutes, and U.S. colleges and universities.

Over the past few months, members of our constituencies alerted us to several missing BJS data reports and asked us to look into the issue. We have identified the following BJS reports that appear to be long-overdue or missing.



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1) The 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates - Nearly two years ago, BJS informed the criminal justice community about a forthcoming report on “Parents in Prison and their Minor Children”. This report and several other regular products are based on the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates (SPI). While a report on the 2016 SPI survey methodology has been released, the survey data itself has yet to be released. One discrete subset of the data focused on firearms was released, but the vast majority of SPI data has not yet been published.

Prior iterations of the SPI were known as the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF), which was renamed with the 2016 implementation. The first survey of state prisoners was fielded in 1974 and thereafter in 1979, 1986, 1991, 1997, and 2004. The first survey of federal prisoners was fielded in 1991, along with the survey of state prisoners, and since then both surveys have been conducted at the same time using the same questionnaire and administration. The last publication from this regular data-collection effort was from 2008.

As you know, the SPI includes a host of pertinent data—which have not been released. The full list of SPI data includes demographic characteristics, current offense and sentence, incident characteristics, firearm possession and sources, criminal history, socioeconomic characteristics, family background, drug and alcohol use and treatment, mental and physical health and treatment, and facility programs and rule violations, etc.

We write to inquire about and request release of the various BJS reports associated with the SPI regular data-collection effort, and that the most recent SPI data be released.

2) The BJS Background Checks for Firearms Transfers Report Series - The last edition of the annual “BJS Background Checks for Firearms Transfers” report series released by BJS seems to be from 2015. We’ve been told that the data for 2016 has been gathered and the report is in progress, but the 2016 report has still not been released--though BJS staff have indicated that it is forthcoming at some unspecified point in the future.

Has BJS ceased to produce reports on background checks for firearm transfers, given that the last one published and available on the BJS website dates to 2015?

3) Death in Custody Reporting Program (DCRP) – BJS implemented the DCRP to fulfill the data collection requirements of the Death in Custody Reporting Act of 2000 (DICRA), reauthorized in 2014, and collects data on mortality during arrest and incarceration, providing national information on the deaths of suspects and offenders from the time they come in contact with law enforcement personnel through the time they are incarcerated in jail or prison.



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Regrettably, the most recent national published suicide statistics from BJS date back to 2013/2014. Our understanding is that DOJ is obligated, by law, to report these data per the Deaths in Custody Reporting Act and its reauthorization.

Has BJS ceased to produce reports on deaths in custody through the DCRP? We write to request that you publish the missing reports.

4) The Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) Survey -

The LEMAS survey collects data from a nationally representative sample of state, county, and local law enforcement agencies in the United States. In 2014, the National Commission on Forensic Science approved a recommendation to ask BJS to conduct a survey of police forensic units and the DOJ agreed to commission such a report. Subsequently, BJS presented a plan to the NCFS in January 2017 outlining the planned study, describing it as the 2017 LEMAS Forensic Science Supplement. The study has not been released nor has it been referenced on the BJS page or the LEMAS page.

Have the LEMAS supplemental surveys been discontinued and has BJS decided not to conduct the LEMAS Forensic Science Supplement after all?

In addition, many in the criminal justice research community have heard of an alarming decline in the number of BJS staff as a consequence of hiring freezes, staff attrition, and failure to replace departing staff and experts. We cannot help but wonder if the missing reports mentioned above may be a consequence of such shortages and we urge the Department to determine the extent of workforce shortages in BJS and staff BJS appropriately.

We have outlined four examples of missing or delayed reports or data collections. We make this inquiry to ascertain the status of the specific BJS products identified here, as well as the status of other data reports and data collections that are missing or delayed. Finally, we recognize BJS's critical role as the Nation's primary source of crime and justice data and are concerned about reports of workforce shortages that may impact the Federal government's ability to provide critical crime and justice data in a timely manner.



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We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Peter B. Wood, Chair
Crime & Justice Research Alliance

Wendy A. Naus, Executive Director
Consortium of Social Science
Associations

cc: Jeffrey H. Anderson, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics