



Highlights of [GAO-07-340](#), a report to congressional requesters

BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS

Quality Guidelines Generally Followed for Police-Public Contact Surveys, but Opportunities Exist to Help Assure Agency Independence

Why GAO Did This Study

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), a statistical agency of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, produces a recurring national Police-Public Contact Survey documenting contacts between the police and the public, including instances involving the use or threat of force by police. BJS issues public reports and sometimes press releases from survey results.

For reports and a press release issued from the 1999 and 2002 surveys (the most recent available), GAO reviewed (1) the extent to which BJS followed quality guidelines to ensure the accuracy and integrity of its survey-related products, and (2) factors that affected whether and how BJS followed available guidelines.

GAO reviewed applicable federal data quality guidelines, policy and procedure documents, and interviewed current and former officials familiar with BJS.

What GAO Recommends

In a May 2006 report, GAO recommended that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issue a directive to further safeguard the integrity of federal statistical data and improve guideline clarity. Such a directive could help address conflicting interpretations about the applicability of quality guidelines. Since OMB is still working on this directive, GAO makes no new recommendations in this report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-340.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Brian Lepore at (202) 512-4523 or leporeb@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

BJS followed nearly all quality guidelines for its 1999 and 2002 Police-Public Contact Surveys. Specifically, for the four public reports issued from these surveys, BJS fully followed all data quality guidelines available for reviewing statistical information, obtaining the approval of key decision makers, and publicly disseminating information. These guidelines were issued by the National Research Council, Department of Justice, Justice's Office of Justice Programs, and BJS itself. GAO believes that because BJS followed these guidelines, proper steps were taken to help ensure the accuracy and integrity of the reports. BJS followed 7 of the 10 quality guidelines available for the one press release issued from its 1999 survey, but was not in a position to fully follow 3 other guidelines for reasons discussed below.

Two key factors affected whether and how BJS followed quality guidelines. The first concerned different interpretations about certain guideline applicability. BJS considered its survey-related reports—but not its press releases—to be statistical products covered by the National Research Council's guidelines. BJS cited a lack of specificity in these guidelines, which did not specifically state that they were applicable to statistical agency press releases, as a basis for concluding that the survey press releases need not conform to guidelines for statistical products. We believe BJS's position was not unreasonable, and did not find fault with the agency. However, we determined nonetheless that the single press release issued from the 1999 survey was a statistical product, and therefore believe the council's guidelines appropriately applied. Second, certain noncareer appointees outside BJS may, in accordance with Justice Department policy, make decisions about the review, approval, and dissemination of press releases, and BJS press releases are jointly issued with the Justice Department, with input from its Office of Justice Programs. Both conditions can potentially affect BJS's independence. Owing to these conditions, BJS was not, in our view, in a position to meet 3 council quality guidelines related to statistical agency independence, including that it be able to issue statistical products without prior clearance, and control the scope and content of its products.

Justice affirmed several of GAO's findings but disagreed with certain GAO conclusions about the applicability of guidelines to a press release. Justice's detailed comments and GAO's response are contained in the report.

Guidelines BJS Followed for Products Issued from 1999 and 2002 Police-Public Contact Surveys

Reports			Press releases		
Number of reports issued	Number of guidelines available	Number of guidelines fully followed	Number of press releases issued	Number of guidelines available	Number of guidelines fully followed
4	Up to 23 ^a	All	1 ^b	10	7

Source: GAO analysis of agency data.

^aTotal guidelines were 24 across the different points in time; 23 was maximum at any given time.

^bFrom 1999 survey information.