

This study was conducted to provide knowledge about current criminal justice information integration initiatives as a basis for designing business case materials. To be effective, a business case for criminal justice information integration must be specific about its objectives, practical in its approaches, and realistic in assessing its prospects for success. Therefore it must be grounded in the realities and problems of criminal justice information use and responsive to the main issues affecting attempts at integration.(1) While the overall objectives of information integration may be common across many states and localities, the specific issues and problems to be solved vary greatly. This study was conducted to examine current initiatives and their context in local, specific terms. The resulting details about the types of initiatives underway, their objectives, and progress form a very useful basis for business case development and for broader understanding of integration in general.

Approach to Information Integration

Integrating criminal justice information involves, ultimately, the whole institutional structure of the criminal justice enterprise.(2) This organizational and institutional structure differs greatly among states and localities. To simplify the description a bit when describing information creation and use, information needs and activities are grouped into five basic functions: (1) law enforcement, (2) court operations and administration, (3) prosecution and legal administration (Prosecuting/District attorneys, states attorneys, Attorneys General), (4) defense (public and private), and (5) incarceration (including parole).(3) Of these, three typically fall under the executive branch of government (law enforcement, prosecution and legal administration, and incarceration). In a number of states, however, the executive branch at each level can include constitutionally independent executives (e.g., separately elected Attorneys General, District Attorneys etc.). In all cases, the courts are a separate branch of government, but often dependent on the executive and legislature for funding. The legislature is, of course, involved directly through funding and oversight of these other branches, as well as through legislation on crime and criminal procedures.

These different components of government seldom share the same objectives or views of criminal justice information integration. The courts tend to see criminal justice as only part, and in terms of case load the minority part, of their business. Improved court information integration can mean improved management, better input for decisions, and better justification of budget and workload. In the law enforcement area, the primary concern are public safety, reduced risk to officers, and less chance of making major mistakes, as well as reducing paperwork. The analysis here has to deal with these and a wide range of other divergent views.

The divergence of views does not extend to the general meaning of integration of criminal justice information. All the parties desire smooth and effective information sharing and use throughout all these diverse branches, functions, and levels of government. Agreement is also easy to reach on the expected results: increased public safety, enhanced justice in society, and more efficient government operations. The problems come when actual integration initiatives generate conflict over specific impacts on budgets, organizational relationships, and established procedures. For example, there was widespread support for implementing a statewide LiveScan fingerprint system in California. But it required standardizing booking and identification procedures across hundreds of local law enforcement offices. Orange County already had its own well-established scanning system and procedures in place and was unwilling to abandon them. Both the state and county had to accept adjustments to allow Orange County local fingerprinting to become integrated with the state's, while maintaining most of the local procedures and systems. This example, as with most problems and issues we encountered, involved problems not of technology nor of conflicting visions, but of organizational and political interests and relationships. These concerns thus form the core of the analysis and discussion to follow.

Overview of Methods

The results of this study are based primarily on interviews conducted with participants in integration initiatives. A total of 26 telephone interviews were conducted over a two-week period. The participants for the initial interviews were selected by the Office of Justice Programs staff as persons who were knowledgeable about specific state and local initiatives. During the interviews the participants were asked to identify other knowledgeable persons for possible additional interviews, and some of these were contacted as well. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours, and were semi-structured, open-ended in style. All the participants were contacted with preliminary phone calls or email and received a copy of the interview questions in advance. All interviews were recorded and notes and summaries were prepared. The interviews were conducted by Center for Technology in Government professional staff who were trained specifically for these interviews to ensure consistency in questions and approach. The study also draws on published materials about the integration initiatives, obtained either from the participants directly, or by searching print and electronic sources.

Purpose and Overview

- (1) For simplicity this report uses the term “integration” to represent the more specific term “criminal justice information integration” since the latter is somewhat cumbersome for repeated use. It is not meant to imply integration of the institutions and agencies themselves.
- (2) The term “criminal justice enterprise” is used here instead of the more common “criminal justice system.” It refers to all the activities conducted by the organizations that are responsible for criminal justice in a particular setting.
- (3) An example of the kinds of complexity that can arise is found in the fluctuating government structure of parole functions in New York. Over its history the parole function has moved back and forth three times between being a part of the Department of Corrections and being a separate Commission reporting directly to the Governor.