

**Transparency and Truth in Reporting:
Honolulu Police Department's Response to Crime Clearance Statistics**

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In November 2017, Susan Ballard was appointed to a five-year term as the Chief of Police for the Honolulu Police Department. In the first few months of her administration, she decided to remove crime clearance statistics (which had been published annually by the department since 1932) from the HPD annual report, published the following spring. Chief Ballard also made public statements that the HPD was understaffed. She planned to divert personnel away from units that investigate property crime and into patrol and alternate call servicing (ACS)¹. She said that the public should expect burglary and other property crimes to go un-investigated without further staffing (Kawano, 2018).

In January 2018, the Honolulu Police Department (HPD) was certified by and began transmitting their Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) statistics directly to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In early 2020 following the State of Hawaii's NIBRS certification, the FBI sent the data back to the Hawaii Attorney General (AG) office. As a result, the AG had two-year's worth of unpublished crime data that was analyzed, summarized, and sent back to the HPD in June 2020, for review before publication. That summary was transmitted, without response, to the department's administration for their consideration.

On September 30, 2020, a local media outlet, Civil Beat, conducted an analysis and determined when compared with national averages, the HPD's crime clearance rates, as determined by the AG for 2018 and 2019, were extremely low. The Chief was asked to comment on the story, but she declined. Civil Beat published an article citing its own analysis, HPD's failure to publish crime clearance statistics, and Chief Ballard's comments about property crime (Jedra, 2020).

On October 7, 2020, during a Honolulu Police Commission (HPC) meeting, Chief Ballard spoke about the crime clearance numbers. She stated the numbers were inaccurate, lamented that we had to submit them in the first place, said that the HPD didn't know how Civil Beat had gotten the numbers, and that the AG numbers, once published, would exonerate the department (HPC, 2020). Meanwhile, the department was thrown into internal turmoil, with the Chief demanding answers and explanations to back up her public statements, some of which could not be directly substantiated.

¹ This HPD's ACS unit consists of full-duty sworn personnel who remain at the station and handle certain types of cases by telephone. These cases are typically cold property crimes and civil "Records Only" type cases.

Admittedly, the UCR – Summary Reporting System to NIBRS transition can be confusing to the uninitiated. The topic only becomes more challenging to understand when you add in the additional factors of a homemade Records Management System (RMS) and some confusing translations between the Hawaii Revised Statutes and NIBRS offense definitions. However, by choosing to remain silent on the matter, the HPD failed to “[strike] the right balance between satisfying the public’s desire for information with the need to preserve the integrity of ongoing investigations” (Patrick, 2020).

While it would clearly be inappropriate to discuss the status of individual cases, with over 25,000 Part I offenses, the HPD could have shared significantly more information with the public in a general way. Instead of continuing an air of secrecy, the department should have been more transparent, as suggested by Patrick by, striking a “balance [between] the value of transparency and the importance of confidentiality and maintaining the integrity of an ongoing investigation” (Patrick, 2020).

Agnes (2016) presented three important steps to begin implementing ahead of any crisis in law enforcement agencies. The first, seeing crisis as an opportunity to collaborate, was ignored entirely by the HPD. Rather than embrace the department’s critics and attempt to offer an explanation, the administration chose to toe the line with a standard, “No comment.”

Instead of treating the NIBRS crime clearance story as an opportunity to practice honest transparency, as suggested by Agnes (2016), the HPD administration repeatedly refused to comment on the story, seemingly hoping it would go away. Until the HPC meeting, publicly, the department was wholly silent on the topic, failing to use its social media presence to respond to this crisis. As Yael Bar Tur, former New York Police Department Director of Social Media said, “We realize that these conversations are happening with, or without us. We’re not telling our story” (Dudley, 2020).

In hindsight, a better approach to addressing the story may have been to create a series of short videos posted to Facebook or YouTube each day explaining the crime clearance issues. This effort would have at least begun to limit the damage the story had done. Instead, the comments on the news story, on social media, and in a scathing editorial a few days after the HPC meeting have further damaged public trust.

When facing the controversy of the NIBRS crime clearance story, the Chief addressed the topic head-on with the HPC. As suggested by Agnes (2018), while she demonstrated decisiveness, she did so without being completely thoughtful on the topic. Instead, the Chief spoke out without completely understanding the issues at hand. As a result, some of her answers to the commissioners could be considered misleading at best.

Perhaps a better approach to answering the HPC's questions would have been with a prepared statement to the effect, "The NIBRS classification and crime clearance systems are extremely complicated. I have asked the head of the Records and Identification Division to be here with us today to provide you with an executive summary as well as answer any questions you may have." The subject matter experts could have then explained the issues in layman's terms.

The HPD missed three very significant opportunities with their handling of this situation. The first opportunity was to understand the UCR – RMS – NIBRS relationship better. This likely began years earlier when Chief Ballard made the decision to stop publishing crime clearance statistics. Only with a thorough understanding of how offenses are classified and clearances calculated could an informed administration make appropriate decisions regarding internal policies, practices, and procedures.

Secondly, based on this lack of understanding, the HPD missed the chance to build a more collaborative, transparent, and trusting relationship with the community and local media outlets. Once the story broke, had they taken the time to explain how complicated the problem was, rather than hide behind empty excuses designed to prop up a broken system, the public and the media may have understood the eventual outcomes much sooner.

Finally, the HPD administration alienated the women and men of the department who administer and use the RMS and investigate the cases involved in the UCR report. Rather than accept responsibility and implement improvements, publicly blaming the department-developed system and using words like "garbage in, garbage out" (Honolulu Police Commission, 2020), demonstrated a lack of trust and confidence in those most familiar with the system, who, ironically, have worked hardest to improve it.

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