Chapter 4

Description of the National Crime Information Center in Context

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Chapter 4

Description of the National Crime Information Center in Context

Chapter Summary

The National Crime Information Center (NCIC) uses computer and telecommunication technology for collecting, storing, retrieving, transmitting, and disseminating criminal justice information. NCIC interfaces with and complements many other criminal justice information systems at the Federal, State, and local levels. Thus, NCIC maybe viewed as one member of a family of systems.

NCIC

NCIC contains 10 files. Eight of these, the so-called "hot files, " furnish an electronic bulletin board capability used by law enforcement agencies to list persons or properties (e.g., vehicles, guns, and securities) that are wanted, missing, or stolen. The ninth file is the computerized criminal history (CCH); the tenth is the Criminalistics Laboratory Information System (CLIS) file which contains no information about individuals.

As of October 1981, NCIC included about 9.3 million records—7.4 million hot file records and 1.9 million CCH file records. However, about 90 percent of NCIC traffic is for use of the stolen vehicles/plates and wanted/missing persons files. CCH use involves about 4.4 millions transactions annually, or about 3.5 percent of total NCIC traffic.

The low level of CCH use compared with hot file use is due in part to the small number of States that are fully participating in the CCH program. Whereas all 50 States can both enter data into and retrieve data from the hot files, as of December 1981 only 8 are authorized to enter data into the CCH file. Only 15 States have ever fully participated in CCH, with never more than 13 at any one time. However, in addition to the 8 fully participating States, 41 others participate in CCH on a limited basis (retrieve data entered by others) and have signed a management control terminal agreement with NCIC.

NCIC has 137 direct communication lines to law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, including 79 State and Federal agencies, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) headquarters, 27 FBI field offices, and 2 FBI metropolitan resident agents. An estimated 64,000 other Federal, State, and local law enforcement and criminal justice agencies are entitled to access NCIC over these lines. Depending on the State, these agencies may include, for example, local police departments, U.S. magistrates, district attorneys, courts, county jails, State hospitals, and parole boards.

Related Systems

NCIC interfaces with a large number of other criminal justice information systems. The following are particularly important:

. *The FBI Identification Division (Ident)* fingerprint record repository is integral to NCIC/CCH, since every CCH entry must reference an FBI identification number initially assigned by Ident based on positive fingerprint identification. The Automated Identification Division System (AIDS) is the FBI's effort to automate Ident, and in October 1981 included about 5.8 million criminal history records. All first offender records are entered into AIDS. Ident is not maintaining manual rap sheets on any individual who is in the AIDS file. When a criminal history record is needed it is generated by computer. As of October 1981, 58 percent of the records

in the NCIC/CCH file were also maintained in AIDS.

- *National La w Enforcement Telecommunications System (NLETS) is* a computerized message switching network linking local, State, and Federal law enforcement agencies. Operated by a nonprofit corporation controlled by the States, NLETS does not hold or manage record files. It is a principal means by which user agencies verify data from the NCIC hot files. NLETS can also be used to transfer records from the NCIC/CCH file and between State CCH files.
- *Treasury Enforcement t Communication System (TECS)* is a large communication network and computerized data base managed by the Customs Service in the Treasury Department. TECS supports over 1,400 terminals in, for example, the 50 States, Puerto Rico, and Canada, and serves various Federal agencies and Interpol (the International Police Organization). TECS users can access the NCIC/CCH file to obtain summary records online. Full records can be produced offline and delivered to TECS users who are authorized to receive them.
- *Justice Telecommunications System (JUST)* provides computerized administrative message service to Department of Justice (DOJ) offices in Washington, D. C., and to 329 department offices in 169 cities nationwide. JUST has a direct link to NCIC and offline linkages to the Department of Defense AUTODIN network and the Department of State Diplomatic Network.
- *State and* local *systems are also* highly automated. As of August 1982, 27 States had CCH files, and another 7 had an automated name index. At the local level, most major metropolitan police departments use computer-based systems (19 such departments have direct lines to NCIC).

Thus, automated systems are clearly prevalent at the local as well as State and Federal levels, and NCIC is only one of a rather large family of computer-based criminal justice information systems.

What NCIC Is

System Description

NCIC is a computer-based national information system whose principal function is to support law enforcement and criminal justice activities. Managed and operated by the FBI, NCIC uses computers and telecommunication technology for collecting, storing, retrieving, transmitting, and disseminating criminal justice information among government agencies at the Federal, State, and local levels, and among some private organizations. The center is located in the FBI's computer facility in Washington, D. C., and includes a telecommunication network that reaches automated or manual teletype terminals in all of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, Canada, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, as shown in figure 6.

As of October 1981, the NCIC network had 137 direct communication lines to law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, including 79 State and Federal agencies, FBI headquarters, 27 FBI field offices, and 2 FBI metropolitan resident agents.1 As shown in figure 6, State agencies with direct lines include primarily State police or highway patrols or departments of public safety, justice, or criminal identification. Nine Federal agencies (listed in fig. 6) have a direct line to NCIC.

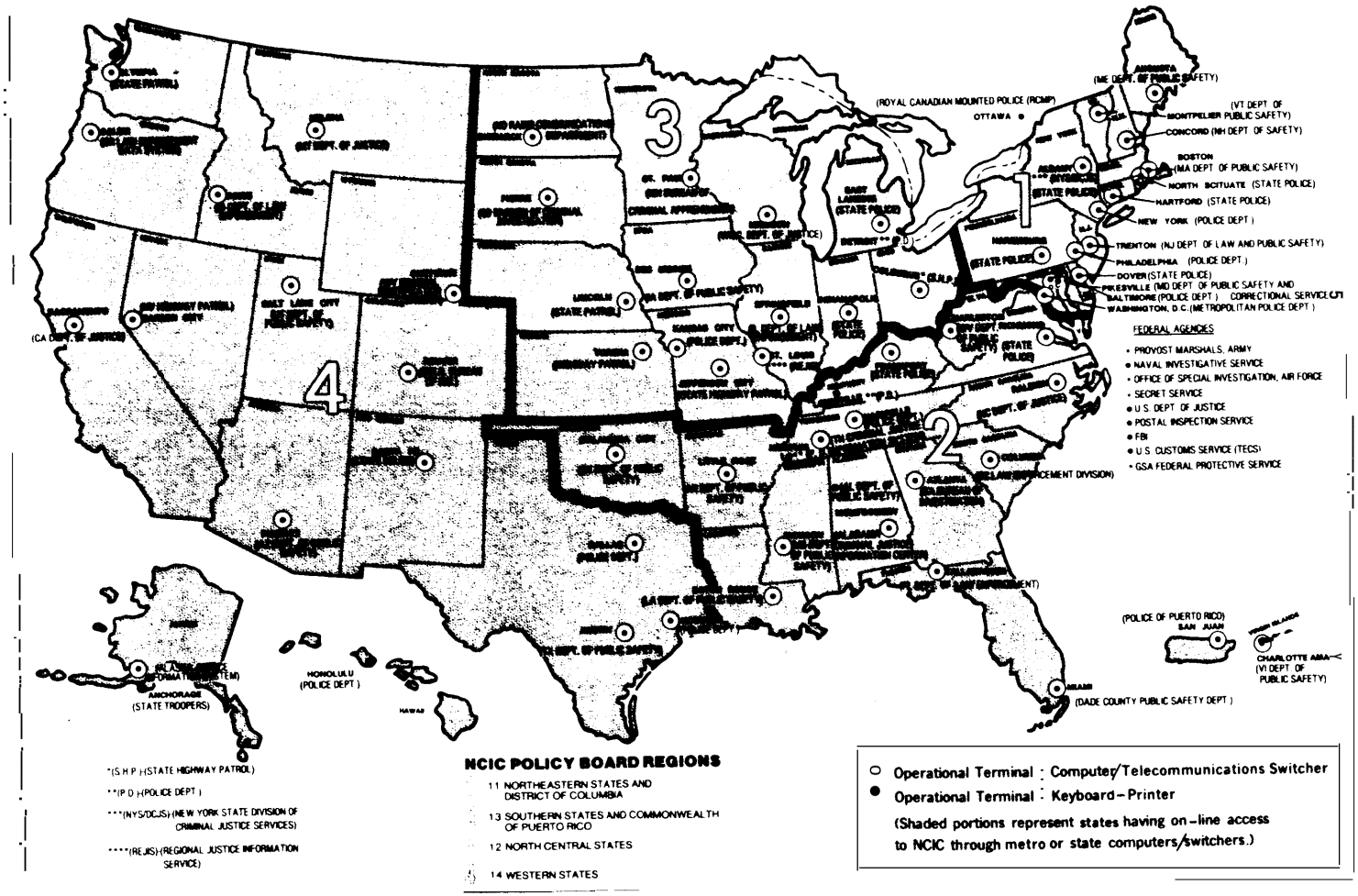
Although only 79 State and Federal agencies have a direct line to NCIC, an estimated 64,000 other Federal, State, and local law en-

'Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Interstate Identification Index (III): Background and Findings for July-September 1981 Phase I Pilot Project,* Dec. 4, 1981, p. 22.

Figure 6.—NCIC Network

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

NCIC NETWORK
OCTOBER 1981



SOURCE: National Crime Information Center, Federal Bureau of Investigation, October 1981

forcement and criminal justice agencies are entitled to access NCIC over these lines.[2]

NCIC users may retrieve data from the files, modify existing records, and/or add new data to the files in accordance with the relationship each has established with NCIC. Not all users are permitted to perform all functions. The rules for participating are described in the NCIC operating manual.[3]

The NCIC system interfaces with and complements other systems for processing and disseminating law enforcement and criminal justice data. Some are operated by other Federal agencies, and many have been implemented at the State and local levels. The degree to which each is automated varies from system to system.

NCIC Files

The NCIC system provides access to data contained in 10 files. Eight of these files, the so-called "hot files, " furnish a "bulletin board" capability that is used by law enforcement agencies to list people or properties that are wanted, missing, or stolen. The ninth file, the CCH file, contains archival criminal history data most often used for criminal justice activities subsequent to apprehension of an individual.

A tenth file, CLIS, provides access to a data base of laboratory information. Although maintained on and accessed through the NCIC system, in most respects CLIS is a separate information system, except that it shares NCIC computer and telecommunication facilities. CLIS contains no information about individuals.

The number of records included in the various NCIC files (except for CLIS) is shown in table 3. These files contained over 9 million records as of October 1, 1981. The CCH file is the second largest (exceeded only by the stolen securities file), even though at present only eight States are authorized to enter criminal history record information into the CCH file.

Most inquiries of the hot files are made by law enforcement and investigative personnel seeking to determine whether a specific person or item of property is wanted. Such an inquiry may occur, for example, when a traffic officer stops a vehicle and seeks to determine whether it has been reported stolen or whether the driver is wanted for possible involvement in criminal activity. In all cases, NCIC operating procedures require that information obtained from a hot file be verified with the agency that originated the record before police take any action based on it.

[2] FBI estimate, *NCIC Operating Manual*, pt. 10. P. 13.
[3] Federal Bureau of Investigation, Technical Services Division, National Crime Information Center Section, *NCIC* Operating *Manual*, updated periodically.

Table 3.—Number of Records Included in NCIC, by File

File	Number of records as of 6/1/79	12/31/79	12/31/80	10/1/81	Percent of total NCIC records
"Hot Files:"					
1. Stolen Vehicles[a]	970,714	1,108,574	1,174,639	1,163,771	12.50/o
2. Stolen Articles	1,091,461	1,502,209	1,562,284	1,427,535	15.4
3. Stolen Guns	1,337,310	1,426,008	1,574,959	1,674,814	18.0
4. Stolen License Plates	397,706	499,868	551,373	543,173	5.8
5. Wanted Persons[b]	148,644	162,128	179,044	190,159	2.1
6. Stolen Securities	1,998,778	2,189,594	2,303,716	2,361,971	25.4
7. Stolen Boats	17,615	21,277	24,707	22,807	0.2
8. Missing Persons	21,535	22,722	23,406	24,640	0.3
Subtotal	5,983,763	6,932,380	7,394,128	7,408,870	79.7 "/0
Computerized Criminal Histories File:					
9. CCH	1,482,017	1,606,837	1,706,955	1,885,457	20.3
Total	7,465,780	8,539,217	9,101,083	9,294,327	100.0 "/0

[a] Includes vehicle parts, felony vehicles, airplanes, and trailers
[b] Does not include Canadian warrants, which totaled 183 as of Oct 1, 1981

SOURCE Federal Bureau of Invest igation

Most inquiries of the CCH files are generated by criminal investigations or by criminal justice actions following an individual's detention. In these cases, data pertaining to a specific individual are requested. The data obtained are then used in conjunction with steps in the criminal justice process such as arraignment, determination of sentence, and the decision to grant parole. To obtain a CCH summary record, an agency must provide its own identifier plus a valid basis for searching the file. A search may be based solely on a State or FBI identification number, on a name and social security or other identification number, or on name, sex, race, and date of birth information. To obtain a full record, the requesting agency must provide a State or Federal identification number for the subject.

Volume of NCIC Transactions

In terms of number of transactions, the bulk of the traffic processed by the NCIC system is concerned with processing data in and for the hot files. Use of the hot files is dominated by law enforcement and criminal justice personnel engaged in tactical operations. Information from the hot files is used primarily to guide actions taken prior to the arrest of an individual or the seizure of a piece of property. For the month of September 1981, NCIC transactions totaled 10,270,500, averaging 342,350 daily.' This represents a traffic growth of about 28 percent over the last 2 1/2 years. * Transactions for the stolen vehicles/plates and wanted/missing persons files account for roughly 90 percent of the total NCIC traffic.

The CCH file is used primarily in postarrest situations and represents a very small part of total NCIC traffic. In September 1981, CCH traffic accounted for about 3.5 percent of the NCIC monthly total. At this rate, CCH use would involve about 4.4 million transactions annually. The low level of CCH traffic compared with hot file traffic is also due in part to the small number of States fully participating in the CCH program.

CCH Participation

There are two levels of participation in the CCH program. Full participation permits the organization to add data to the file as well as retrieve data from it. Such users are responsible for entering data into the files and maintaining the records they have entered. This can require considerable resources from the participant. Generally, States have been hesitant to participate fully in the CCH program. The maximum number of fully participating States that has been reached is 13. As of December 1981, only eight States were full participants, as listed in table 4.

Less than full participation allows the user to access the data in the CCH file, but not to contribute to it. Users at this level are still required to meet the basic criteria established for participation and to execute a management control agreement that the rules of NCIC will

Table 4.—States With Full Participation in the NCICICCH Program

Currently active (as of December 1981)
Florida
Iowa
Michigan
Nebraska
North Carolina
South Carolina
Texas
Virginia
Previously active (withdrew from full participation prior to December 1981)
Arizona
California
Illinois
Minnesota
New York
Ohio
Pennsylvania

SOURCE Federal Bureau of Investigation"

'FBI, NCIC Section, *NCIC Newsletter*, October 1981, p. 2.

*Th average daily NCIC traffic totaled 266,479 transactions in April 1979. Thus, the daily average increased 28.5 percent by September 1981.

be followed. For example, the agreement includes provisions requiring the user to safeguard the data and limit its distribution to those authorized to receive it. (See ch. 6 for further details.) As of December 1981, only Kansas had no agreement and therefore was not allowed access to the CCH file.[5]

[5]FBI, *III: Background and Findings,* op. cit., p. 24.

Related Systems

NCIC interfaces with a large number of criminal justice information systems operated by State, local, and Federal agencies. A selected sample of such systems is discussed below to illustrate mutual dependencies among systems designed to support criminal justice and law enforcement activities.

Identification Division System

As of December 1981, Ident maintained files containing approximately 175 million fingerprint cards representing 65 million individuals. Of the total number of cards, 78 million representing 21 million individuals were in Ident's criminal file, and 96 million representing 44 million people were in Ident's civil file. In addition, Ident maintains files of criminal history data (in the form of rap sheets) on individuals who are included in the criminal fingerprint file.

The criminal fingerprint file operated by Ident is key to the operation of the automated NCIC/CCH file. It is this file that is searched when an FBI identification number is required for entering a record in the NCIC/CCH file. Ident maintains manual criminal history records in parallel with the computerized records in the NCIC/CCH file.

Ident also initiates the process of creating NCIC/CCH records for all Federal offenders. In addition, when Ident receives a fingerprint card from a State that is not a full participant in the NCIC/CCH program on a subject who already has a record in NCIC/CCH, Ident initiates the procedures to update the CCH record. Thus, Ident's operations are integral to the NCIC/CCH system.

In an effort to automate Ident record processing, the FBI has been developing, since the early 1970's, a three-phased system called AIDS (Automated Identification Division System). The first phase, AIDS-I, was implemented in August 1973 and supports a computerized data base containing the records of first offenders arrested since that time.

This automated file has grown at the rate of approximately 750,000 records per year or 3,000 records per workday, and in October 1981 totaled about 5.8 million records.[6] Ident is not maintaining manual rap sheets on any individual who is in the AIDS file. When a rap sheet is needed, it is generated by computer. The second phase, AIDS-II, became operational in October 1979 and added the capability for automated name searching of the computerized arrest record file (AIDS-I). It is already handling roughly 45 percent of Ident's name searching operations.

In AIDS-III, not yet implemented, fingerprint readers will be used to automate the matching of fingerprint cards submitted to Ident against the criminal fingerprint file. As of October 1981, the prints of 14.6 million individuals born in 1929 or later had been converted, representing about 70 percent of the criminal file. However, automated fingerprint searches were run on only about 17 percent of the file due to equipment and staffing limitations. Automated processing of low-quality prints, such as latent prints found at the scene of a crime, is expected to be possible through the use of semiautomatic fingerprint reader equipment.

[6]NCIC Staff Paper prepared for the Nov. 3-4, 1981, meeting of the NCIC Advisory Policy Board Subcommittee on the Interstate Identification Index, Topic #7, p. 5.

The development of AIDS is intended as a means to automate Ident operations, not to replace or overlap the functions that are performed by NCIC/CCH. However, as presently structured the operation of the NCIC/CCH file will depend on the operation of AIDS to establish the identity of subjects before an NCIC/CCH record can be entered or updated. For example, the process of creating a record in the NCIC/CCH file for individuals who have committed their first Federal offense has been automated. An interface between AIDS and NCIC/CCH creates a copy of the AIDS record for the NCIC/CCH file. Similarly, whenever a record in AIDS for a Federal offender is updated, the related record in the NCIC/CCH file is automatically updated also. As of June 1979,647,990 records in AIDS had been duplicated in NCIC/CCH, which at that time represented 44 percent of total CCH records. As of October 1981, the percentage of NCIC/CCH records also in AIDS had increased to about 58 percent.[7] Thus, at least in the short run, the FBI is operating two systems—Ident/AIDS and NCIC/CCH—that maintain criminal history records on individuals, although alternatives for consolidation of these systems are being considered.*

National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (NLETS)

NLETS is a computerized message switching network linking local, State, and Federal law enforcement agencies for the purpose of information exchange. Operated by a nonprofit corporation controlled by the States, NLETS does not hold or manage data files. It is a communication network functioning in much the same way as the public switched Telex network to carry messages between various users.

NLETS plays an important role in the operation of the NCIC hot files. NCIC operating procedures require verification of data obtained from its hot files before action is taken based on that data. NLETS is a principal means by which such verification is accomplished. In such cases, NLETS is used to query directly the agency that would have information confirming whether an individual or item of property listed in the NCIC hot files is wanted or stolen.

NLETS could be used to transmit criminal history information in the absence of NCIC/CCH or any other system designed expressly for this purpose. There is no easy way to be certain of the contents of the messages moving over NLETS, although NLETS use statistics indicate that 2 percent of messages relate to criminal records. However, it is possible that some criminal history information is also being transmitted in the form of administrative messages, which account for about 17 percent of NLETS use. Florida and the FBI completed a pilot project in 1981 using both NLETS and CCH, as described in chapter 10. And NLETS is an integral part of the ongoing test of the Interstate Identification Index (III) concept.

Treasury Enforcement Communication System (TECS)

TECS is a large communication network and data base that supports over 1,400 terminals in, for example, the 50 States, Puerto Rico, and Canada. Managed by the Customs Service, it serves a variety of law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, including the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; the Internal Revenue Service; and the National Central Bureau of the International Police Organization (Interpol); as well as the Bureau of Customs.TECS also serves the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Immigration and Natural ization Service, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Coast Guard.

TECS is used by customs officers and other officials to ascertain whether or not certain individuals or items of property are of interest to or wanted by law enforcement, criminal jus-

[7] Ibid., p. 6. As of October 1981, about 1.085 million (or 57.6 percent) of the 1.885 million total NC IC/CCH records were also in AIDS.

*See discussion in ch. 10.

tice, or related agencies. One of the main uses of the system is the checking of vehicles at border crossings to see if they are stolen, have been used in the commission of a crime, or are associated with an individual who is wanted. The TECS data base is also used to determine if there is any reason to detain an individual at a port of entry or exit, including airports with international arrival service, or to prevent someone from crossing the border.

Among the data available to TECS are pointers to the NCIC hot files. The indices maintained on TECS and the corresponding files of NCIC are maintained in real-time and coordinated on a regular basis. Records in the TECS index but not in NCIC files are deleted from the TECS index, while entries that are in NCIC files but not in the TECS index are added to TECS. A "lookout" file of persons and property of interest to Customs and the other users of TECS is maintained independently and is not coordinated with NCIC files. Items in this file may not be included in NCIC files.

Users of TECS can access the NCIC/CCH file, but with certain restrictions. Only the NCIC/CCH summary record will be printed out at a TECS terminal. If the complete record is required, the TECS user must arrange to have it printed out at a primary NCIC/CCH user terminal and forwarded through the mails. Foreign inquiry by Interpol to the NCIC/CCH data must pass through a human operator who is an American law enforcement agent resident in the National Central Bureau (Washington, D. C.) office before it can be processed by the CCH system.

The future configuration of TECS is under review by the current administration.

Justice Telecommunications System (JUST)

The DOJ's JUST provides computerized administrative message service to department offices in Washington, D. C., and to approximately 329 DOJ offices in 169 cities nationwide. JUST provides a direct linkage to NCIC, enabling DOJ offices (such as the U.S. Marshals Service) to make inquiries against the NCIC data base.

Under this arrangement, department offices first make inquiries against their own data bases at the DOJ computer facility and then, if necessary, route additional inquiries through the JUST facility to NCIC. JUST also has offline linkages to the Department of Defense AUTODIN network and the Department of State Diplomatic Network in support of international law enforcement activities.

State and Local Systems

The capabilities of criminal justice information systems at the State and local levels range from handwritten manual files that are kept in the desks of local police departments to computerized systems that are considerably more comprehensive in terms of information content than those operated by the FBI.

In September 1981, the FBI conducted a survey of all State criminal justice record repositories. Selected results, summarized in table 5, indicate that about one-half of the States have online computerized criminal history files and roughly another one-quarter have an automated name index. However, the 25 States with an online CCH file account for about 80 percent of all fingerprint cards submitted to State and Federal repositories. The 12 States with completely manual systems account for only 5 percent of the total.

As of September 1981, the 25 States with an online CCH file maintained collectively a total of about 10.9 million full CCH records, compared with 5.8 million CCH records in the AIDS file and 1.9 million in the NCIC/CCH file. The States also maintain a large number of manual criminal history records, estimated at roughly 25 million to 30 million records in 1979. Available evidence suggests that the rate of dissemination for computerized records is significantly higher than for manual records. In 1979, while CCH and manual record disseminations were about equal in absolute numbers

Table 5.—Number of States With On-Line Computerized Criminal History Information Systems

	On-line CCH file[a]	Automated name index	Manual file only	Total
Number of States[b]., ...	25 (50°/0)	13 (260/o)	12 (24%)	50 (100°/0)
Number of fingerprint cards received by States[c].	3.37 million (81 °/o)	*0.57* million (14°/0)	0.22 million (5°/0)	4.16 million (100°/0)
Number of fingerprint cards submitted to FBI[d].	2.35 million (81 %)	0.40 million (14°/0)	0.16 million (5%)	2.91 million (100°/0)

[a]Excludes States with off-line CCH file, · e., Washington and Maryland. Including these two States, the 27 States accounted for about 85 percent of all criminal fingerprint cards submitted to State and Federal repositories
[b]Based on September 1981 survey of State criminal history record repositories
[c]Criminal fingerprint cards received annually by State repositories; State estimates
[d]Criminal fingerprint cards submitted by States to the FBI during fiscal year 1981; FBI estimates

SOURCE Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 1981 survey of State crlmlnal record repositories

(roughly 5 million each), these disseminations accounted for more than half of all CCH records maintained but less than one-fifth of all manual records.[8] This is due in part to the record automation policies of many States (21 States as of September 1981[9]) which require that the records of current offenders be converted first. Most States do not convert existing manual files until an "activity" (e.g., arrest) occurs. Also, records can be updated more easily and disseminated more quickly once they are computerized.

At the local level, most major metropolitan police departments use computer-based criminal justice information systems. Nineteen such departments have direct lines to NCIC. Literally hundreds of other police departments have access to NCIC through metropolitan or State agency terminals. The exact number of police departments with computerized information systems is not known. However, as early as 1974, a survey of police departments in cities with populations exceeding 50,000 found that 56 percent (193 of the 326 departments responding) were using computers. Criminal justice recordkeeping was reported as the second most important use of computers, followed closely by police patrol and inquiry systems based on hot files of wanted persons and stolen property.'"

In a 1979 OTA survey of the 50 States,[11] OTA found that 34 States reported a total of about 9,000 terminals at the State and local levels with direct access to criminal history information in State repositories. Several States contacted in a 1982 followup survey indicated that the number of terminals had increased since 1979; for example, from 244 to 700 terminals in Massachusetts, 70 to 206 in New Jersey, 80 to 102 in South Carolina, and 225 to 250 in Virginia. In 37 of 49 States reporting, law enforcement officers on patrol duty can gain access to criminal history information in State files through local police and patrol inquiry systems. Thus, the clear implication is that automated systems are prevalent at the local as well as at State and Federal levels.

In a followup survey, OTA found that as of August 1982,27 States had a CCH file (including an automated name index), 7 States had an automated index, and 16 States were operating manually. The discrepancies when compared with the results of the September 1981 FBI survey are explained as follows. Two States (Washington and Maryland) with CCH files were counted by the FBI as automated index States since the CCH files did not permit online interstate access. Five States (Idaho, Maine, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota) counted as automated index States by the FBI were still in the process of implementation as of August 1982. One State (Massachusetts) counted by the FBI as manual actually has an operational automated name index. The OTA results are summarized

[8]OTA 50-State Survey conducted in 1979-80. See appendix B for list of State officials responding.
[9]NCIC Staff Paper prepared for the Nov. 3-4, 1981, meeting of the NCIC APB Subcommittee on II I, Topic #6, p.3.
[10]Kent W. Colton, "The Use and Impact of Police Computer Technology, '' in Kenneth Kraemer and John King, *Computers in Local Government: Police and Fire* (Pennsauken, N. J.: Auerbach, 1981), pp. 2-4.
[11]OTA 50-State Survey.

in table 6. For those 12 States in the process of implementing an automated name index and/or CCH file, the estimated time to completion ranged from 1 month, to 1 year, to an indefinite time period, due largely to variations and/or uncertainties in staffing and funding. With full implementation, all but four States would have at least an automated name index; two of these four remaining manual States do have plans to automate.

Table 6.–Status of State Criminal History Systems, August 1982

	CCH file	Automated name index	Manual file only	Totals
Operational				
Number of States	27 (54°/0)	7 (14%)	16 (320/o)	50 (100%)
Under implementation				
Number of States	2[a]	1O[b]		
Totals after implementation				
Number of States	29 (580/o)	17 (34%)	4 (8°/0)	50 (100°/0)

[a]Estimated time to complete implementation: 1 month (1 State), and 6 months (1 State).
Estimated time to complete implementation: 3 months (1 State), 6 months (2 States), 9 months (1 State), 1 year (1 State), indefinite (3 States), and unknown (2 States).

SOURCE: Office of Technology Assessment 50-State survey, 1982 followup.