

Open Police Data

Overview

A lack of transparent or comparable police data inhibits the public and policymakers' ability to fully understand and address problematic police practices and their consequences. OGP members are increasingly taking the initiative to open police data with the ultimate aim of evidence-based police reform.

Transparent data on police-citizen interaction is a vital tool to assess the efficacy and fairness of interactions between citizens and the police. Open data in areas like public complaints, officer-involved deaths, and use of force provides the foundation for informed research, policy reforms, and oversight. Specifically, open data enables evaluation of law enforcement's fairness in their interactions with the public. Separately, the publication of police department budgets and expenditures ensures that public funding of law enforcement meets the needs of all citizens. Therefore, requiring police departments to provide accessible data is an essential first step toward strengthening public accountability and building public trust. Of course, police departments must also be cautious to protect individuals' right to privacy and need to have fair, well-publicized processes for ensuring that open data respects the rights of victims, witnesses, and the accused.

Recommendations and Sample Reforms

The following are actions governments can take to ensure that they maximize the transparency and accountability of the police.

- **Codify police data collection and publication in law.** Amend policing and right to information legislation to require greater transparency.
- **Involve citizens early.** Convene law enforcement and public officials, civil society organizations, and members of the public to identify priority information for collection, disclosure, and privacy protection.
- **Systematically collect and retain standardized policing data.** Establish routine procedures that ensure various agencies use common terminology, categorization, and collection practices for data.
- **Publish policing budget data.** Regularly provide up-to-date data on government budgets for law enforcement as well as data on police expenditures. Aim to disclose information disaggregated at the police precinct level.
- **Release data through an accessible online database.** Provide current data in a free and downloadable format to ensure transparency. Provide disaggregated demographic data to measure the fairness of police interactions with the public and to facilitate analysis of particular patterns.
- **Publish data-restriction policies.** Publish, in clear and accessible language, information on standards and practices that inform what police information is classified or restricted. Include the public in shaping policies that determine what information is classified or restricted.
- **Organize the data.** Ensure that data can be downloaded, searched, and machine-read to facilitate researchers and community members' data analysis.
- **Develop standards for comparison.** Comparable data enables better research and policy responses. While some governments may begin with a data standard, others will have more success in working toward cross-jurisdictional consensus on common data collected and published.
- **Translate data into digestible formats.** Provide graphics and written narratives that help the general public observe important trends and findings within the data.
- **Facilitate data-driven publications and policy changes.** Actively collaborate with civil society organizations, researchers, and other stakeholders to produce reports and recommendations based on findings from collaborative data analysis.

Police officers on duty in the United Kingdom. Photo by: Clickmanis



LESSONS FROM REFORMERS

Open Police Data Initiative in the United States

The United States government undertook the [Open Police Data Initiative](#)¹ as part of its 2015 [National Action Plan](#) to address high levels of distrust and tension between police and the public.² The initiative encourages local police jurisdictions to proactively extract and publish policing data. The project is managed collaboratively by the Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the nonprofit organization, the National Police Foundation. The initiative increased access to information by creating a centralized database that comprises over 130 jurisdictions and 405 data sets as of June 2020, including cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Detroit. The website also provides tools to extract, analyze, and publish data. This repository has led to published data sets in numerous areas, including on police use of force and officer-involved shootings. However, agency participation is voluntary, and the adoption rate remains low. Additionally, there is a need to improve data standardization and ensure regular updates. Recent unrest across the United States has reignited interest in open police data as reformers call for greater police transparency. This initiative demonstrates a viable process to further open police data with the ultimate aim to reduce bias and unnecessary use of force in policing tactics and increase public trust.

LESSONS FROM REFORMERS

Legislating policing transparency in India

In 2009, India's Parliament amended the Criminal Procedure Code to include a [requirement](#) that all police departments disclose information about arrests made. The law mandates that the information be published daily at the district level and include the names of arrested individuals and the names and designations of the police officers who arrested them. While this information raises concerns about privacy protections, it can be an important step for minimizing pretrial detention that does not comply with due process rights, especially in contexts where institutional protections against abuse of power and for access to justice may be weaker. Additionally, police headquarters must regularly collate this information at the state level, as well as information about the offenses for which arrested individuals were charged. All of this information is publicly available in the form of databases on the official websites of each state's police department. For example, see [Kerala State Police's portal](#).³ Separately, India's National Crime Records Bureau has published the annual [Crime in India Report](#) since 1953, which contains crime data from across the country, including cases registered and persons arrested.⁴

Other OGP Commitments⁵

Austin, United States: Translate annual crime data file into accessible formats for the general public, such as written narratives and interactive maps ([2019–2021](#)).

Liberia: Provide live police data on Liberia's Open Data Portal that would include the location of police depots, actions against unprofessional police conduct, and crime maps ([2015–2017](#)).

Mexico: Create a standardized prisoner registration system to more effectively keep track of arrests, sentences, and time spent in detention ([2013–2015](#)).

United Kingdom: Bring police records under legislative control through the Public Records Act of 1958 to ensure long-term preservation and access ([2013–2015](#)).

GUIDANCE AND STANDARDS

The UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – Handbook on Police Accountability, Oversight, and Integrity

The [handbook](#) offers OGP countries several tangible actions to build a culture of transparency and accountability, as well as reliable statistics on police performance, integrity, and public confidence.⁶ It encourages police reforms to be developed through public-police participation and not be simply prescriptive. Furthermore, the handbook gives guidance for external police oversight mechanisms:

- The mechanism should be required to issue regular reports to the government and the public on its activities.
- It should maintain a website with easily accessible information.
- It should respond in a timely fashion to citizen complaints.
- It should maintain detailed data on police abuses. Civilian oversight mechanisms are uniquely placed to conduct statistical or general reviews of patterns in police killings, including their causes, and should do so.
- Its budget and expenses should be publicly reported.⁷

The United States – Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st-Century Policing

Released in 2015, this [report](#) recommends that agencies should collect and make aggregate data publicly available.⁸ Specific action items for police forces include the following:

- Collect, maintain, and report data to the federal government on all officer-involved shootings;

- Develop policies on what types of information will be released, when, and in what situation, to maintain transparency;
- Make public the demographic data regarding the composition of their force;
- Collect, maintain, and analyze demographic data on all detentions (stops, frisks, searches, summons, and arrests); and
- Disaggregate data by school and nonschool contacts.

Organizations for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – Guidebook on Democratic Policing

The 2007 [guidebook](#) serves as a reference for police practitioners and policy-makers working to strengthen democratic policing and covers topics such as “policing ethics, and human rights standards; the essential nature of police accountability to the law and to the society they serve; as well as the need for their co-operation with the communities.”⁹ In particular, the guidebook discusses key aspects of data oversight and disposal (sections 49–51) and police oversight (sections 84–94), including through data generated by citizen complaints.

Endnotes

- ¹ Police Data Initiative. “Home.” Accessed November 9, 2020. <https://www.policedatainitiative.org/>.
- ² “Build Safer Communities with Police Open Data (US0088),” (OGP, 2015), <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/united-states/commitments/US0088/>.
- ³ “Official Website of Kerala Police.” Accessed November 9, 2020. <https://keralapolice.gov.in/page/arrest-thiruvananthapuram-city>.
- ⁴ “Crime in India,” National Crime Records Bureau, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://ncrb.gov.in/en/crime-india>.
- ⁵ See also **Colombia**: Improve access to information, increase police services for people with disabilities, and strengthen citizen oversight and citizen-police communication (2017–2019), and **Georgia**: Publish national phone-tap data according to the nature of the crime and geographic area (2016–2018).
- ⁶ United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Handbook on Police Accountability, Oversight, and Integrity* (New York: United Nations, 2011), https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/Handbook_on_Police_Accountability_Oversight_and_Integrity.pdf.
- ⁷ Ibid, 7.
- ⁸ The President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of The President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015), https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/task-force/taskforce_finalreport.pdf.
- ⁹ The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), *Guidebook on Democratic Policing*, (Vienna: OSCE, 2008), <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/23804#:~:text=Guidebook%2C%20written%20and%20compiled%20by,develop%20and%20strengthen%20democratic%20policing>.



Resources and Partners

Resources

Global

- The Centre for Human Rights and the Institute for International and Comparative Law in Africa at the University of Pretoria publishes [The Law on Police Use of Force Worldwide](#), an index of national and international policing laws.
- The Institute for Security and Democracy (Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia) report, *Transparency: Pathway to Effective and Legitimate Public Policing* ([Transparencia: Ruta para la Eficacia y Legitimidad en la Función Policial](#)), offers recommendations for police transparency.

Europe

- The Open Society Justice Initiative's [Reducing Ethnic Profiling in the European Union: A Handbook of Good Practices](#) provides recommendations to address racial profiling by police in the EU.

United States

- The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights' [New Era of Public Safety: A Guide to Fair, Safe, and Effective Community Policing](#) provides recommendations on handling data and video footage among other topics.
- US General Services Administration, Office of Evaluation Sciences' 2016 [Community Action Deck: A discussion support tool for empowering communities to take action on the recommendations of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing](#) outlines actions community reformers can take to further implementation of recommendations from the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing.
- Campaign Zero lists [policy recommendations](#) for community oversight of police and provides several databases aggregating and visualizing relevant police data:
- [Use of Force Project](#) aggregates data on use of force policies across the United States, including comprehensive reporting requirements.

- o [California Police Scorecard Project](#) grades police agencies based on several indicators, including police accountability and civilian complaint outcomes.
- o [Mapping Police Violence](#) aggregates data on police-involved killings along with whether the officer was charged with a crime.

- Olugbenga Ajilore offers concrete recommendations in the article "[How Civilian Review Boards Can Further Police Accountability and Improve Community Relations.](#)"
- The Opportunity Agenda provides [recommendations](#) regarding various mechanisms for police accountability.
- The American Civil Liberties Union's [Fighting Police Abuse: Community Action Model](#) provides action-oriented guidance for community reformers.

Organizations

- [African Police Civilian Oversight Forum](#) (APCOF)
- [Center for Policing Equity](#) (United States)
- [Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative](#) (CHRI)
- [Igarapé Institute](#) (Latin America)
- [Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia](#) (insyde) (Mexico)
- [Instituto Sou da Paz](#) and [Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública](#) (Brazil)
- [Campaign Zero](#) (United States)
- [National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement](#) (United States)
- [National Initiative for Building Community Trust & Justice](#) (United States)
- [The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\)](#)
- [Open Society Foundations](#)
- [Vera Institute of Justice](#) (United States)
- [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#)

This module is part of the Justice Policy Series Part II, Open Justice paper which can be found [here](#).

