

Are the Crime Figures Reliable?

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When the new-style crime figures were published in 2002, Mr Blunkett claimed they were the 'most accurate measure' of crime ever. The report was also said to be the most comprehensive ever. But when you check the small print, it turns out that the Home Office itself thinks that there were far more than the 13 million crimes discovered by the British Crime Survey for 2001/02 – perhaps four times as many.

Arriving at the true figure is not easy because police figures are notoriously unreliable, but the Home Office has made 'best estimates' of the extent of police under-recording of some offences. Even on the most cautious assumptions, at least another 11.3 million crimes should be added to the 13 million acknowledged crimes in 2001/02, a total of 24.3 million. According to another Home Office research study, *The Economic and Social Costs of Crime*, in 2000 there were at least 60 million crimes. On these estimates, the real figure lies somewhere between 24.3 million and 60 million.

Why the huge disparity? Has there been a cover-up? Is any of this found only in a secret report? No, there is no secret report to be found. And, if you ask Home Office officials to confirm the higher figures they do so promptly. It's partly a case of 'If you don't ask, you don't get'. And until members of the public do ask – and keep on asking – the Government has every intention of pretending that the crime problem is under control. The Government has become notorious for spin and publication of the crime figures is no exception. No objective observer would say that the British Crime Survey is comprehensive when it misses out murder, sexual offences, crimes against people under 16, and crimes against commercial premises, including thefts of trucks, vans and shoplifting. And no independent statistician would claim that the British Crime Survey was the 'most accurate' measure of crime.

The central issue is the independence of the government statistical service. There can not be a proper public debate about how best to deal with crime unless the full facts are made readily

available for all. But as things stand, it is simply too tempting for any political party to have control of the release of information about crime – if the next election result might depend on public perception of the Government's effectiveness, it is not going to give easy 'ammunition' to opponents. The street crime initiative, prompted by Mr Blair's promise to get street crime 'under control' by the end of September 2002, revealed the nature of the problem. The figures published by the Government to prove its success were so widely perceived to be suspect that even the most steadfast loyalists doubted them.

The underlying problem is that many, if not all, statistical reports are still being submitted to ministers for approval of their content and the timing of their release. In an open society, there is no justification for the involvement of party politicians in regulating public access to information. Inevitably they use their control of the flow of facts to gain advantage over their opponents.

The independence of the Bank of England provides a parallel. The Government accepted that fixing interest rates was too tempting a party-political weapon and, to its credit, it handed authority to the independent Bank of England. Similarly, the independence of the National Audit Office and the Audit Commission has been accepted. But Home Office statisticians and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) lack full autonomy. The Office for National Statistics is supposed to be independent, but it too needs to be made wholly autonomous, perhaps accountable to Parliament as a whole rather than to the Government of the day, which often functions as little more than a political party with a programme and a wish to defeat its opponents by whatever means come to hand.

In the September 2002 issue of *Horizons*, the official publication of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Len Cook, the National Statistician, defends the impartiality of ONS. There have been 'one or two rumblings recently', he admits, about the extent to which ONS is free from political interference. The ONS, he insists, is thoroughly objective and acts with integrity under all circumstances. But does it? In the same issue of *Horizons*, the catchline for an article about the

crime figures was: 'Looking at recent newspaper reports, you could be forgiven for thinking that crime is spiralling out of control. But the figures behind the headlines tell a different story.' The article goes on to attack newspapers for using headlines to sell papers and insists that, when you 'look at the long-term picture', crime has fallen by 22% since 1997. The chances of being a victim of crime are 'at around their lowest since the BCS began in 1981 – so don't have nightmares, do sleep well!'

Whilst using phrases like 'looking at the long-term-picture' and taking 'a closer look at the figures' the author of the article disregards both the long-term picture and the facts that any objective observer would see upon taking a closer look. Statistical analysis is notoriously open to interpretation and, for this very reason, we need a genuinely independent statistical service whose officials see themselves as servants of democracy, not the instruments of the party in power.

The Official Line

The Government is anxious to claim that it has got crime under control and Government press releases regularly emphasise the fall in crime since 1997. The Government is particularly anxious to encourage the public to rely on the British Crime Survey (BCS). In the press release (STAT026/2002) accompanying the 20001/02 crime figures Mr Blunkett claimed that: 'The largest ever BCS is now widely seen as the most accurate measure of people's experience of crime'.

In truth the British Crime Survey misses out a large amount of crime. The Preface to the annual Home Office report on crime, *Crime in England and Wales 2001/2002*, declares that the intention is to make available the 'most comprehensive picture of crime'. However, later in the document, significant omissions are acknowledged: the British Crime Survey excludes illegal drug use and murder as well as sexual offences. It also does not cover offences against businesses, those living in institutions, and those under 16.

Crimes Omitted from the British Crime Survey

Crimes with child victims

When comparing the BCS and recorded crime the following adjustments were made in by the Home Office in 2001/02 to allow for the exclusion of under 16s. The calculations are contained in a separate document obtainable from the Home Office, 'Comparing BCS and police counts of crime'. The Home Office assumed that 11% of woundings were against under 16s, and reduced the recorded crime total by 24,381. Robbery was reduced by 20%, or 18,968 offences. Theft from the person was reduced by 9% or 9,150 offences. And assault was reduced by 20% or 44,396 offences. In total 96,895 recorded crimes were carried out against under 16s, but excluded for the purpose of comparison with the BCS figures.

We can get a little closer to the true figure by using BCS estimates of the crimes not reported to the police and, if reported, not recorded. The Home Office has produced a 'best estimate' of the proportion of crimes recorded by the police.

Best Estimate of Crimes Against Victims aged 11-15, excluded from the BCS

	Best estimate of % of real crimes recorded by police	Home Office estimate of crimes with victims aged 11-15	Best estimate of actual crimes against victims aged 11-15
Woundings	30%	24,381	81,270
Robbery	21%	18,968	90,324
Theft from the person	15%	9,150	61,000
Assault	12%	44,396	369,967
Total			602,561

Source: *Crime in England and Wales 2001/2002*, Table 2.01.

In other words, when the Government claims that the BCS provides the most reliable picture of

crime, it is missing out 602,561 offences against children under 16. It is also missing out offences against shops, offices and manufacturers. How many crimes against these victims are excluded?

Crimes against shops and offices

We can make similar calculations to those for the under 16s. The Home Office estimated that in 2001/02, 50% of vandalism (which includes arson and criminal damage to buildings) was against commercial premises, that is 507,375 offences. Similarly 12% of thefts from motor vehicles, were against commercial victims, 64,898 offences; 10% of thefts of motor vehicles, 24,609 offences; 10% of attempted thefts of motor vehicles, 11,811 offences; 10% of attempted thefts from motor vehicles, 8,500 offences; and 7% of vehicle interference and tampering, 4,054 offences. Altogether this produces a total of 621,247 recorded offences, excluded for the purpose of comparison with the British Crime Survey.

Best Estimate of Crimes Against Commercial Victims, Excluded from the BCS

	Recorded crimes against commercial victims	Best estimate of % of real crimes recorded by police	Best estimate of actual crimes against commercial victims
Vandalism	507,375	19%	2,670,395
Theft from motor vehicle	64,898	31%	209,348
Theft of motor vehicles	24,609	67%	36,730
Attempted theft of motor vehicle	11,811	32%	36,909
Attempted theft from motor vehicle	8,500	32%	26,563
Vehicle interference and tampering	4,054	32%	15,191
Total			2,995,136

Source: *Crime in England and Wales 2001/02*, Table 2.01.

These figures make no allowance for theft from commercial premises. In *the Economic and Social Costs of Crime*, published by the Home Office in 2000, the authors estimated the real number of thefts from shops by multiplying the number of recorded offences by 100. Why did they choose 100? The figure was based on a study by Professor Farrington of Cambridge University who has estimated that the multiplier should be between 100 and 1,000. The Home Office opted for the lowest figure in the range, 100, which produced an estimate of nearly 31 million instances of shoplifting. The report acknowledges that this figure may be on the low side and suggests another formula, also based on the work of Professor Farrington. He has estimated that for every criminal cautioned for or convicted of shoplifting, about 150 offences have actually been carried out. The Home Office further assumes that each offender in the official figures has been convicted for two acts of shoplifting. In 1998 120,000 individuals were cautioned for or convicted of theft from a shop. Using the Farrington formula the Home Office estimated that the total number of offences was 36 million. (The calculation is $120,000 \times 2 \times 150 = 36$ million. See p. 16, note 17 of *the Economic and Social Costs of Crime*.)

Professor Farrington's estimate is based on a detailed study of shoplifting, but to multiply recorded crime by 100 may strike many observers as rather arbitrary. Another indicator that could be used is the *Commercial Victimization Survey* (CVS) carried out by the Home Office in 1994 to discover crime in 1993. The survey found 6,932,000 thefts by retailers' customers or unknown persons (but not counting employees or 'outsiders') in 1993. In that year only 275,607 acts of shoplifting were recorded by the police. If that ratio of recorded crime to actual crime is used, then the multiplier would be 25.2. In 2001/02 306,308 thefts from shops were recorded by the police. If multiplied by 25.2 the total is 7,718,961.

This means that the amount of shoplifting not counted by the BCS in 2002/02 was somewhere between 7.7 million and 31 million, depending on which Home Office report is preferred.

On the most cautious of assumptions, there were 602,561 offences against people under 16 and, on similarly cautious assumptions, there were 2,995,135 offences against commercial victims, not including shoplifting. If shoplifting is included, based on the CVS and again making only the most cautious of assumptions, another 7,718,961 should be added, producing a grand total of 11,316,657 offences. That is, still leaving out many offences recorded by the police (including drug offences and sexual offences), we should add 11.3 million offences to the 13.0 million reported by the BCS, a total of 24.3 million.

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Note: Civitas wishes to record its thanks to the Home Office for checking and confirming the accuracy of the comparisons between the BCS and recorded crime in 2001/02. The document Crime in England and Wales 2001/02 reported 13.0 million BCS crimes. The 2002/03 report reduced the figure to 12.6 million after 'recalibrating' to allow for the 2001 Census. We have left all the figures as reported in the original 2001/02 Home Office document.