
Jil Matheson National Statistician | Ystadegydd Gwladol

15 March 2010

Ms Philippa Stroud
The Centre for Social Justice
9 Westminster Palace Gardens
Artillery Row
London
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Dear Ms Stroud

Violent Crime Statistics

Sir Michael Scholar passed me your letter of 16 February and has asked me to reply.

Given the major changes that have occurred in the recording of crimes, warnings about comparisons of the data from periods before and after the dates of the changes appear in all relevant official releases of crime statistics. For example, warnings on recorded crime statistics after April 2002 say that 'figures before and after that date are not directly comparable'. For a fuller explanation of the changes and their impact, I have attached an extract from the Home Office's Explanatory Notes and Classifications which accompany the annual crime statistics volume.

You refer to the 2003 Home Office assessment of the effect of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) on crime recorded in 2002/03, and ask whether the estimated impact is still applicable. The estimate of 20 per cent for the first year effect on the NCRS on what was then termed violent crime (violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery combined) still stands. This indicates that between 2001/02 and 2002/03 there was an increase for this category of close to 3 per cent after factoring out the NCRS effect.

However, it is not appropriate to apply this rationale to comparisons of the numbers of violent crimes recorded by police in 1998/99 and 2008/09. The estimate of 20 per cent relates to an estimated effect only in the first year of operation of the NCRS. No similar estimate has been made for subsequent years as changes continued to be bedded in. Further information is provided in the attached note.

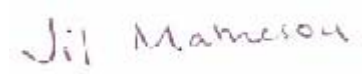
The British Crime Survey (BCS) is therefore used to provide measures of the national trends in violent crime over time. For the crime types and population that it covers, the BCS is viewed as the best indicator of the level and trends in crime because it is unaffected by differences in levels of reporting to the police and, unlike the police recorded crime series, unaffected by changes in police recording practices or police activity.

I have provided detailed responses to your other questions about the BCS in the attached note.

I hope this information is useful to you in helping to ensure accurate and appropriate comments on official crime statistics by the Centre for Social Justice.

I am copying this response to Sir Michael Scholar and to David Blunt in the Home Office.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jil Matheson". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name.

Jil Matheson

Additional Information and Responses to Detailed Questions

Changes to the recorded crime series

The following is an extract from the Home Office's Explanatory Notes and Classifications, which accompany the annual crime statistics volume

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/hosb1109vol2.pdf> :

"There have been two major changes to the recording of crimes. In April 1998 the Home Office Counting Rules for Recorded Crime were expanded to include certain additional summary offences, and counts became more victim-based (the number of victims was counted rather than the number of offences). In April 2002, the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) was introduced across England and Wales, although some forces adopted key elements of the standard earlier. The NCRS was devised by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) in collaboration with Home Office statisticians. It was designed to ensure greater consistency between forces in recording crime and to take a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording with the police being required to record any allegation of crime unless there was credible evidence to the contrary (Simmons et al., 2003). Both these changes resulted in an increase in the number of crimes recorded. Certain offences, such as the more minor violent crimes, were more affected by these changes than others. All of these factors need to be considered when looking at the trends in recorded crime."

Is it accurate to conclude that recorded violent crime has increased by 40 per cent in real terms between 1998/99 and 2008/09?

The calculations you have made to factor out an NCRS effect for the period 1998/99 to 2008/09 are not valid because the estimate of 20 per cent relates to an estimated effect only in the first year of operation of the NCRS. However, no similar estimate was made for subsequent years as changes continued to be bedded in. The Audit Commission undertook substantial audit work on crime recording in the years following NCRS introduction up until 2006/07, this indicating a generally increasing level of NCRS compliance across forces. Furthermore, it is known that some forces had taken steps to make their recording of crime more victim-oriented prior to the formal introduction of NCRS. The steps the police had taken to improve recording of crime over this period, as well as the potential impact of changes in public reporting rates, are why the BCS is used to provide a reliable measure of violent crime trends.

Is the BCS a useful indicator of crimes or crime trends in deprived communities?

The BCS sample is carefully designed to ensure it provides a representative sample across all areas of England and Wales. It has one of the highest response rates – currently running at 76% - of voluntary household surveys run by the UK government. Weighting to correct for differential response rates ensures the final sample matches the demographic profile of the actual population.

Is there a lack of engagement with surveys from those in our poorest communities?

Response rates to surveys are the best evidence of this and the 2008/09 BCS technical report¹ provides a summary of variation in response rates by type of area. This shows a complex picture and it is not simply explained by factors associated with deprivation. For example, analysis by ACORN (A Classification Of Residential Neighbourhoods produced by the marketing solutions/information systems company CACI) shows that response rates were actually lowest in areas of 'Urban Prosperity' (67%).

As with other household surveys, BCS response rates are generally lower in inner city than non inner city areas (70% and 76% respectively) and particularly in London (64%). However, as the technical report highlights, and perhaps a factor not immediately obvious to those not involved in conducting household surveys, differences in the actual housing stock is a significant factor. Across the country as a whole, response rates were highest for households living in detached and semi-detached houses (82%) and lowest for those living in flats (67%). Within the category of flats, those with communal

¹ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/bcs0809tech1.pdf>

entrances that had controlled entry systems were the most difficult type of property for interviewers to gain response (62%), compared with 72% for flats with their own (non-communal) entrances.

It is important to recognise that risks of possible bias arising from differential response rates may in part be mitigated by weighting. In line with best practice, the BCS has a calibration weighting system to bring the final interview sample in line with the actual demographic profile. The system was developed following recommendations by two of the leading survey sampling methodologists in the UK – Dave Elliott and Peter Lynn².

Does the exclusion of people in irregular households have a significant impact on the BCS as a crime indicator for deprived areas?

It is not clear what you mean by irregular households. Like other government household surveys, the BCS samples households from the postcode address file (PAF). The PAF is known to have good coverage of the household population but excludes the population living in institutions or communal establishments. The Home Office has explored the feasibility of extending the BCS to such groups and independent advice from survey sampling experts concluded that the BCS covers nearly 98% of the England and Wales population aged 16 and over. Extending the sample to cover communal establishments would, therefore, have little impact on the overall estimates from the BCS³.

Does the cap on the number of incidents at only five crimes per household under-report crime in such areas where victimisation rates are comparatively higher than elsewhere?

There is not a cap of five crimes per household, but a cap of five on a series of offences “where events of a similar nature and probably by the same perpetrator(s) have occurred”. This restriction has been applied since the BCS began in order to ensure that estimates are not affected by a very small number of respondents who report an extremely high number of incidents and which are highly variable between survey years. The inclusion of such victims could undermine the ability to measure trends consistently. This sort of capping is consistent with other crime surveys, such as the National Crime and Victimization Survey in the United States.

The number of victims in the BCS sample subject to such capping is quite small (around 2%) and there is no evidence to suggest that this has a significant effect on estimates for poorer communities.

Are national levels of recorded crime somewhat distorted by a lack of reporting in deprived communities (caused in part by a lack of trust between residents and police officers)?

The BCS asks people who experienced crimes in the past year whether the police came to know about the incident; that is, whether they reported it or the police came to know about it in another way (e.g. someone else reported it). A ‘reporting rate’ is calculated by dividing the number of incidents that the police came to know about by the total number of BCS incidents.

The BCS has consistently shown that the likelihood of reporting crime varies considerably by type of offence. For example, thefts of vehicles and incidents of burglary where something was stolen are well reported (by 89% and 83% respectively according to the 2008/09 BCS⁴), possibly because insurers demand a police incident number on insurance claims. Conversely, reporting rates are relatively low for crimes such as vandalism, assault without injury and theft from the person, where only about one-third of incidents are reported to the police (33%, 33% and 30% respectively). Victims are asked about reasons for not reporting to the police but there is not a specific category covering lack of trust in the police. However, “dislike or fear of the police” or “previous bad experience with the police or courts” were mentioned as reasons by relatively small proportions of victims (between 1% and 3% across

² <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/bcs-methodology-review-2000.pdf>

³ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/horr06c.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/hosb1109vol1.pdf>

offence types). I understand that Analysis by area deprivation shows that reporting rates are no lower in the most deprived areas than in other areas.