

Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Chris Grayling MP
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

8 March 2010

Dear Mr Grayling

VIOLENT CRIME STATISTICS

Thank you for your letter of 5 March.

I am very grateful for your assurance that you are keen to use the available statistics correctly. The UK Statistics Authority, for its part, is keen to help as much as it can.

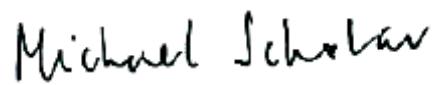
You asked me to confirm that there will be no further intervention from the Authority if you make public the views expressed in your letter, based, as you record them to be, on advice from the House of Commons Library. I am afraid that it will not be possible for the Authority to give advance clearance to your, or anyone else's, future statements on this subject – or indeed on any other. In assessing whether statistics are being used properly, and not in a misleading way, much depends on the accuracy of the language which is used, the context, and the inferences which are drawn from the statistics. On some issues – including violent crime – there are several series of statistics which attempt to measure the same phenomenon using different methodologies, and which can sometimes produce results which appear to point in different directions. In such cases, the selective quotation of one without regard to the other could prove misleading, and a balanced presentation of an inevitably complex case would refer to all available statistics, and the uncertainties and ambiguities which they sometimes reveal. The Home Office's statistical publications document these issues.

This brings to me to the particular case of violent crime statistics. I am glad to learn that you have now sought and been given guidance on these statistics from the House of Commons Library. The adjustment you record them as having suggested to you in relation to the police recorded statistics certainly provides a more accurate comparison than can be made through the unqualified use of published numbers a decade apart, without regard to the definitional changes which have taken place during that time. But a more balanced commentary on national trends in violent crime would, in the view of the Authority, also make reference to the estimates given in the British Crime Survey, which in our view provide a more reliable measure of the national trend over time. All this was set out in the Authority's Note which I attached to my letter to you of 4 February.

Finally, I am afraid I cannot allow your assertion to go unchallenged that you used no statistics in your BBC radio interview. The transcript available to me (and attached) records you as saying: "If you go into depths of the figures you'll find a 98% increase in serious violent crime which was almost unaffected by any changes at all".

I hope you will find my comments helpful as you consider how in future to present the statistics on violent crime. The Authority will not comment on the use of official statistics unless we judge it clearly necessary – as we did when I wrote to you on 4 February – to do so in order to prevent damage to trust in official statistics.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Scholar".

Sir Michael Scholar KCB

TRANSCRIPT

Programme(s)	BBC Radio 4 Today
Date & time	Wednesday 3 February 2010 07.30
Subject/Interviewee	Crime statistics – Mark Easton, Chris Grayling

Evan Davis, presenter: *Have the Conservatives been caught in one of the first dodgy use of statistics episodes in the run-up to the election? They've sent each of their local constituency parties in England and Wales some figures which show violent crime rising in their area, but the way the numbers were compiled had completely changed over the period of comparison. Well I spoke to Chris Grayling, the shadow home secretary. But first, our home affairs editor, Mark Easton, who uncovered this, explained what had gone on.*

Mark Easton, home affairs editor: Many people simply don't believe crime statistics in Britain and partly because over decades politicians, frankly of all parties, have spun them, massaged them, abused them. Only last year, for instance, I revealed on my BBC blog how the Government had used knife crime figures that they'd been warned by officials were inaccurate to try and prove how successful they'd been in tackling knife crime. So the Government isn't clean on this. But now I've discovered that the Conservative Party has sent out statistics, as you say, to every Tory constituency in England and Wales which suggests huge increases in violent crime since Labour came to power. Now the problem is that the numbers they used don't compare like with like; they've ignored big warnings plastered over the official statistics telling people not to try and compare the two sets of numbers. Take Milton Keynes, for example: Conservative Central Office sent a local Tory MP in the town figures which claimed that there were 6,000 violent attacks in the town in 2008/2009 – a 236% increase in violence against the person, they said, since 1999. Now that's a pretty high rate; that's a violent attack, according to the Conservatives, every 90 minutes in Milton Keynes. Now the local police chief there is furious, arguing that the figures are extremely misleading because they include... the Conservatives include in the definition of "violent attack" a whole range of crimes including, for example, being sworn at, and they take no account of the change – a massive change – in recording practices that took place in 2002. The same figures caused a similar reaction from police in Colchester.

So let me just explain what happened in 2002. Before April 2002 a police officer would decide if an incident was a violent crime; after April 2002 any incident that a victim said was a violent crime had to be recorded as such. So before that date – say, you know, a drunk staggers into a police station and says someone's hit him, the desk sergeant might shrug and tell him to go home and sleep – that's before; afterwards, that had to be recorded as a violent crime and the effect inevitably was to push up the crime figures dramatically – the experts reckon about 35% in the first year, further rises thereafter. So comparing figures before and after that change might tell you actually more about the effect of the reform than it did... what's actually happening to violence, and the official stats people say you shouldn't do it. And indeed, some senior Conservatives agree; the Centre for Social Justice, a Tory think tank headed by former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith, wrote to me only last week to say that – quote – "significantly changed recording methods has rendered direct numerical comparisons with pre-2002/2003 levels inaccurate". So it's not just me saying it, I think there is an issue here.

ED: *Mark, thank you for that. Well, Chris Grayling joins us now. Chris... Mr Grayling, did you know that the recording method had changed when you sent these figures out to local parties?*

Chris Grayling, shadow home secretary: Well, there's certainly changes in the recording method at the time. But the point is that these are the figures: they're the only comparators available; they are published by the Home Office. Mark is wrong when he says that the Conservatives have included certain items in the figures. We've included nothing; we don't create crime figures, we use the official crime figures published by the Home Office, the published... the Home Office. Take the case of the...

ED: *But the Home Office provide caveats and say these figures should not be used for purposes of comparison. Did you know that that is what they advised when you sent these figures out, with comparisons to be made, to local parties?*

CG: Well take the case of Milton Keynes, for example, the one that Mark's just given. What actually the police officer in Milton Keynes said was, look, there are all these things contained in the violent crime figures. These are the violent crime figures that are published now, this year, by the Government. They include all these things – we don't.

ED: *But you have provided them on... with... you've provided them to be compared to earlier crime statistics that were collected on a different basis and which the statisticians warned should not be compared. I'm just asking did you know that the statisticians said these should not be compared with each other, pre and post-2002?*

CG: I know there's been a change; I also know the Home Office has continued to use the same comparators. Now, as an opposition party we don't make the statistics, we can only use what the Home Office publishes...

ED: *Well hang on, but... but hang on...*

CG: ...the Home Office itself continues to use these comparators. And so...

ED: *Well, I've actually got some examples – provided by you – of where the Home Office does provide these comparators, but they provide the caveat. They say things like: "Much of the increase can be attributed to the increases in recording of violent crime." It's a caveat. They don't just provide these figures generally to be compared; they warn people that reporting changed. Now you didn't warn people or warn your local parties that reporting had changed, you invited them to make a comparison that the statistics themselves... the statisticians themselves say shouldn't be made.*

CG: Well, when these review... figures were reviewed in 2006 independently the official... or the independent assessors actually said very specifically that the changes that were made – the comments made by the Home Office, the caveats they put in – had been put in because they were the most likely to be politically advantageous to the Government. They say so specifically. But look, Evan, the whole point about all this, we can dance around, you know, saying, you know, were the figures 60%, 70%, 80%. But...

ED: *No, it's not about dancing around and picking little... it's not being pedantic, it is you're providing people, inviting people, to make a comparison of two sets of figures that are apples and oranges...*

CG: Oh look...

ED: *...and comparisons shouldn't be made.*

CG: They are not apples and oranges, these are the figures. When the Government made another major change to the figures...

ED: *But if the Government warns that the figures...*

CG: Well let me finish. When...

ED: *...shouldn't be used then they're not the figures, are they? I mean, it's not the figures.*

CG: But the Government itself continues to use the figures. When the Government made another major change in the 1990s it actually restarted the data set completely so it's impossible to make a comparison if you go back as far as 1997. These figures are different. It continues to publish this comparator every year, it uses it when it suits it to do so, so what else as an opposition do we use to make a judgement...

ED: *Right.*

CG: ...about the level of violent crime over the last decade? But look, absolutely all of this...

ED: *I hear what you're saying...*

CG: ...the statistics...

ED: *I hear what you're saying. Can I just put a point to you? Those people that had listened to you and thought the current Government was selective or mendacious in its use of the statistics, and those people who would have hoped that you would somehow be different should now acknowledge that your benchmark for your use of statistics is what the Government does. So if they use dodgy statistics, you will use dodgy statistics. You're aspiring to be absolutely no better, cleaner, more clear, more honest than they are.*

CG: We have for a long time had a very clear policy, which we will put into place in government, that crime statistics should be collected, handled, published entirely independently of government. Let's get rid of all of these issues, let's have a system where it's absolutely clear that the Home Office and the Government has no fingers in the pie of collecting crime statistics. Because what matters out there, actually there has been – if you go out to talk to anybody in the streets and if you go to some of our poorest areas, because it's our poorest areas that are disproportionately affected

by violent crime – you will find people who absolutely clearly say that violent crime has risen sharply over the past 10 years. And the reality is that is the life they are experiencing and the problems that we've got to get to grips with are not debates over statistics it's actually sorting out those problems – it's delivering better policing in those areas, it's getting to grips with the problems that are really affecting those communities.

ED: *Now you've been shopped on the fact that these figures should not be used for the purposes of comparison, will you write to the local parties and tell them not to make these comparisons which are not really very honest, are they?*

CG: I simply don't accept that we've been shopped on anything. These are the figures that are used by the Home Office, they are published by the Home Office every year, they are the official crime figures; they are the only way of making reference to what's happened over the years. I'm not airbrushing back. If you go back to the start of this decade there were steady year by year increases in the level of violent crime. If you go into the depths of the figures you'll find a 98% increase in serious violent crime which was almost unaffected by any changes at all. I am not going to try and do something differently when the Home Office itself is publishing the figures. As an opposition politician I don't have access to some special independent source of data, I can only use what the Home Office publishes and what the Home Office itself uses. That's what I do. I can change the system if I'm in government, and I will seek to do so to make all of this independent, but for now I have to use what the Home Office publishes and makes, you know, available, and in Milton Keynes any complaints from the police there are about what the Home Office publishes – nothing to do with us.

ED: *Let me go back to Mark Easton for one last quick comment. Mark, this is a published series of statistics, does that, if you like, give anyone licence to just use the public series... the published series?*

ME: Well, you know, helpfully there is a set of statistics which is unaffected by recording changes and system changes, which has been running for the last 30 years. It is the British Crime Survey, a huge survey done annually involving tens of thousands of people – you know, it's not a perfect survey, it doesn't do all crime – but what it shows is since 1995 that people's experience of violent crime has fallen by 50%. Now I know that Mr Grayling and others think that the British Crime Survey has holes in it – that it doesn't, for instance, look at some crimes; it's more difficult to get people to talk in some more deprived neighbourhoods – but actually what he's asking us to believe is that this survey, which has shown this huge drop in people's experience of violent crime, because it's not quite complete masks a massive number of people who've seen huge extra violence against them but have not told the police and have not told the pollsters.

ED: *I think I owe you a last right of reply on that particular point, Chris Grayling.*

CG: Well the British Crime Survey to which Mark refers doesn't contain – for obvious reasons because people can't give it... views of their experience – it doesn't contain murder, it doesn't contain manslaughter; it doesn't contain crimes committed by people under the age of 16, and we know that the peak age of offending for many crimes is 15. It is fundamentally flawed – you cannot use this as a way of assessing violent crime levels. And the reality is, talk to anybody in the streets and any way you care to dice the official recorded crime statistics violent crime is coming... is going up.

ED: *Chris Grayling and Mark Easton, thank you both very much indeed.*

Ends