
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Alan Johnson MP
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

14 July 2010

Dear Mr Johnson

VIOLENT CRIME STATISTICS: PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS – 7 JULY 2010

Thank you for your letter dated 7 July regarding the remarks by the Prime Minister about violent crime and gun crime in the House of Commons during Oral Questions that day.

After receiving your letter I asked the Statistics Authority's Monitoring and Assessment staff to investigate this matter and to review the publicly available statistical sources. The position of the Authority remains unchanged from that set out in my letter to Mr Grayling of 4 February. It is not possible, without qualification, to compare police recorded statistics of violent crime between the late 1990s and 2008/09 (the latest year for which there are figures), because of the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard in 2002/03. But, to take the longest recent period during which comparisons may legitimately be made, police recorded violence against the person stood at 845 thousand in 2002/03, rising to 1,060 thousand in 2005/06, then subsequently falling to 903 thousand in 2008/09 [see revised Table 2.04 in Home Office Statistical Bulletin 11/09].

Over the same period, offences reported to the police in which a firearm was used (excluding air-weapons, which gives a better indication of trends for the more serious firearm offences) stood at 10,200 in 2002/03, rising to 11,100 in 2005/06, then subsequently falling to 8,200 in 2008/09 [as set out in Table 2.03 in Home Office Statistical Bulletin 01/10].

The Authority's view remains that the British Crime Survey (BCS) provides a more reliable measure of the national trend in violent crime. The evidence from the BCS is that there has not been an increase in respondents' experience of violent crime between the late 1990s and 2008/09.

You also asked me whether the ongoing review of the methodology underpinning the British Crime Survey meant that this called into question the statistics themselves. Our view is that this is not the case, although we must await the publication of the review itself. We regard it as good practice for Departments involved in the production and publication of official statistics to undertake periodic methodological reviews of this kind.

The Authority does not wish to be drawn into the political debate, and cannot assume the role of a referee on each occasion that an official statistic is misquoted or misinterpreted. But I hope that those who comment in Parliament and elsewhere on trends in violent crime will take account of the points made in this letter.

I note, as you do, that the next statistical release on crime is due later this week.

I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, to the Chair of the House of Commons Home Affairs and Public Administration Select Committees, to the Home Secretary, the National Statistician, and the Chief Statistician in the Home Office.

Yours sincerely

Michael Scholar

Sir Michael Scholar KCB