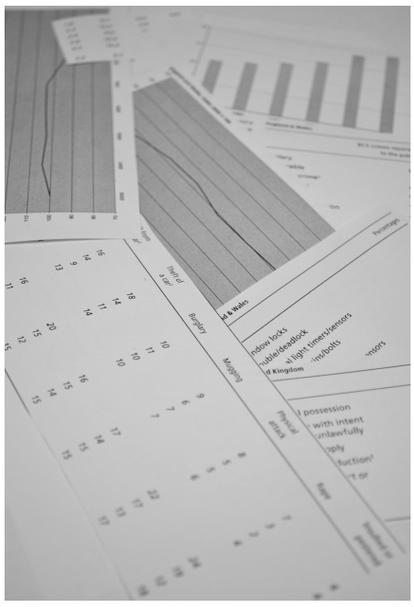
New Labour's crime statistics: a case of 'flat earth news'

Tim Hope examines the distortions behind crime stats.



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Number confusion

Of the Three Rs, how good has New Labour been with the arithmetic of crime? The answer depends upon who is doing the marking. By self-assessment, it felt it had done remarkably well:

> *We have had ten years of sustained investment in crime reduction – not just financial, but also expertise, new policy and legislation, and rigorous focus on delivery. The benefits are clear: overall crime has fallen by around a third since 1997, following rising crime throughout the 1980s and first half of the 1990s.* (Home Office, 2007)

Yet New Labour's actual achievement with the crime trend has been less to do with its efforts and more to do with its skill in rigging the examination system. Not that there has been any outright dishonesty; after all, a system that allows those sitting the exams to set the questions and to mark the papers has no need to cheat; a fact that was never going to be lost on the new boys of Home Office House.

'Lies …'

Habitually, British governments are reticent about holding themselves to account, other than when they have to via the ballot box. So why would any incoming government want to set itself the hostage to fortune of 'evidence-based policy'; what if it didn't have much evidence of what worked; what if the evidence showed that what it did do subsequently didn't work? Still, the happy circumstance of having enunciated particularly strident and ambitious crime reduction plans whilst in opposition, winning a landslide election in 1997 in part on the basis of such promises, promulgating programmes and legislation once in office and thence presiding over year-on-year reductions in the official indicators of crime; all must have seemed incontrovertible. Yet this is a deception due not just to the inaccessibility of figures so much as to the interpretation placed upon them; and it is the latter that won New Labour its early successes (at least in their own minds), even if, as with so many things, it squandered public trust in the process.

New Labour's first senior prefect (Home Secretary, Jack Straw), put in place a conceptual apparatus that would stack the odds in favour of coming up with success. Two innovations were central to this: the first was governance via press release. To be fair, New Labour was merely furthering the practices that had brought it into power. Indeed, as Nick Davies (2008) has shown with *Flat Earth News,* the ability of government to produce figures, facts and claims that go unchallenged relies upon the competitive pressure of 24-hour news production and the concentration of media ownership, which renders news journalists incapable (even if they wished) of checking their stories; far easier to re-hash a press release than to independently source and corroborate a story. Second, Straw sought to co-opt social science into the machinery of governance of crime reduction. An aura of scientific expertise would help quell contrary challenge (not least from the political opposition) while the connotation of scientific progress would appeal to an awe-struck general public. Here, the Home Secretary was much helped by the expert crime scientists and statisticians within the in-house Research, Development and Statistics Directorate (RDS); an outfit whose denizens had been woefully neglected by the previous regime, scorned alike both by politicians and their academic peers, subjected to market-testing (save for the reluctance of anyone to buy them), with only the occasional Philosopher-Chief Constable left to impress. A toxic brew was bubbling away: politicians who lived by the news, crime reduction experts who wanted to make it.

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'… damned lies …'

One of New Labour's chief electoral pledges in 1997 was to

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put government spending itself upon a more rational, evidence-based footing through the first Comprehensive Spending Review, which required spending departments to justify the need for their expenditure. As part of its case for a large investment in crime reduction – particularly what would become known as the Crime Reduction Programme (CRP; Home Office, 1999) – the Home Office produced a revision of its model of the crime trend. Unlike the downward trend, this new forecast appeared to predict a counter-intuitive, 26 per cent *rise* in crime, particularly in the key target-crime of burglary (Dhiri et al., 1999). While the forecast amply and successfully demonstrated the need for massive investment from the Treasury – funding the experimental CRP and its extra CCTV add-on to the tune of half a billion smackers, there was a presentational problem: if the crime forecast was so bad, would the public continue to believe in the government's promises or instead call for even more costly bobbies on the beat; but if crime wasn't that bad, why give the cash away when it could go on schools and hospitals instead. Some fancy footwork was needed, so Straw issued a press release:

> *There is nothing inevitable about the trend in the model. Halfway through this period there is good evidence we are in fact bucking the projected trend. Burglary in the first two years of this period [i.e. since the general election] is down, not up; and vehicle crime is down, not up. This research therefore underlines the relative success achieved so far, but also the scale of the challenge we must face*.
> (Jack Straw, quoted in Travis, 1999)

As *The Guardian* helpfully went on to explain (presumably briefed by the Home Office Press Office):

> *The resulting projections are based on a forecast of what will happen if current demographic and economic trends continue without any impact from crime reduction measures taken by the police and the government*.
> (Travis, 1999)

So, we have the Home Secretary gamely rising to the challenge. But can you see what he did here? The sleight-of-hand is to insinuate that 'current demographic and economic trends' will *necessarily* bring about increases in crime, while governmental crime reduction measures will also *necessarily* (though not tautologically) bring about reductions. It follows that this polarisation between social forces (bad) and government actions (good) are the only drivers of the crime rate, setting up a titanic struggle from which, if crime goes down, the government will emerge victorious.

The overarching task, then, was not so much to reduce crime but to be seen and believed to have reduced crime.

'… and crime statistics'

Still, a further twist was necessary in order to cover the government's bet. In the past, statistics of recorded crime (and more recently from the British Crime Survey) had been seen as measuring the public's *demand* for action against crime, placing responsibility on the government to provide the necessary resources and means. In contrast, the Simmons Review (Home Office, 2000) turned this definition on its head, suggesting that the crime statistics should be a measure of the *supply* of criminal justice services, comprising a basis for the performance management regime that the government itself was to impose on the various criminal justice agencies. After all, the demand for government action had already been expressed through the ballot box, and it was now up to the government to prove that it could do the job. A further refinement to this subtle shift would seek to place New Labour in a win-win situation: if crime went down, it could take the credit, no question; if it didn't, it could either (a) blame the criminal justice services, especially the police, for their incompetence and/or (b) blame those darn economic and social conditions, whose global origins lay beyond the government's control. Either way, it hoped that the public could be persuaded to vote in even more resources as New Labour set its shoulder to the wheel in its heroic 'crusade [sic] against crime' (Jack Straw in Home Office, 1999: Preface), thus garnering its just reward at the ballot box. The overarching task, then, was not so much to reduce crime but to be seen and believed to have reduced crime.

Didn't he do well?

So, how did it all pan out? On the one hand, head boy Blair managed to bow-out believing he'd done it (Hope, 2008b); on the other hand, his 'fags' had to resort to ever-more sleight-of- and under-hand tactics of pretence. Not surprisingly, perhaps, to seasoned observers of the performance of criminal justice agencies in the face of hare-brained government schemes, the massive CRP soon lead to equally massive muddle, confusion and general implementation failure across much of the board. Yet what was the official response? On the one hand, to pretend that the CRP wasn't actually about *delivering* crime reduction but about *experimenting* with what works (in the noblest tradition of management science), and then to blame all and sundry (except the management science experts) for not putting enough effort in to getting it right; nothing wrong with the ideas, just feeble political leadership (from sacked ministers), even more research and investment needed (Homel et al., 2004). On the other hand, officials set about blaming the evaluators and suppressing unfavourable evaluation reports (Hope, 2008c), reanalysing data to come up with more favourable results (Hope, 2004, 2008a), and issuing blatant ministerial press releases (e.g. *Groundbreaking Projects Crack Burglary*, Home

Office Press Release 177/2003, 25 June 2003).

But did New Labour get away with it? Even in its own lifetime, parliament began to suspect it had been pulling a fast one with the facts (STC, 2006), though officials continued to ignore such criticism as if it didn't matter (Hope, 2008c). And just as the independent UK Statistics Commission launched what was in fact a rather innocuous enquiry about the public and private uses of crime statistics (Statistics Commission, 2006), an evidently paranoid government not only commissioned its own, pre-emptive report (Home Office, 2006) but also abolished the Statistics Commission itself. And things went from bad to worse: Not only had the Home Office taken to releasing its findings *en masse* on 'Research Thursday', giving journalists no time to corroborate the accompanying press releases (Davies, 2008), but when it became engulfed in an administrative crisis, the supposedly new-broom Home Secretary John Reid banned the release of any research report for five months, without explanation. Such cavalier attitudes to the evidence continued, earning the Home Office the distinction of becoming the first government department to breach on various occasions the government's new *Code of Practice for Official Statistics* (UK Statistics Authority, 2009); while a similar incident in defence of another indefensible policy – the retention of DNA records (Pease, 2009) – attracted immediate condemnation (Goldacre, 2009).

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And the rest is silence: Home Office research reports continue to dribble out from time to time, though these often seem pallid reflections of past standards of quality; and the Home Office continues to publish its annual 'pictures' of crime (*Crime in England and Wales*) although the editorial policy continues to allow plenty of scope for 'impressionism' (Hope, 2008d). Finally, having been held up until after the election, the UK Statistics Authority published its report on *Overcoming Barriers to Trust in Crime Statistics* (2010). In January 2011, Home Secretary Theresa May announced that she has asked the National Statistician to lead an independent review into the collection and publication of crime statistics, and that the responsibility for their publication would move from the Home Office to an independent body. ■

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