



MEDIA SCEPTIC GROUP

BBC's misleading crime headlines

Press release - 24 April 2007

After the BBC's Editorial Complaints Unit upheld an earlier complaint¹ of ours on misleading crime coverage, we looked at BBC News Online, and found that BBC headlines systematically cherry-picked "rises" in crime, whilst ignoring the (often more significant) falls.

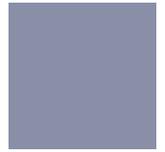
Summary

All of the BBC News Online headlines from July 2004 to January 2007 (reporting on the quarterly publication of the official crime figures) cherry-picked "rises" in crime. Not one mentioned the significant falls in crime consistently highlighted by the official crime bulletins.

In cases where the "summary" or "main points" sections of the official bulletins listed no significant crime "rises" (due to falls in crime being more prominent), the BBC utilised, for headline purposes, less prominent crime "rises" found in the detail section of the bulletins.

In some cases the "rises" reported in the BBC headlines were not real rises at all, but artificial inflations caused by changes in crime recording practices. (Note: it was on this point that our earlier complaint was upheld after a long investigation by the Editorial Complaints Unit).

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Headlines are important

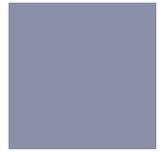
We have restricted our analysis to headlines (specifically, all of the headlines between July 2004 and January 2007 - eleven in total - which reported the quarterly crime bulletins).

We are aware that the detailed texts of the BBC reports mention falls in crime and briefly refer to caveats concerning crime "rises". However, our concern is the impression given by headlines which exclusively focus on crime rises (with no apparent justification).

The following BBC Online headlines cover the official crime figures (published quarterly) between 2004 and 2007:

- "Violent crime figures rise by 12%"** (22/7/04)
- "Gun crime figures show fresh rise"** (21/10/04)
- "Violent crime increases by 6%"** (25/1/05)
- "Violent crime 'rise' sparks row"** (21/4/05)
- "Violent offences top million mark"** (21/7/05)
- "Violent crime shows 6% increase"** (20/10/05)
- "Violent crime and robbery on rise"** (26/1/06)
- "Robberies up 6% but crime stable"** (27/4/06)
- "Phones and MP3s fuel robbery rise"** (20/7/06)
- "Robbery continues on upward trend"** (19/10/06)
- "Risk of suffering crime 'rises'"** (25/1/07)

(See footnotes⁵ for hypertext links to the relevant BBC Online web pages)

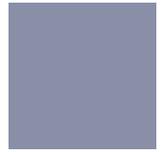


Distorted impressions

Among other things, these headlines give the impression that violent crime has been consistently rising (according to the official figures). In fact, the official figures indicate that violent crime has fallen or remained stable since 1995, and has not significantly risen in the last three years. Recent "rises" in recorded violent crime are to a large extent due to the continued effect of changes in recording practices². The quarterly Home Office Statistical Bulletins (which contain the official crime figures - a combination of police records and the British Crime Survey) make this clear³. Furthermore, the Association of Chief Police Officers was reported (by BBC's Panorama, 17/4/05) as acknowledging that, allowing for the changes to recording practices in recent years, violence had not risen.

Analysis

We illustrate, in our analysis below, the systematic "cherry-picking" of crime "rises" by BBC News Online. We do this by comparing the BBC headlines with highlighted "summary" or "main points" from the Home Office Statistical Bulletins (which the BBC headlines were, ostensibly, reporting).



July 2004

BBC headline: "Violent crime figures rise by 12%"

Home Office Statistical Bulletin (HOSB): "The number of violent incidents has fallen by 36 per cent since a peak in 1995". Between 2002/03 and 2003/04, the British Crime Survey (BCS) found "violent crime to be stable" (ie no rise).

HOSB: "There was an increase of 12% in violent crimes (i.e. violence against the person, sexual offences and robberies) recorded by the police since 2002/03 though much of the increase is likely to be due to the continuing impact of changes in recording."²

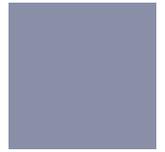
October 2004

BBC headline: "Gun crime figures show fresh rise"

HOSB: "The risk of being a victim of crime, at 25 per cent, is lower compared with the year to June 2003 and is also lower than it was in 1981, the year of the first British Crime Survey (BCS)."

HOSB: "significant falls in vehicle thefts, all household crime and all personal crime".

HOSB: "an increase of 310 [firearms] offences or three per cent compared to the year ending June 2003." (The yearly number of fatalities from firearms fell from 82 to 70⁴)



January 2005

BBC headline: "Violent crime increases by 6%"

HOSB: "The risk of being a victim of crime, at 25 per cent, is the lowest recorded by the BCS since it began in 1981."

HOSB: "The number of domestic burglaries and vehicle thefts recorded by the police fell by 23 per cent and 17 per cent respectively."

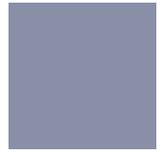
HOSB: "There was a seven per cent increase in crimes of violence against the person [...] but these increases in recorded violence appear to reflect continuing effects of improved police recording of crime."

April 2005

BBC headline: "Violent crime 'rise' sparks row"

HOSB: "statistically significant falls in domestic burglary, vehicle thefts, all household crime and all personal crime".

HOSB: "The number of crimes recorded by the police fell by five per cent [...] The figures show a ten per cent increase in violence against the person but increases in recorded violence continue to reflect the improved police recording of crime."



July 2005

BBC headline: "Violent offences top million mark"

HOSB: "Overall crime has fallen by seven per cent according to the BCS. There has also been a fall of six per cent in the number of crimes recorded by the police [...] The risk of being a victim of either burglary or vehicle-related theft has halved since 1995 and is much reduced for other property crimes."

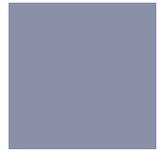
HOSB: "Violent crime has decreased by 11 per cent according to BCS interviews [...] There were 1,184,702 violent crimes recorded by the police in 2004/05, an increase of seven per cent [...] "Police recorded crime is susceptible to recording changes, especially non-serious violent offences which form a large proportion of overall violent crime."

October 2005

BBC headline: "Violent crime shows 6% increase"

HOSB: "The number of domestic burglaries and vehicle thefts recorded by the police fell by 11 per cent and 8 per cent respectively."

HOSB: "The number of crimes recorded by the police fell by two per cent [...] Within this total there was a six per cent increase in violence against the person but increases in recorded violence continue to reflect the improved police recording of crime and more proactive policing of violence problems."



January 2006

BBC headline: "Violent crime and robbery on rise"

HOSB: The BCS found "violent crime to be stable [ie no rise] compared with the previous year".

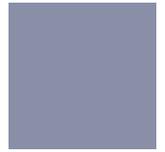
No "main points" in the January 2006 HOSB mention a rise in violent crime or robbery. However, the bulletin provides details of changes in recorded crime which show that while there were falls in serious violence, violence involving no injury, sexual offences, burglary, vehicle theft, other theft and criminal damage, there were rises in robbery and violence involving non-serious injury.

April 2006

BBC headline: "Robberies up 6% but crime stable"

HOSB: "The number of crimes recorded by the police remained stable". Recorded violent crime "remained broadly stable". There was a 3% decrease in firearms offences. (Note that in October 2004, a 3% increase was enough to generate the headline: "Gun crime figures show fresh rise").

No "main points" in the April 2006 HOSB mention the 6% rise in robbery, although it is mentioned briefly in the further detail, along with a 12% fall in serious violence.



July 2006

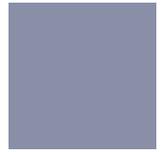
BBC headline: "Phones and MP3s fuel robbery rise"

HOSB: "The British Crime Survey (BCS) shows that crime is stabilising after long periods of reduction. Police recorded crime shows a one per cent reduction in the number of crimes".

HOSB: "Violent crime as measured by the BCS has fallen by 43 per cent since a peak in 1995."

HOSB: "There were 765 homicides in 2005/06, a decrease of 12 per cent from the previous year. The homicide figure of 765 includes 52 homicide victims of the 7 July London bombings."

HOSB: "Police recorded robbery increased by eight per cent between 2004/05 and 2005/06. This is still 19 per cent below the 2001/02 peak in robbery."



October 2006

BBC headline: "Robbery continues on upward trend"

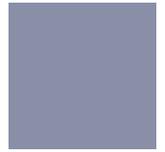
HOSB: "The number of crimes recorded by the police has fallen by two per cent for the period April to June 2006 compared with the same quarter a year earlier".

HOSB: "The BCS showed a statistically significant fall in vehicle thefts (6%) compared with interviews in the year to June 2005."

HOSB: "In the year to June 2006, there were a provisional 10,267 firearm offences, a decrease of eight per cent compared with the previous year."

HOSB: "Recorded violent crime for April to June 2006 showed no change from the same period in 2005."

No "main points" in the October 2006 HOSB mention the "upward trend" in robbery, although it is mentioned briefly in the further detail (page 4): "Recorded robbery figures showed a five per cent rise in April to June 2006 compared with a year earlier." A fall in sexual offences is mentioned in the same paragraph: "There was a six per cent fall in recorded sexual offences in April to June 2006 compared with a year earlier".



January 2007

BBC headline: "Risk of suffering crime 'rises'"

The previous ten BBC headlines (July 2004–October 2006) didn't mention British Crime Survey falls in crime at all. This is the first time (over the period analysed, 2004–2007) that a HOSB "main point" relating to BCS findings is used as the basis for a BBC headline. Coincidentally, it's the first time in this period that the BCS reported an overall crime increase (of just 1%).

Also notable is that the number of crimes recorded by the police fell by 3%. The BBC didn't use this as the basis for their headline, despite a preference for using police recorded figures for the ten previous headlines (July 2004–October 2006) - when they showed crime "rises".

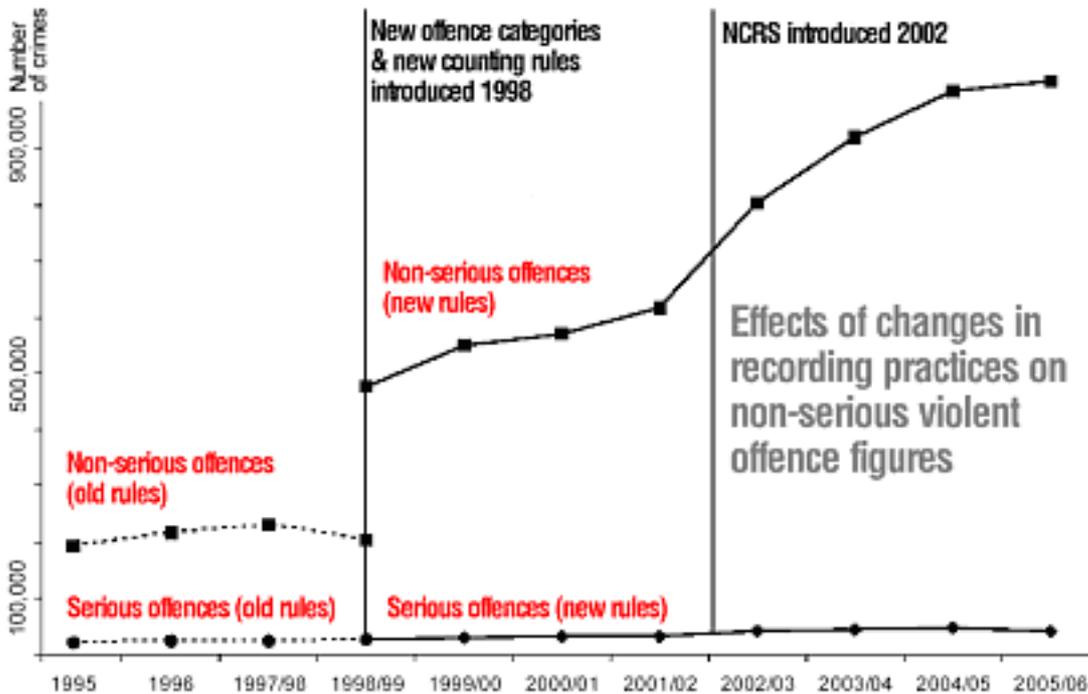
HOSB: "The risk of being a victim of crime as measured by the British Crime Survey (BCS), at 24 per cent, has increased by one percentage point compared with the year to September 2005 (23%). This is still considerably lower than the peak of 40 per cent recorded by the survey in 1995".

HOSB: "The number of crimes recorded by the police fell by three per cent for the period July to September 2006 compared with the same quarter a year earlier."

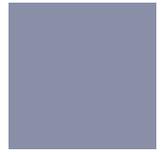


Complexity & clarity

In the past when we've notified BBC reporters about misleading crime reports, they've responded by pointing to the "complexity" of the crime figures. There are complexities, but the authors of the official crime bulletins have gone out of their way to simplify and clarify - with bullet points and clear graphs (such as the one below). You don't need to be an expert to understand the crime figures.



Based on: Crime in England and Wales, Section 5.3, Home Office, July 2006

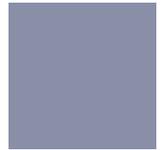


Conclusion

All of the BBC News Online headlines from July 2004 to January 2007 (reporting on the quarterly publication of the official crime figures) cherry-picked "rises" in crime. Not one mentioned the consistent and significant falls in crime highlighted by the official crime bulletins. In some cases the "rises" reported in the BBC headlines were not real rises at all, but artificial inflations caused by changes in crime recording practices. This was always made clear in the official crime bulletins - usually in the front page "main points" section, or the "summary" section.

Some of the BBC Online articles do briefly refer to caveats concerning the violent crime "rises". But this is always further down in the text - in our opinion it doesn't mitigate the impression created by the headlines. Furthermore, the misleading impression of "rises" in violent crime is reinforced by a summary of links on some of the above BBC pages, which reads as follows:

"FROM THE ARCHIVE
2006: Phones fuel robbery
2005: Violent offences up 7%
2004: Violent crime rises 12%
2003: Crime fight 'being lost'
2002: Street robberies soar
2001: Violent crime on the rise
2000: Big rise in violent crime"



Footnotes:

1. We complained to the BBC in November 2005 that a BBC1 Ten O'Clock News report of a "significant rise" in violent crime was erroneous and misleading. On 21st February 2006, we received a letter from the head of BBC's Editorial Complaints Unit (ECU), saying that our complaint was upheld. The ECU has found that BBC1 news breached editorial guidelines on "truth and accuracy", and that there was "no basis" for claiming a significant rise in violent crime. More details:
<http://www.mediasceptic.org/bbccrime.htm>

2. Changes to recording practices have inflated the figures for violent crime, especially with minor offences. Certain "yobbish" behaviours (eg minor scuffles) have been reclassified as crime; a violent crime with many victims is no longer recorded as a single crime - an incident with 3 victims is now recorded as 3 crimes; a higher proportion of violent crime is recorded - eg the proportion of common assaults (without injury) recorded rose from around 50% to 68% between 2002 and 2003. (Sources: Guardian, 22/4/05, Panorama BBC1, 17/4/05, quoting: Home Office, Association of Chief Police Officers, British Crime Survey)

3. "The British Crime Survey (BCS) is considered the more reliable measure of violent crime. Police recorded violent crime has been inflated over the last few years by changes in recording practices (particularly marked since the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard in April 2002), increased reporting by the public and increased police activity." (Home Office Statistical Bulletin on crime, section 5.1, July 2006. See also: 5.2 BRITISH CRIME SURVEY AND POLICE MEASURES OF VIOLENT CRIME in same document)

4. Home Office Statistical Bulletin: Crime in England and Wales, Quarterly Update, 21 October 2004. Firearm Offences, table 2, p6: 82 fatal injuries in year ending June 2003; 70 in year ending June 2004.

5. Links to BBC News Online pages quoted above (respectively):

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3914289.stm>
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3761626.stm>
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4204843.stm
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/frontpage/4467569.stm
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<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6059520.stm>
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6297715.stm

The index to above-quoted Home Office Statistical Bulletins (HOSB) on crime can be found at:
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/bcs1.html>