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- Matheson urged to sort out 'misleading' crime figures

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Scotland's justice secretary has been urged to sort out the Scottish Government's reporting of crime figures, after they were branded 'confusing and misleading'.

In a letter from Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross, Michael Matheson was told it was almost impossible to gauge violent crime because of the disparity in figures used.

The SNP has been criticised in recent weeks for boasting there were less than 7000 violent crimes in Scotland last year, even though data recorded by the police suggested there were close to ten times that.

It said there were 6775 instances of violence, but when incidents such as broken noses and cases where a victim loses consciousness are included, the toll rises to 68,482.

The disparity is caused by the distinction between 'crimes' and 'offences' in the recorded crime statistical bulletin, which ministers argue has been made since the 1920s.

But Mr Ross pointed out that the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey – which is also used to record violent crime – makes no such distinction.

And Derek Penman, HM Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, said last week that figures combining violence with and without injury offer "a better overall measure of violent crime".

Mr Ross argued that ministers should therefore create a clearer system of recording and publishing, adding it would increase the public's confidence in policing.

Earlier this month, the SNP was accused of "fiddling" crime figures after offences including punching, kicking and brandishing a weapon were left out of statistics.

**Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross said:** "The inconsistent use of 'violent crime' by the Scottish Government is at best confusing and at worst misleading.

“The SNP should consider implementing a joined-up, common sense and transparent approach on this issue so that the public can have full confidence in crime statistics.

“The current spin from the SNP does a disservice to tens of thousands of victims of violence and fails to provide an accurate overall picture of violent crime in Scotland.”

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A copy of the letter is below:

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

### **General Questions – Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2017**

I wish to follow up in writing on our exchange during General Questions on Thursday, 19<sup>th</sup> January, when I asked whether the Scottish Government is content with the way it records crime. You will be aware this is an issue the Scottish Conservatives have raised before, and which was reported in the national and local press earlier this month.

The Scottish Government statistical bulletin, ‘Criminal Proceedings in Scotland, 2015-16’, explicitly states that “violations of criminal law are divided, for *statistical purposes only*, into crimes and offences.” Equally, the UK Statistics Authority, to which you referred in our exchange, emphasised in its July 2014 assessment report of the recorded crime statistics that the distinction between ‘crimes’ and ‘offences’ is “...made *only for working purposes*.”

Nevertheless, the Scottish Government is issuing press releases, such as the release on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2016, which states that “non-sexual crimes of violence are at their second lowest level since 1974, despite a slight rise over the twelve months from 6,357 to 6,775.” In this instance, and in others, the reference to violent crime fails to include weapons offences and common assaults – encompassing a broken nose and loss of consciousness, as well as domestic abuse – which would bring the total closer to 70,000 incidents across the country. This spin from the SNP does a disservice to tens of thousands of victims of violence and fails to provide an accurate overall picture of violent crime in Scotland for the public.

As a defence, and as you mentioned in your remarks last week, the SNP repeatedly argues that the distinction between ‘crimes’ and ‘offences’ has been made by consecutive administrations since the 1920s. Yet the Scottish Government’s own website says that the recorded crimes bulletin in its current format has only been published since April 1998. Furthermore, you mentioned during our exchange that the Scottish Government records crime using the Scottish crime and justice survey (SCJS) and police recorded crime statistics.

However, and as you will be aware, the SCJS does not make the same distinction between ‘crimes’ and ‘offences’: “...*violent crime in the SCJS*

*includes assault and robbery, crimes which are included in Group 1 (Nonsexual crimes of violence) and Group 6 (Miscellaneous offences) in police recorded crime figures.”* (Scottish Government, Recorded Crime in Scotland 2015-16, p. 25)

The inconsistent use of ‘violent crime’ across the Scottish Government’s statistical publications on recorded crime is at best confusing and at worst misleading. I am not alone in this view – it was reported last week that HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland has questioned whether it is right that some 60,000 common assaults are not treated as “crimes of violence” in official publications. He further commented that the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which includes violence with and without injury, offers “a better overall measure of violent crime.”

The SNP’s argument in favour of “continuity for continuity’s sake” does not serve the best interests of the public. Above all, the information should be targeted to the audience, even if the status quo better serves the SNP’s spin machine. I strongly urge you to consider implementing a joined up, common sense and transparent approach on this issue so that the public can have full confidence in the Scottish Government’s crime statistics.

I look forward to receiving your response to the points raised in this letter. Yours sincerely, Douglas Ross MSP

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**The SNP was accused of fiddling figures earlier this month:**

<https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/404767/snp-accused-of-fiddling-crime-figures-as-the-shocking-extent-of-violent-incidents-in-scotland-is-revealed/>

**The Scottish Government hailed what it said was statistics showing fewer than 7000 instances of violent crime last year:**

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00506122.pdf> (p1) and

<http://news.gov.scot/news/recorded-crime-at-a-42-year-low>

However, when a range of other violent incidents are included, such as handling offensive weapons, broken noses, loss of consciousness and other common assaults, the figure rises to 68,482. HM Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland Derek Penman said on [Twitter](#) on 19<sup>th</sup> January that the approach used by the Crime Survey for England and Wales “*includes violence with & without injury and is a better overall measure of violent crime*”.