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FBI Rewritten

How U.S. Edits Crime Statistics

Washington

For the last year, the office of Attorney General John N. Mitchell has been rewriting the FBI's interpretations of the nation's crime statistics, which for four decades had been within the sole control of J. Edgar Hoover.

As a result, it has been made to appear that the FBI believes the crime rise that began under a Democratic administration almost a decade ago is tapering off.

The figures, however, show that reported crime is rising at about the same velocity as before.

CHANGE

Documents have come to light illustrating how the attorney general began last year to change the interpretation placed on the crime figures, without altering the figures themselves, or omitting crucial statistics.

The difference between Hoover's view and Mitchell's view of the crime figure became clear last week when the annual figures for 1970 were released.

They showed that, in the two years since the Republicans took office, major crimes have risen from 4.4 million in 1968 to 5.5 million last year — a rise of 25 per cent. The crime rate has also risen, but not as rapidly — from 2235 major crimes per 100,000 U.S. residents in 1968 to 2741 per 100,000 in 1970.

INCREASE

The explanatory material written by the FBI in the report said that crime increased by 11 per cent in 1970 over 1969, and that it rose by 144 per cent since 1960. "The risk of becoming a victim of crime in this country is increasing," it concluded, and "population growth cannot alone account for the crime increases."

In issuing the report, Mitchell began his statement by saying: "Serious crime in the Nation continued to increase in 1970, Attorney Gen-

eral John N. Mitchell announced today, but at a slower rate than in 1969. It marked the second year in a row that the crime statistics showed a tapering off of the sharp upward swing recorded during the mid-1960s."

The next day some news reports said that crime was rising, others said that it was "tapering off," and others quoted Hoover as having said that the risk of being a crime victim was rising, and then quoted Mitchell's statement that the crime rise was slowing down.

APPROVAL

Spokesmen for the FBI and Mitchell's office said that the releases were being handled as always, with the Attorney General's office giving final approval to the press statements.

Comparisons between the FBI's explanatory material and the press statements of past years make it clear that only in Mitchell's tenure has Hoover's copy been edited.

The change in practice occurred June 22, 1970, when Hoover's office prepared a statement, under his letterhead, that characterized the statistics to be released that day as follows:

"For release Monday p.m., June 22, 1970 — according to figures made available through the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and released by Attorney General John N. Mitchell, serious crime in the United States continued its upward trend, recording a 13 per cent rise nationally for the first three months in 1970 when compared to the same period in 1969."

(The FBI has often been accused of presenting the crime figures in a way that emphasizes the crime increases, supposedly because this will justify larger FBI budget.)

Hoover's statement was rewritten in Mitchell's office, and as it was actually issued

under Hoover's letterhead, began as follows:

"For release Monday p.m., June 22, 1970 — Attorney General John N. Mitchell announced today that the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports show that the rate of increase of violent crimes in the first three months of 1970 slowed by 7 per cent in the major cities of the nation — and by 3 per cent in the nation as a whole."

It was not until the third paragraph of Mitchell's release that it was disclosed that the statistics indicated crime had risen by 13 per cent.

DIFFERENCES

Since then, each release of FBI figures has revealed a difference in tone between the explanatory material written by the Bureau and printed in the crime reports themselves, and the statement authorized by Mitchell and published under the FBI letterhead.

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports are compilations of local police department's statistics on crimes reported to them.

The reports are presented in a virtually impenetrable form, consisting of tables of figures plus some explanatory passages.

So the public's impression of what the figures show is largely influenced by the press statements always issued on FBI stationery with the reports.

ARTICLES

Newspaper reporters often base their articles on the statement, and newsmen are sometimes loath to write that the figures are going up when the official interpretation says that the crime rise is slowing down.

The "rate of increase" argument is not easily resolved. It can be said that while the volume of reported crime was 11 per cent higher in 1970 than 1969, and 12 per cent higher in 1969 than 1968, this is a slower rate of increase than in 1968, when it rose 17 per cent over 1967, and 1967, when it rose 16 per cent over 1966.

Statisticians say that there is some validity to this argument, but that it also contains a built-in distortion because as the volume grows, the rate of increase usually shrinks.

They cite the following example: If there were one million crimes in 1968, two million crimes in 1969 and three million crimes in 1970, crime would have increased by 100 per cent in 1969, but by only 50 per cent in 1970. It could thus be said that the rate of crime increase had been cut in half in 1970.

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