

Police 'ordered to slant crime data'

Crime figures are being kept artificially low because of pressure from chief constables, a police leader will warn this week.



Officers fear that speaking to the media about serious issues will lead to disciplinary measures or the sack Photo: ALAMY

By David Barrett, Home Affairs Correspondent

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The head of the Police Federation will suggest a "fear factor" in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry is preventing officers from blowing the whistle on how crime statistics are being manipulated.

The intervention by Steve Williams, chairman of the organisation which represents 130,000 frontline officers in England and Wales, is highly significant because it appears to confirm widespread public scepticism of how crime is recorded.

Official figures show crime is at an historic low, despite cuts to police budgets and staffing levels.

Mr Williams will say that police transparency on crime levels and other areas has been badly hit by the Leveson inquiry on Press standards, which examined alleged collusion between police officers and journalists.

Officers now fear that speaking out about scandals, mistakes and other serious issues - including

pressure from senior officers to massage crime figures - will lead to disciplinary measures or the sack, he will suggest.

Ahead of his speech later this week at the Federation's annual conference in Bournemouth, Mr Williams said: "The latest crime figures showed a 5 per cent fall in crime but in reality, based on the anecdotes I'm getting, I am not sure that is the case.

"Pressure is being brought to bear on frontline officers on the way they are recording crime, and I am very concerned about the current situation.

"Cops are very reluctant to speak to the media and say how it really is.

"It is all on the back of Leveson and some chief officers have imposed almost a gagging order on their staff.

"According to what we hear in the Federation it is happening en masse around the country.

"I do not think the true story is getting out because of the 'fear factor' in the wake of Leveson about the effect of going public would have on police officers' careers."

Mr Williams, who took over as Federation chairman in January, said: "There is a lack of understanding in the wake of Leveson about what police officers can and cannot do.

"Officers feel that speaking to journalists will lead to them being labelled troublemakers and that it could lead to them losing their jobs, facing disciplinaries or affecting their promotion prospects.

"It means officers are not telling things how they really are and spin about things such as falling crime figures is not being challenged."

Mr Williams said there was considerable anecdotal evidence from police officers that the true level of crime is not being recorded.

"Closing police stations and reducing the number of cops means it is not so easy for victims to report crime to us," he said.

"And most significantly bobbies find themselves under huge pressure about how to record crime.

"Crimes are downgraded in seriousness or the numbers are hidden. For example, if 10 caravans are broken into overnight with 10 different victims it will sometimes be recorded as just one crime.

"And a stolen mobile phone will be recorded as lost property, and so will not appear in crime data at all.

"If there is a crime where there is little or no evidence, and little chance of police detecting it, then that will be screened out at a very early stage so it does not appear in the stats."

He added: "With property crimes such as burglary and mugging, victims would historically report them because they needed a crime number for their insurance.

"People are now not too bothered about insuring their property and so it does not get reported."

He urged the Association of Chief Police Officers to issue national guidelines on when police can speak to the media, in a bid to thaw relations after the Leveson Inquiry.

"Officers need to know what they can and cannot get involved in, and when there is a public interest in them coming out about what they are asked to do," said Mr Williams.

In latest figures published last month the total number of crimes recorded by the police fell 8 per cent to 3.7 million last year.

And the estimated level of crime in England and Wales fell by 5 per cent to 8.9 million offences against adults, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which asks the public about their experiences of crime regardless of whether they reported incidents to the police.

Separate figures showed the number of suspects arrested by police fell more than twice as fast as the decline in crime rates.

The Opposition said the 9 per cent fall in arrests raised concerns that criminals were "getting away with it".

The Office for National Statistics has suggested that pressure to meet targets may be leading officers to downgrade crimes.

Theresa May, the Home Secretary, faced booing and calls to resign from Federation members during her speech at last year's conference and is due to address officers again on Wednesday.