

News

## Phoenix Police Department Finally Admits Problems With Border-Related Kidnapping Statistics; Agency Spent Months Misleading Public

By [Monica Alonzo](#), Tue., Mar. 1 2011 @ 11:59AM



Phoenix Police Chief Jack Harris

Phoenix police officials finally admitted that the border-related kidnappings statistics they trumpeted for years are not accurate, blaming the problem on "challenges with how cases are classified."

The admission from the police department comes after at least six months of Police Chief Jack Harris' reassuring the City Council and the public that the kidnapping statistics were vetted and valid.

Councilwoman Thelda Williams tells *New Times* that she has learned that police officials have known the figures were wrong since August 2010.

"There needs to be real accountability for this," she says, adding that she is extremely disappointed and frustrated. "There were many opportunities to explain those numbers were incorrect. You don't cover it up."

"You don't continue to deny, deny, deny and send memos to the City Council and manager about the numbers being valid," Williams says. "I thought that this department was held to a higher standard."

The issue: Police reported that they had 358 kidnappings in 2008, and have said that nearly all were linked to U.S.-Mexico border-related violence. The figures were also used in at least two federal grants that helped the Phoenix Police Department land \$2.45 million.

*New Times* first detailed problems with the police statistics earlier this month in an in-depth analysis of kidnapping reports.

In a statement released late yesterday, PPD officials said their own audit has "determined that there are reports that do not belong in these [kidnapping] statistics." But, they say they have also found "numerous other existing reports that were not included within the kidnapping statistics, but should have been."

That wasn't the message coming out of the department in August or December. Instead, police officials insisted that the kidnapping statistics repeatedly had been reviewed and that no problems were found.

Williams said she wasn't sure whether she could believe an audit from the department, but said that wasn't the point.

Indeed the issue these days is far less about the veracity of the statistics and more about the integrity of Phoenix police officials and how they handled the situation.

What compounds the problem is that they "have known for months that the numbers were submitted in error, and they didn't take immediate action to fix it," Williams told *New Times* this morning.

The Department of Justice Office of Inspector General is also conducting an audit of the city's reported kidnapping statistics.

Phoenix Police Sergeant Tommy Thompson said police officials would not comment on the situation.

In a statement, however, he said "kidnappings and home invasions have been, and continue to be, a threat to the safety of the residents of Phoenix and the surrounding communities." Indeed, *New Times* highlighted the real problem in a cover story last year -- point being that the statistics did not need to be inflated to prove there was a crisis.

Thompson offered the following explanation for the statistics boondoggle:

"When a patrol officer responds to a call, the officer authors and classifies the incident based upon available information. The officer writes a report based upon information from a victim even if there is no immediate proof to substantiate the crime. This report is then entered into the department's records-management system and [is] forwarded to an investigative unit for review and follow-up. As additional information is received, the case is subject to change and may be updated and reclassified if necessary."

Why aren't police reports updated or reclassified? And why didn't the police department come up with that explanation sooner?

Instead, in **December 2010**, police officials released a statement to all Phoenix employees telling them that "the [Office of Inspector General] will be performing a statistical audit and inquiry on kidnapping data as the result of a 3rd-party request ... This information was **fully reviewed and cleared in August** when similar allegations were raised."

Also, in an August 2010 memo to City Manager David Cavazos, Chief Harris said "accusations that the numbers have been intentionally inflated ... [are] untrue."

Harris' memo notes that reported kidnapping figures included only finalized incidents, and excluded reports where "the crime was later determined to be unfounded."

He wrote that the kidnapping statistics did not include "information only" incidents -- reports with insufficient evidence to determine whether a crime actually occurred. Kidnappings that were sexually motivated or tied to domestic violence were reported separately.

Harris' explanation in that August 25, 2010 letter suggests that the figures were reviewed at the time.

But how could they have been when Phoenix police officials are only now saying that their audit has revealed problems?

Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon told a panel of federal lawmakers that Phoenix police were dealing with border-related kidnapping cases on a daily basis.

Even City Manager David Cavazos told the general manager of a local news station in December 15, 2010: "It is important to state clearly that we have **verified several times** the accuracy of the kidnapping statistics generated by the Phoenix Police Department ... We are available to discuss and review our home invasion and kidnapping statistics, **which have been thoroughly reviewed and vetted...**"

It is glaringly obvious that the public has been getting half-truths or outright lies from officials at Phoenix City Hall and the Phoenix Police Department.

Because if the reports were "thoroughly reviewed," why are police officials only now admitting that the statistics are inaccurate? And if they were not actually "verified several times," then how could the city betray the public trust and claim that they were?