



No.11

# How the public see the police: an Australian survey - I

Compiled and written by Bruce Swanton, Paul Wilson, John Walker and Satyanshu Mukherjee

*A study of the way in which citizens view their police often provides a revealing glimpse of a nation's commitment to democracy, and respect for authority. Among Australians, commentators have long identified a strong anti-authoritarian trait which has been said to account for the average citizen's view of the 'police as enemies, army officers as traitors to democracy... the boss as a barely necessary evil and anyone who gives an order as deeply suspect'.\**

*The results of a national survey of public attitudes to police and police services reported here indicates that Australians are more respectful of their police, and pleased with the assistance they provide, than some observers have suggested. At a time of major controversy and change among many of the nation's enforcement agencies, a majority of survey respondents indicated that they still possessed great respect for the police. But the report also shows that the level and degree of this public respect varied widely between jurisdictions, as did citizens satisfaction with a range of police actions.*

*As consumers of police services, and as taxpayers who must meet the substantial and escalating cost of law enforcement, all citizens have a vital interest in ensuring police use their resources and powers efficiently, effectively and fairly. Surveys like this provide one important method of evaluating how well the police are achieving these objectives. The results of the present survey suggest there is plenty of scope for improvement.*

**Duncan Chappell**  
Director

- Majority of respondents in all states satisfied with assistance provided by police. The greatest cause for dissatisfaction with police was inaction.
- Police honesty is seen overwhelmingly as being on par with that of the community generally in all states. The older the respondent the more likely he/she was to see police as honest.
- Majority of respondents possess great respect for police in most states. This was greatest in South Australia and least in Queensland.
- Public respect for police appears to have declined considerably in all states over a 20-year period.

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE  
OF CRIMINOLOGY**

*trends*

*&*

*issues*

in crime and criminal justice

March 1988

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 13232 1



Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

<http://www.aic.gov.au>

**Table 1 Public Respect for Police**

Responses	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	Australia	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	1969	1987
great respect	50.8	63.4	37.8	60.3	66.6	56.0	64.0	54.6
little respect	4.1	5.3	7.8	3.7	4.5	1.3	2.0	5.0
mixed feelings	40.5	29.0	51.3	34.4	27.5	41.8	29.0	37.3
no opinion/answer	4.5	2.2	3.0	1.6	1.5	0.9	5.0	3.3

Source: McNair Monitor (1987); Chappell and Wilson (1969).

## The Survey

The Australian Institute of Criminology sponsored a survey concerning attitudes to police and police services. It was conducted by McNair Market Monitor during July 1987. There were 2745 persons aged 14 years and over interviewed in all states: New South Wales (771), Victoria (614), Queensland (317), South Australia (294), Western Australia (286) and Tasmania (132). As samples for the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory were small they were not included in this report.

The wealth of information produced by the survey is great and future *Trends and Issues* report will deal with performance and functions. The present report concerns opinions and experiences of police as expressed by respondents. It presents a gross response to interview questions.

## Public Respect For Police

The question posed was:

- Considering everything about the way the police do their job, would you say that you have: (1) great respect for police, (2) little respect for police, (3) mixed feelings about them, (4) no opinion, or (5) don't know?

Responses are tabulated by state at Table 1. It will be seen from the Table that:

- The police departments of South Australia (66.6 per cent), Victoria (63.4 per cent) and Western Australia (60.3 per) were accorded 'greatest respect'.
- The police departments of Queensland (51.3 per cent) Tasmania (41.8 per cent) and New

South Wales (40.5 per cent) were most subject to 'mixed feelings'.

These findings are similar to those of a survey conducted a decade ago, and a still earlier one conducted by Chappell and Wilson in 1969<sup>1</sup>, in that survey South Australian police achieved most public respect and Queensland achieved least. In general, the Police Department of South Australia received most public respect over the 20 year period while Queensland remains at the lowest level. Although a royal commission had been appointed to inquire into alleged police improprieties in Queensland just prior to the survey, the consistently low rating of Queensland police over two decades indicates the level of public respect for police in that state was not significantly influenced by recent events.

'Great respect' for police has fallen significantly in aggregate over the period 1969-87, while 'mixed feelings' have grown. In terms of differences between the various sub-groups surveyed in July 1987 it was found that:

- Females (57.5 per cent) had slightly greater respect for police than males (51.6 per cent) and, that respect increased generally with increasing age.

Conservatism is strongly associated with advancing age but the association noted here between females and age suggests vulnerability to criminal victimisation may also be a factor in determining respect for police.

- In accordance with past surveys, the present study demonstrated an inverse relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and respect for police. People of higher SES are generally more likely to be stopped by police (see Figure 2). This fact may, in part, account for

the lower respect expressed by this group.

## Public Satisfaction With Police Performance

The question posed was:

- How satisfied are you with police efforts in: (1) dealing with mugging and street crime, (2) catching burglars, (3) educating school children about law and order, (4) dealing with organised crime, (5) preventing crime in your neighbourhood, (6) dealing with crimes like gambling and prostitution, (7) getting to know the community, (8) investigating business fraud, (9) dealing with drink driving, (10) coping with marches and demonstrations, and (11) dealing with drug offences. Response options offered were: (1) very satisfied, (2) satisfied, (3) unsatisfied, (4) very unsatisfied, or (5) no opinion?

This question produced numerous responses but only major findings are presented here:

- Respondents in all states expressed themselves as more satisfied than dissatisfied with police efforts in dealing with muggings and street crime, although there were considerable differences between states. South Australia police (71.9 per cent), by far, was accorded the highest satisfaction level on this item, followed by Queensland Police (66.7 per cent) and Western Australia (65.6 per cent). New South Wales Police (36.6 per cent) scored greatest dissatisfaction, followed by Tasmania Police (25.9 per cent) and Victorian Police (25.1 per cent).
- In all states more respondents expressed themselves satisfied than dissatisfied with police efforts in apprehending burglars, despite large differences between states, Tasmania Police (69.6 per cent), South Australia Police (68.3 per cent) and Western Australia

Table 2 Police Honesty

Responses	NSW %	VIC %	QLD %	WA %	SA %	TAS %
more honest than most	8.8	11.0	5.6	9.3	12.0	7.2
about the same as most	79.8	80.1	79.2	83.9	79.0	79.5
less honest than most	7.6	5.4	9.9	3.8	4.6	9.6
no opinion / answer	3.7	3.5	5.3	3.0	4.4	3.7

Source: McNair Monitor

Police (64.4 per cent) warranted greatest satisfaction in this regard. New South Wales Police (42.5 per cent), Queensland Police (35.8 per cent) and Victoria Police (35.3 per cent) recorded most dissatisfaction.

This finding appears incongruous given the limited success achieved by all police agencies in apprehending burglars and other breakers. One explanation is that respondents in fact appreciate the difficulties faced by police and are satisfied with achieved results. Alternatively, the response may be interpreted as broad public satisfaction with police responses to burglary calls.

- Dissatisfaction outweighed satisfaction with regard to how police dealt with organised crime in New South Wales and Queensland. However, satisfaction exceeded dissatisfaction in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. Opinion was divided in Western Australia.
- With regard to police efforts in dealing with matters such as prostitution and gambling, greatest public dissatisfaction was apparent in the cases of New South Wales Police (47.1 per cent) and Queensland Police (57.0 per cent). Greatest satisfaction was registered in the cases of the Victorian Police (48.0 per cent), South Australia Police (58.3 per cent) and Tasmania Police (52.7 per cent). Again, wide differences of opinion occurred between states.

### Public Perceptions of Police Honesty

The question posed was:

- Do you think police are (1) more honest than most people, (2) about the same as most people, (3) less honest than most people, or (4) no opinion?

Responses are shown by state at Table 2. The principal conclusion to be drawn from these data is:

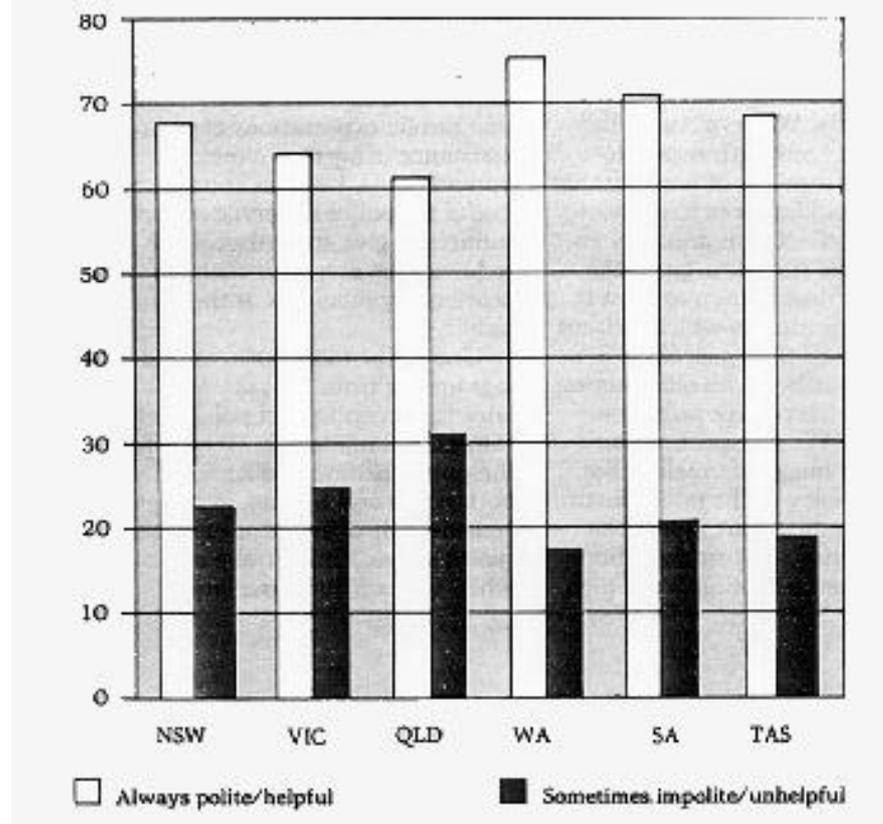
- In all states more than three-quarters of respondents assessed the honesty of their police generally as being at about the same level as their respective communities generally. There were no great differences between states in this view.

This finding is of particular interest as

severely questioned at times whereas others have suffered few allegations of malpractice. On this evidence, the impact of royal commissions and other inquiries into allegations of police malpractice on public perceptions of police honesty appear negligible. On the other hand, distinctions may be made between corporate malpractice and the collective behaviour of officers. Further research is clearly necessary in order to gain better understanding of the issue.

- No significant variation occurred within the various demographic sub-groups surveyed with regard to this item. It was noticed, however, that perceptions of honesty generally increased with age. The single age group exception to this generalisation is the under 20s which, surprisingly perhaps, rated police honesty similarly to the over 60s group. American research demonstrates a similar pattern.<sup>2</sup> Female responses to this item were similar to those of males.

Figure 1 Politeness/Helpfulness of Police



the probity of some agencies has been

**Politeness/Helpfulness Of Police**

The question posed was:

- Have you, personally, always found the police polite and helpful, or have the police sometimes been impolite and unhelpful to you?

Responses are shown by state at Figure 1. It will be seen from the Figure that:

- Considerable divergences exist between states with a range of 14.2 percentage points regarding 'always polite/helpful' responses and 13.7 percentage points concerning sometimes impolite/unhelpful.
- Western Australia Police (75.4 per cent), South Australia Police (70.8 per cent) and Tasmania Police (68.4 per cent) received greatest acknowledgment for politeness and helpfulness while Queensland Police (31.0 per cent), Victorian police (24.6 per cent) and New South Wales Police (22.5 per cent) rated highest on 'sometimes impolite/unhelpful' responses.

More generally:

- Females (71.3 per cent) found police officers significantly more polite than did males (62.3 per cent).
- Increasing age correlated closely and positively with heightened perceptions of police politeness/helpfulness.

Generally speaking, females and elderly pose less of direct threat to police authority. Both groups are generally less aggressive than younger males and have greater perceptions of vulnerability. Also, they tend generally to be more polite than younger males. These assumptions suggest police are more likely to perceive females and the elderly in positive terms and are accordingly polite to them. In short, politeness breeds politeness.

**Stopped/Questioned By Police**

The question posed was:

- Have you ever been stopped or questioned by police: (1) yes, (2) no?

Responses are shown by state at Figure 2. It will be seen from the Figure that:

- A majority of respondents in all states but New South Wales had at some time been either stopped/questioned by police.
- Considerable variation exists between states as to the rate of persons being stopped/questioned by police; the range being 16.9 percentage points. Exclusive of New South Wales and Victoria, the percentage of respondents stopped ranged between 60 and 65 per cent.

These differences between the two largest states on the one hand and four smallest on the other, suggest agency size may influence operational style, i.e. the larger metropolitan areas are, over a certain minimum size, the greater the rate of stops exercised by police.

It should be noted that no time limit was placed on whether people had been questioned or stopped by police. Even given this 'open' time frame, it is still remarkable that roughly every other person over the age of 14 years had been stopped and/questioned by police. The pervasiveness of police presence in contemporary society is clearly demonstrated by these data, a pervasiveness probably increased in recent years by Random Breath Testing.

More generally:

- A far higher proportion of males (69.4 per cent) than females (40.8 per cent) was stopped/questioned by police.

This difference no doubt reflects a range of gender based differences in social behaviour, including males committing more offences than females and, that when a male and female are in company and are stopped by police, it is more often the male who takes it upon himself to respond.

- A clear inverse relationship exists between the age and being stopped/questioned, with the

Figure 2 Public Stopped/Questioned by Police

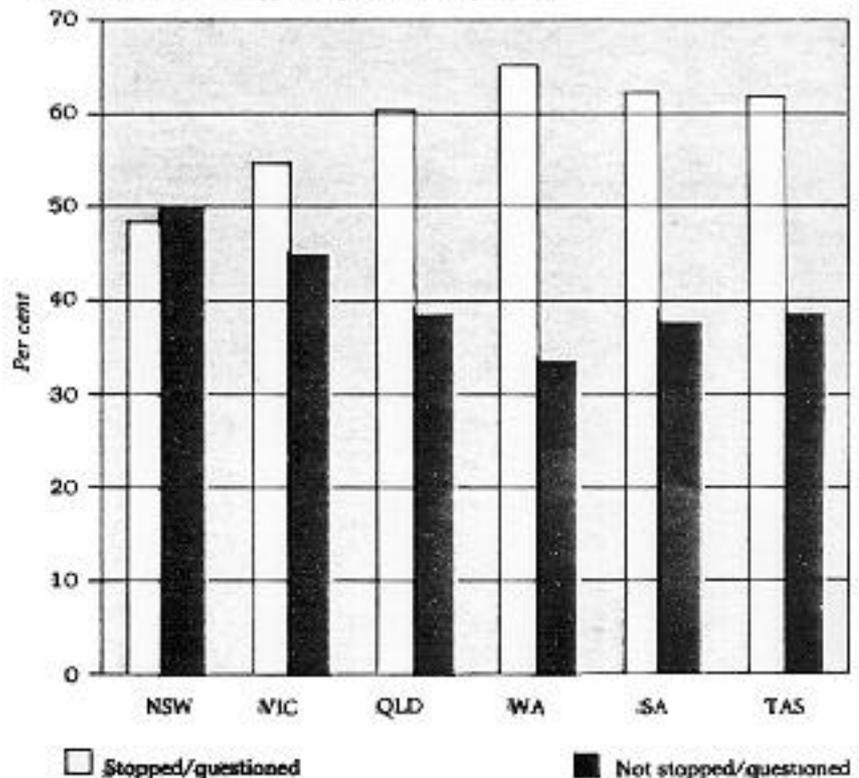


Figure 3 Public Requests for Police Assistance

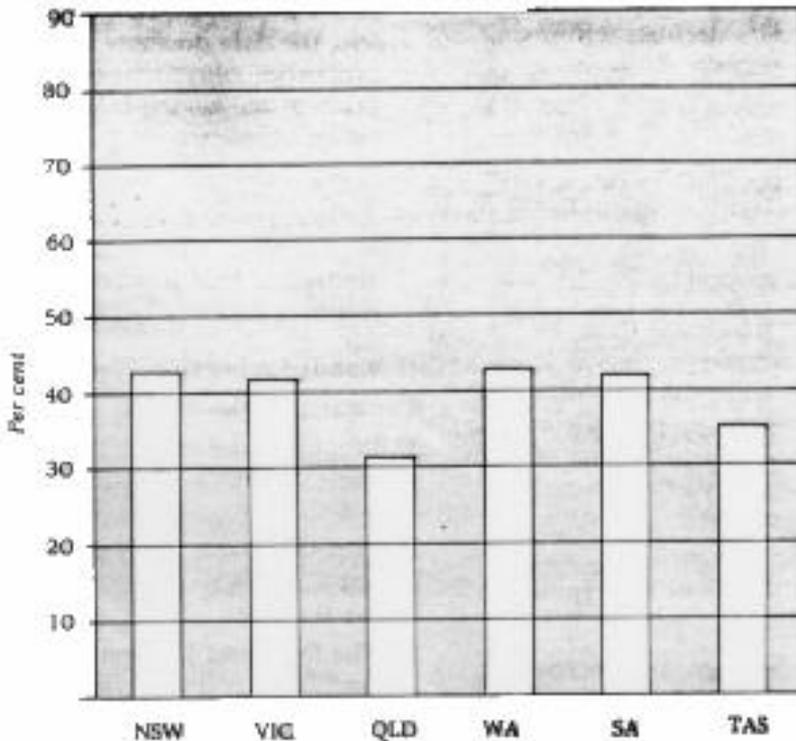
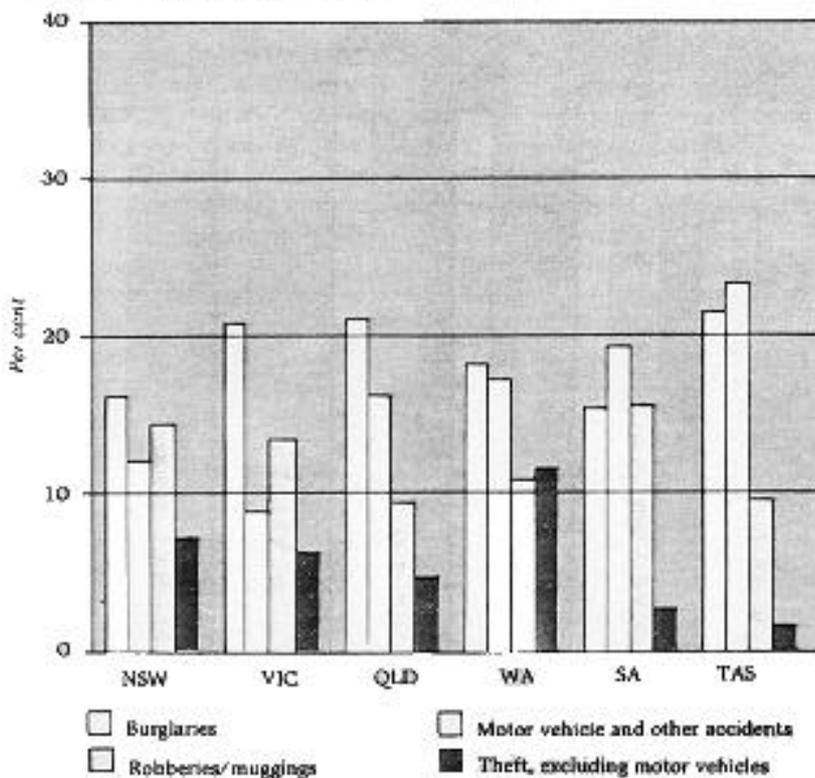


Table 3 Public Satisfaction with Police Help

Responses	NSW %	VIC %	QLD %	WA %	SA %	TAS %
satisfied	70.2	65.2	63.6	81.2	69.2	79.4
dissatisfied	22.3	26.5	35.7	16.1	23.1	20.6
no opinion / answer	2.5	8.2	0.7	2.7	7.7	-

Source: McNair Monitor.

Figure 4 Demand for Service



exception of those under 20 years who rate roughly the same as persons in their late 40s to early 50s.

- A relationship exists between socio-economic status and being stopped/questioned, i.e. the higher one's status the greater the probability of being stopped/questioned. This finding is consistent with the response to question one in which it was found that respect for police declines with rising socio-economic status.

### Request for Assistance

#### Requests for help

The question asked was:

- Apart from such things as asking the time or the way to a place, have you ever asked the police for help of any kind? (For example, about an accident or a robbery.) Responses offered were (1) yes, (2) no.

Responses are shown by state at Figure 3. It will be seen from this Figure that:

- A wide range, 11.8 percentage points, exists between states in calls for help. Such calls were noticeably fewer in Queensland (31.3 per cent) and Tasmania (35.0 per cent), while calls for service in other states showed little variation. It is not clear whether these state differences capture in part public perceptions of police capacity to respond to calls for assistance.
- In all cases a majority of respondents had never asked for police assistance; but, nevertheless, the data do show a large proportion of citizens over 14 years of age having called for police assistance.

More generally:

- A clear, positive correlation exists between socio-economic status and

likelihood of re-requesting police for help.

*Demands for service*

The question posed was:

- What was the most serious thing for which you sought police help?

Responses are shown by state at Figure 4. It will be seen from the Figure that:

- The four most frequent demands for police services overall were in relation to: (1) burglaries, (2) motor vehicle and other accidents, (3) robberies/muggings, and (4) thefts.
- Relatively fewer calls for assistance were made in New South Wales generally.
- A relatively higher rate of calls for assistance regarding robberies/muggings occurred in South Australia.
- A relatively higher rate of calls for assistance regarding accidents occurred in Tasmania.

There is evidence suggesting more serious offences are reported to police at a higher rate than less serious offences<sup>3</sup> and, as well, higher reporting can be expected when insurance claims are involved, such as in cases of traffic accidents, car theft and so on. It may thus be that the three most highly reported categories shown above, i.e. burglary, motor vehicle accidents and robbery/mugging reflect these considerations rather than their relative frequencies.

Other types of calls for assistance included: vandalism, domestic violence, disputes between neighbours, missing persons, lost/found property, nuisance calls, trespass and child welfare matters.

*Satisfaction with Police Service*

The question posed was:

- On that occasion were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way police helped you?

Data are shown by state at Table 3. It will be seen from the Table that:

- Greatest satisfaction with police help was shown in Western Australia (81.2 per cent), Tasmania (79.4 per cent) and New South Wales (70.2 per cent).
- Greatest dissatisfaction was exhibited in Queensland (35.7 per cent), Victoria (26.5 per cent) and South Australia (23.1 per cent).

More generally:

- A positive correlation exists between age and satisfaction, i.e. the greater the age, the higher the level of satisfaction expressed.

*Reasons for dissatisfaction*

The question posed was:

- If dissatisfied was it because of: (1) inaction, (2) wrong action, or (3) failure to keep you informed of events/outcome?

Data shown by state at Figure 5. It will be seen from the Figure that:

- The first ranked cause for public dissatisfaction with police assistance in each state was inaction.

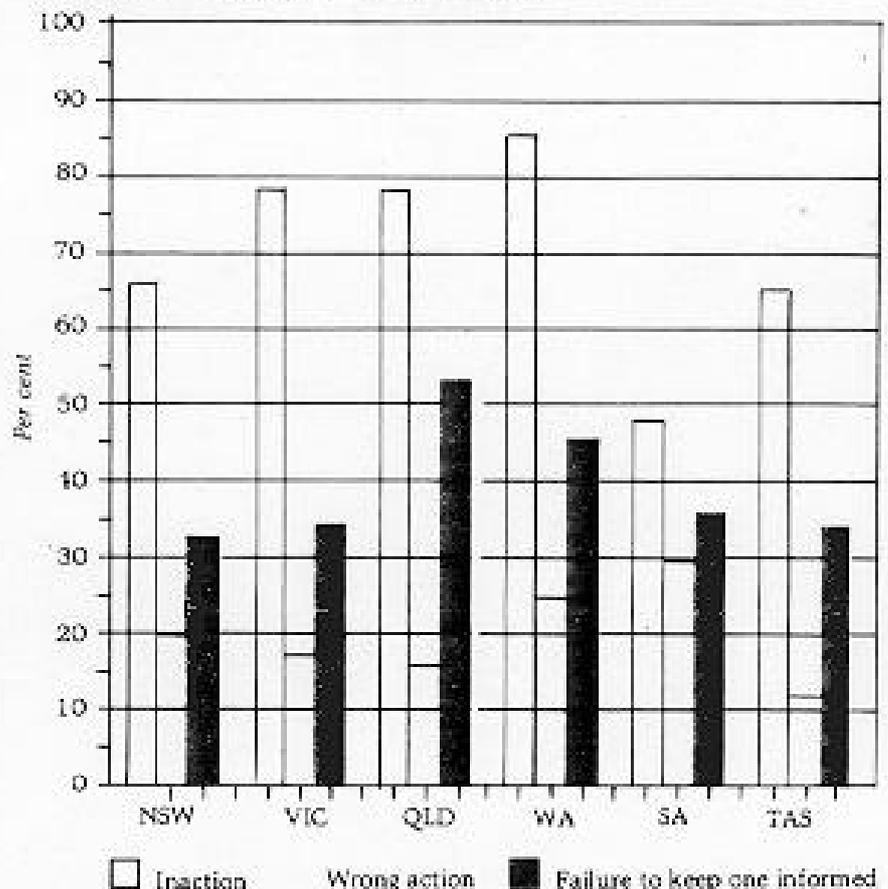
- The second ranked cause for dissatisfaction in each state was that of failing to keep one informed.
- The third ranked cause for dissatisfaction in each state was wrong action.

**Conclusion**

Surveys such as that partially reported here provide useful measures of public perceptions of police. We note, for example, a substantial decline in public respect for police over the last two decades, although perceived honesty of police remained unchanged.

Police agencies are seen in light of the above data to possess both strengths and weaknesses as measured by public opinion; although some agencies are clearly satisfying their respective publics more than others. The point is reflected in the degree of respect shown towards police. While there is satisfaction to be gained from

Figure 5 Reasons for Dissatisfaction



the fact that all states but Queensland registered more than 50 percentage points in favour of 'great respect' for police, the extent of 'mixed feelings' responses in relation to not only Queensland but New South Wales and Tasmania Police as well, is cause for concern in those states. Conversely, considerable satisfaction is experienced in South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia.

It is perhaps with regard to public perception of honesty that police administrators have most cause to reflect. It is arguably an undesirable situation, given the levels of crime known to exist in all communities, in which citizens generally see their guardians in aggregate as being no more honest than their respective publics in aggregate. We are speaking here, of course, of image not reality. But the legitimacy of the police institution depends in part at least on considerations of perceived honesty. If the perception is not high, legitimacy is affected accordingly. Police administrators also need to ponder the number of citizens dissatisfied with police responses to request for assistance (especially with regard to inaction and failure to keep one informed). Negative responses were high, although one should bear in mind the possibility that public expectations of police assistance in aggregate may be unreasonable. Even so, it could be useful for police supervisors and trainers to give some thought to reducing the scope for such perceptions by members of the public.

One of the most positive findings arising from the survey relates to perceptions of police helpfulness and politeness. Generally, the public believes police to be both polite and helpful, although considerable differences exist between states. This is quite a tribute when one considers the largely regulatory role of police officers.

The various items in this survey concerning police/public contacts in relation to stops and requests for assistance reveal mixed results and, importantly, indicate the considerable

extent of police presence in contemporary society.

Overall, there are grounds in these findings for both satisfaction and concern among police administrators.

---

### Notes

---

1. Chappell, Duncan and Wilson, Paul (1969). *The Police in Australia and New Zealand*. University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.
2. (1987) *Law Enforcement News*, 28 Apr.
3. (1985) Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The authors express their gratitude to Lavinia Hill and Robyn Lincoln for word processing, editing and production support. Also, our thanks are due to all those who critiqued the final draft.

- \* McGregor, C (1966). Profile of Australia, Hodder and Stoughton, London, p. 43



Inquiries about the Trends and Issues series should be forwarded to:  
The Director  
Australian Institute of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia