



No.15

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

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

*Law and order issues have been at the forefront of many contemporary Australian political agendas. The State Government in Western Australia, for example, announced a comprehensive crime prevention plan in July of this year. A cornerstone of the plan was said to be the addition over the next three years of 1000 officers to the State's police force.*

*These survey results indicate very strong public support across the country for government actions like those occurring in Western Australia. Clearly citizen concerns about troubling increases in crime are such that they favour governments providing more funds to bolster law enforcement resources. These resources have already experienced substantial growth. During the past 15 years, for example:*

- *The police to population ratio in Australia has increased by almost 30 per cent.*
- *The annual expenditure on police forces, taking into account inflation, has increased by about 60 per cent.*
- *A new enforcement agency, which some have called Australia's ninth police force, has been established in the form of the National Crime Authority.*

*These significant public investments appear to be producing positive dividends. A quiet revolution is occurring in the nation's police forces, led by a new generation of police leaders. Such outmoded practices as promotion by seniority are giving way to advancement by merit. But as one of the principal proponents of these changes recently reminded his colleagues, '... more police will not necessarily reduce crime levels and what each one of us needs to reflect on carefully is that we must make the utmost use of the police that we have.'*

*This reminder is in accord with the survey results which show that public support for more police is tempered by the belief that significant proportions of the population in each State thought that the police spend too much time on minor offenders and too little responding to serious crime.*

**Duncan Chappell**  
Director

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## The Survey

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**T**he Australian Institute of Criminology sponsored a survey concerning public attitudes to police and police services. It was conducted by McNair Monitor during July 1987. Some 2475 persons aged 14 years and over were interviewed in all states: New South Wales (771), Victoria (614), Queensland (317), Western Australia (286), South Australia

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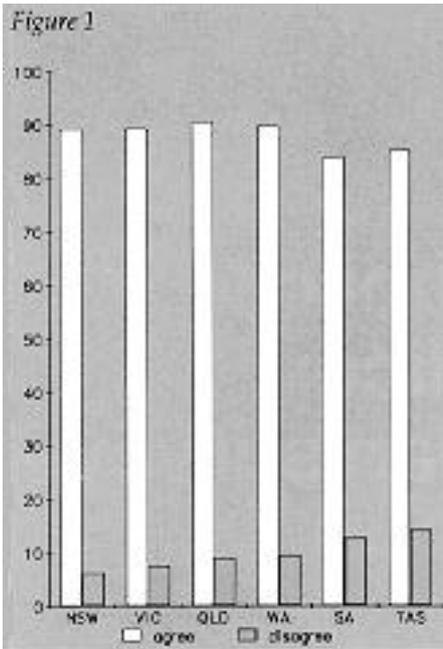
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Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

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



(294) and Tasmania (132). Samples for Northern Territory and Australian capital Territory were small and not included.

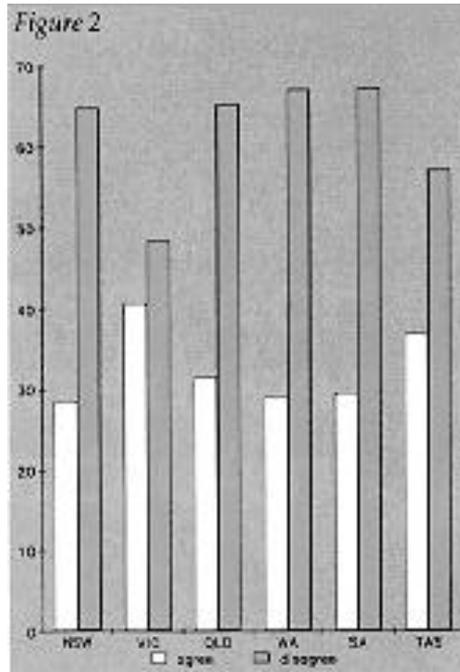
Information produced by the survey is considerable. *Trends and Issues No. 11* (part I of this survey) addressing people's experiences with the police was published in March 1988. This report concerns public perceptions of police performance and resources together with one item relating to personal experiences of the police behaviour.

## Performance and Resources

The question posed was:

[Indicate] how strongly you agree or disagree with each of these statements:

(1) there should be more police officers; (2) traffic regulation should not be the responsibility of the police; (3) police in your area spend too much time going after people who do little things wrong and ignore the serious crime; (4) police need better training in dealing with violence in the family; (5) increased phone tapping powers to the police would lead to serious threats to civil liberties; (6) police are unnecessarily hampered by restrictions on their power to arrest and question suspects; (7) police



should carry guns at all times; (8) there should be more people from minority groups in the police force; (9) police should spend more time patrolling on foot and less time patrolling in cars; (10) police sometimes use unfair methods to get offenders convicted.

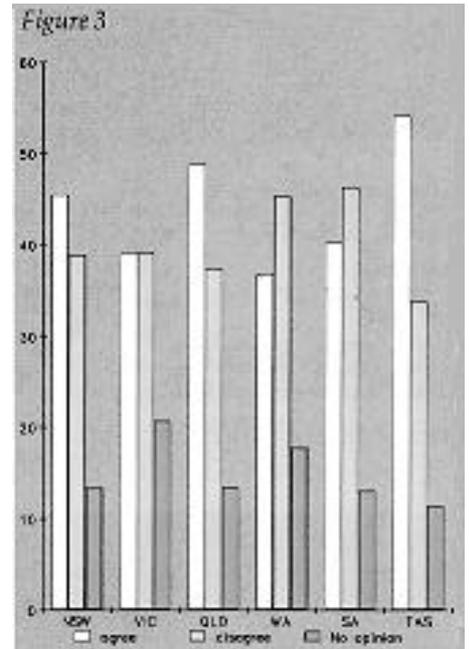
Response options offered were: (1) strongly agree; (2) agree; (3) disagree; (4) strongly disagree; (5) no opinion.

### More Police

Principal conclusions to be drawn from these data include:

A majority of respondents in all states supported the proposition that *there should be more police officers* (see Figure 1). Approval was particularly strong in Victoria, in which a greater percentage of respondents 'strongly agreed' (just over 50.8 per cent) than 'agreed' (38.4 per cent). The range of responses indicating agreement did not vary greatly between states and were as follows: Queensland (90.3 per cent), Western Australia (89.6 per cent), Victoria (89.2 per cent), New South Wales (89.1 per cent), Tasmania (85.1 per cent) and South Australia (83.8 per cent).

It is noted police strengths and police/public ratios increased steadily throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s in most states and yet recorded crime continued to increase overall



(Mukherjee 1988). This raises the possibility that crime containment is not strongly related to gross number of police officers employed.

A 10 per cent increase in police resources across the board would cost, very approximately, \$180,000,000. But it is not certain such increased investment would be cost effective in terms of crime suppression. Thus, findings such as this possess implications for funding as well as human resources deployment.

- Agreement with the statement was strong and fairly even across all age groups but it is noticeably that intensity of support is associated with increasing age.

### Traffic Regulation

- The statement that *traffic regulation should not be the responsibility of the police* was disagreed with by a majority of respondents in all jurisdictions (see Figure 2.). Opposition to the proposition was greatest in South Australia (67.2 per cent), closely followed by Western Australia (67.0 per cent), Queensland (65.2 per cent) and New South Wales (64.8 per cent). Disagreement was least in Tasmania (57.1 per cent) and Victoria (48.8 per cent). There was thus a considerable spread of emphasis (18.8 percentage points)

on the issue throughout the various states.

- These data correlate most closely with responses concerning politeness of police and being stopped by police.
- Generally, levels of disagreement decreased with advancing age.

**Time Spent on Crime and Minor Offences**

- Considerable variation occurred among states in response to the proposition that *police spend too much time going after people who do little things wrong while ignoring serious crime* (see Figure 3). Respondents in Tasmania (54.1 per cent), Queensland (48.8 per cent) and New South Wales (45.4 per cent) expressed greatest agreement. Opinion in Victoria was evenly divided. South Australia (46.3 per cent) and Western Australia (45.3 per cent) respondents disagreed most strongly.
- Generally, under 20s (59.1 per cent) and 20-29 year olds (49.5 per cent) felt most strongly on this point.
- An average 'no opinion' response of 15.7 per cent suggests a significant level of ambiguity and/or ignorance among respondents on the point

Findings such as these are highly relevant to police decision-making with regard to setting priorities and distributing resources at local level.

**Domestic Violence Training**

- There was widespread and strong agreement among respondents that *police need better training in dealing with violence in the family* (see Figure 4). Agreement was strongest in Queensland (71.6 per cent), followed by Victoria (69.3 per cent), Tasmania (68.7 per cent), New South Wales (67.7 per cent), South Australia (64.9 per cent) and Western Australia (64.4 per cent).
- Females (71.8 per cent) agreed more strongly than males (64.8 per cent) overall and also felt more intensely on the issue.
- There was majority support for the statement through all age groups, with particular emphasis in the 20-29 years (75.9 per cent) and 30-39 years (73.4 per cent) age groups. The under 20s and over 60s felt least strongly on the point.
- A clear pattern of reducing agreement was evident among the various socio-economic groups, from highest down to lowest, although strong agreement existed in all groups.
- The average 'no opinion' response of 12.6 per cent indicates a degree

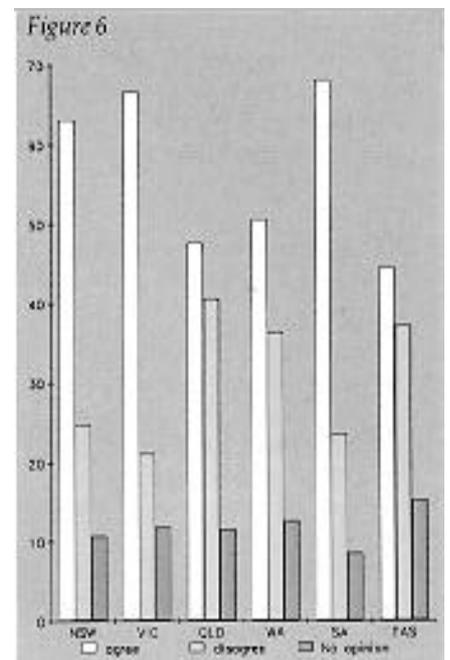
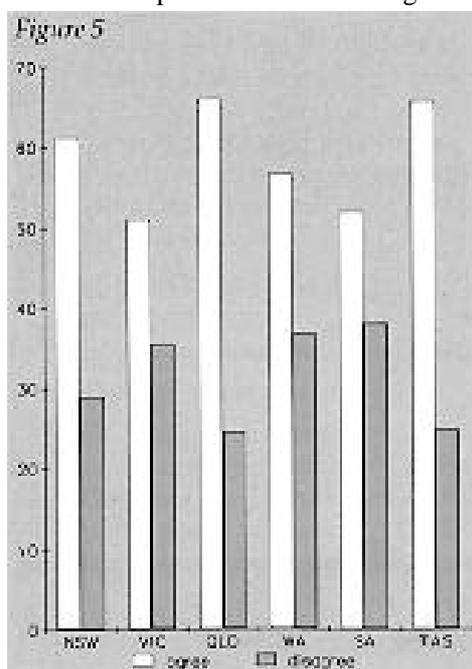
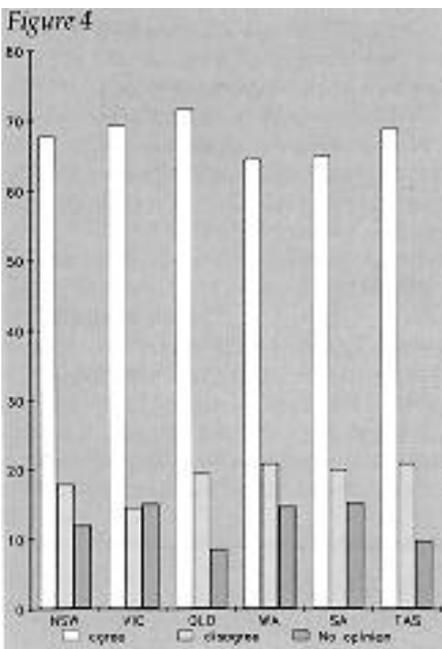
of ambivalence and/or ignorance among respondents.

**Phone Tapping**

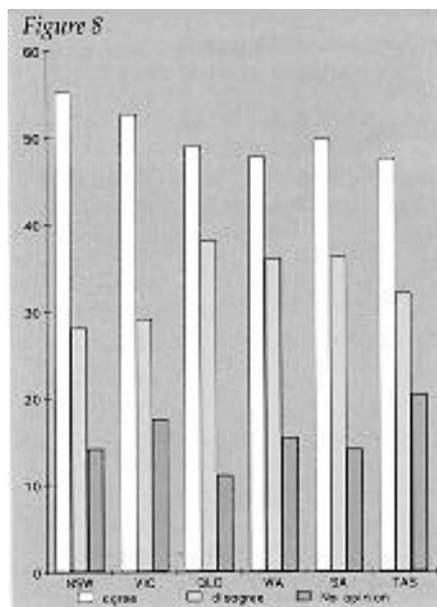
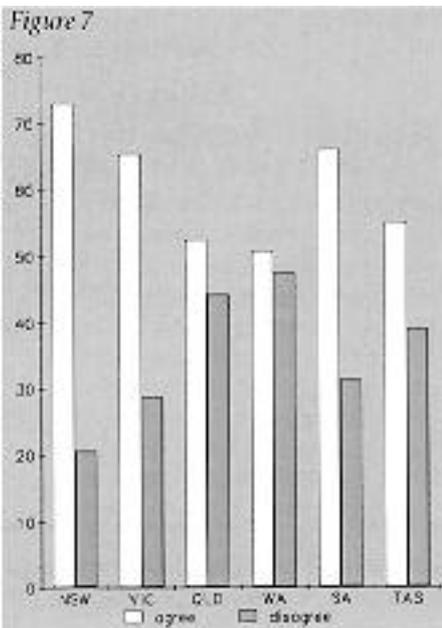
- A majority of respondents in all jurisdictions agreed that *increased phone tapping powers to police would lead to serious threats to civil liberties*, although levels of agreement differed considerably between some states (see Figure 5). Agreement was strongest in Queensland (66.0 per cent), Tasmania (65.5 per cent) and New South Wales (61.2 per cent) and, least in Western Australia (56.7 per cent), South Australia (52.0 per cent) and Victoria (51.0 per cent). These data associate closely with those concerning respect for police (discussed at Part I of this report, *Trends and Issues No. 11*). They also reveal strong but minority objection to the statement.
- A strong pattern of decreasing agreement with advancing age was apparent, possibly as a result of increasing conservatism.

**Police Powers**

- Although more respondents in each states agrees that *police are unnecessarily hampered by restrictions on their power to arrest and question suspects* than disagreed, widely diverging levels



of emphasis were apparent (see Figure 6). South Australia (68.0 per cent), Victoria (66.6 per cent) and New South Wales (63.0 per cent) agreed most strongly. Western Australia (50.6 per cent), Queensland (47.6 per cent) and Tasmania (44.5 per cent) were far less supportive. These data correlate closely with responses presented earlier concerning public respect for police and satisfaction with police help. Victoria Police and Victoria Police Association efforts to increase suspect detention time and gain authority to take fingerprints are noted in this regard but on these data it is impossible to gauge the impact of such efforts on public opinion.



- Respondents under the age of 20 years showed less agreement with the proposition than those of any other age group and respondents in the highest socio-economic group similarly showed less agreement than those of any other socio-economic group.
- An average 'no opinion' response of 11 per cent suggests some ambivalence on the point within the community.

### Guns

- A majority of respondents in all states agreed *police should carry guns at all times* (see Figure 7), although there was considerable diversity among responses. Support was strongest in respect of New South Wales (73.5 per cent), South Australia (66.0 per cent) and Victoria (65.3 per cent). Weaker support was offered with regard to Tasmania (55.1 per cent), Queensland (52.4 per cent) and Western Australia (50.7 per cent).
- Younger (14-29 years) and older (60 years plus) respondents agreed most strongly with the statement while the level of agreement shown by the 30-59 year old respondents was markedly lower, although a majority in all age groups indicated agreement.
- Tertiary educated respondents were fairly evenly balanced between those in agreement and those disagreeing while non-tertiary educated respondents strongly favoured police being armed.
- Respondents in the top two socio-economic groups, although favouring the carrying of guns by police, were considerably less emphatic on the issue than those in the lower socio-economic groups.

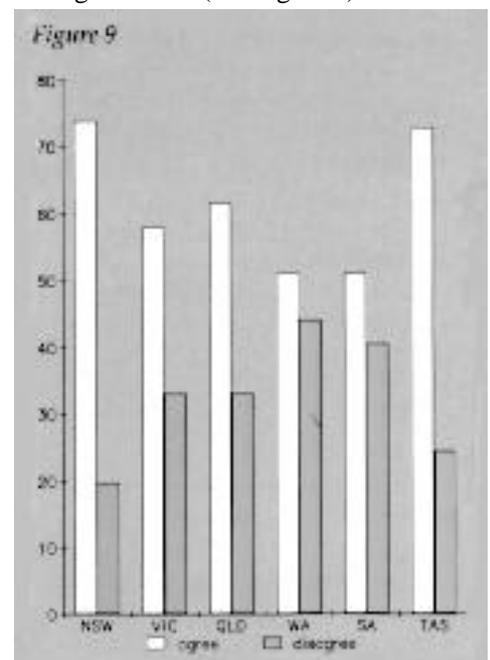
### Minority Groups

- There was broad-based agreement among respondents in all states that *there should be more people from minority groups in the police*

- *force* (see Figure 8). Highest agreement was registered in respect of New South Wales (55.2 per cent) and Victoria (52.6 per cent). Responses in respect of South Australia (49.7 per cent) and Queensland (49.0 per cent) were close to the mean, while Western Australia (47.7 per cent) and Tasmania (47.5 per cent) indicated least agreement.
- In general, respondents under 20 years of age were most supportive of the proposition while those aged 60 years and over were in least agreement.
- Readers will note the 15.1 per cent 'no opinion' response offered in respect of this item.

### Patrolling

- Although there were sizeable variations in the proportions of respondents in each state opposed to the proposition that *police should spend more time patrolling on foot and less time patrolling in cars*, a majority in all jurisdictions agreed with the statement. New South Wales respondents (73.8 per cent) most favoured the idea, followed closely by Tasmania (72.7 per cent), Queensland (61.5 per cent) and Victoria (57.9 per cent). South Australia and Western Australia (at 51.0 per cent each) agreed least (see Figure 9).



- As respondents aged, they increasingly saw a need for police officers to spend more time on foot. The only exception to this pattern was in the under 20s who, in fact, saw a greater need than the 20-39 year olds.
- The lower a respondent's socio-economic group the greater was the perceived need for police officers to patrol on foot.

Methods

- There were mixed responses to the statement that *police sometimes use unfair methods to get offenders convicted*. Greatest agreement was recorded by respondents in Queensland (66.7 per cent) and Tasmania (60.9 per cent) and least agreement was recorded in Western Australia (41.6 per cent), Victoria (41.4 per cent) and South Australia (39.7 per cent). New South Wales (46.7 per cent) fell between the two extremes (see Figure 10).
- The large but varied 'no opinion' responses in all jurisdictions resulted in a situation in which high agreement responses were not necessarily matched by low disagreement responses. In fact, opinion in South Australia was evenly divided on the issue. The average 20.7 per cent 'no opinion'

response suggests considerable ignorance and/or ambivalence on the topic in all jurisdictions.

- Increasing age associated with declining agreement with the proposition, with under 20s respondents being particularly accepting of it.
- Respondents in the two lowest socio-economic groups agreed with the statement to a significantly greater extent than did those of the upper three socio-economic groups.

although it was noted Victoria respondents scored relatively highly with regard to experiences of wrongful arrest and undue force by police and South Australia with regard to malpractice and false accusations.

More generally:

- Younger people, ie. Under 20s and 20-29 year olds, generally claimed greater experience or personal knowledge of police misconduct than older persons.

The relationship apparent between age and claimed experiences/personal knowledge of police misconduct is consistent with findings presented in *Trends and Issues No. 11* in which greater respect for police was found among older respondents.

- An association is evident between the number of times persons were stop by police in the preceding 12 months and their perceptions of police misconduct.

Misconduct

The question posed was:

- Have you or a close relative or friend, *personally* experienced any of the following; (1) undue use of force by police; (2) corruption/malpractice by police; (3) wrongful arrest; (4) false accusation by police; (5) harassment by police.

Response options offered were: (1) Yes; (2) No; (3) Don't know.

Responses are shown by state at Table 1. Principal conclusions to be drawn from these data include:

- Western Australia respondents in aggregate, appeared least likely to experience police misconduct, while Queensland respondents seemed most likely to experience it.
- New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania generally ranged between the two extremes;

Discrimination

The question posed was:

... do you believe that the police in your area generally discriminate against: (1) poor people; (2) young people; (3) Aboriginals; (4) migrants; (5) unemployed; (6) people with criminal records; (7) protesters, (8) homosexuals; (9) motor cyclists; (10) women.

Responses options offered were : (1) strongly agree; (2) agree; (3) disagree; (4) strongly disagree; (5) no opinion;

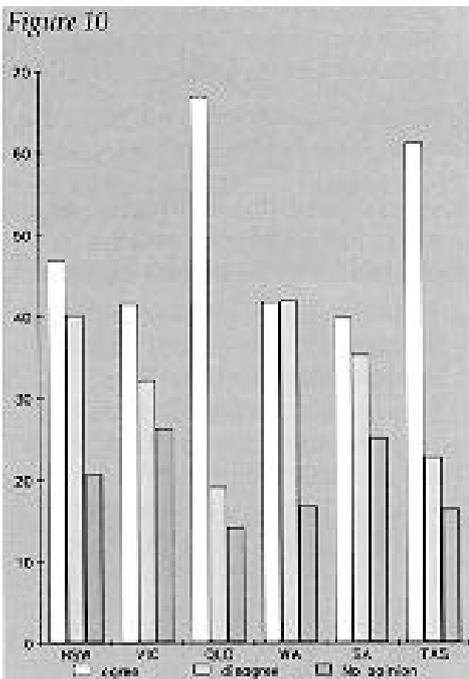


Table 1 Personal Knowledge or Experience of Police Misconduct (percentages)

State	Response	Response				
		undue force	malpractice	wrongful arrest	false accusation	harassment
NSW	Yes	12.1	8.0	8.0	15.5	13.9
	No	85.7	89.3	90.2	82.5	83.7
VIC	Yes	15.5	9.2	9.6	15.5	18.0
	No	81.6	87.3	86.2	80.9	77.7
QLD	Yes	17.5	11.5	10.8	18.7	19.3
	No	81.6	86.4	88.7	80.5	80.2
WA	Yes	13.1	7.5	5.4	10.7	12.4
	No	84.8	89.1	90.7	86.8	85.9
SA	Yes	14.0	9.8	9.4	17.7	16.4
	No	86.0	90.2	90.5	82.1	82.0
TAS	Yes	15.1	5.6	8.4	14.0	18.1
	No	84.9	94.4	90.8	85.1	81.1

Source: McNair Monitor

and (6) don't know.

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

- With the single exception of Tasmanian respondents' perceptions of police discrimination concerning convicted persons, a majority in all states disagreed that police discriminate against the various sub-groups listed.
- The two groups perceived as being most discriminated against by police overall were the young and convicted persons. However if, the criterion of perceived discrimination (30 percentage points average) is reduced by 10 percentage points (ie. 20 percentage points average), the number of groups perceived as substantially discriminated against increases by four, ie. Aboriginals, unemployed, protesters and motor cyclists.
- The four groups perceived as being least discriminated against by police overall were the poor, migrants, women and homosexuals.
- Victoria Police were seen as being least discriminatory overall and Queensland Police as most discriminatory. New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania Police ranged between the two extremes.

Tasmania Police was nevertheless perceived as being most discriminatory with regard to four of the six groups seen overall as being most discriminated against ie. Young

persons, convicted persons, unemployed and motor cyclists. Conversely, Tasmania Police was rated as being least discriminatory with regard to Aboriginals and protesters. This latter observation is possibly partly explained by an assumed lower profile of these two groups in Tasmania. No other agency was perceived in terms of such extremes.

More particularly:

- Agreement that police discriminate against the young was highest in Tasmania (36.2 per cent) and South Australia (34.0 per cent). Least agreement occurred in Victoria (24.5 per cent), New South Wales (29.8 per cent), Queensland (27.7 per cent), and Western Australia Police (27.6 per cent) were closest to the average.
- Tasmania respondents agreed most strongly (50.8 per cent) that police in their state discriminate against persons possessing criminal convictions. Least agreement was evident in respect of South Australia (38.0 per cent) and Victoria (35.3 per cent). Queensland (47.7 per cent), New South Wales (44.0 per cent) and Western Australia (43.0 per cent) fell between the two extremes.

significant proportions of the population in each state believe that the police spend too much time on minor offenders while ignoring serious crime.

The public, it appears, is also discriminating and thoughtful where issues relating to police powers are considered. Most respondents believe police are unnecessarily hampered by restrictions on their power to arrest and question suspects. In some states campaigns waged by Police Associations and others to increase police powers were conducted during the time the survey was carried out. Though the effects of these campaigns were impossible to gauge through the present survey, it is salient to note that states where the campaign was active (such as Victoria) strongly supported extensions of police powers.

On the other hand the Australian public was aware of possible consequences of such powers. For example, most respondents in all states believed that increased phone tapping powers would lead to serious threats to civil liberties. And, although supportive of police in many respects, citizens wanted to see police spend more time patrolling on foot rather than from cars and place increased emphasis on recruiting people from minority groups into the service.

Although there were wide variations across jurisdiction in issues relating to police corruption and discrimination toward minority groups, there was widespread agreement concerning dissatisfaction with police involvement in domestic violence matters. In particular a

### Conclusion

One of the most significant findings from the survey was the overwhelming public support for more police. However, this view was tempered by the finding that

Table 2 Perception of Police Discrimination

Sub-group	NSW		VIC		QLD		WA		SA		TAS	
	agree %	disagree %										
poor	9.5	72.0	8.5	70.5	8.5	73.8	7.4	78.3	9.3	74.9	6.6	83.4
young	29.8	55.3	24.5	57.8	27.7	56.3	27.6	61.0	34.0	54.1	36.2	55.9
Aboriginals	19.6	51.1	12.7	76.3	25.6	54.5	26.5	51.2	22.6	54.7	12.0	67.0
migrants	11.2	65.0	17.6	64.5	11.2	65.1	6.9	74.5	17.8	68.6	5.1	78.8
unemployed	20.6	57.9	17.1	60.5	21.4	59.0	13.6	71.5	20.3	64.4	24.8	66.2
convicted persons	44.0	30.5	35.3	32.7	47.7	28.4	43.0	34.0	38.0	38.0	50.8	33.1
protesters	21.8	52.3	19.8	49.4	34.1	40.3	17.5	61.2	20.0	57.8	15.3	63.2
homosexuals	19.2	44.8	13.1	40.9	19.8	40.4	16.6	50.7	18.7	47.8	12.5	56.3
motor cyclists	26.4	54.0	13.5	57.5	27.1	54.1	16.7	67.6	19.3	63.6	30.4	55.3
women	6.7	74.9	2.9	74.4	9.0	72.7	2.6	84.1	7.4	78.0	7.0	81.9

majority of respondents in all states considered police need better training in dealing with violence in the family. This issue is important given the planned National Campaign against domestic violence spearheaded by the Federal Government.

As with the results from the first half of our survey reported in *Trends and Issues No. 11*, police can find grounds for both satisfaction and concern in terms of public attitudes toward them. Australians clearly wish to grant police added resources and additional powers when they feel they are necessary. On the other hand, citizens also believe that these resources and powers should not be unlimited and that the police can improve their performance in many areas.

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## References

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## Acknowledgments

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The authors express their gratitude for the assistance provided by Institute staff. Their thanks are also due to those who critiqued the final draft. Data in respect of this survey are stored on magnetic tape held at the Australian Institute of Criminology. Police agencies and bona fide researchers interested in accessing the data should make application to the Director.

1. Commissioner John Avery addressing the NSW Police Association Conference. *New South Wales Police News* (1988) 68:25



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