

Report to be used for further study on internal and external views of policing

A National Police Research Unit study released recently has found that while research into public perceptions of policing has been considerable, few surveys have been done in Australia and New Zealand to examine police perceptions of their profession.

The NPRU report, *Perceptions of Police and Policing: A Review of Public and Police Surveys*, also found that most community and police surveys had focused on issues of police performance as opposed to police roles.

The review examined the findings of surveys conducted in the past five years in Australia and New Zealand on the public's perception of police and policing, and of similar surveys on the attitudes of police to policing.

It was the first stage in a project to examine the police role in the community and was used to develop a questionnaire to compare public and police perceptions of police roles. This will be used to identify any areas of discrepancy between these groups which is seen as vital in minimising or removing any barriers to continual improvement in service delivery.

The report said that at least one community survey had been conducted in each jurisdiction in the past five years to ascertain public perceptions of police, compared with a total of only four police attitude surveys.

Community surveys were conducted at the national level in Australia, as well as being done in NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia, the Northern Territory, the ACT, and in New Zealand.

The report cautioned that although results from different surveys conducted in different jurisdictions were presented together, they should not be considered directly comparable as they differed in terms of objectives and methodology, such as sampling procedure and method of questionnaire administration.

A summary of the report is published here, while the complete version is available from the NPRU in Adelaide.

Public attitude surveys

The public's satisfaction with police, either overall or on the basis of a specific contact, was addressed in 11 surveys with the universal finding that most people were satisfied with police. Four

of the surveys, taken in New Zealand, Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria, addressed overall satisfaction with police and the percentage of respondents who were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' ranged from 65 per cent to 77 per cent.

In a national survey, 72 per cent of respondents were satisfied with police during a specific contact. Three surveys, conducted in New Zealand and Victoria, found the main reasons for satisfaction with police were prompt attention; a friendly, courteous or helpful attendant; a perception that police did all they could; police solved the crime; and police followed up the case.

Only a minority of respondents said that they were dissatisfied with police. In the seven surveys which requested reasons for dissatisfaction with police, the main reasons given were rudeness or other poor attitudes, such as being unsympathetic, not understanding or not caring; lack of interest; slow response; treating the matter as trivial or unimportant; lack of follow-up; and a perception that the police involved did not do anything or were ineffective.

Ten surveys addressed issues of the effectiveness and efficiency of police including perceptions of police effectiveness overall, effectiveness in relation to specific police functions, and the visibility of police. Four of these surveys asked respondents to indicate the effectiveness of police overall, with the following results: in the ACT 70 per cent of those surveyed thought police did a 'good' or 'very good job'; in NSW the figure was 55 per cent; in the Northern Territory 90 per cent of respondents said police did their job 'as well as they can', 'quite well', or 'very well'; and in Victoria 77 per cent thought police were 'effective', 'reasonably effective', or 'very effective'.

Five surveys asked respondents to rate police effectiveness at carrying out specific functions.

Those most commonly rated as being done well were ‘encouraging protection of homes from theft’; ‘ensuring road safety’; ‘providing assistance to the community’; ‘responding promptly to assault or rape calls’; and ‘reducing the road toll’.

The functions rated as being done least effectively were ‘helping victims of crime’; ‘discussing issues with the community’; ‘communicating police activities’; ‘supporting and following-up crime victims’; ‘reducing drug abuse’; and the ‘right amount of time spent’ dealing with child abuse.

Three surveys asked respondents to rate police in terms of their effectiveness at crime control. Each used a different response format but overall, the majority of respondents considered police to be effective at general crime control.

The results of five surveys which asked for respondents’ perceptions of police visibility

showed that police were most likely to be seen when on the road, either patrolling by car or engaged in traffic duties.

Questions about public perceptions of the professionalism of police mainly referred to the demeanour of police. In some cases, perceptions of police in general were sought, while in others, respondents were asked for their perceptions of police demeanour based on a specific contact with police.

Table 1.0 shows the results of surveys made of the public’s impressions of police demeanour in general where the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought police had particular attributes.

In surveys of public perceptions of police demeanour on the basis of a specific contact, some variation was found according to the nature of the offence or the way with which the matter was dealt.

Table 1.0 – Police demeanour in general

	ACT (1994)	NSW (1994b)	NSW (1992)	NZ (1993b)	SA (1993)	Vic (1992a)
Response item	'Agree' or 'strongly agree'	'Agree' or 'strongly agree'	'Somewhat' or 'very approachable'	'Approachable' or 'very approachable'		'Good'
Polite	86		87			
Helpful	89		91			
Responsive	84		81			43
Approachable		86	87	83		66
Accessible		81				
Reliable		79				
Professional		83				
Friendly					59	
Competent					57	
Fair					43	
Caring/attentive						52

In the SA survey respondents were asked to nominate which adjectives, from a list of 12, best described police. “This different question format may account for the lower proportion of respondents who nominated each adjective,” the report said.

Table 2.0 – Police demeanour based on specific contact

	NSW (1994b)	NSW (1992)	NT (1993)
Response item	'Agree' or 'Strongly agree'	'Helpful'/'polite' or 'very helpful'/'very polite'	
Professional	90		
Reliable	91		
Competent	88		
Credible	90		
Understanding	89		
Courteous	84		
Fair	90		
Good communication	88		
Helpful		82	
Polite		89	
Correct/efficient/open and friendly			91
In control/sympathetic/ concerned and professional			94
Responsive	87		83*

* This includes 'generally good', 'very good', and 'excellent' responses.

Table 2.0 shows the results of the surveys. "Public perceptions of police demeanour are quite positive, regardless of whether those perceptions are of police in general or are based on a specific contact with police", the report said.

Issues relating to public perceptions and concerns about crime were addressed in 12 of the surveys. Six surveys addressed public feelings of safety, six surveys explored public fear of victimisation in general or in relation to specific offences, and seven surveys identified those offences or problems perceived to be the most frequent at the local level.

Walking or jogging alone at night in one's neighbourhood and using public transport at night were the activities most frequently considered to be 'unsafe'.

The Qld (1993) and NZ (1993b) surveys asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they feared becoming a victim of crime in general. In the Queensland survey, 31 per cent of respondents reported a medium level of fear of personal victimisation, and a further 24 per cent reported a high level of fear. The NZ results showed that 44 per cent of respondents were either 'afraid' or 'quite afraid' of becoming a victim of crime.

The surveys which sought responses on fear of becoming a victim of specific offences showed

that people were most concerned about becoming a victim of housebreaking. In the NSW (1994b) survey, this was equalled by respondents' fear of becoming a victim of murder.

The NZ (1993b) survey also asked respondents about their fear of specific offences, irrespective of whether they thought they were likely to become victims. The results showed that violent crime was feared most (39 per cent), followed by sexual violation (30 per cent), and housebreaking (24 per cent).

In terms of the likelihood of victimisation, most respondents from the ACT (1994) survey (68 per cent) thought that they were likely to become a victim of housebreaking. Similarly, respondents from the Qld (1992) survey thought that they were most likely to become a victim of housebreaking (34 per cent 'very' or 'fairly likely'), followed by car damage (33 per cent), or car theft (33 per cent).

Similarities were found across jurisdictions in terms of the offences which were most frequently perceived to be a problem at the neighbourhood level. Housebreaking or burglary was most frequently perceived to be a local crime problem. It was also perceived to be the main local crime problem in the four surveys which asked this question (NSW [1994a] 18 per cent; SA [1991] 30 per cent; Tas [1991a] 25 per cent;

Respondents were also asked about the importance of meeting with police to discuss matters of concern, and other issues relating to police-community co-operation

and WA [1992] 30 per cent).

The Qld (1992) survey also asked about perceptions of local problems but restricted this to public or social disorder problems. Rubbish and litter was most frequently identified to be a local problem (28 per cent 'very' or 'fairly common'), followed by drunks and vagrants (19 per cent).

Ten surveys included items on police-community relationship issues. The most frequent issue raised was that of respondents' membership of Neighbourhood Watch (NW) or Rural Watch (RW), which was included in nine of the surveys. In general, 20 to 30 per cent of respondents reported being a member of NW or RW.

Respondents were also asked about the importance of meeting with police to discuss matters of concern, and other issues relating to police-community co-operation.

The surveys which asked respondents to indicate the extent to which it was important for the community to meet and discuss matters of concern with police were ACT (1994), NSW (1994b), and NSW (1992). Eighty per cent, 93 per cent and 83 per cent of respondents from these surveys (respectively) considered this to be important.

The same three surveys asked respondents about their willingness to help police. Sixty-seven per cent of the ACT (1994) respondents said that they would 'go out of their way' to help police, and 63 per cent of respondents in the NSW (1994b) survey said that they would voluntarily give information to police. In the NSW (1992) survey, 59 per cent of respondents said that they would take a pro-active stance to help police.

There was considerable agreement with the need for co-operation between the community and police to prevent and reduce crime. Ninety-five per cent of respondents in the NZ (1993b) survey agreed that police and the community should have joint responsibility for crime reduction, and 62 per cent of respondents in the ACT (1994) survey agreed with such joint responsibility for local crime prevention. In the Qld (1993) survey 97 per cent of respondents agreed that greater community co-operation would help to prevent crime.

Other surveys asked for ways in which the community could help police. The most frequent responses to this question in the Qld (1993) survey were that the public should report crime or

suspicious activities (28 per cent), become more aware of daily happenings (24 per cent), and become involved in police-community schemes (21 per cent). These same three activities were also more frequently nominated by the NZ (1993b) survey respondents (42 per cent, 18 per cent and 22 per cent respectively). The Tas (1991a) survey showed that 64 per cent of respondents said that the community could help police by providing more information, and 23 per cent suggested becoming involved in police-community programs.

Four surveys asked respondents to rate the importance of various police functions and roles. Those most frequently regarded as important in the NZ (1993b) survey were prompt response to assault or rape calls (91 per cent 'very important'), followed by dealing sensitively with crime victims (73 per cent) and targeting or apprehending repeat offenders (71 per cent).

The police roles listed in the Qld (1993) survey were of a more general nature. Functions considered most important were the protection of people (33 per cent), law and order maintenance (16 per cent), and crime prevention (8 per cent). In the SA (1993) survey, several police functions were considered to be 'quite' or 'very important' by a large proportion of respondents (more than 89 per cent). These were reducing crime, preserving the peace, ensuring public safety, maintaining road safety, and ensuring the efficient use of roads. Respondents from the Vic (1992a) survey most frequently identified the targeting of violent crime (26 per cent), increased police visibility (11 per cent), and crime prevention and solution (9 per cent) as important police roles.

A common item included in community attitude surveys related to offence reporting rates. The highest reporting rates were consistently found for motor vehicle theft and break and enter, or theft from homes. Assault and sexual assault were considerably less frequently reported. In the surveys where respondents were asked for reasons why they did not report offences or other matters to police the main reasons given were: that the matter was too trivial (Aust [1994b], NZ [1993b], Qld [1992], Vic [1992a], WA [1992]); police couldn't do anything (Aust [1994b], NSW [1994b], NSW [1992], NZ [1993b], Qld [1992], WA [1992]); and police wouldn't do anything

(Aust [1994a], Aust [1994b], Qld [1992], Vic [1992a]).

Four surveys asked respondents to suggest ways to improve the effectiveness of police or the services provided by them. Increased police visibility, more police, and improved police attitudes were most frequently suggested.

Police attitude surveys

Three of the surveys asked about police satisfaction with their work in general or with specific work conditions. In terms of their job overall, the majority of police said that they were satisfied. In the NZ (1993c) survey, more than 80 per cent of respondents agreed that they 'felt good' working for the police. Seventy-nine per cent of respondents in the Vic (1992b) survey said that they were satisfied with their current job while 86 per cent of police in the Vic (1992c) survey were satisfied with policing as a career choice. However, when more specific work conditions such as salary and staffing levels were addressed, police tended to be more dissatisfied (more than three quarters of the sample considered these to be 'very inadequate').

The NSW (1994c) survey found mixed views regarding the effectiveness of communication. A significant proportion of police agreed to some extent that they were encouraged to express their opinion (46 per cent), while an equally significant number of police considered that there was 'no open forum for discussing goals and priorities' (46 per cent).

The effectiveness of communication was also raised in the Vic (1992b) survey. In this case, 66 per cent of police agreed that they were able to communicate suggestions for change. There was, however, a mixed reaction when they were asked if they felt restricted communicating through 'normal channels' (36 per cent agreed, 33 per cent disagreed).

In terms of training, three quarters of the NZ (1993c) sample agreed that they have the necessary skills and training to carry out what is expected of them. In the Vic (1992c) survey, initial training at the academy was most frequently considered to be inadequate, while the probationary constable training course was considered by most respondents (83 per cent) to have been useful. In the Vic (1992b) survey, 75 per cent of the sample agreed that they received 'adequate' training for their present rank and duties, and 70 per cent also agreed that internal training is of a high standard. However, a considerable proportion (43 per cent) felt that internal training was 'totally irrelevant'.

The perceived efficiency of police performance was addressed in the NZ (1993c) survey. The majority of police considered their

emergency services to be 'excellent' (for example, 76 per cent for search and rescue and 70 per cent for emergency call responding), however, more routine tasks were only considered to be 'excellent' by a minority of police (for example, 15 per cent for police station service, and 17 per cent for routine phone call service).

The Vic (1992c) survey asked police for their perceptions of public satisfaction with police and their services. Most considered the public to be 'very satisfied' with their appearance (81 per cent), honesty (76 per cent), and knowledge (75 per cent), however considerably fewer viewed the public as 'very satisfied' with their politeness (51 per cent) and efficiency (52 per cent). In terms of performance, police perceived the public to be most dissatisfied with their capacity to recover stolen goods (more than half were 'very dissatisfied' while a significant number of police considered the public to be 'very dissatisfied') with their response times (40 per cent), and visibility (about 33 per cent).

In questions on professionalism, three quarters of the NZ (1993c) police sample either agreed or strongly agreed that police had a good image in the media.

On crime perceptions and concerns, findings were in line with the public attitude surveys.

Most police think the public does not understand the nature of police work

Housebreaking (74 per cent) was considered to be the main local crime problem by police in the NZ (1993c) survey, followed by car theft (30 per cent), and family or domestic violence (28 per cent).

Overall, the findings from questions on police-community relationships were that 60 per cent of police in the NSW (1994c) survey agreed to some extent that the police service supports the community. Only 42 per cent in the Vic (1992b) survey agreed that police-public relations were 'good' (32 per cent 'mildly' or 'strongly' disagreed), and 50 per cent of police in the Vic (1992c) survey considered police-public relations to be 'excellent'. Also, both Victorian surveys found that most police think the public does not understand the nature of police work (69 per cent in 1992b, 81 per cent in 1992c).

In relation to community policing, 75 per cent of the NZ (1993c) police agreed or strongly agreed that a police-community partnership would work. In contrast, 50 per cent of the Vic

(1992b) sample agreed that more emphasis should be placed in involving the community in policing. The overwhelming majority of the NZ (1993c) sample (98 per cent) considered the police and the community to be jointly responsible for crime prevention. They indicated that the public could co-operate with police by providing information and assisting in programs such as victim support, distributing leaflets, and attending regular police-community meetings.

The police roles which were considered to be important by the highest percentage of respondents in the NZ (1993c) survey were the maintenance of ‘integrity and professionalism’ (80 per cent), ‘upholding the law’ (78 per cent), and ‘consulting with and responding to police staff’ (70 per cent).

In comparison, ‘consulting with and responding to the needs of the community’ was considered to be important by significantly fewer respondents (48 per cent).

Taking a slightly different angle, the Vic (1992b) survey found that the majority of police agreed that crime prevention should be an important part of policing, and three quarters of the sample agreed that more emphasis should be placed on ‘catching crooks’.

The area of police-management relations was addressed in three surveys which included items on whether management was aware of problems. In general, less than half of each sample agreed that management was aware of problems, and in particular, the Vic (1992b) survey found that higher management levels, such as Force Command, were considered to be even more unaware of the problems police encountered (65 per cent ‘mildly’ or ‘strongly’ disagreed that Force Command was aware) than district level management.

Indications from the other main police-management relations issues addressed in the surveys, such as feedback and communication, were that feedback from managers was lacking.

The results of surveys of provision of feedback by managers are shown in Table 3.0.

In terms of communication, 55 per cent of the NSW (1994c) police agreed to some extent that decisions were made without input from those actually ‘doing the job’. Similarly, only 50 per cent of the NZ (1993c) police ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that their manager consulted them on important matters.

Barriers to service delivery: In all four surveys, police nominated resources as a barrier to best practice in policing. In the NSW (1994c) survey, resourcing of patrols and uneven workloads were raised as barriers in a focus group discussion. Other resource problems mentioned were insufficient staff and the lack of availability of motor vehicles, equipment, computers and software.

Community attitudes such as public apathy, a reluctance to take responsibility, and public tolerance and acceptance of certain offences were raised as external barriers in the NZ (1993c) survey. Some internal barriers were also nominated, including poor management of information sharing and a lack of management commitment.

In the Vic (1992c) survey, police-public relations in general were seen as a barrier, as was the criminal justice system. In particular, the penalties or sentences given, police powers, and legislation were considered to be inadequate.

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Table 3.0 – Provision of feedback by managers

	NZ (1993c)	Vic (1992b)	Vic (1992b)	Vic (1992b)
Response item	‘Staff who perform well are rewarded’ (‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’)	‘Immediate supervisors do not let you know when you have done a good job’ (‘mildly’ or ‘strongly agree’)	‘Immediate supervisors do not give subordinates adequate recognition for the work they do’ (‘mildly’ or ‘strongly agree’)	‘Immediate supervisors do not provide constructive criticism’ (‘mildly’ or ‘strongly agree’)
Percentage	18	30	28	23