

Public Confidence in the NSW Criminal Justice System: Media Release

Embargo: 10.30AM, Friday October 17th 2008

Most people in New South Wales (NSW) are very or fairly confident that the NSW criminal justice system respects the rights of accused persons and treats them fairly but many fewer are confident the justice system is effective in bringing people to justice and meeting the needs of victims of crime.

These are two of the key findings to emerge from a survey of public confidence in the NSW criminal justice system undertaken by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and the NSW Sentencing Council.

The survey involved telephone interviews with over 2,000 NSW residents. Sample quotas were set on the basis of age, sex and residential location to as to match, as closely as possible, the distribution of these characteristics in the NSW population. Respondents were asked a range of questions about their confidence in the NSW criminal justice system, the views about sentencing and their knowledge of crime and justice.

Most people (72%) aged 18 and over in New South Wales (NSW) are 'very' or 'fairly' confident that the criminal justice system respects the rights of accused persons and treats them fairly (75%). Public confidence in other aspects of the criminal justice system, however, is significantly lower.

Slightly over half (55%) of those aged 18 and over in NSW are 'very' or 'fairly' confident that the criminal justice system brings people to justice. Just under half (44%) are 'very' or 'fairly' confident that it deals with cases efficiently. Less than a third (29%) are 'very' or 'fairly' confident that it deals with cases promptly. Slightly more than a third (35%) are 'very' or 'fairly' confident that the justice system meets the needs of victims.

The survey also measured public attitudes to sentencing and public knowledge of crime and criminal justice.

A high proportion (66%) of NSW residents feel that the sentences imposed on convicted offenders are either 'a little too lenient' or 'much too lenient'.

Lack of confidence in sentencing and the criminal justice system, however, was found to be strongly associated with mistaken beliefs about crime and criminal justice.

To measure public knowledge about crime and justice respondents were asked:

1. Whether property crime had increased, decreased or remained about the same over the last five years?
2. What percentage of all crime recorded by police involves violence or the threat of violence?

3. What percentage of persons charged with home burglary are convicted of the offence?
4. What percentage of persons charged with assault are convicted of the offence?
5. What percentage of persons convicted of home burglary receive a prison sentence?
6. What percentage of persons convicted of assault receive a prison sentence?

Only 11 per cent of those surveyed gave the correct answer (fallen) to question (1). Most respondents grossly over-estimated the proportion of all crime that involves violence, grossly underestimated the conviction rates for assault and home burglary and grossly underestimated the proportion of burglars sent to prison.

The only area where the public *overestimated* the harshness of the criminal justice system was in relation to the percentage of persons convicted of assault who receive a prison sentence.

Generally speaking, those who knew that property crime had fallen or who were more accurate in their judgement of conviction and imprisonment rates had more confidence in the criminal justice system than those who thought property crime was rising or who underestimated conviction and imprisonment rates.

Confidence in sentencing and some aspects of criminal justice was also more pronounced among those who are better educated and among those who draw their information about crime and justice from broadsheet newspapers or educational institutions as opposed to tabloid newspapers, TV/radio news or talk-back radio.

Commenting on the findings, the director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn, said that it is impossible to tell without research into specific issues, which public concerns about the criminal justice system are warranted and which are not.

“It is clear, nonetheless, that lack of public confidence in the NSW criminal justice system is at least partly attributable to misapprehensions about crime and criminal justice.”

“Large sections of the public mistakenly believe property crime is going up, overestimate the proportion of crime that involves violence and underestimate the percentage of arrested offenders who are convicted and imprisoned.”

“Since most people obtain their information about crime from TV, radio and the newspapers, the media must take some responsibility for this.”

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