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Australian Institute of Criminology

What Australians think
about crime and justice:
results from the 2007
Survey of Social Attitudes

Lynne Roberts
David Indermaur

AIC Reports
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Public Policy Series **101**

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Foreword

Criminal justice researchers and policymakers the world over are aware of a mismatch between the public view and the reality of how much recorded crime there is and what happens to offenders after they are charged. This report provides the most recent evidence of this mismatch. The 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes included a range of questions about what Australians think about crime and criminal justice. Several of the questions have been asked in previous surveys, so provide a picture of trends over time, but some were new for this survey and were commissioned by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

The results of the survey show that many Australians consider crime-related issues to be of importance, a large majority would like more spent on police and law enforcement and that television, radio and newspapers are the major source of information about crime and justice for most people. At the same time, crime is believed to be increasing, violence is thought to be widespread and offenders are seen as being treated lightly by the court system.

A major new fear was worry about identity theft and credit card fraud, and over one-third of respondents, at least in 2007, thought a terrorist attack was likely in Australia. However, most people were not particularly worried about incivilities in their local area and did not expect to become a victim of crime.

In general, there was considerable confidence in the police to respond quickly and fairly, less confidence in the courts, most noticeably in relation to having regard for victims' rights, and little confidence in the prison system to deter offending or rehabilitate prisoners. Support for harsher penalties, including the death penalty, has declined over time.

The results from the survey are valuable for giving us a measure of public attitudes and perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system and it will be important to continue to monitor these into the future. However, further in-depth research is required to ensure we have a better understanding of the factors that influence perceptions and attitudes in the general community.

Judy Putt
General Manager, Research
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Unless otherwise noted, the source for all data in figures and tables is the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (computer file). Canberra: Australian Social Science Data Archive.

Analyses present varying totals, due to missing data on individual items.

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We would like to thank the Australian Institute of Criminology for funding the crime and justice questions in the AuSSA 2007 survey and our analysis of these questions. In particular, we would like to acknowledge the role of Dr Judy Putt, General Manager, Research, for her carriage of this project. We would also like to acknowledge the support of members of the AuSSA team, including the survey manager, Dr Ann Evans, from the Australian National University.

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Executive summary

This report provides an analysis of the responses in the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) on crime and justice. The AuSSA is a biennial mail-out survey that provides data on key questions relating to Australians' social attitudes and behaviours over time (Gibson et al. 2005). AuSSA 2007 consisted of a cross sectional mail-out survey completed by 8,133 adults from all Australian states and territories. Three versions of the survey were fielded with final response rates ranging from 39 to 42 percent. To produce Australian estimates the data have been weighted by education level to correct for differences in education level between survey respondents and the general population.

Perceptions of crime

Key findings from the survey on perceptions of crime were:

- Approximately one in eight adult Australians (12.9%) views crime, drugs or terrorism as the most important issue facing Australia today.
- Broadcast and tabloid media provide the major source of information for most members of the public about crime and justice. Almost 80 percent of respondents rate TV, radio and newspapers as fairly or very important sources of information.
- A large majority of the public have inaccurate views about the occurrence of crime and the severity of sentencing. Consistent with previous Australian and international research, the Australian public perceives crime to be increasing when it isn't, overestimates the proportion of crime that involves violence and underestimates the proportion of charged persons who go on to be convicted and imprisoned.

- Approximately three-quarters of Australians thought a terrorist attack in South East Asia in the 12 post-survey months was likely, with one-third thinking a terrorist attack likely in Australia.
- The majority of survey respondents support the government having the right to tap telephone conversations (76.7%), stop and search people in the street at random (54.2%) and to detain indefinitely without trial (56.1%) where terrorism is suspected, but do not support the torture of prisoners (59.6%).

Fear of crime

Key findings from the survey on fear of crime were:

- The majority of Australians rate incivilities as 'not a very big problem', or 'not a problem at all' in their local area.
- The majority of Australians are not very worried about being a victim of a range of crimes. However, this still leaves a large minority who are 'fairly' or 'very' worried.
- On average, females reported higher rates of fear than males, with fear increasing as perceptions of incivilities increased.
- A major new fear is worry about identity theft and credit card fraud.
- Fear of crime is associated with decreased confidence in the criminal justice system and more punitive attitudes.

Administration of criminal justice

Key findings from the survey on the administration of criminal justice were:

- There is wide variation in views as to the efficacy of the government in controlling crime in Australia. Approximately one-third each of Australians report that the government is successful, unsuccessful and neither successful nor unsuccessful in controlling crime.
- Approximately two-thirds of Australians (67.6%) support increased government expenditure on police and law enforcement.
- The majority of Australians express quite a lot of confidence in the police to solve crime (74%), to respond quickly to crime (54.3%) and to act fairly (73.7%), despite one-quarter of the population believing there was a lot of police corruption in their state or territory.
- Australians have more confidence in the criminal courts to have regard for defendants' rights (66.9%) than victims' rights (46.6%) or to deal with matters fairly (51.5%).

- The majority of Australians have little or no confidence in the prison system to rehabilitate prisoners (87.7%), as a form of punishment (59.2%), in deterring future offending (84.7%) or in teaching prisoners skills (63.8%).

Changes in attitudes over time

Key findings from the survey on changing attitudes over time were:

- Public support or approval of the death penalty has consistently declined since 1996 and is now well below the 50 percent mark (43.5%) for the third measurement in a row, the first being in 2002.
- The proportion of Australians who agree that stiffer sentences are needed has gradually declined from a peak of 84.8 percent in 1987 to 71.7 percent in 2007.



Introduction

Measuring public attitudes to crime and criminal justice is of fundamental policy relevance. Criminal justice policy, particularly sentencing policy, is largely based on assumptions about public attitudes. Further, there is good reason to believe that judges themselves are sensitive to what they perceive public attitudes to be (Mackenzie 2005) even though for some judges this perception is often flawed if it is based on what appears in the media (see Indermaur 1990; Roberts 2008; Roberts, Doob & Marinos 2000). The important point is that public attitudes to justice do matter and they matter at a number of different levels that influence sentencing.

Public attitudes to sentencing and confidence in the courts have been regularly measured and explored in the western world, particularly over the past 20 years. Within Australia, a limited number of surveys and scholarly reviews of public attitudes to crime and criminal justice have been conducted since the 1970s (Broadhurst & Indermaur 1982; Indermaur 1987, 1990; Indermaur & Roberts 2005; Walker, Collins & Wilson 1988; Wilson & Brown 1973).

Previous Australian research has consistently reported that most Australians are dissatisfied with current sentencing practices and have a preference for more punitive sentencing (Indermaur & Roberts 2005). In addition, research has demonstrated that

the majority of the Australian population incorrectly believe crime rates are increasing (Indermaur & Roberts 2005; Weatherburn & Indermaur 2004), overestimate levels of violent crime and underestimate the severity of sentences (Indermaur 1987, 1990; Weatherburn & Indermaur 2004; Weatherburn, Matka & Lind 1996).

These findings are not unique to Australia. Research conducted in Canada (Roberts, Crutcher & Verbrugge 2007), America (Johnson 2008), Wales (Haines & Case 2007) and the United Kingdom (Mattinson & Mirrlees-Black 2000) has found the majority of survey respondents believe courts are too lenient. Incorrect perceptions of crime and sentencing practices are the norm rather than the exception (Doob & Roberts 1988; Haines & Case 2007; Hough & Roberts 1998; 2004; Mattinson & Mirrlees-Black 2000; Roberts and Stalans 1997; Sprott 1996).

This report provides the latest figures on the core matters that have been canvassed in studies of public perceptions of crime and punishment as well as a range of new and topical matters. The traditional areas of concern cover attitudes to sentencing severity, attitudes to the death penalty, the degree to which judges should reflect public opinion, fear of crime, perceptions of crime rates and knowledge of the criminal justice system and

sentencing. Previous surveys (see Indermaur & Roberts 2005; Roberts & Indermaur 2007) have also included analyses of the degree of confidence in various aspects of the criminal justice system, sources of information about crime and justice and beliefs about the impact of immigration on crime. New and topical matters in this report concern perceptions of the need to allow expanded police powers to deal with the threat of terrorism, censorship and the protection of personal information.

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) is a biennial mail-out survey developed by the Centre for Social Research at Australian National University in collaboration with national and international researchers. The surveys aim to provide ongoing data on key questions relating to Australians' social attitudes and behaviours over time, while also including varying topical questions in each iteration (Gibson et al. 2005). The first two AuSSA surveys were conducted in 2003 and 2005 (see Wilson et al. 2005 and Denmark et al. 2007 for the reports on the first two surveys). This report provides an

analysis of the crime and criminal justice items from the third AuSSA survey, conducted in 2007.

Since its inception, AuSSA has included a range of crime and justice items, some of which can be linked back to earlier surveys including the National Social Science Survey in 1984, and the Australian Election Surveys in 1990, 1993, 1996, 1998 and 2001. Indermaur and Roberts (2005) completed an analysis of the crime and justice items from the 2003 AuSSA. This report builds on that analysis to update those crime and justice items that have remained in the AuSSA survey over the three iterations to date. In addition, new items commissioned by the Australian Institute of Criminology are analysed. These items assess sources of information contributing to views of crime trends and criminal attitudes; civil incivilities and fear of crime; confidence in police, criminal courts and prisons; and knowledge of crime and sentencing. Further items included in the survey and the analysis presented in this report focus on the government's role in crime and criminal justice, terrorism, and police treatment of Indigenous Australians.



Methodology

AuSSA 2007 consisted of a cross sectional mail-out survey with a partial replication of survey items used in AuSSA 2003 and 2005.

answered every question but the vast majority did and where the number of respondents falls below 95 percent, this will be indicated in text.

Sampling procedure and response rates

The sampling frame for AuSSA 2007 was the Australian electoral roll. A random number of 20,000 individuals on the roll were selected for the sample. In week one each selected individual was sent a letter advising of the survey. This was followed in week two by the survey package. A postcard serving as a reminder/thank you was sent in week three, a reminder package sent to non-respondents in week four and a second reminder/thank you card sent out in week six. To extend the range of questions asked, three versions of the survey instrument were in the field simultaneously, and resulted in response rates of 42 percent (Version A; 2,783 completed surveys) 41 percent (Version B; 2,769 completed surveys) and 39 percent (Version C; 2,583 completed surveys). In total, 8,133 surveys were completed sufficiently to be analysed, and provide the sample for the analyses conducted for this report. Sample sizes for individual analyses vary depending upon the version(s) of the survey in which questions were included. Not all respondents

Participants

The final set of respondents consisted of 8,133 adults from all states and territories in Australia (Figure 1). The majority (61.3%) of survey respondents lived in the capital city of their state/territory. Table 1 provides a comparison of the 2007 population of each state/territory as a percentage of the total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008a) with the number of surveys completed in each state/territory as a percentage of all completed surveys. The close concordance between percentages suggests that the final sample provides a close representation of the state/territory breakdown of population in Australia. Further details of the sample (age, gender, education and income) are presented in Appendix A.

The key question with all the figures and tables presented in this report is the degree to which the results faithfully represent the proportions in the various demographic categories of the Australian population. A sampling weight was created by the survey administrators to correct for differences in education level between survey respondents and

The AuSSA survey sample provides a close representation of the Australian population

the general population aged between 20 and 64 years (Graham 2008). In this report, weighted data have been used for all population estimates (percentages) and unweighted data have been used for all further univariate and multivariate analyses.

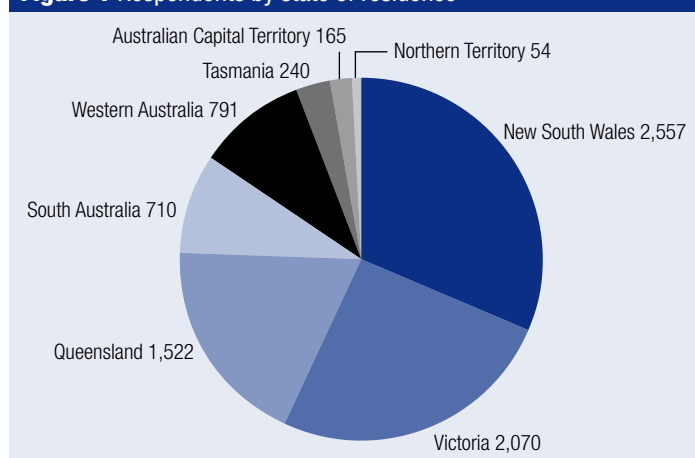
Measures

AuSSA 2007 utilised three survey instruments (Versions A, B and C). The surveys covered thirty-five categories of attitudes and behaviours (see Appendix B). Items from the major category of interest in this report, crime and criminal justice, were mostly included in survey Version B and Version C. The full survey forms are available from the AuSSA website (<http://aussa.anu.edu.au/questionnaires.php>). The items from the crime and criminal justice section of the surveys are presented in Appendix C. The data set (Phillips et al. 2008) analysed was provided by the Australian National University.

Table 1 Comparison of population and surveys completed by state

State	Population ('000)	% Australian population	Surveys	% surveys
New South Wales	6,927.00	33	2,557	32
Victoria	5,246.10	25	2,070	26
Queensland	4,228.30	20	1,522	19
South Australia	1,591.90	8	710	9
Western Australia	2,130.80	10	791	10
Tasmania	495.80	2	240	3
Northern Territory	217.60	1	54	1
Australian Capital Territory	340.80	2	165	2
Australia	21,180.60	100	8,109	100

Figure 1 Respondents by state of residence





Results

The results of the crime and criminal justice items in the AuSSA 2007 survey are presented by theme in nine sections below:

- government and crime control
- media informing crime views
- perceptions of crime
- fear of crime
- policing
- courts
- prisons
- confidence across the criminal justice system
- laws.

Government and crime control

The role of government in controlling crime was assessed through questions assessing perceptions of the government's success in controlling crime, spending on police and law enforcement and rights when terrorism was suspected.

Importance of crime as an issue in Australia

Survey respondents (n=2,586) were asked to nominate the two most important issues facing

Australia from a list of 18 options (Table 2). In total, 6.1 percent of survey respondents nominated crime as the most important issue facing Australia, with 3.8 percent nominating drugs and 3.0 percent nominating terrorism. A further 4.7 percent nominated crime as the second most important issue (drugs 6.2%; terrorism 3.0%). These results suggest that approximately one in eight adult Australians views crime, drugs or terrorism as the most important issue facing Australia today. While not in the top range of social issues, crime is clearly an issue of considerable importance, nominated by a greater proportion of the population, and thus rating well above some other issues that receive regular attention such as 'involvement in military conflicts overseas', 'government corruption', 'refugees' and 'inadequate public transport'.

Government's success in controlling crime

Survey respondents (n=2,652) were asked 'How successful do you think the government in Australia is nowadays in controlling crime?' (Figure 2). Approximately one-third (32.4%) of Australians reported that the government was successful in controlling crime, just over one-third (38.2%) reported the government was neither successful nor unsuccessful and just under one in three (28.4%) reported the government was not successful in

Table 2 Two most important issues facing Australia (percent)

Issue	Most important	Next most
Health care and hospitals	14.7	13.4
Environmental damage	12.6	8.1
An ageing population	10.5	6.2
Lack of affordable housing	10.0	8.9
Taxes too high on ordinary Australians	8.9	5.9
Lack of moral values in the community	8.6	7.7
Gap between rich and poor	6.9	7.4
Australian jobs going to other countries	6.8	10.6
Crime	6.1	4.7
Drugs	3.8	6.2
Terrorism	3.0	3.0
Minorities too much say in politics	1.6	3.4
Australian involvement in military conflicts overseas	1.5	5.2
Corruption in government	1.4	1.3
Refugees and asylum seekers	1.0	2.7
Not enough progress in Aboriginal reconciliation	0.9	1.4
Inadequate public transport	0.9	2.1
Too much 'red tape' holding business back	0.7	1.6
Total	100.0	100.0

controlling crime. The dispersion of results suggests there is wide variation in views as to the efficacy of the government in controlling crime in Australia, with many respondents remaining ambivalent or undecided on this issue.

Government spending on the police and law enforcement

Government expenditure on police services across Australia in 2006–07 was approximately \$6.7 billion (SCRGSP 2008: 6.8). In the AuSSA 2007 survey, respondents (n=2,630) were asked 'Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please show whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say 'much more', it might require a tax increase to pay for it.' The large majority of survey respondents stated that the government should either continue to spend the same amount as now (29.7%) or more (47.1% more, 20.5% much more) on police and law enforcement. These results can be compared with responses to the same question on other areas of government spending (see Figure 3). The proportion of respondents wanting the government to increase spending is greatest in the areas of health (90.8%) and education (79.5%), with spending on police and law enforcement the third most endorsed area (67.6%).

Figure 2 Success of the Australian Government in controlling crime (percent)

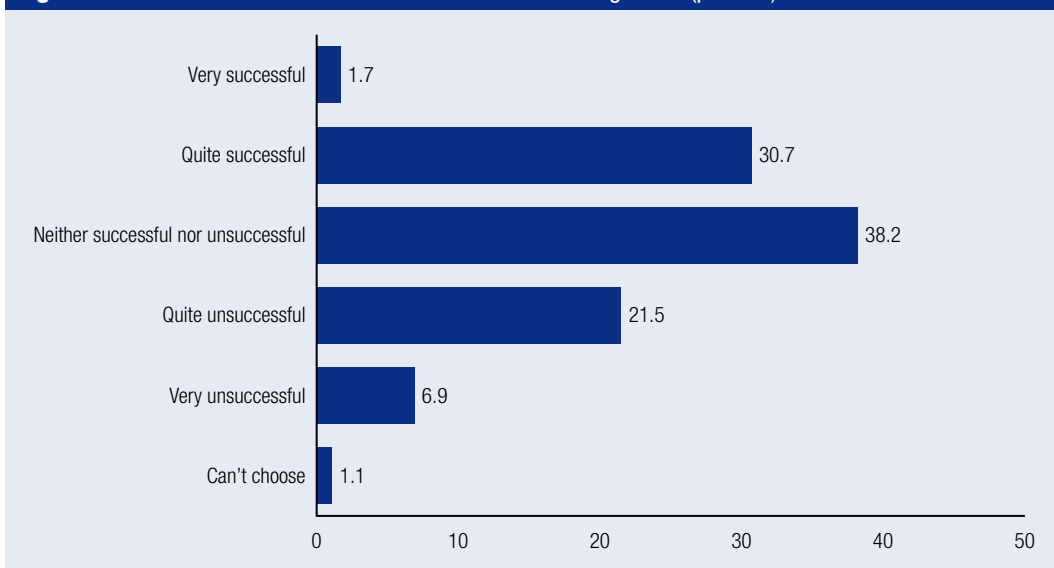


Figure 3 Preferences for the level of government spending (percent)

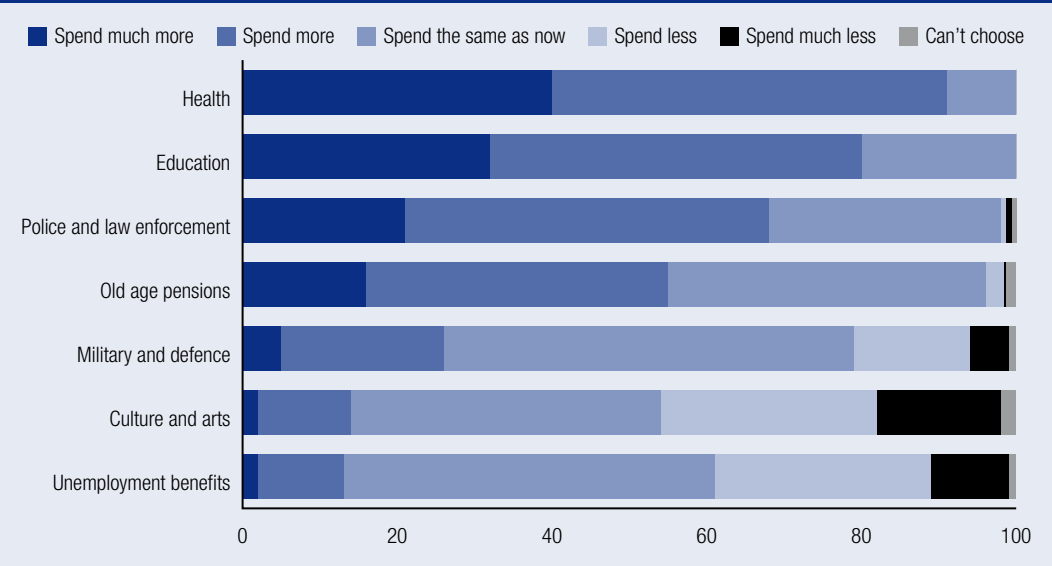


Table 3 Support for government actions where terrorism is suspected (percent)

	Detain indefinitely	Tap conversations	Stop and search
Definitely should have right to	28.9	38.9	23.7
Probably should have right to	27.2	37.8	30.5
Probably should not have right to	21.8	13.4	24.3
Definitely should not have right to	19.5	7.9	19.7
Can't choose	2.6	1.9	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Governmental rights when suspecting terrorism

Survey respondents answering Form A (n=2,655–2,676) were asked about the government's rights, where terrorism was suspected, to detain people, to tap telephone conversations, and to stop and search at random. The specific questions were:

Suppose the government suspected that a terrorist act was about to happen. Do you think the authorities should have the right to:

- detain people for as long as they want without putting them on trial
- tap people's telephone conversations
- stop and search people in the street at random.

Responses to these questions (Table 3) suggest that the majority of survey respondents support the government's rights to tap telephone conversations (76.7%), stop and search people in the street at random (54.2%) and detain indefinitely without trial (56.1%).

Factor analysis of the three items resulted in the identification of a single component; that is, the three terrorism items can be combined into a uni-dimensional scale with good internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .73). The scale was computed by reversing items and then adding scores. The resultant scale ranges from three to 15, with higher scores representing stronger support for the government's rights to intervene when terrorism is suspected. There was no significant difference in scores between males and females on the terrorism scale (independent groups t-test analysis). There was a very weak significant correlation (r=.08)

between age and scores on the terrorism scale indicating a slight increase in support for stronger rights with age. There was a moderate relationship ($r=.29$) between self-placement on a political spectrum with increasing support for stronger rights where terrorism was suspected with movement from the left to the right of the political spectrum.

Survey respondents completing Form C ($n=2,593$) were asked two questions about what they thought was the likelihood of a terrorist attack during the next 12 months in South East Asia and Australia. The results are presented in Table 4. Approximately three-quarters of respondents rated the likelihood of a terrorist attack in South East Asia in the 12 months following the completion of the survey as likely (73.4%), and less than half this number (33.8%) thought this likely in Australia. As questions on the perceived likelihood of terrorist attack were asked on Form C, and the previous questions were asked on Form A, the questions cannot be analysed together as different respondents completed each set of questions. It should also be noted that the survey was conducted in 2007 and perceptions about the likelihood of a terrorist attack in the ensuing 12 months may have declined since then.

Table 4 Perceived likelihood of terrorist attack in South East Asia and Australia in the 12 months post-survey (percent)

Perceived likelihood of terrorist attack	South East Asia	Australia
Very likely	17.8	4.0
Likely	55.6	29.8
Not very likely	11.5	42.8
Not at all likely	1.8	10.9
Don't know	13.3	12.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Survey respondents completing Form C were also asked how much they agreed or disagreed with two statements about terrorism:

If a man is suspected of planning a terrorist attack in Australia, the police should have the power to keep him in prison until they are satisfied he was not involved.

Torturing a prisoner in an Australian prison is never justified, even if it might provide information that could prevent a terrorist attack.

The results are presented in Table 5. The majority of Australians support detaining suspects (74%) but do not support the torture of prisoners (59.6%).

Table 5 Supporting imprisonment and not supporting torture where terrorist involvement suspected (percent)

Level of agreement	Support imprisonment	Do not support torture
Agree strongly	40.0	28.2
Agree	34.0	31.4
Neither agree or disagree	7.9	16.7
Disagree	11.4	13.3
Disagree strongly	4.8	7.4
Don't know	1.2	3.0
Total	100.0	100.0

To assess the relationship between the perceived likelihood of a terrorist attack and support for the two statements about terrorism, the perceived likelihood of a terrorist attack in Australia was broken into two categories ('likely' and 'very likely' were combined into one category and 'not very likely' and 'not at all likely' into a second category) and responses to the two terrorism statements reduced to three categories (for both statements, 'agree strongly' and 'agree' were combined into one category, 'disagree strongly' and 'disagree' into a second category, and 'neither agree nor disagree' and 'don't know' combined into a third category). Respondents who thought a terrorist attack likely in the 12 months post-survey were significantly more likely than those who did not to agree that police should have the power to detain a terrorist suspect (85.8% versus 61.3%, $\chi^2(2)=1.19$, $p<.001$) and significantly less likely to agree that torturing a prisoner is never justified (57.5% versus 64.6%, $\chi^2(2)=10.4$, $p<.01$). Although the association is significant, it is not possible to ascertain from this analysis whether beliefs about the likelihood of terrorism in any way influence beliefs about police powers. It may be that people who are more likely to rate the chances of an attack highly are also those who are likely to believe in the benefits of police powers.

Media informing crime views

Individuals may use a range of sources in forming views about crime and criminal justice. Previous research has established that the types of media accessed (e.g. radio versus newspapers) as well as the forms of media (e.g. news versus entertainment) affect perceptions of crime and justice (Reiner 2002). The results from the AuSSA 2005 survey (Indermaur & Roberts 2005) indicated that people who rely on talkback radio, family and friends or commercial television have less accurate perceptions of crime than those who rely on other sources.

Importance of sources in informing views of crime

Survey respondents were asked about the importance of a range of sources (TV n=5,175; radio n=5,055; internet n=4,778; work colleagues, n=4,720; friends n=4,931, family n=4,967) in informing their views of crime. The results suggest that the media remains the most important source in informing Australians' views of crime, with almost eight out of ten respondents rating each of TV, radio and newspapers as fairly or very important (Figure 4).

Perceptions of crime

The rate of crimes reported to police per 100,000 persons was lower in 2007 than in 2005 for the four major crime categories of homicide and related offences, unlawful entry with intent, motor vehicle theft and other theft. The rate of crimes reported to police increased for two minor categories: robbery and blackmail/extortion (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008c). When all categories are considered together as one category 'crime', the trend is downward. Survey respondents (n=5,303) were asked 'Do you think that the level of crime in Australia has changed over the past 2 years?' The majority of respondents (64.9%) responded that crime has increased over the past two years. Only 2.9 percent correctly identified that crime rates reduced over this period. However almost one-quarter of respondents (24.6%) indicated that the crime rate had stayed the same, which is closer to reality than the two groups that incorrectly perceived a crime increase. Of those perceiving a crime increase, most (four in 10 overall) thought there was a lot more crime and just over two in 10 (23.2%) thought there was a little more crime.

Survey respondents were asked four questions about their perceptions of crime and the operation of the criminal justice system. In Figures 6–9 the

Figure 4 Ratings of information sources on crime (percent)

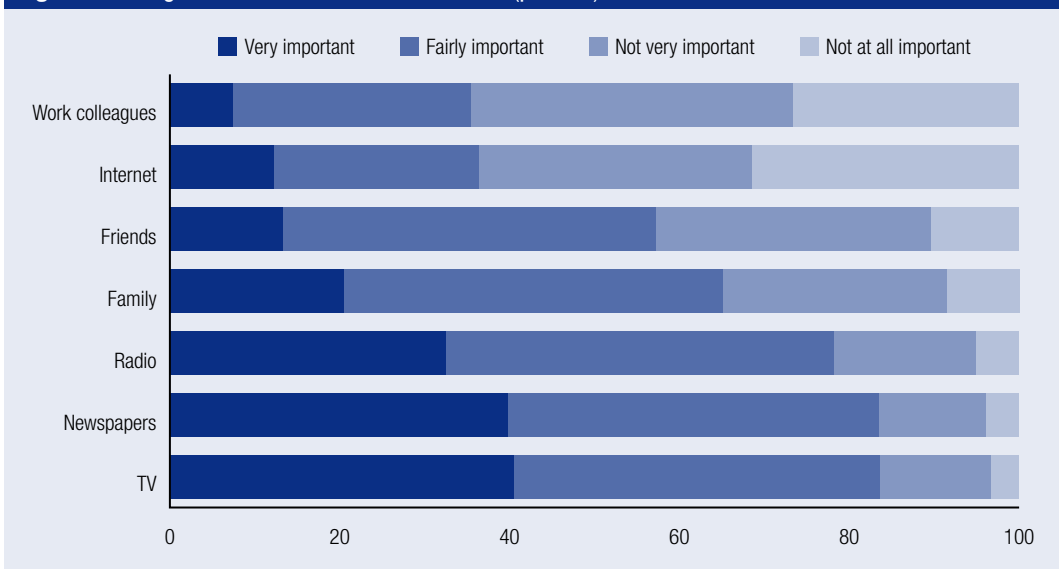
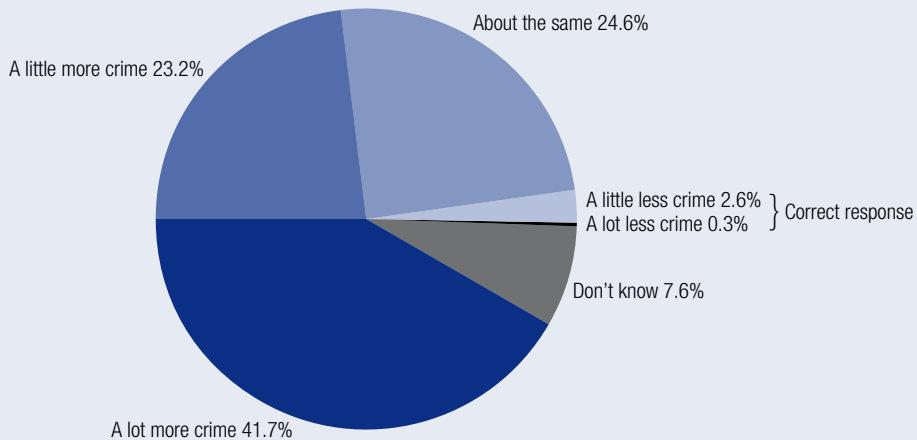


Figure 5 Perceptions of crime trends over the past two years (percent)



statistically correct answer is indicated by the lighter bar and the darker bars indicate respondents' incorrect perceptions.

Violence

Ten percent or less, depending on how precisely violence is defined, of all crime reported to the police involves violence or threat of violence. Current national data are not available, as the Australian Bureau of Statistics no longer compiles them on a national level. For example in Western Australia, of the 301,160 recorded offences in 2006, 26,510 (8.8%) may be considered as violent (homicide and related offences, acts intended to cause injury, sexual assaults and related offences (Fernandez et al. 2008). Similarly, in Queensland, although the Queensland Police Service does not release figures on all offences committed, 33,517 offences against the person were reported for 2006–07 compared with approximately 375,000 offences against property or other offences. This puts the rate of offences against the person at approximately nine percent of all offences recorded by the police in that state (Queensland Police Service 2007).

Survey respondents (n=5,197) were asked 'Of every 100 crimes recorded by the police, roughly what number do you think involve VIOLENCE or the

THREAT of violence?' Responses ranged from 0 to 100 percent (mean 61.0%, standard deviation 23.5%). As discussed above, violent crime generally accounts for less than 10 percent of all crimes. As shown in Figure 6, less than four percent of survey respondents were accurate in their knowledge of the proportion of crimes that involve violence or threats of violence. The majority greatly overestimated the proportion of violent crime.

Convictions for violent crime

In the category of 'offences intended to cause injury' (equivalent to the term violent crime), in 92 percent of matters dealt with by higher courts and in 90 percent of matters dealt with by magistrates courts, the offenders were found guilty (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008b). That is, more than 90 percent of violent offenders are convicted.

Survey respondents were asked:

Of every 100 people charged with a violent crime and brought to court, roughly what number do you think end up convicted?

Responses ranged from 0 to 100 percent (mean 48.6%, standard deviation 24.2%). Only two percent answered correctly. The vast majority greatly underestimated the conviction rate. The results are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 6 Estimates of percentage of crimes that involve violence (percent)

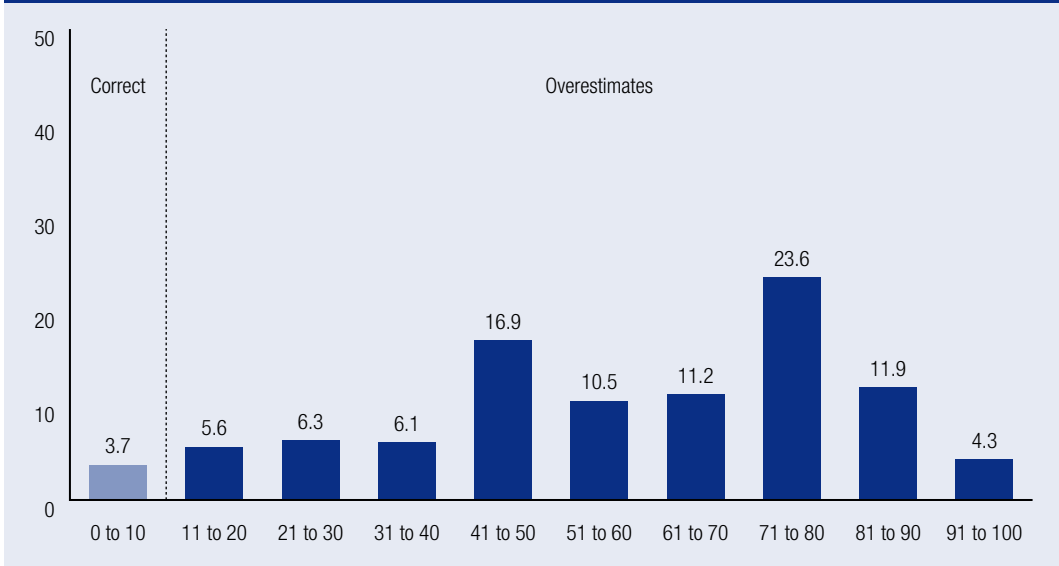
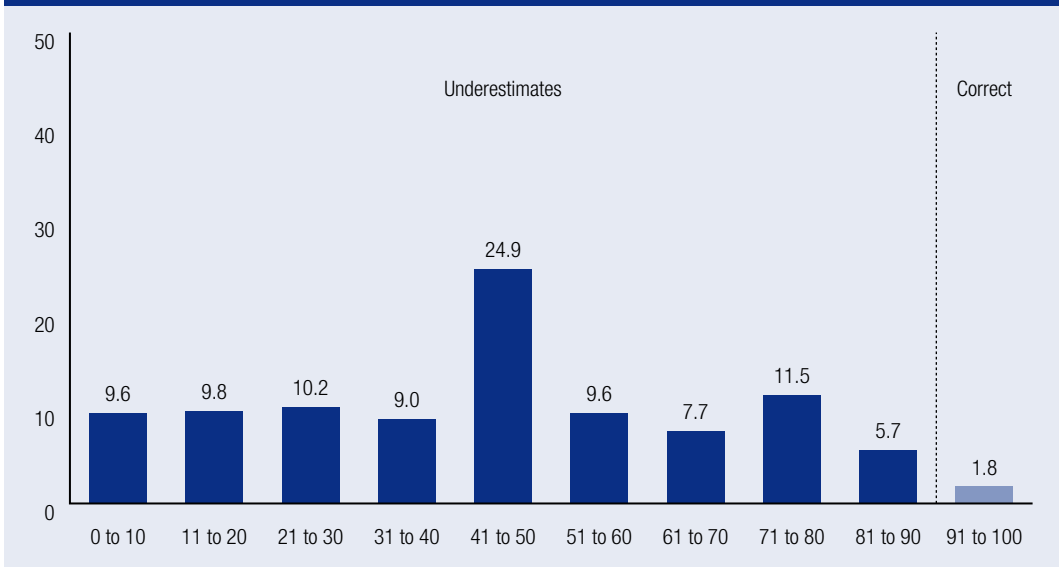


Figure 7 Estimates of percentage of violent criminals brought to court who are convicted (percent)



Imprisonment for assault

In the category of 'offences intended to cause injury', 80 percent of offenders convicted in higher courts and 26 percent of offenders convicted in magistrates courts received a custodial sentence (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008b). As the vast majority of cases of assault are heard in the magistrates court, the magistrates court figures can

be taken as an accurate indication of the overall imprisonment rates. That is, approximately one in four of those convicted (26 to 27%) are sent to prison.

Survey respondents were asked:

Out of every 100 men aged 18 or over who are CONVICTED of ASSAULT, how many do you think are sent to prison?

Figure 8 Estimates of percentage of men convicted of assault who are imprisoned (percent)

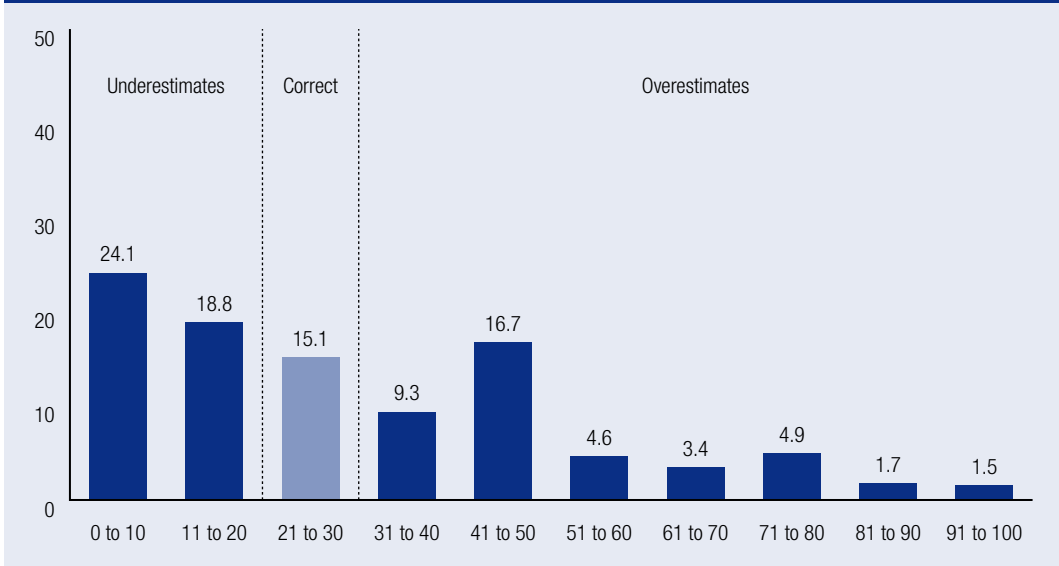
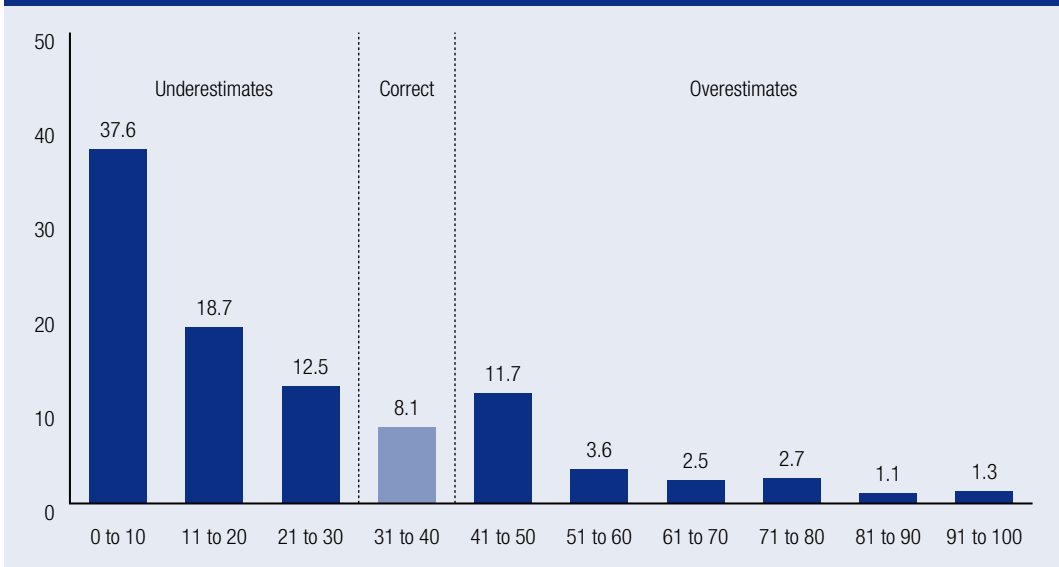


Figure 9 Estimates of percentage of men convicted of home burglary who are imprisoned (percent)



The survey responses are presented in Figure 8. Responses ranged from 0 to 100 percent (mean 33.5%, standard deviation 23.4%). Only 15 percent gave the correct answer. About equal numbers underestimated and overestimated the proportion imprisoned

Imprisonment for burglary

In the category of offence 'unlawful entry with intent', 82 percent of offenders convicted in higher courts and 37 percent of those convicted in magistrates courts received a custodial sentence (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008b). Again, as the vast

majority of cases are heard in the magistrates court rather than the higher courts, the magistrates court figures are best to use as an accurate indication of the overall imprisonment rates. That is, 35–40 percent of those convicted of burglary are sent to prison.

Survey respondents were asked:

Out of every 100 MEN aged 18 or over who are convicted of HOME BURGLARY, how many do you think are sent to prison?

Responses ranged from 0 to 100 percent (mean 26.8%, standard deviation 22.8%). Most respondents underestimated the proportion of burglars who are imprisoned, in line with findings that the public underestimates sentencing severity. The survey responses are presented in Figure 9.

Migrants and crime

Survey respondents (n=2,748) were asked whether immigrants increase crime rates. Opinion was divided with approximately one third each agreeing (31.6%), disagreeing (35.4%) and neither agreeing nor disagreeing or unable to choose (33.0%). Australian and international research on this topic has found no direct link between immigration and crime or crime rates (Mukherjee 1999; Butcher & Piehl 1998). It is likely that this question taps both misperceptions about sources of crime and prejudices.

Fear of crime

Fear of crime is often cited as a cause of people's attitudes to crime and justice. In many ways it is the most obvious and compelling reason—people fear crime and are concerned to do whatever is necessary to preserve and advance their interest in being safe from it. However while the connections are easy to see, there are immediately a number of problems, not only with the factual elements to this story (whether people's perceptions of crime, their risks of victimisation and their perceptions of what would work to reduce their risks are correct) but also with the deeper psychological forces at work. Are people really animated out of fear and protection,

or is the emotional basis one of anger, entitlement and outrage? Recent work in the United Kingdom investigating the nature of fear of crime has challenged some of the long-standing assumptions about fear of crime and its distribution in the population (Ditton & Farrall 2007). It now appears likely that earlier methodologies typically employed to measure fear of crime could have produced elevated and artifactual readings of the true extent of fear of crime in the population. Briefly this occurs because, when posing simple questions about fear of crime (Are you afraid? How much are you afraid?), there is a strong acquiescence effect—people are likely to respond positively to the suggestion contained in the question that they are, should be or could be, afraid of crime.

Incivilities

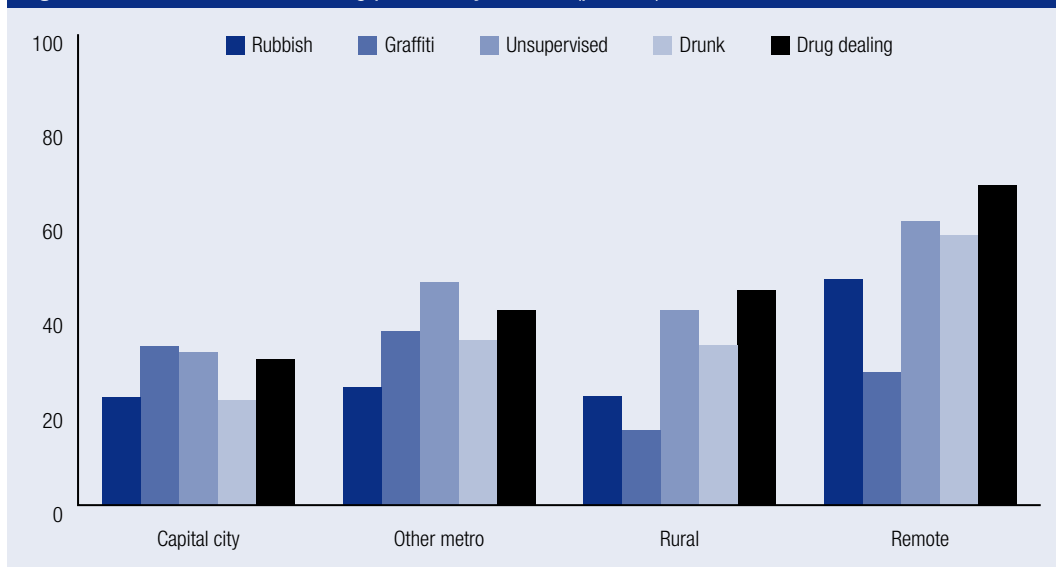
One theory of fear of crime is the incivilities thesis, that disorder in the community, rather than crime itself, leads to increased fear of crime through an emotional response of perceived vulnerability (LaGrange, Ferraro & Supancic 1992; Perkins & Taylor 1996; Robinson et al. 2003). This section examines survey respondents' perception of incivilities in their local area and its relationship to worry about being the victim of a range of crimes.

AuSSA 2007 survey respondents were asked how much of a problem a range of 'incivilities' were in their local area. The results (Table 6) indicate that for the majority of Australians, these five types of incivility are not perceived as 'a very big problem', or 'a problem at all' in their local area. In rank order, the most commonly perceived big problems (obtained by summing percentages for 'a very big problem' and 'a fairly big problem') were drug dealing (36.9%), unsupervised groups of young people (36.7%), graffiti (28.7%), drunk people (27.5%) and rubbish (23.7%).

Further analysis suggests that approximately four out of 10 survey respondents (41.5%) do not report a big problem (response options of 'a very big problem' and 'a fairly big problem' collapsed into one category) with any of the five incivilities in their local area, while 7.1 percent report a problem across all five types of incivilities.

Table 6 Incivilities in local area (percent)

Size of problem	Rubbish/litter	Graffiti	Unsupervised groups of young people	Drunk people	Drug dealing
A very big problem	6.3	8.6	12.8	9.3	13.9
A fairly big problem	17.4	20.1	23.9	18.2	23.0
Not a very big problem	60.6	52.9	47.2	50.6	41.0
Not a problem at all	15.8	18.4	16.0	22.0	22.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 10 Incivilities rated as a big problem by location (percent)

There are differences in perceptions of incivilities across types of locations (Figure 10). With the exception of graffiti, remote area respondents reported higher rates of concern with incivilities than respondents from capital cities, other metropolitan areas and rural areas.

Factor analysis was used to examine the underlying structure of the five incivilities items. These five items form a uni-dimensional scale with good internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .84). Possible scale scores range from five to 20. Data were recoded so that higher scores on the scale reflected greater problems.

This perceptions of incivility scale could be used to gauge overall levels of community concern with incivilities and could be a useful tool for local governments trying to measure the level of

community concern in this common area for complaints.

Fear of becoming a victim

The AuSSA 2007 survey respondents were asked:

How worried are you that the following will occur to you:

- being physically attacked at home
- being physically attacked on the street or other public space
- being sexually assaulted
- having your home/place of residence being broken into
- having your identity stolen via the Internet
- having your credit card stolen

- having your credit card details used illegally via the Internet.

The results are presented in Table 7 below.

Response options of 'very worried' and 'fairly worried' were collapsed into one category ('worried') to examine differences in worry about being the victim of crime by location. The results are presented in Figure 11. A smaller percentage of survey respondents in rural areas were worried about each of the crimes than survey respondents from other locations. The two forms of crime causing most worry were home burglary, and the theft of credit card and identity or credit card fraud.

Factor analysis was used to examine the underlying structure of the fear of crime items. Two underlying components were identified. The first includes the

items on worry about physical attack within the home and on the street, sexual assault and having the home broken into. This component has been labelled fear of physical/street crime. The four items were computed into a scale with good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=.86). The second component includes the remaining three items on worry about having personal identity stolen, credit cards stolen and illegally used on the internet. This component has been labelled fear of identity theft related crime. The three items were computed into a scale with good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=.88). Possible scale scores range from four to 16 (fear of physical crime scale) and three to 15 (fear of identity theft related crime scale). Data were recoded so that higher scores on the scales reflect higher levels of fear of crime. The two fear of crime scales are moderately correlated ($r=.47, p<.001$).

Table 7 Concern about becoming the victim of crimes (percent)

	Physical attack —home	Physical attack —street	Sexual assault	Home broken into	Identity stolen via internet	Credit card stolen	Credit card used illegally via internet
Very worried	6.0	8.3	6.0	14.9	15.9	17.5	23.0
Fairly worried	13.6	22.3	12.5	34.6	24.4	28.0	27.9
Not very worried	49.9	52.3	41.3	41.6	32.8	37.5	27.1
Not worried at all	30.5	17.1	40.2	8.9	26.9	17.0	22.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 11 Worry about being a victim of crimes by location (percent)



Consistent with the incivilities hypothesis, there was a moderate relationship between civil incivilities and fear of physical/street crime ($r=.38$, $p<.001$) and a weaker relationship between civil incivilities and fear of identity theft related crime ($r=.21$, $p<.001$).

Females scored significantly higher than males on the fear of physical/street crime ($t(4983.9)=16.04$, $p<.005$), and the fear of identity theft related crime ($t(4983)=2.82$, $p<.01$) scales, but did not score significantly differently from males on the incivilities scale. Fear of physical/street crime did not significantly differ with age, with only a very weak significant decrease in fear of identity theft related crime scores with age ($r=-.03$, $p<.05$). There was also a significant, but small increase in ratings of incivilities with age ($r=.07$, $p<.001$). That is, perceptions of incivilities and fear of identity theft related crime weakly decreased with age.

Fear of crime was also weakly, but significantly negatively correlated with measures of confidence in police and courts; that is, as fear increases, confidence decreases. Fear of physical crime was significantly negatively correlated with confidence in police and confidence in courts ($r=-.138$, $p<.001$). Fear of identity theft related crime was significantly negatively correlated with confidence in police ($r=-.06$, $p<.001$), and confidence in courts ($r=-.10$, $p<.001$). The correlations between fear of crime and confidence in prisons were not significant once Bonferroni corrections were made. The strongest relationship was between fear of physical crime and confidence in the police, with fear of physical crime accounting for approximately one-quarter of the variance in confidence in police scores. There are weak statistically significant relationships between fear of crime measures and agreement with the need for stiffer sentences (fear of physical crime: Spearman's $\rho=.20$, $p<.001$; fear of identity theft related crime: Spearman's $\rho=.12$, $p<.001$). Here we need to caution against any assumption of a causal relationship between these two variables as other explanations of the observed association are possible.

Policing

More than four out of 10 (40.5%) survey respondents ($n=2,125$) had some contact with police in the past year. In this group, the most

common form of contact, reported by more than half, was for random breath testing (Table 8).

Table 8 Respondents who had contact with the police in the past 12 months (percent)

Reason for contact	% ^a
Random breath test	57.2
Report a crime	27.8
Traffic infringement	20.9
Suspect in crime	1.1
Victim of crime	12.9
Call for assistance	23.6
Other	21.7

a: Figures add up to more than 100 percent as more than one type of contact is possible and recorded.

AuSSA figures are lower than those obtained in the National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing, which found that almost six in ten survey respondents (57.7%) reported contact with the police in 2006–07 (SCRGSP 2008).

Confidence in police

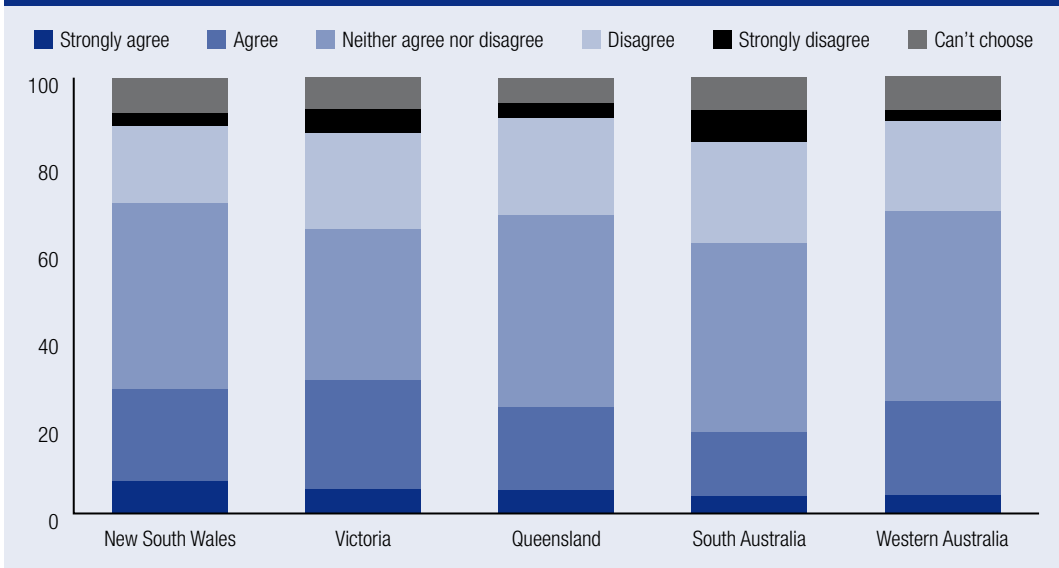
Survey respondents ($n=5,187-5,222$) were asked how much confidence they had in the police for a range of situations. The results (Table 9) indicate that the majority of respondents have at least quite a lot of confidence in the police to solve crime, to respond quickly to crime and to act fairly. Just under half the respondents (49.3%) had at least quite a lot of confidence in the police to prevent crime.

The four confidence in police items were factor analysed and formed into a uni-dimensional scale with good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha=.85$). Scores were reversed to compute a scale with a possible range from four to 16 where higher scores reflect greater confidence in the police. Females (mean 11.0, standard deviation 2.4) had slightly higher confidence in police than males (mean 10.5, standard deviation 2.4, $t(5067)=7.8$, $p<.001$). There was also a small significant effect for age, with confidence in police increasing with age ($r=.13$, $p<.001$).

Individuals who had contact with the police in the previous twelve months were slightly, (but

Table 9 Confidence in police (percent)

Level of confidence	Solve crime	Prevent crime	Respond quickly to crime	Act fairly
A great deal of confidence	15.8	8.8	9.7	16.2
Quite a lot of confidence	58.2	39.5	44.6	57.5
Not very much confidence	23.7	45.4	38.6	22.2
None at all	2.3	6.3	7.1	4.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 12 Agreement with statement ‘There is a lot of corruption in the police force in my State or Territory’ by state (percent)^a

a: Only states with 200 or more survey respondents are included in this figure

significantly), less confident in the police (mean 10.6, standard deviation 2.5) than others (mean 10.9, standard deviation=2.3; $t(4366.1)=4.5$, $p<.001$).

Police corruption

Survey respondents ($n=2,750$) were asked their level of agreement with the statement ‘There is a lot of corruption in the police force in my State or Territory’. Almost half the survey respondents (48.6%) neither agreed nor disagreed, or were unable to decide. Across Australia, approximately one-quarter each agreed (26.4%) and disagreed (25.0%). Responses by state are presented in Figure 12. Perceptions of corruption were highest in Victoria and lowest in South Australia. As a whole,

findings indicate a rather ambivalent public attitude to the occurrence of police corruption.

Post hoc Scheffe tests were used to show that those who agreed with the statement ‘There is a lot of corruption in the police force in my State or Territory’ had significantly lower confidence in the police (mean 9.7, standard deviation 2.5) than those who could not decide or neither agreed or disagreed (mean 10.9, standard deviation 2.1), who in turn had lower confidence than those who disagreed with the statement (mean 11.8, standard deviation 2.1; $F(2, 2607)=164.2$, $p.<.001$).

Those who had contact with the police in the previous year were significantly more likely to disagree that the police were corrupt (30.5% versus 22.6%; $\chi^2(2)=24.9$, $p<.001$).

Police treatment of Indigenous Australians

Four in 10 survey respondents (42.4%) disagreed with the statement that Aborigines are treated too harshly by the police. Just over one in five (21.4%) stated they were treated too harshly and just over one-third (36.2%) neither agreed nor disagreed or were unable to decide.

Courts

The majority of Australians have limited contact with criminal courts. Only one in twenty AuSSA 2007 survey respondents (5.4%) had any contact with a criminal court (magistrates, district or higher court) in the past year.

Confidence in criminal courts

AuSSA 2007 survey respondents were asked:

How much confidence do you have in the criminal courts

- to have regard for defendants' rights
- to have regard for victims' rights
- to deal with matters quickly
- to deal with matters fairly.

The responses are recorded in Table 10. The results indicate that Australians have more confidence in the criminal courts to have regard for defendants' rights (66.9%) than victims' rights (46.6%) or to deal with matters fairly (51.5%). Of concern, less than one-quarter (22.1%) have confidence in criminal courts to deal with matters quickly.

The four confidence in the courts items were factor analysed and a uni-dimensional scale with good

internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha: .84) formed from adding the four items. Scores were reversed to compute a scale with a possible range from four to 16 where higher scores reflect greater confidence in the courts. Scores on the newly created confidence in the court scale were compared for those who had and did not have contact with the courts in the past 12 months. Those who had contact with criminal courts in the previous 12 months had higher levels of confidence in the courts (mean 10.1, standard deviation 2.8) than those who did not (mean 9.7, standard deviation 2.4; $t(300.1)=2.5$, $p<.05$; equal variances not assumed). There are no significant sex differences in levels of confidence in criminal courts, but there is a small decrease in confidence in the courts with increasing age ($r=-.11$, $p<.001$).

The desire for harsher sentences

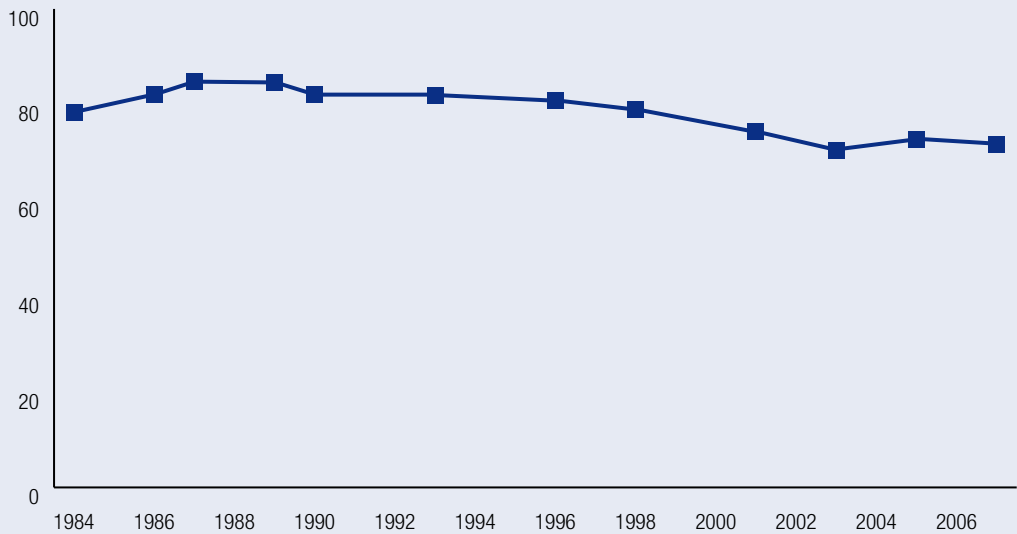
The majority of survey respondents (71.2%) agreed that 'people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences'. Similar results have been reported in Canada, where 74 percent of the public rate sentencing as 'too lenient' (Roberts et al. 2007). Only 6.6 percent disagreed, with a further 22.2 percent neither agreeing nor disagreeing or unable to choose. This question has been asked in Australian surveys for more than two decades (see Figure 13). The proportion of Australians who agree that stiffer sentences are needed has gradually declined from a peak in 1987. This is consistent with findings from other countries that also report declines in punitive attitudes to criminal behaviour (Roberts et al. 2003).

Those who had contact with the criminal court over the past 12 months were significantly less likely to agree that 'people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences' ($\chi^2(2)=25.3$, $p<.001$). The relationship is shown in Figure 14.

Table 10 Confidence in criminal courts (percent)

Degree of confidence	Defendants' rights	Victims' rights	Deal with matters quickly	Deal with matters fairly
A great deal of confidence	11.4	6.8	3.0	6.7
Quite a lot of confidence	55.5	39.8	19.1	44.8
Not very much confidence	27.4	41.8	58.1	40.0
None at all	5.7	11.1	19.8	8.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

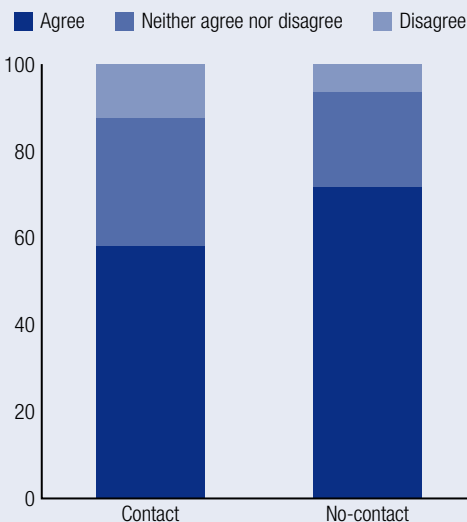
Figure 13 Respondents agreeing that people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences 1984–2007 (percent)^a



a: Unweighted data from AuSSA 2005 and 2007 have been used to retain consistency with earlier surveys.

Sources: National Social Science Survey (Kelley et al. 1984, 1986–87, 1987–88, 1989–90); Australian Election Study (McAllister et al. 1990; Jones et al. 1993, 1996; Bean et al. 1999, 2002); Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Gibson et al. 2004, Wilson et al. 2006, Phillips 2008)

Figure 14 Agreement with statement ‘people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences’ by contact with court (percent)



The relationship between desire for stiffer sentences and the importance of a range of media for informing views of crime was examined using Spearman’s rho correlations. The desire for stiffer sentences was

significantly positively associated with the self-rated importance of television ($\rho=.27, p<.001$), radio ($\rho=.15, p<.001$), family ($\rho=.12, p<.001$), newspapers ($\rho=.12, p<.001$) and friends ($\rho=.11, p<.05$) for informing views of crime.

The relationship between desire for stiffer sentences and beliefs about crime trends over the past two years was also examined using Spearman’s rho correlations. The desire for stiffer sentences was significantly positively associated with beliefs that crime was increasing ($\rho=.35, p<.001$) and perceptions of the number of crimes reported to the police that involved violence ($\rho=.30, p<.001$). However, there were weak negative correlations between the desire for stiffer sentences and perceptions of the proportion of violent criminals charged who were convicted ($\rho=-.17, p<.001$), men convicted of assault who were imprisoned ($\rho=-.14, p<.001$) and men convicted of home burglary who were imprisoned ($\rho=-.18, p<.001$).

The relationship between confidence in the courts and desire for stiffer sentences was also examined using Spearman’s rho correlations. The desire for stiffer sentences was significantly negatively correlated with confidence in the courts ($\rho=-.25, p<.001$).

Judges reflecting public views

The majority of survey respondents (58.4%) agreed that ‘when sentencing criminals, judges should reflect the views of the public’. Approximately one in five survey respondents (21.3%) disagreed, with the remainder (20.2%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing, or unable to choose. Those who had contact with a criminal court in the past 12 months were significantly less likely to agree that judges should reflect the views of the public when sentencing than those who had not (53.7% versus 70.8%.; chi sq (2)=24.8, p<.001).

Prisons

Survey respondents (n=5,059–5,117) rated how much confidence they had in the prison system to perform a number of roles. Table 11 shows that the majority of survey respondents had very little or no confidence in the prison system in terms of rehabilitating prisoners (87.7%), as a form or punishment (59.2), in deterring future offending (84.7%) or in teaching prisoners skills (63.8%).

The four items relating to confidence in the prisons were factor analysed and combined into a uni-dimensional scale with good internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha=.77). Scores were reversed to compute a scale with a possible range from four to 16 where higher scores reflect greater confidence in the prisons. There was no significant difference in scores on the confidence in prisons scale between those who had contact with a criminal court in the past 12 months and those who had not. Similarly, there were no sex differences in confidence in

prisons and only a slight decrease in confidence in prisons with age ($r=-.06$, $p<.001$).

Confidence across the criminal justice system

The scales measuring confidence in the police, prisons and courts are moderately positively correlated (police and courts $r=.38$, $p<.001$; courts and prisons $r=.43$, $p<.001$; police and prisons $r=.29$, $p<.001$).

Confidence levels (scale scores) in the three sectors of the criminal justice system are presented for the five largest states in Figure 15. In each state, the public has greatest confidence in the police, followed by courts and the least confidence in prisons.

Laws

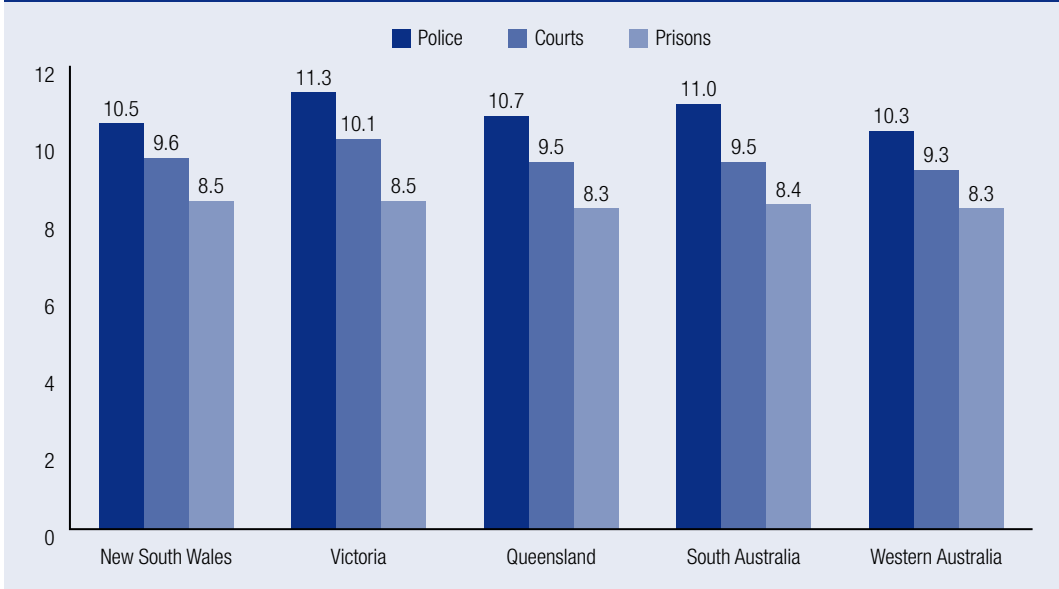
Death penalty

Capital punishment in Australian states was abolished in all Australian states between 1922 (Queensland) and 1984 (Western Australia). Before the final abolition there was a lengthy period where the death penalty officially existed and was passed as a sentence but was routinely commuted, with the last execution occurring in 1967, in Victoria. Approximately four out of 10 respondents (43.5%) agreed with the statement that the death penalty should be the punishment for murder, with just over one-third (34.7%) disagreeing. The remainder neither

Table 11 Confidence in prison system (percent)

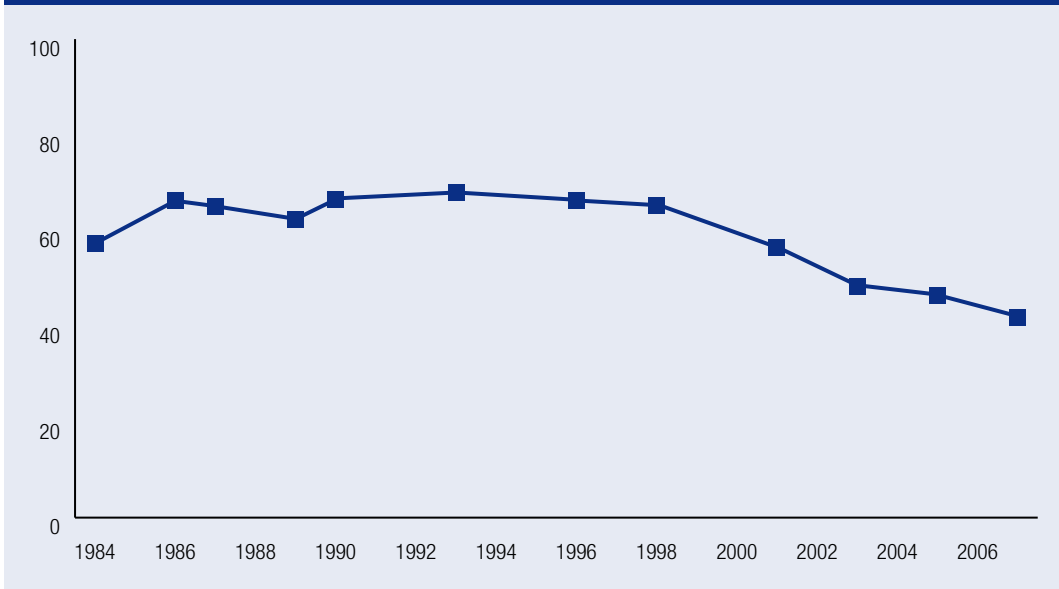
	Rehabilitate prisoners	Form of punishment	Deter future offending	Teach skills
A great deal of confidence	1.5	5.6	2.1	3.6
Quite a lot of confidence	10.8	35.2	13.2	32.6
Not very much confidence	66.6	44.8	59.8	51.9
None at all	21.1	14.4	24.9	11.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figure 15 Confidence in police, courts and prisons by state (scale score)^a



a: Five largest states (by population) shown only.

Figure 16 Respondents agreeing that the death penalty should be the punishment for murder 1984–2007 (percent)^a



a: Unweighted data from AuSSA 2005 and 2007 have been used to retain consistency with earlier surveys.

Sources: National Social Science Survey (Kelley et al. 1984, 1986–87, 1987–88, 1989–90); Australian Election Study (McAllister et al. 1990; Jones et al. 1993, 1996; Bean et al. 1999, 2002); Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Gibson et al. 2004, Wilson et al. 2006, Phillips 2008)

agreed nor disagreed or were unable to choose. This question has been asked in various forms in Australian surveys for more than two decades. The trends in response to this question are presented in Figure 16 and show a steady decline in support for the death penalty as the punishment for murder since 1993.

Marijuana laws

Opinion was also divided over whether the smoking of marijuana should be decriminalised. Just over half the respondents (50.8%) disagreed and approximately one in four (26.2%) agreed that marijuana should not be a criminal offence. A minority (23.1%) neither agreed nor disagreed or were unable to choose. This question has been asked in various forms in Australian surveys for more than two decades. The trends in response to this question are presented in Figure 17 and depict little movement in support for the decriminalisation of smoking marijuana since 2001. Following a slight increase in support during the 1990s, levels have fallen marginally over the past decade. By 2004 four Australian jurisdictions provided civil rather than criminal penalties for minor cannabis offences

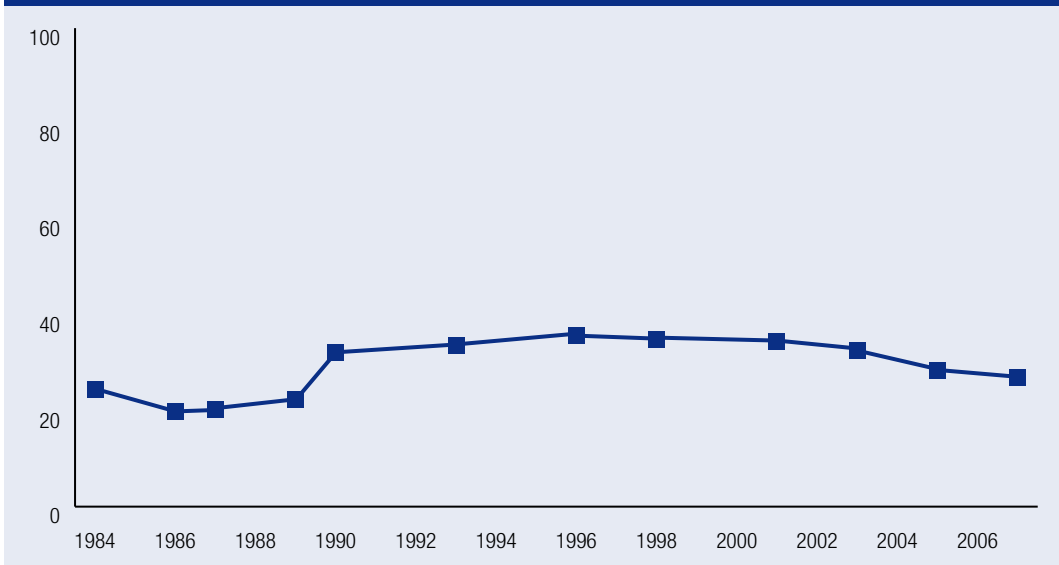
(South Australia, Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Western Australia) with an additional three states (Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales) providing formal cautions for the first two or three offences where small quantities of cannabis are involved (Lenton 2004).

The law, personal information and censorship

In each of the three iterations of AuSSA to date, a series of statements about law and authority have been presented for survey respondents to indicate their level of agreement. In this section, results for four of these statements are provided from the 2007 survey:

- ‘The law should always be obeyed even if a particular law is wrong.’
- ‘Breaking the law to protect a family member or a friend is sometimes justified.’
- ‘Personal information about citizens should have stronger legal protection.’
- ‘Censorship of films and magazines has no place in a free society.’

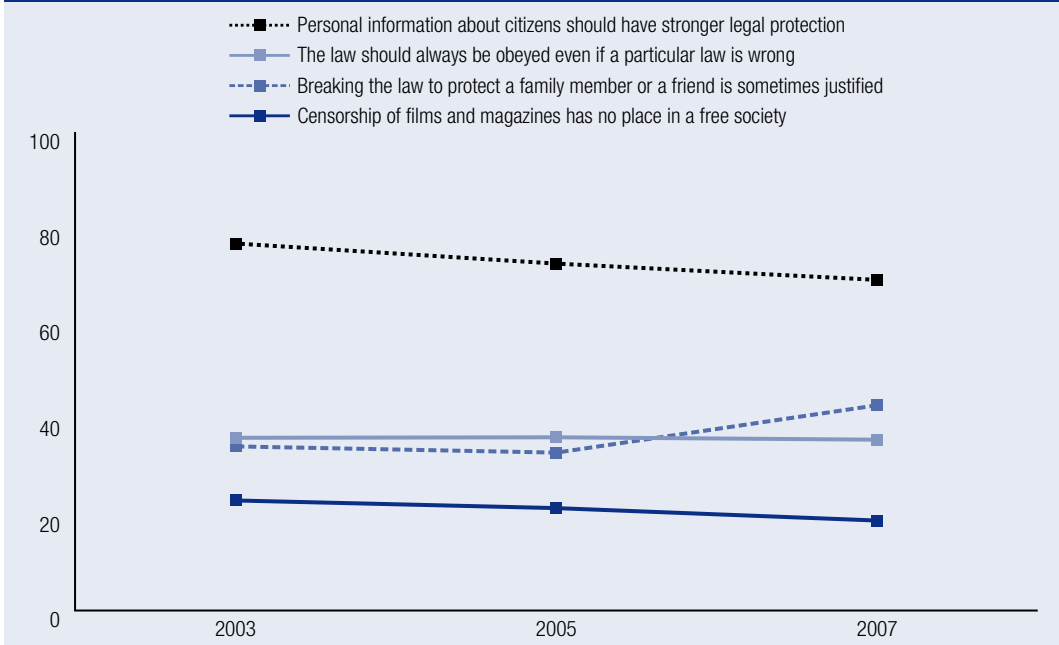
Figure 17 Respondents agreeing that smoking marijuana should not be a criminal offence, 1984–2007^a (percent)



a: Unweighted data from AuSSA 2005 and 2007 have been used to retain consistency with earlier surveys.

Sources: National Social Science Survey (Kelley et al. 1984, 1986–87, 1987–88, 1989–90); Australian Election Study (McAllister et al. 1990; Jones et al. 1993, 1996; Bean et al. 1999, 2002); Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Gibson et al. 2004, Wilson et al. 2006, Phillips 2008)

Figure 18 Respondents agreeing with law and authority statements 2003–07 (percent)^a



a: Unweighted data used for comparability across surveys

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Gibson et al. 2003, Wilson et al. 2005, 2007)

Survey respondents were divided in their views regarding whether the law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong. Just over one-third (36.0%) stated the law should always be obeyed, a similar proportion (36.3%) disagreed and 27.6 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, or were unable to decide.

A large minority (42.9%) agreed that breaking the law to protect a family member or friend is sometimes justified. Three in ten (30.1%) disagreed and 27.1 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, or were unable to decide.

The majority of survey respondents (69.5%) believed that personal information about citizens should have stronger legal protection. A small minority (7.2%) disagreed, with almost one-quarter of respondents

(23.3%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing, or unable to decide.

The majority of respondents (60.7%) disagreed that censorship of films and magazines has no place in a free society. Less than one in five (19.0%) agreed, and one in five (20.3%) neither agreed nor disagreed, or were unable to decide.

Agreement with the four statements over the three iterations of the survey is presented in Figure 18. Taken together, changes in levels of public agreement with these four statements suggest little change in the public mood apart from a slight decline in the level of respect for the rule of law in terms of the allegiance owed to it by individual citizens.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the AuSSA 2007 survey, the third in the series, confirm some of the emerging trends in public perceptions of crime and justice in Australia. In broad summary the results reported here support the following observations:

- Crime remains an important concern to Australians, being consistently ranked as one of the top ten concerns from a list of social issues over the three sweeps of the AuSSA survey. Approximately one in eight adult Australians view crime and related issues (drugs, terrorism) as the most important issues facing Australia today.
- Broadcast and tabloid media provide the major source of information for most members of the public on crime and justice.
- The vast majority of the public have distorted views about the distribution of crime and the severity of sentencing. Consistent with previous Australian research and in line with observations in similar western countries, the Australian public hold incorrect perceptions of crime trends, the proportion of violent crimes, and the number of offenders brought to trial who are convicted and imprisoned.

The AuSSA 2007 survey provides a degree of benchmarking of public beliefs and perceptions about crime and justice. These results highlight some of the pervasive beliefs and concerns of the

public and also to some degree, the possible causes or associated concerns underlying those beliefs and perceptions.

The AuSSA 2007 survey explored perceptions of new and topical areas of crime, in particular, terrorism. The results indicate that approximately three-quarters of Australians thought a terrorist attack in South East Asia in the 12 months post-survey was likely, with one-third thinking this likely in Australia during the same period. The majority of survey respondents support governments having the right to tap telephone conversations, stop and search people in the street at random and to detain indefinitely without trial where terrorism is suspected, but do not support the torture of prisoners. Support for the extension of legal powers is related to individual beliefs about the likelihood of a terrorist attack. Australians who thought a terrorist attack was likely in Australia in the 12 months post-survey were significantly more likely than those who did not, to agree that police should have the power to detain a terrorist suspect and significantly less likely to agree that torturing a prisoner is never justified. Naturally, as always, when associations between two variables are observed we cannot assume that it is actually the belief in increased risk that drives the preference for tougher measures. It may be that these two variables tap into a more fundamental aspect of the individual such as authoritarianism

or conservatism that explains both observations. However, even if this is the case, perceptions of increased threat are likely to support expressions of support for tougher measures. Thus, during times of heightened anxiety about terrorist attacks in Australia, it is likely that public discourse will be steered towards discussions of the need for the extension of police powers to address terrorism. The complex interplay of media exposure, political initiative and public expressions of grief and outrage will facilitate a focus on measures of combating terrorism. This focus will make it less possible for a rational debate and a consideration of human rights (Indermaur 2008) to occur.

The majority of Australians rate incivilities as not a very big problem, or not a problem at all in their local area. Further, the majority of Australians were not very worried about being a victim of crime. However, this still leaves a sizeable minority who are fairly or very worried. On average, females had higher rates of fear than males, with fear increasing as perceptions of incivilities increased. A major new fear is worry about identity theft and credit card fraud. While fear of crime remains a large issue, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which this actually affects the everyday activities of different Australians. However, fear of crime was associated with decreased confidence in the criminal justice system and more punitive attitudes.

The AuSSA 2007 survey also highlighted emerging themes of public interest with regard to the administration of criminal justice. The public have mixed views about the efficacy of the government in controlling crime, with approximately one-third each reporting that the government was successful, unsuccessful and neither successful nor unsuccessful in controlling crime. The majority support increased government expenditure on police and law enforcement.

Confidence in the criminal justice system varies in predictable ways, with most confidence in the police and least in the prison system. The majority of Australians have confidence in the police to solve crime, to respond quickly to crime and to act fairly, despite one-quarter of the population believing there is a lot of police corruption in their state or territory. Australians have more confidence in the criminal courts to have regard for defendants' rights than

victims' rights or to deal with matters fairly. Low levels of confidence in the courts were associated with the desire for stiffer sentences. The majority of Australians have little or no confidence in the prison system in rehabilitating prisoners, as a form of punishment, in deterring future offending or in teaching prisoners skills.

Some questions in the AuSSA 2007 survey have now been asked of Australians over two decades. Of note, public support or approval of the death penalty has consistently declined since 1996 and is now well below the 50 percent mark for the third measurement in a row, the first being in 2002. This is a pertinent finding, given the debate about whether practice leads attitude change or attitude change leads practice. This is highly relevant to debates and decisions in the US regarding the death penalty (see Indermaur 2006). Similarly, the proportion of Australians who agree that stiffer sentences are needed has gradually declined from a peak in 1987. This is consistent with findings from other countries with regard to declines in punitive attitudes (Roberts et al. 2003). In contrast, the level of support for the decriminalisation of cannabis has remained relatively stable since 1990.

Despite the reported decline in desire for stiffer sentences, the majority (approximately 7 out of 10) of Australians still report that people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences. The results indicate that this is at least partially driven by incorrect perceptions of crime rates and sentencing and the importance placed on a range of media as the source of information about crime and justice. The desire for stiffer sentences is also significantly associated with lower levels of confidence in the courts.

The biennial AuSSA surveys provide an important means of measuring the pulse of Australians in relation to their perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system. The results provided in this report are important in confirming the importance of public perceptions and highlighting those areas where more work is needed to increase the level of public awareness and understanding of matters related to crime and the criminal justice system. The results provide a good overview of perceptions and attitudes held at a superficial level. Naturally, a more detailed and nuanced picture emerges

when the public is provided more detailed information and put in a position to balance competing interests in the area of crime and punishment. This kind of analysis requires a much more detailed investigation than is possible with the simple mail-out questionnaire used as the basis for the AuSSA results reported here. The results at the superficial level are useful for very general purposes and reveal a public that remains sceptical, or

perhaps ambivalent, about the performance of the criminal justice system, perceives criminal victimisation to be a much greater risk than is actually the case and perceives the criminal justice system as being softer than it really is. These misperceptions are generally attributable to the main source of information respondents rely on for their picture of crime and criminal justice—the popular media.



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Appendixes

Appendix A: Demographic details of sample

A breakdown of research participants by age and gender is shown in Table A1.

Table A1 Gender and age

Age	Female	Male	Total
18–30	654	395	1,049
31–40	745	502	1,247
41–50	877	765	1,642
51–60	863	854	1,717
61–70	622	635	1,257
71–80	390	392	782
Over 80	129	118	247
Total	4,280	3,661	7,941

Highest level of education completed by survey respondents is shown in Table A2.

Table A2 Highest level of education completed

Highest level of education completed	Frequency	%
Less than Year 12	1,817	23.0
Year 12	849	10.7
Trade/apprenticeship	1,180	14.9
Certificate/diploma	2,125	26.8
Bachelor degree and above	1,946	24.6
Total	7,917	100.0

The majority (62.6%) of survey respondents were currently part of the labour workforce. Individual and

household incomes were widely dispersed (see Table A3), with more than half (56%) of households, but less than a third (30%) of individuals having a gross income of over \$52,000 per annum.

Table A3 Individual and household gross income

Gross income	Household	Individual
\$1 – \$199 per week (\$1 – \$10,399 per year)	321	986
\$200 – \$299 per week (\$10,400 – \$15,599 per year)	479	905
\$300 – \$399 per week (\$15,600 – \$20,799 per year)	300	541
\$400 – \$499 per week (\$20,800 – \$25,999 per year)	400	508
\$500 – \$599 per week (\$26,000 – \$31,199 per year)	346	539
\$600 – \$699 per week (\$31,200 – \$36,399 per year)	308	457
\$700 – \$799 per week (\$36,400 – \$41,599 per year)	374	483
\$800 – \$999 per week (\$41,600 – \$51,999 per year)	555	758
\$1,000 – \$1,499 per week (\$52,000 – \$77,999 per year)	1,220	1,191
\$1,500 – \$1,999 per week (\$78,000 – \$103,999 per year)	1,038	483
\$2,000+ (\$104,000+ per year)	1,683	526
Total	7,024	7,377

Appendix B: Content areas of survey

The surveys covered thirty-five categories of attitudes and behaviours

- describing Australia
- leisure time and sports
- environment
- role of government
- crime and criminal justice
- risk
- law and authority
- politics and media
- culture
- magistrates court
- geographical identity
- retirement
- industrial relations
- culture and society
- private health insurance
- place of residence
- collective memory
- financial future
- religious attitudes
- Ned Kelly

- Aboriginality
- government regulation
- engagement with Asia
- work
- homelessness
- the sacred
- gender
- IVF technology and sex selection

- loneliness
- global networks
- shopping
- politics and society
- terrorism
- people in general
- membership of organisations.

Appendix C: Crime and justice items in AuSSA 2007 (AuSSA survey forms B and C)

Section B: Crime and criminal justice

B1. How important are the following in informing your views of crime trends and the criminal justice system?

- TV
- Radio
- Newspapers
- Internet
- Work colleagues
- Friends
- Family

Rating scale

- Not at all important
- Not very important
- Fairly important
- Very important

B2. How would you rate the following problems in your local area?

- Rubbish and litter
- Graffiti on footpaths and walls
- Unsupervised groups of young people
- People drunk
- People dealing illicit drugs

Rating scale

- Not a problem at all
- Not a very big problem
- A fairly big problem
- A very big problem

B3. How worried are you that the following will occur to you?

- Being physically attacked at home
- Being physically attacked on the street or other public space
- Being sexually assaulted
- Having your home/place of residence being broken into
- Having your identity stolen via the Internet
- Having your credit card stolen
- Having your credit card details used illegally via the Internet

Rating scale

- Not worried at all
- Not very worried
- Fairly worried
- Very worried

B4. How much confidence do you have in the police...

- to solve crime?
- to prevent crime?
- to respond quickly to crime?
- to act fairly when dealing with people?

Rating scale

- None at all
- Not very much confidence
- Quite a lot of confidence
- A great deal of confidence

B5. Have you had any contact with the police in the past year?

- Yes
- No Skip to B7

B6. If yes, what kind of contact?

Cross all that apply

- Random breath test
- Reporting a crime
- Traffic infringement
- Being a suspect in a crime
- Being a victim of a crime
- Calling police for assistance
- Other

B7. Have you had any contact with the criminal courts (magistrates, district or higher courts) in the past year?

- Yes
- No

B8. How much confidence do you have in the criminal courts...

- to have regard for defendants' rights?
- to have regard for victims' rights?
- to deal with matters quickly?
- to deal with matters fairly?

Rating scale

- None at all
- Not very much confidence
- Quite a lot of confidence
- A great deal of confidence

B9. How much confidence do you have in prisons...

- to rehabilitate prisoners?
- to act as a form of punishment?
- to deter future offending?
- to teach practical skills to prisoners?

Rating scale

- None at all
- Not very much confidence
- Quite a lot of confidence
- A great deal of confidence

B10. Do you think that the level of crime in Australia has changed over the past 2 years?

Rating scale

- A lot more crime
- A little more crime
- About the same
- A little less crime
- A lot less crime
- Don't know

The following questions ask you to give an answer out of 100. If you are not sure about the number, please give your best guess.

B11. Of every 100 crimes recorded by the police, roughly what number do you think involve VIOLENCE or the THREAT of violence? (0–100)

B12. Of every 100 people charged with a violent crime and brought to court, roughly what number do you think end up convicted? (0–100)

B13. Now I would like you to think about the kinds of sentence that are imposed for assault. Out of every 100 men aged 18 or over who are CONVICTED of ASSAULT, how many do you think are sent to prison? (0–100)

B14. Now turning to home burglary. Out of every 100 MEN aged 18 or over who are convicted of HOME BURGLARY, how many do you think are sent to prison? (0–100)

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The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) is a biennial mail-out survey that provides data on key questions relating to Australia's social attitudes and behaviours over time. This report explores the differences between the public view and the reality of how much recorded crime there is and of what happens to offenders after they are charged. The results are valuable as a measure of public attitudes and perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system.

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