



Public Satisfaction with Police Contact - Part I: Police-Initiated Contacts

Findings from the 2002-03 ACPR National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing

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This paper is Part I of a two-part series exploring public satisfaction with police contact. Public satisfaction with police contact is a key indicator of service quality. Public satisfaction surveys are therefore one way police departments can monitor the quality of the services they provide. Using data from the 2002-03 National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing, the paper focused upon public satisfaction with police-initiated contacts. Differentiating between a variety of police-initiated contacts (broadly defined as non-targeted, neutral-targeted, and negative-targeted), the paper aimed to: (1) examine the different types of police-initiated contact; and (2) determine whether specific situational and individual factors influence evaluations of police service quality. The paper found that although the majority of respondents were satisfied with the service they received during their most recent police-initiated contact, satisfaction varied according to the type of contact. Age, gender, and ethnicity also influenced satisfaction to varying degrees. The implications for police are discussed.

Introduction

Public contact with the police is not uncommon. It is estimated that approximately one in every two Australians will have direct contact with police each year.¹ From the public's perspective, contact with police usually occurs under unpleasant circumstances. Often it will be as the result of committing a crime or, more commonly, as the result of being a victim of a crime. However, regardless of the reason for contact, service quality is of great importance. Evidence suggests that individuals who have negative experiences with the police are less willing to co-operate with police investigations, less likely to report crimes, and more likely to behave in a defensive manner when approached by the police (Brown & Benedict, 2002). From a police perspective, therefore, the provision of high quality service is vital for maintaining strong police–community relations.

Public satisfaction with police is considered a key indicator of service quality. As a result, police departments worldwide have begun to employ public satisfaction surveys to monitor the quality of the services they provide. Here in Australia, public satisfaction is monitored by the *National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing* (NSCSP). The NSCSP is an annual survey commissioned by the Australasian Centre for Policing Research on behalf of all Australian police departments. Conducted by ACNielsen, the NSCSP is the only Australian survey to provide national data regarding public satisfaction with police and police services.²

¹ Based on unpublished data from the 2002-03 *National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing* (Australasian Centre for Policing Research).

² The NSCSP was established in July 2001, replacing the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Population Survey Monitor*.

Public satisfaction with police contact

The 2001-02 NSCSP revealed that the majority of Australians who came into direct contact with police were satisfied with the service they received. Specifically, 82.4 percent of respondents surveyed reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service they received during their most recent encounter with police. This suggests that, in general, eight in every ten contacts with police are considered to be satisfactory. Empirical evidence, however, suggests that satisfaction can vary markedly according to the nature of the contact.

Satisfaction and the nature of police contact

Researchers generally differentiate between two forms of police contact: police-initiated (or involuntary) contact and public-initiated (or voluntary) contact. Studies comparing these forms of contact have generally found that public-initiated contacts are associated with significantly higher satisfaction ratings than police-initiated contacts (Cheurprakobkit, 2000). Distinguishing the nature of police contact is therefore important when analysing satisfaction data.

To date, the majority of satisfaction research has focused on public-initiated contacts or, more specifically, contacts that were initiated to report a crime. Such research suggests that although the majority of individuals who initiate contact with the police are satisfied with the service they receive, satisfaction is influenced by a variety of situational and individual variables. Influential factors include the reason for contact, the type of crime reported, and the age, gender, and ethnicity of the member of the public (Brown & Benedict, 2002). As yet, few studies have examined public satisfaction with *police*-initiated contacts. In those that have, the definition of police-initiated contact was generally limited to receiving a traffic violation (Cheurprakobkit, 2000; Reisig & Chandek, 2001) or arrest (Cheurprakobkit, 2000). Obviously, police officers initiate contact with members of the public for a variety of reasons, many of which have more positive outcomes than receiving a traffic violation or being arrested. In fact, a study conducted by the National Institute of Justice (2003) in the United States found that informal contacts (e.g., interactions with police at community meetings and police sponsored youth activities) elicited much greater satisfaction than did formal contacts (e.g., calls for service and being questioned by police). As a result, the present research examined a range of reasons for contact, including those with potentially positive and neutral outcomes.

Purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper was to examine public satisfaction with a variety of police-initiated contacts using data from the 2002-03 *National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing*. Specifically, the paper aimed to: (1) examine the different types of police-initiated contact; and (2) determine whether specific situational and demographic variables influence evaluations of police service quality during police-initiated contacts.

The 2002-03 National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing

The 2002-03 NSCSP covered the period from 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2003. Conducted by telephone interview, the survey contained 20 questions relating to general and contact-specific evaluations of police performance, perceptions of personal safety, and perceptions of crime-related problems. Although previously limited to persons aged 18 years and older, the present survey incorporated persons aged 15 to 17 years. Current police employees and their immediate family were excluded from participation.

Respondents

During the 2002-03 period, 22,433 persons aged 15 years and older participated in the NSCSP. A breakdown of the respondents' demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. 2002-03 National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing sample demographics

		N	%
Gender	Male	8,883	39.6
	Female	13,550	60.4
Age Group	15 – 17 years	541	2.4
	18 – 19 years	460	2.1
	20 – 24 years	1,228	5.5
	25 – 39 years	6,150	27.4
	40 – 54 years	7,325	32.7
Multilingual*	55 + years	6,729	30.0
	Yes	2,115	9.4
	No	19,958	89.0
ATSI*	Yes	439	2.0
	No	21,605	96.3

Note. ATSI = Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

*Totals do not equal 100% as participants who refused to respond are not shown.

Contact with Police

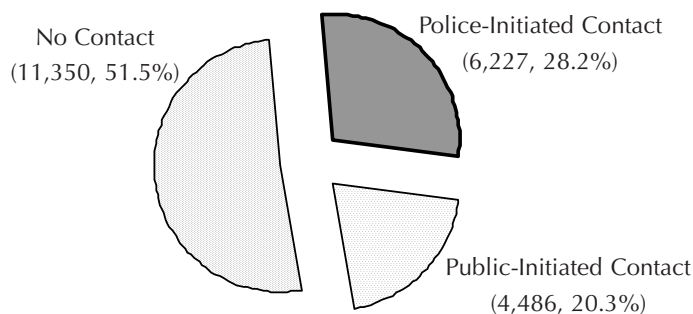
All respondents were asked: 'In the last 12 months, have you had contact with the police?' Overall, 47.8 percent of respondents reported having at least one contact with police, averaging approximately three contacts each.³ Men were significantly more likely to have had police contact than women.⁴ Further, respondents aged between 18 and 54 were significantly more likely to have had contact than respondents aged 15 to 17, and those aged 55 and over.⁵ In contrast, respondents who spoke a second language were significantly less likely to have had contact with police than respondents who only spoke English.⁶

Nature of contact

The NSCSP distinguishes between two forms of contact: police-initiated and public-initiated. *Police-initiated* contacts are contacts initiated by the police and may be formal or informal in nature. Examples of police-initiated contacts include conducting random breath tests, issuing a speeding fine, or arresting a suspect. In contrast, *public-initiated* contacts are defined as contacts that are initiated by individual members of the public.

Respondents who had contact with police were asked, 'Who initiated the *most recent contact* you had with police?'. As shown in Figure 1, approximately 58 percent of respondents (28.2% of the total sample) reported that their most recent contact was police-initiated. As the aim of this paper was to examine public satisfaction with a variety of police-initiated contacts, the remainder of the paper focuses upon those respondents who reported that their most recent contact with the police was initiated by the police.

Figure 1. Nature of contact with police



³ $M = 3.08, SD = 5.01$

⁴ $\chi^2(1) = 96.90, p < .001$

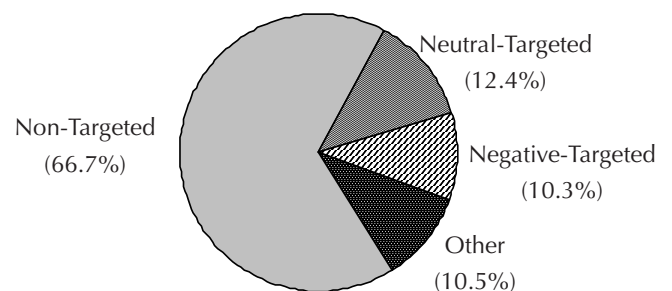
⁵ $\chi^2(5) = 971.03, p < .001$

⁶ $\chi^2(1) = 55.97, p < .001$

Type of police-initiated contact

Respondents who indicated that their most recent contact was police-initiated were asked, 'Why were the police in contact with you most recently?'. Responses were classified as either: non-targeted or targeted.⁷ Non-targeted contacts were defined as contacts that occurred at random (e.g., random breath tests) or were informal in nature. In contrast, targeted contacts were defined as contacts in which police officers approached particular individuals for a specific purpose. This category was further divided into neutral or negative contacts. Neutral-targeted contacts were contacts that resulted in a neutral outcome (e.g., asking for information, investigating a noise/disturbance, or investigating a traffic accident) while negative-targeted contacts were those that had a negative outcome for the respondent (e.g., arrest or recording a traffic violation). As illustrated in Figure 2, non-targeted contacts were by far the most common type of police-initiated contact (66.7%), and negative-targeted contacts were the least common (10.3%).

Figure 2. Type of police-initiated contact



Younger respondents were more likely to have reported having a neutral- or negative-targeted contact, while older respondents were more likely to have had a non-targeted contact.⁸ Further, men were more likely than women to have had a negative-targeted contact, while women were significantly more likely than men to have had a neutral-targeted contact.⁹

Satisfaction with Police-Initiated Contacts

Respondents were then asked, 'How satisfied were you with the service you received during your most recent contact with police?'. Respondents indicated their degree

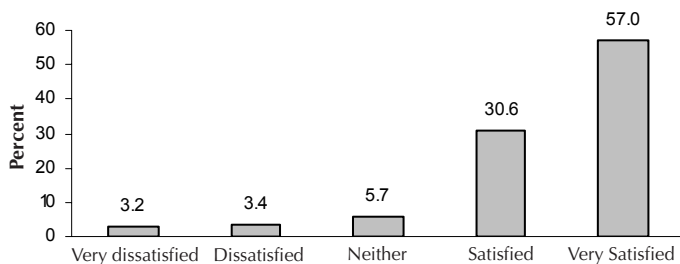
⁷ Responses coded as 'other' were excluded from analysis because the exact type of contact could not be determined.

⁸ $\chi^2(15) = 127.21, p < .001$

⁹ $\chi^2(3) = 25.92, p < .001$

of satisfaction on a five-point scale, where 1 represented 'very dissatisfied' and 5 represented 'very satisfied'. As illustrated in Figure 3, the majority (86.6%) of respondents reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service they received. This finding suggests that the majority of Australians who are contacted by the police are satisfied with the service they receive. This implies that, from the public's perspective, the service provided by police during such contacts is of a reasonably high standard.

Figure 3. Respondent evaluations of their most recent police-initiated contact



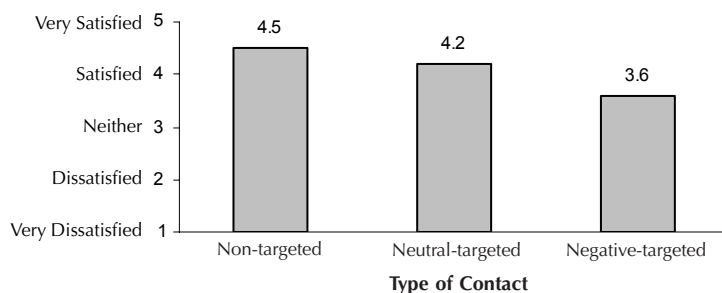
As previously indicated, studies that have investigated evaluations of specific *public*-initiated contacts have consistently demonstrated that satisfaction with police service can be influenced by a number of situational and individual factors. In order to determine whether such factors also influence satisfaction with *police*-initiated contacts, the present paper explored a number of variables in greater detail. Specifically, type of police-initiated contact and the respondents' age, gender, and ethnicity¹⁰ were examined.¹¹

Type of police-initiated contact

Statistical analysis showed that the type of police-initiated contact had a significant impact upon satisfaction.¹² Overall, contacts that were non-targeted elicited greater satisfaction than targeted contacts. Further, targeted contacts that had a neutral outcome received a greater satisfaction rating than targeted contacts with a negative outcome. It should be noted, however, that despite receiving the lowest rating of service satisfaction, negative-targeted contacts still averaged a satisfaction rating of 3.6 ($SD = 1.4$) on the five-point scale. This means that, despite the negative outcome, a large proportion of respondents rated the service as satisfactory. In fact, more than 65 percent of respondents were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'

with the service they received during their most recent negative-targeted contact.

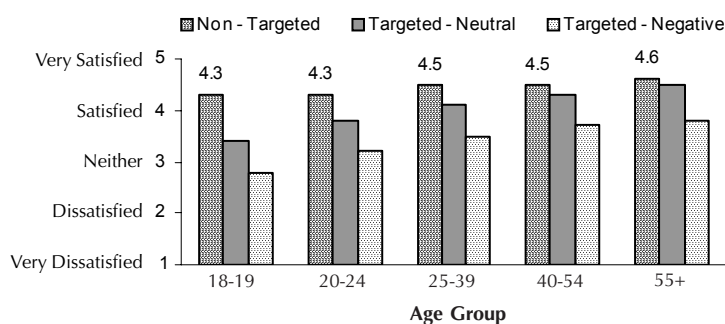
Figure 4. Average satisfaction rating for police-initiated contact according to the type of contact



Age

Further analysis showed that satisfaction with the quality of police service differed according to the age of the respondent.¹³ Specifically, satisfaction tended to increase with age, such that older respondents were significantly more satisfied than younger respondents. As illustrated in Figure 5, this age pattern was evident across all three types of contact. This finding is consistent with Cheurprakobkit (2000), who also found that satisfaction with police-initiated contacts (specifically arrest and traffic violations) increased with age.¹⁴

Figure 5. Average satisfaction rating for police-initiated contact according to the reason for contact and age



Gender

Gender also had a significant impact on satisfaction ratings, but this appeared to vary according to the age of the respondent.¹⁵ As illustrated in Figure 6, female respondents aged 20 to 24 and 25 to 39 were significantly more satisfied than their male counterparts. There was no gender difference in the remaining age groups, nor did this pattern vary according to the type of contact.¹⁶

¹⁰ The influence of ethnicity on satisfaction was examined by comparing the respondents who were multilingual to those who were unilingual.

¹¹ The influence of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status on satisfaction was not explored due to an insufficient number of respondents.

¹² $F(2, 5431) = 162.88, p < .001$

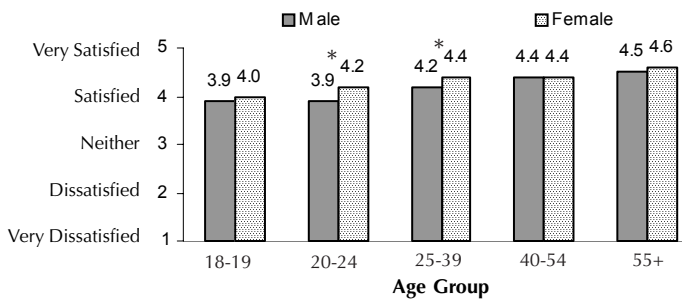
¹³ $F(4, 5431) = 27.81, p < .001$

¹⁴ An interaction between age and type of contact was also found, $F(8, 5431) = 3.54, p < .001$. Further investigation revealed that this interaction effect did not alter the pattern of findings.

¹⁵ $F(4, 5431) = 5.016, p < .001$

¹⁶ $F(2, 5431) = 0.87, p > .025$

Figure 6. Average satisfaction rating for police-initiated contact according to age and gender

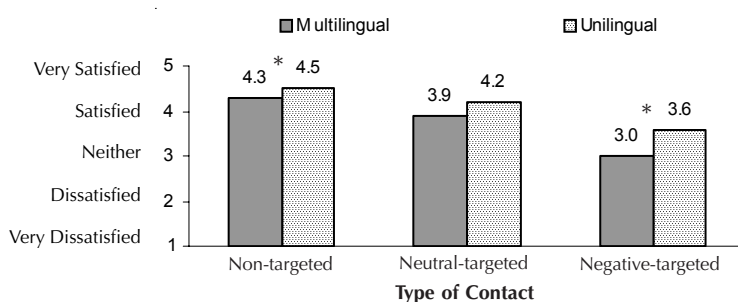


*Denotes significant difference ($p < .001$)

Ethnicity

Finally, statistical analysis¹⁷ found that ethnicity significantly influenced satisfaction ratings.¹⁸ As illustrated in Figure 7, unilingual respondents were significantly more satisfied with police service than multilingual respondents when contacts were non-targeted or targeted with a negative outcome.¹⁹ No difference was found for neutral-targeted contacts. This finding is consistent with similar surveys conducted in Great Britain and the United States, which found that individuals from ethnic backgrounds tended to rate police-initiated contacts more negatively than respondents of white-European descent (Cheurprakobkit, 2000; Clancy, Hough, Aust, & Kershaw, 2001).

Figure 7. Average satisfaction rating for police-initiated contact according to the reason for contact and ethnicity



*Denotes significant difference ($p < .001$)

Reasons Underlying Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

Finally, respondents were asked, 'Why were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the service you received?'. The reasons underlying satisfaction with police service quality were considered according to the type of contact (non-targeted,

¹⁷ A second univariate analysis of variance was needed to investigate the influence of ethnicity on satisfaction due to an insufficient number of participants. Consequently, alpha was adjusted to .025.

¹⁸ $F(1, 5546) = 31.66, p < .001$

¹⁹ $F(2, 5546) = 6.40, p < .025$

neutral-targeted, negative-targeted). First, the most common reason for satisfaction among respondents who reported having a *non-targeted* contact was that the police were courteous (39.4%). Alternatively, the most common reason for dissatisfaction was that the police were unfriendly or impolite (37.9%). It therefore appears that police demeanour played an important role in the evaluation of non-targeted police contacts. It has been suggested that police behaviour has a strong influence on public evaluations of *public*-initiated contact. In fact, Chandek and Porter (1998) found that police behaviour was the most salient determinant of satisfaction among victims of crime. The present research reinforces this finding for *police*-initiated contacts.

In comparison, the most common reason for satisfaction among respondents who reported a *neutral-targeted* contact was that the police were professional or fair (25.1%). Similarly, the most common reason among respondents who reported a *negative-targeted* contact was that the police took appropriate action or were simply doing their job (29.1%). The most common reason for dissatisfaction for both types of targeted contacts was that the police were unprofessional or unfair (20.4% and 20.2%, respectively), followed by reports that the police made a false accusation (19.4% and 24.8%, respectively). These findings suggest that evaluations of targeted contacts were not only influenced by the officer's actions, but also according to whether the individual considered these actions to be reasonable or justified. In other words, the individual's interpretation of police action seems to be an important determinant of satisfaction for targeted contacts. This finding is unique to the present study and suggests that the *type* of police-initiated contact should be taken into account when investigating public satisfaction with service quality.

Key Findings

- Almost half of respondents interviewed reported having at least one contact with police during the 12 months preceding the survey;
- Overall, 58 percent of respondents who had contact with police reported that their most recent contact was police-initiated;
- Approximately 87 percent of respondents were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service they received during their most recent police-initiated contact;
- Women aged 20-39 were more satisfied than similarly aged men;

- Non-targeted police-initiated contacts received a higher average rating of satisfaction than targeted contacts (both neutral and negative);
- Older respondents were generally more satisfied than younger respondents across all three types of contact;
- Unilingual respondents were more satisfied than multilingual respondents during non-targeted and negative-targeted contacts;
- Officer demeanour was the main reason for satisfaction for non-targeted contacts;
- Officer action and the interpretation of this action were the primary reasons for satisfaction for targeted contacts.

Conclusions

A considerable proportion of Australian residents have direct contact with police each year. A substantial proportion of these contacts are initiated by the police. The findings of this paper suggest that, overall, the majority of Australians are satisfied with the service they receive during police-initiated contacts. However, satisfaction varied according to the *type* of police-initiated contact experienced. Specifically, non-targeted contacts (such as random breath tests and informal contacts) led to greater satisfaction ratings than targeted contacts. It is interesting to note, however, that although targeted contacts with a negative outcome (e.g., receiving a traffic violation or arrest) obtained the lowest average satisfaction rating, a large proportion of respondents still rated such contacts as 'satisfactory'. This finding suggests that the outcome of the contact is not the only influence on satisfaction.

Consistent with previous research, age also affected satisfaction ratings. Specifically, older respondents tended to be more satisfied with police-initiated contacts than younger respondents. This age pattern was evident across all three types of contact. Gender and ethnicity also influenced satisfaction, but only in certain cases. For example, females aged 20 to 39 tended to be more satisfied than their male counterparts, while unilingual respondents tended to be more satisfied than multilingual respondents, but only for non-targeted and negative-targeted contacts. Such findings suggest that demographic factors play a significant role in determining the satisfaction ratings for police-initiated contacts.

Finally, the reasons underlying satisfaction and dissatisfaction also differed according to the type of police-initiated contact. Specifically, evaluations of non-targeted contacts depended upon the demeanour of the responding officer. In contrast, evaluations of targeted contacts depended upon the individual's interpretation of the

actions of the officer. This finding lends support to popular belief and reinforces the need for police to behave in a polite, courteous and respectful manner when interacting with members of the public. It also highlights the need for clear, concise explanations of actions when performing targeted contacts. Explaining why certain actions are necessary may not only reduce dissatisfaction, but also assist in community education.

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