



## Public Satisfaction with Police Contact - Part II: Self-Initiated Contacts

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

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*This paper is Part II of a two-part series exploring public satisfaction with police contact. While Part I focused upon public satisfaction with police-initiated contacts, this paper examined public satisfaction with public-initiated (i.e., self-initiated) contacts. Using data from the 2002-03 National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing, the paper found that approximately three-quarters of respondents were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service they received during their most recent self-initiated contact. However, satisfaction varied according to the reason for contact and according to age. Specifically, respondents who contacted the police to report a crime or suspicious circumstance were less satisfied than respondents who contacted the police to report a traffic accident or to gain assistance. Younger respondents were also less satisfied than older respondents, regardless of the reason for contact. Finally, implications for police are discussed.*

### Introduction

Members of the public contact the police for a variety of reasons. They may, for example, make contact to report a traffic accident or to request assistance. Most commonly, however, members of the public contact the police to report a crime.<sup>1</sup> The quality of the service provided to members of the public during such interactions is of great importance. Evidence suggests that individuals who have negative experiences with the police are less likely to initiate future contact (Brown & Benedict, 2002) and more likely to express negative opinions about the police in general (Brandl, Frank, Worden, & Bynum, 1994). From a police perspective, therefore, the provision of a high quality service is vital for maintaining public confidence.

Public satisfaction surveys are a popular method of monitoring the quality of police service. Here in Australia, public satisfaction is monitored by the annual *National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing* (NSCSP). The NSCSP is commissioned by the Australasian Centre for Policing Research and conducted by ACNielsen. It is the only survey to provide national data regarding public satisfaction with police and police services.<sup>2</sup>

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

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

## Public satisfaction with self-initiated police contact

Research conducted overseas suggests that the majority of individuals who initiate contact with the police are satisfied with the service they receive. Despite this, dissatisfaction is reasonably common. The 2000 *British Crime Survey*, for example, reported that approximately 70 percent of citizens who initiated contact with the police were 'very satisfied' or 'fairly satisfied' with the service they received (Clancy, Hough, Aust, & Kershaw, 2001). However, as many as 30 percent of respondents reported being dissatisfied. Similarly, a national survey conducted in New Zealand found that 67 percent of respondents who contacted the police to report a crime were satisfied with the service they received, with 20 percent being dissatisfied (MRL Research Group, 1995).

## Factors that influence public satisfaction

Research has identified a number of factors that influence satisfaction with self-initiated police contacts. These factors include, but are not limited to, situational factors (such as the type of contact) and individual factors (such as age, gender, and ethnicity). These are briefly considered below.

Evidence suggests that satisfaction with self-initiated contact varies markedly according to the reason for contact. Citizens who contact the police to report a crime, for example, generally express less satisfaction than citizens who contact the police for other reasons (e.g., Clancy et al., 2001). The demeanour and performance of the responding officer have also been shown to exert a strong influence upon satisfaction. For example, some researchers have found that citizens are more likely to be satisfied when officers behave in a polite, pleasant, and respectful manner (Reisig & Chandek, 2001). Other researchers have demonstrated a direct relationship between satisfaction and the number of activities performed by the responding officer (Brandl & Horvath, 1991; Chandek & Porter, 1998).

Research into the influence of individual factors, such as gender and ethnicity, upon satisfaction with self-initiated contact has generally produced inconsistent findings. Some studies, for example, have suggested that women were generally more satisfied than men (Mirrlees-Black & Budd, 1997), others have shown that men tended to be more satisfied than women (Percy, 1980), while still others failed to find any gender difference at all (Brandl & Horvath, 1991; Chandek & Porter, 1998). Age, however, has consistently been identified as a major influence upon satisfaction. Specifically, a number of studies found that as age increased, so too did satisfaction with police contact (Brandl & Horvath, 1991; Cheurprakobkit, 2000; Mirrlees-Black & Budd, 1997). Such findings suggest that older citizens tend to be more satisfied with police contacts than younger citizens.

## Purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper was to examine public satisfaction with self-initiated police contacts within an Australian context. Using data from the *2002-03 National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing*, the paper aimed to: (1) examine the nature of public-initiated contact with the police; and (2) identify factors that influence public evaluations of police service quality. Specifically, the paper intended to determine whether situational factors (e.g. type of contact) and individual factors (e.g., age, gender and ethnicity) influenced satisfaction with self-initiated contacts, as suggested by previous research.

## 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	%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	8,883	39.6
	Female	13,550	60.4
<b>Age Group</b>	15-17 years	5441	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
	55 + years	6,729	30.0
<b>Multilingual*</b>	Yes	2,115	9.4
	No	19,958	89.0
<b>ATSI*</b>	Yes	439	2.0
	No	21,605	96.3

Note. ATSI = Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

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

## Contact with Police

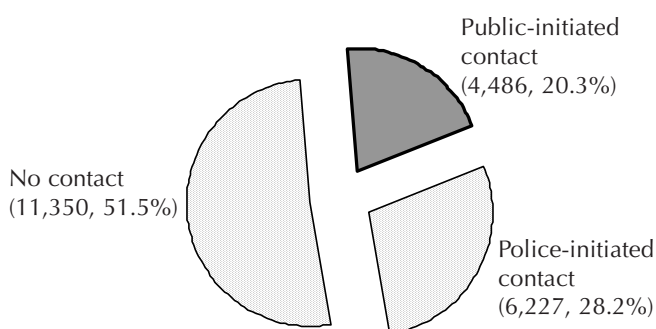
All respondents were asked: 'In the last 12 months, have you had contact with the police?' Overall, 47.8 percent of respondents reported having at least one contact with police, averaging approximately three contacts each.<sup>3</sup> Men were significantly more likely to have had police contact than women.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, respondents who spoke a second language were significantly less likely to have had contact with police than respondents who only spoke English.<sup>6</sup>

### Nature of contact

The NSCSP distinguishes between two types of contact: public- or self-initiated and police-initiated. *Public-initiated* contacts are defined as contacts with the police that are initiated by individual members of the public. Examples of public-initiated contacts include contacting the police to report a crime, requesting information, or attending a community meeting where police officers are present. In contrast, *police-initiated* contacts are contacts initiated by the police.

Respondents who had contact with police were asked, 'Who initiated the *most recent contact* you had with police?'. As shown in Figure 1, approximately 42 percent of respondents (20.3% of the total sample) reported that their most recent contact was self-initiated. As the aim of this paper was to examine public satisfaction with self-initiated contacts, the remainder of the paper focuses only upon those respondents who indicated that their most recent contact with the police was self-initiated.

**Figure 1.** Nature of contact with police



<sup>3</sup>  $M = 3.08, SD = 5.01$

<sup>4</sup>  $\chi^2(1) = 96.90, p < .001$

<sup>5</sup>  $\chi^2(5) = 971.03, p < .001$

<sup>6</sup>  $\chi^2(1) = 55.97, p < .001$

### Reason for self-initiated contact

Respondents who indicated that their most recent contact with police was self-initiated were asked, 'Why did you contact the police most recently?'. The most common reasons for contact were:

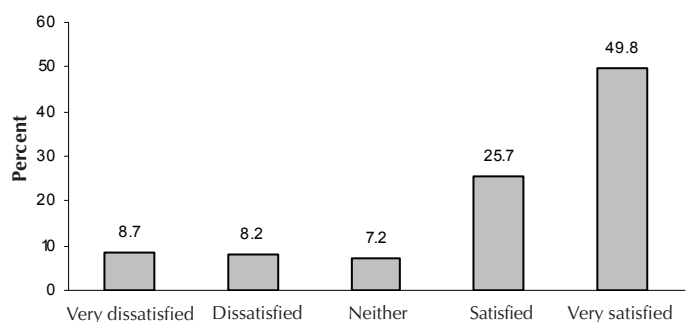
- to report a crime (40.5%);
- to report suspicious people or circumstances (14.1%);
- to get assistance (10.2%); or
- to report a traffic accident (8.9%).

Combined, these four reasons accounted for almost three-quarters of all self-initiated contacts with police.

### Satisfaction with Self-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 level of satisfaction on a five-point scale, where 1 represented 'very dissatisfied' and 5 represented 'very satisfied'. As illustrated in Figure 2, the majority (75.5%) of respondents were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service they received. However, almost 17 percent of respondents reported being 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied'. In other words, approximately one in six self-initiated contacts were considered to be dissatisfactory. Although consistent with previous surveys, this figure is still of concern given the frequency with which members of the public initiate contact with the police.

**Figure 2.** Respondent evaluations of their most recent self-initiated contact

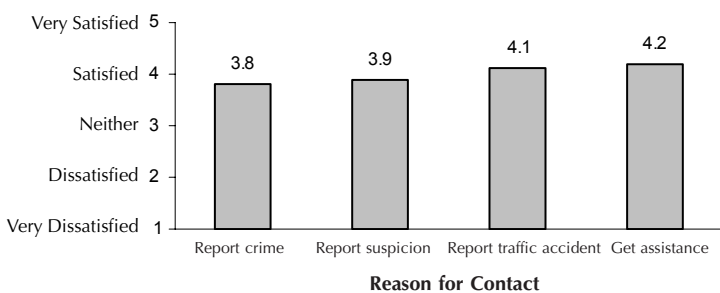


As outlined above, previous research examining evaluations of public-initiated contacts has shown that satisfaction with police service varies according to certain situational and individual factors. In order to determine the factors that influence satisfaction ratings in Australia, a number of situational and individual variables were

explored in greater detail. Specifically, reason for contact<sup>7</sup> and respondent age, gender, and ethnicity<sup>8</sup> were examined.<sup>9</sup>

Statistical analysis showed that satisfaction with the quality of police service varied significantly according to the reason for that contact.<sup>10</sup> As illustrated in Figure 3, respondents who contacted the police to report a crime or a suspicious circumstance were significantly less satisfied with the service they received than respondents who contacted the police to report a traffic accident or to get assistance. In fact, as many as one in five respondents who reported a crime and one in five respondents who reported a suspicious circumstance said they were 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' with the service they received. In comparison, only one in eight respondents who reported a traffic accident and one in seven who contacted the police to get assistance indicated they were dissatisfied with the service.

**Figure 3.** Average satisfaction rating for self-initiated contacts according to the type of contact



Further analysis found that satisfaction varied significantly according to the age of the respondent.<sup>11</sup> As illustrated in Figure 4, satisfaction ratings tended to increase with age, such that younger respondents were significantly less satisfied than older respondents. This age effect was independent of the reason for contact.<sup>12</sup> In other words, regardless of why they contacted the police, younger respondents were less satisfied with the service they received than older respondents. Neither gender<sup>13</sup> nor ethnicity<sup>14,15</sup> significantly influenced satisfaction ratings.

<sup>7</sup> Only the four most common reasons for contact were examined. For the remaining reasons, respondent numbers were too small to be analysed.

<sup>8</sup> The influence of ethnicity on satisfaction was examined by comparing the respondents who were multilingual to those who were unilingual.

<sup>9</sup> The influence of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status on satisfaction was not explored due to an insufficient number of respondents.

<sup>10</sup>  $F(3, 3251) = 3.60, p < .025$

<sup>11</sup>  $F(4, 3251) = 7.52, p < .001$

<sup>12</sup>  $F(12, 3251) = 0.72, p > .025$

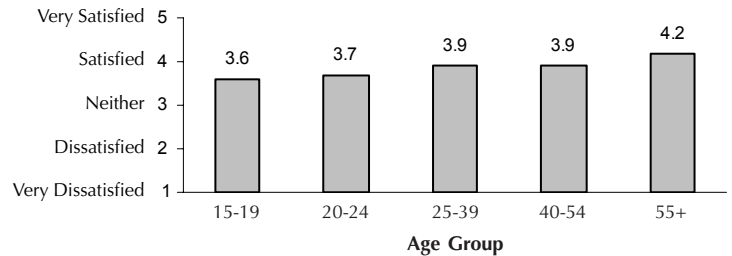
<sup>13</sup>  $F(1, 3251) = 0.19, p > .025$

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup>  $F(1, 3275) = 0.002, p > .025$

These findings suggest that, of the factors examined here, age was the primary determinant of satisfaction with self-initiated police contacts.

**Figure 4.** Average satisfaction rating for self-initiated contacts according to age



## Reasons Underlying Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

Finally, respondents were asked, 'Why were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the service you received?'. The most common responses for each of the four reasons for contact are illustrated in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, the specific reasons underlying satisfaction and dissatisfaction differed somewhat between the four most common reasons for contacting the police. In general though, it appears that respondents were more likely to be *satisfied* when the police were perceived to have acted in a way that the respondent deemed to be suitable or appropriate. Conversely, *dissatisfaction* occurred when the police were perceived to have behaved in a manner considered unsuitable or inappropriate. This finding highlights the impact individual interpretations can have on satisfaction with service quality. Finally, the main reasons underlying satisfaction and dissatisfaction did not differ according to age.

**Table 2.** Most common reasons underlying satisfaction and dissatisfaction according to the reason for contacting the police

Reason for contact	Main reason underlying satisfaction	Main reason underlying dissatisfaction
Report a crime	Police took appropriate action	Police either didn't do enough or took no action
Report suspicious person/circumstance	The police response was prompt	Police either didn't do enough or took no action
Report a traffic accident	Police were helpful	There was no follow-up
Get assistance	Police were helpful	Police either didn't do enough or took no action

## Key Findings

- Almost half of the respondents interviewed reported having at least one contact with police during the 12 months preceding the survey;
- Overall, 42 percent of respondents who had contact with police reported that their most recent contact was self-initiated;
- Approximately three-quarters of respondents were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service they received during their most recent self-initiated contact;
- Overall, one in six public-initiated contacts were considered dissatisfactory;
- Specifically, one in five respondents who contacted the police to report a crime or suspicious circumstance were dissatisfied with the service they received;
- Age influenced satisfaction ratings such that younger respondents were significantly less satisfied with the service they received than older respondents;
- Respondents were more likely to be *satisfied* if they thought the police had acted in a way they considered to be suitable or appropriate;
- Respondents were more likely to be *dissatisfied* if they thought the police had behaved in a manner they considered to be unsuitable or inappropriate.

## Conclusions

The findings of the 2002-03 National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing regarding public evaluations of self-initiated contacts showed that while the majority of respondents were satisfied with the service they received, 17 percent were dissatisfied. Individuals who contacted the police to report a crime or suspicious circumstance expressed even greater rates of dissatisfaction. Despite being consistent with previous research, these findings suggest that a substantial proportion of Australians who initiate direct contact with the police are dissatisfied with the service they receive.

Of the factors examined here, age emerged as a major influence on satisfaction. Specifically, younger respondents tended to be significantly less satisfied with the service they received from the police than older respondents. A variety of theories have been proposed to account for this age effect. Reisig and Correia (1997), for example, argued that the effect occurs as the result of age differences in value structures. They maintained that older members of the public value safety and security, whereas younger individuals value freedom and independence.

Consequently, younger individuals view the police as restricting their independence and perceive them more negatively than older individuals, who see the police as maintaining safety and order. In the context of this paper, Reisig and Correia's (1997) theory suggests that these perceptions may translate into lower ratings of satisfaction from younger respondents relative to older respondents.

Another possible explanation for the observed age effect concerns the public's *expectations* of the police. Expectations, or assumptions about how the police *should* perform, have been shown to play an important role in the evaluation of police contact. For example, a number of studies have shown that victims of crime tended to be more satisfied when perceived police performance met expectations of police performance (Chandek, 1999; Chandek & Porter, 1998; Reisig & Chandek, 2001). Furthermore Chandek (1999) found that the expectations of crime victims differed significantly according to age. Specifically, younger respondents had greater expectations of the police than older respondents. That is, younger respondents expected the police to have performed a greater number of investigative activities (e.g., take notes, make out a report, attempt to locate witnesses, collect evidence, and provide support and advice) than older respondents. This suggests that the reason younger individuals tend to be less satisfied with self-initiated police contact is because they have greater expectations of the police than older individuals. This explanation appears to directly contradict Reisig and Correia's (1997) theory (which depends largely upon the notion that younger individuals simply dislike the police).

## Implications for Police

It is unrealistic to expect that every person who initiates contact with the police will be satisfied with the service they receive. It may, however, be possible to reduce the rate of dissatisfaction experienced. The findings of this paper suggest that, following self-initiated contact with police, a major reason underlying dissatisfaction with police service is the perception of inaction by the police. Most police work occurs out of public view. Members of the public may (incorrectly) perceive a lack of visible policing as a lack of action. Taking time to explain normal police procedure, including the steps that will be taken following the contact, may help avoid perceptions of inaction. In some cases though, there may be nothing more that a police officer can do. In these situations, police officers should make it clear, firstly, that nothing more can be done and, secondly, the reason(s) *why* nothing more can be done. This is likely to be particularly

important when members of the public contact the police to report a crime or suspicious circumstance and also when responding to contacts initiated by young adults.

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