

# Trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice

No. 396 July 2010



Australian Government  
Australian Institute of Criminology

**Foreword** | *Public concern about crime victimisation is one of a range of factors that policymakers take into account when creating new criminal offences, setting penalties and allocating resources for policing and prosecution. The level of public concern about rising crime can also determine the extent to which people engage in certain daily activities, sometimes restricting behaviour unnecessarily. However, there can be a disjunction between how people perceive the risk of crime victimisation and the actual level of victimisation that occurs in the community. Recently, for example, concern with some crime types has increased, despite an actual decline in crime rates for the offences in question. This study reinforces earlier research into perceptions of crime; that there are substantial misperceptions of crime among the general public, both in terms of the number of incidents and in perceptions of trends in crime. This paper uses statistical modelling based on data taken from the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes to examine the relationship between gender, age, education and sources of information on crime in the Australian context.*

Adam Tomison  
Director

## (Mis)perceptions of crime in Australia

Brent Davis and Kym Dossetor

The public's perceptions of crime and of criminal justice can have an important influence on policy decisions relating to operational activity in front line law enforcement and in judicial sentencing. However, there can be and indeed often is, a discrepancy between the public's perception of the likelihood of crime victimisation and the actual risk of victimisation. This discrepancy is apparent in the public's concern regarding a perceived increase in crime amidst declining crime rates (Cohen 2000).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008), the number of crimes reported to police was lower in 2007 than in 1998 in the categories of homicide and related offences, robbery, unlawful entry with intent, motor vehicle theft and other theft. The rate of crime reported to police for kidnapping/abduction and blackmail/extortion increased marginally between 1998 and 2007. However, the aggregate crime trend shows a decline.

However, despite this decline, it is clear that public perceptions of crime rates and crime trends often do not match with police statistics of recorded crime or surveys on victimisation rates (Rex & Tonry 2002; Roberts & Indermaur 2009). Studies of the US and Canadian public indicate people perceive crime rates as increasing even though, in general, crime rates have been declining over the last decade (Maguire & Pastore 1999). Results are not isolated to the United States and Canada, with evidence of similar misperceptions present in Australia (Indermaur & Roberts 2005).

In Australia, studies have shown a substantial proportion of the population incorrectly believe crime rates are increasing when, in fact, they are stable or declining (Weatherburn & Indermaur 2004). Research has found that women, older people and more poorly educated people hold less accurate perceptions of actual crime rates than those who are male, younger and more highly educated (Indermaur & Roberts 2005).

According to Tyler and Boeckmann (1997), there are two theories to explain the process by which the public forms perceptions of crime and sentencing—*experience or instrumental theory* and *expressive theory*. The experience/instrumental theory suggests perceptions

and fear of crime are the result of personal experiences of crime and criminal victimisation. Expressive theories of crime explain broader social concerns 'regarding the cultural meaning of crime, social change and relations, and conditions conducive to crime' (Jackson 2004: 946) and are relatively independent of actual threat.

Expressive variables may contribute more to perceptions of crime than actual victimisation or perceived likelihood of victimisation. Such variables include feelings about the state of the national economy, the level of trust in fellow community members and concerns/anxiety about children (King & Maruna 2009).

It has also been suggested that individuals may be better at estimating the degree and direction of crime rates, depending on the locality of the crime and its relevance to them (Brantingham & Butcher 1986).

People may believe crime rates are increasing very quickly for the nation as a whole, but less dramatically for their city/town and only slightly, if at all, for their residential neighbourhood (Brantingham & Butcher 1986). They may also be much less likely to perceive that there is crime in their own neighbourhood, allocating it to other, less familiar locations (Warr 1995). This has been reflected in the *National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing* (NSCSP) results which are reported by the Productivity Commission in the annual review of government services (SCRGSP 2009).

This nationwide survey examines perceptions of policing-related issues among the Australian community. In 2007–08, 36,489 people participated in the NSCSP survey. Results suggest perceptions of the levels of crime decline substantially as survey participants focus on their neighbourhood rather than the state or territory in which they are living (SCRGSP 2009). Survey respondents consistently perceived the state-level incidences of illicit drugs, property crimes and violent crimes over the past five years as a greater problem than the incidence at a neighbourhood level (AIC 2007). The public perceived these three crime categories as having

decreased at a local level since 2005. This is in line with declines noted in both crime victimisation surveys and in crimes reported to police (AIC 2007).

Hough and Roberts (2004) found a similar misperception of the levels of crime in Britain, specifically in relation to juveniles. Of those surveyed, 75 percent perceived the number of young offenders to be increasing when, in fact, police records indicated a decrease. Respondents also overestimated the proportion of crime for which juvenile offenders were responsible and the proportion of juvenile crimes that were violent. Additionally, the general public has commonly been found to underestimate the length and severity of criminal sentences and over-rate the percentage of crime that is violent crime (Roberts & Indermaur 2009; Weatherburn & Indermaur 2004).

## AuSSA

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) is a cross-sectional mail out survey administered by the Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University. The AuSSA survey has been conducted in 2003, 2005 and 2007 with replication of some questions in the three surveys. The survey was posted to 20,000 randomly selected individuals drawn from the Australian electoral roll. Of these, 8,133 respondents completed the survey sufficiently enough to enable analysis (an effective response rate of almost 41%).

The AuSSA 2007 survey put forward five questions relating to perceptions of crime.

These five questions were respondent's perceptions of:

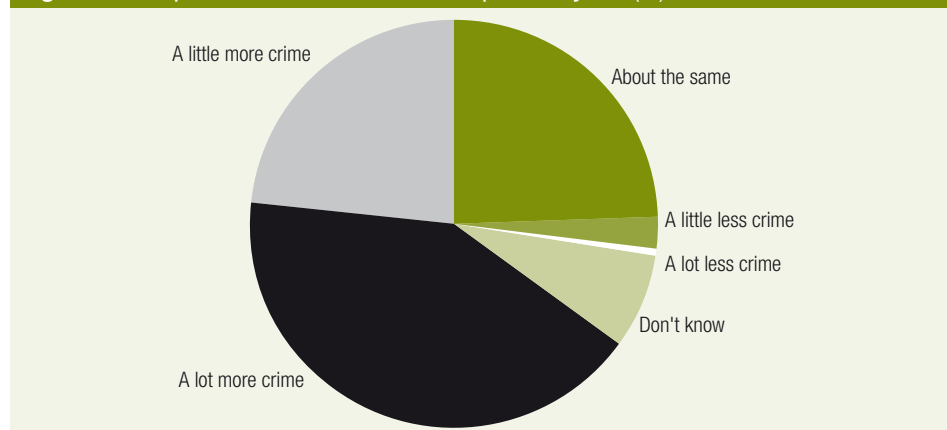
- changes in the level of crime over the previous two years;
- recorded crimes which involve violence, either actual or threatened;
- the proportion of those charged and brought to court for a crime who were eventually convicted;
- the proportion of males convicted of assault who were sent to prison; and
- the proportion of males convicted for home burglary who were sent to prison.

Looking first at respondents' perceptions of changes in the level of crime over the previous two years, AuSSA 2007 reported that 39.8 percent of those polled believed crime had increased *a lot more* during the previous two years. Another 23.8 percent thought it had increased by *a little more* over the same period and 25.7 percent said it had remained *about the same*. Only 3.1 percent of respondents believed it had either fallen *a little* or *a lot* (the remaining 7.6% said they *did not know*; see Figure 1).

In contrast to the opinion of the majority of respondents, the level of crime actually fell during the two years, indicating the majority of respondents (89.3%) held incorrect perceptions, with almost four in 10 making an error of assessment (Roberts & Indermaur 2009).

During the same time period, respondents' perceptions of the proportion of crimes involving violence (actual or threatened violence) also proved to be quite inaccurate. The largest group of respondents (23.6%)

**Figure 1** Perceptions of crime trends over the past two years (%)



Source: Roberts & Indermaur 2009

thought that 71 to 80 percent of crimes involved violence; followed by those (16.9%) who believed violence was involved in 41 to 50 percent of offences. Another 11.9 percent perceived violence to be present in 81 to 90 percent of crimes. However, violent crimes (actual or threatened), accounted for fewer than 10 percent of all crimes (Roberts & Indermaur 2009).

Only 3.7 percent of those surveyed accurately assessed the level of violent crime. Therefore, an overwhelming majority (96.3%) of respondents misperceived the prevalence of violence, most of them by a substantial margin. Respondents were also asked for their perceptions of the proportion of persons found guilty who had been charged and brought to court for violent offences. The largest group of respondents (24.9%) put the figure at between 41 and 50 percent, followed by between 71 and 80 percent (11.5% of respondents).

The actual proportion of those charged and brought to court for a violent offence and subsequently convicted, was between 91 and 100 percent—a response given by only 1.8 percent of those polled (Roberts & Indermaur 2009).

Survey respondents were only slightly more accurate—but still with a large proportion in error—in their perceptions of the proportion of males convicted of assault or of home burglary who were subsequently sent to prison.

Most respondents perceived that only a small proportion of males convicted of assault were sent to prison. Of those surveyed, 24.1 percent placed the imprisonment rate at between zero and 10 percent; 18.8 percent estimated an imprisonment rate for males convicted of assault at between 11 and 20 percent and 16.7 percent of people believed the incarceration rate to be between 41 to 50 percent.

In reality, 21 to 30 percent of males convicted of assault were imprisoned; a range identified by just 15.1 percent of survey participants (Roberts & Indermaur 2009).

The incidence of misperception was slightly higher for the imprisonment rate for males convicted of home burglary, with more than two-thirds of respondents underestimating rates in the first three deciles (0–10%, 11–20% and 21–30%, respectively). This was followed by 11.7 percent of respondents who placed the figure between 41 and 50 percent.

The correct answer (Roberts & Indermaur 2009) was an imprisonment rate of between 31 and 40 percent; a figure perceived by just 8.1 percent of respondents.

Taken together, these results suggest a relatively high incidence of misperceiving crime, with a substantial proportion of the AuSSA 2007 survey participants overestimating the crime rate and incorrectly perceiving an upward crime trend from 2005 to 2007.

Modelling

A key purpose for this study, beyond describing the patterns of the perceptions and the misperceptions of the incidence of crime and criminal punishment, is to model some socio-demographic drivers of these views. In this regard, a modelling framework, based on multinominal, multiple-variable logistic modelling, was used to estimate the practical and the statistical significance of a range of potential drivers of those perceptions, correct or otherwise. Practical significance measures the strength and the direction of the relationship between the variables of interest, while statistical significance speaks to whether the results are due to chance alone.

The modelling concentrated on three potential explanatory variables for (mis)perceptions of crime, namely gender, age and education, as well as indicators of how respondents obtained their information about crime trends and the criminal justice system. In each of the modelling exercises, the dependent variable was *perceived changes in crime levels over the past two years*, with six possible responses: *a lot more*, *a little more*, *about the same*, *a little less*, *a lot less* and *don't know*.

Gender

Looking first at perceptions of crime by gender (where females are coded in AuSSA 2007 as =1 and males are coded as =2), there appears to be a statistically significant difference in perceptions of crime by gender.

Using females' perceptions of the change in crime levels as the base outcome for modelling purposes, males are practically and statistically significantly less likely than females to perceive crime has increased *a lot more* ( $b=-1.04$ ,  $p=0.00$ ).

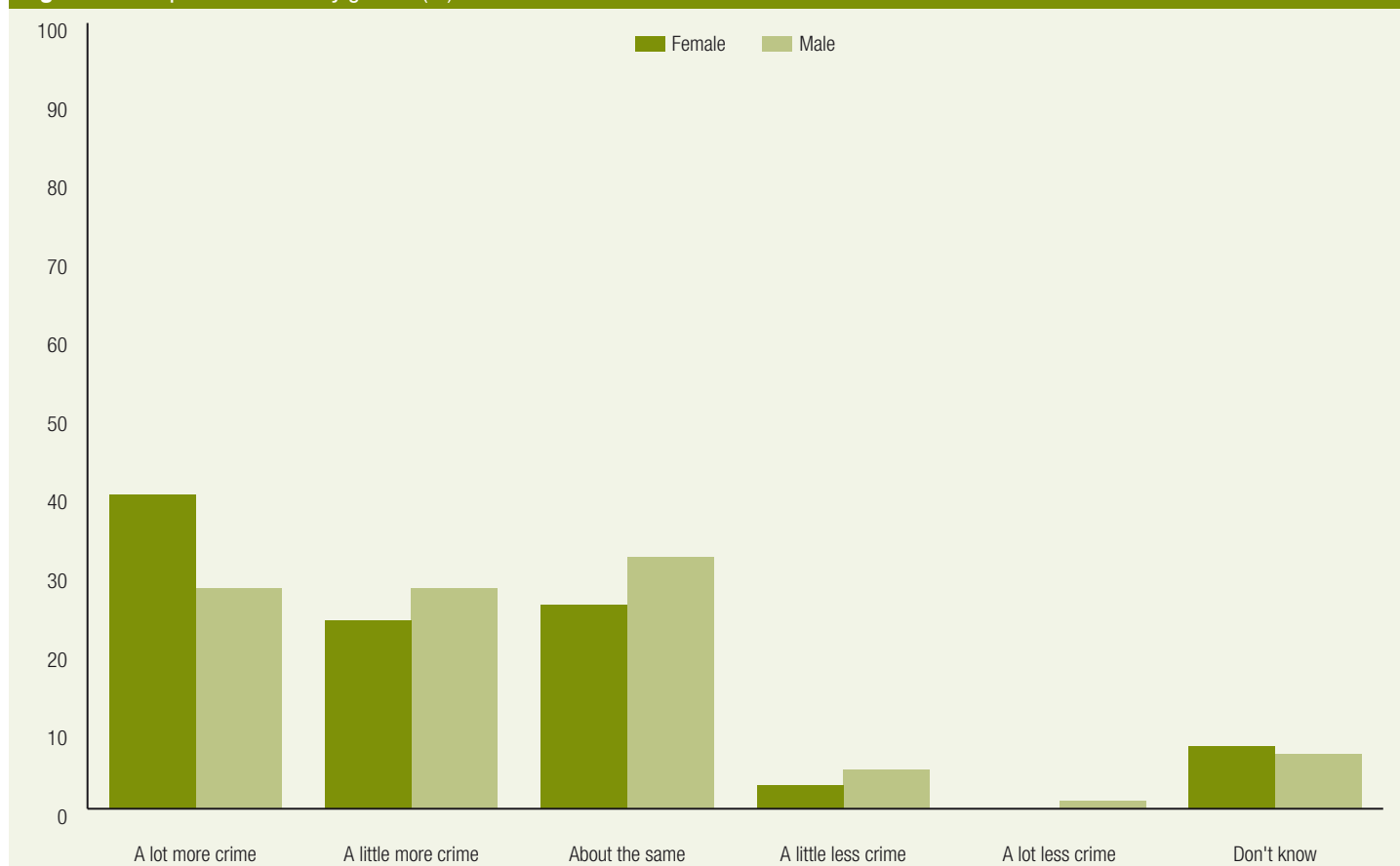
By comparison, there was no statistically significant difference between genders ( $p=0.83$ ) in their perceptions of there being a lot less crime in 2007 compared with two years earlier (see Table 1).

Table 1 Results by gender			
Perceptions of crime	B	z	p
A lot more			
>male	-1.04	-5.82	0.00
>constant	4.24	13.95	0.00
A little more			
>male	-0.60	-3.29	0.00
>constant	3.09	9.99	0.00
About the same			
>male	-0.52	-2.84	0.01
>constant	3.04	9.84	0.00
A lot less			
>male	0.12	0.21	0.83
>constant	-2.46	-2.48	0.01
Don't know			
>male	-0.89	-4.43	0.00
>constant	2.37	7.12	0.00
LR $\chi^2=$	91.78		
Prob $>\chi^2=$	0.00		
Pseudo $R^2=$	0.01		

Note: a little less crime is the base outcome

The model suggests the probability of a female responding she thought the level of crime had increased *a lot more* over the past two years was 39.6 percent; a practical and statistically different rate than for males at 28.4 percent ( $z=-8.15$ ;  $p=0.00$ ; see Figure 2). By contrast, the model indicates the likelihood of a female respondent seeing

**Figure 2** Perceptions of crime by gender (%)



crime levels as having increased *a little more* over the past two years was 24 percent (compared to 27.8% for males), constituting a statistically significant difference ( $z=3.19$ ;  $p=0.01$ ).

This gender difference may reflect differences between males and females in their respective fears of becoming victims of different types of crime.

### Age

Regarding age as a driver of perceptions of crime, the modelling framework grouped the ages of respondents into seven categories—up to age 20 years and then in six decile ranges up to and including the age of 80 years (ie 21 to 30, 31 to 40 and so on until 71 to 80 years of age). Again, using respondents who thought crime had fallen slightly over the past two years as the baseline group for the modelling, the results indicate negligible practical, and no statistical, significance between the seven age groups in their perceptions of crime, except for those who believed crime had increased

*a lot* over the preceding two years, where the likelihood of holding this view increased with respondent's age ( $b=0.02$ ,  $z=3.72$ ,  $p=0.00$ ).

Interestingly, perceptions that crime had increased *a lot* during the previous two years was the only response to rise with the age of respondent ( $b=0.005$ ,  $z=11.51$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). For all of the other crimes, perception responses (*a little more*, *about the same* etc) declined with increasing age.

Taken as a whole, although all of the age groups demonstrated sizeable margins of error in their perceptions of crime, it would appear younger respondents (most notably those in the under 20 years and the 21 to 30 years of age groups) had slightly more accurate assessments than their older counterparts.

### Education

The AuSSA 2007 survey recorded respondents' highest level of education completed since leaving school, grouping them into five categories: *none* (32.2%),

*trade qualification* (15.2%), *TAFE or business certificate or diploma* (27.4%), *undergraduate degree* (15.1%) and *post-graduate degree or diploma* (10%).

Again using the *a little less crime* category as the baseline for modelling, the results indicated that perceptions of crime tend to become more accurate as the post-secondary education of the respondents increased, although not uniformly for each of the crime perceptions categories.

The education effect appeared strongest for those respondents who perceived crime had increased *a lot more* over the previous two years, with noticeable practical, as well as statistically significant, results as post high school education rose ( $b=-0.542$ ,  $z=-8.12$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). Similarly, post-secondary education had a practical, as well as statistically significant effect, upon those who believed crime had increased *a little more* over the same period ( $b=-0.242$ ,  $z=-3.59$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). By comparison, there was no statistically significant education effect for respondents who thought crime had



Table 2 Results by education			
Perceptions of crime	b	z	p
<b>A lot more</b>			
>education	-0.54	-8.12	0.00
>constant	4.08	18.44	0.00
<b>A little more</b>			
>education	-0.24	-3.59	0.00
>constant	2.86	12.66	0.00
<b>about the same</b>			
>education	-0.09	-1.28	0.20
>constant	2.51	11.11	0.00
<b>A lot less</b>			
>education	-0.22	-1.04	0.30
>constant	-1.65	-2.58	0.01
<b>Don't know</b>			
> education	-0.26	-3.5	0.00
>constant	1.76	7.23	0.00
LR $\chi^2$ =	321.16		
Prob > $\chi^2$ =	0.00		
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =	0.02		

Note: *a little less* crime is the base outcome

remained the same or declined *a lot less* over the review period ( $p=0.200$  and  $p=0.297$  respectively). Table 2 provides a summary of the relevant modelling results.

## Sources of information

Individuals are likely to rely on a number of different sources of information to form their views on crime, including information from family or friends, work colleagues and the media, as well as, in some cases, personal experience.

The discrepancy between the crime rate and the public's perceived crime rate has been commonly attributed to the expansive media coverage of crime, especially violent and more sensationalised crime (Duffy et al. 2008).

Duffy et al. (2008) examined the relationship between stories on specific crime-related occurrences and perceptions of safety among London residents. They found that media stories focusing on reductions in crime preceded increased feelings of safety, while stories reporting violent crime preceded reductions in feelings of individual safety.

In 2000, a news poll by the ABC news network in the United States found that, of the 80 percent of respondents who regarded the crime problem in the United States as 'bad' or 'very bad', 82 percent stated that their belief was based on the news media, with the remaining 17 percent basing their opinion on personal experience (Garvey 2003). Individuals' trust and reliance on media as a source of information on crime varies by the source. Television news and documentaries are highly received and trusted, followed closely by local and broadsheet newspapers (Duffy et al. 2008).

Based on results from the AuSSA 2005 survey, individuals who depended on information gathered via talkback radio, family and friends, and commercial television were likely to have less accurate perceptions of crime than those who relied on other sources of crime information (Roberts & Indermaur 2009). The AuSSA 2007 survey asked respondents how important a number of different sources of information were in informing their views of crime trends and of the criminal justice system. The sources of information were television, radio, newspapers, the internet, work colleagues, friends and family. The mean ranked scores (where lowest indicates greatest importance as a source of information on crime issues) placed television and newspapers about equal (both with mean ranked scores of 1.81), followed by radio (score=1.96).

By comparison, the other nominated sources of information about crime and criminal justice issues had mean rank scores greater than two, suggesting they were, to varying degrees, regarded as being of lesser importance (family=2.45, friends=2.41, the internet=2.80 and work colleagues=2.83). Again using the *a little less* crime response group as the baseline for modelling, the results point to important roles for the media (both television and radio in particular) in forming perceptions about crime trends in Australia.

Focusing on respondents who perceived there to be a lot more crime in 2007 than two years earlier (essentially, those with the

greatest misperceptions), it would appear that television and family play the most powerful (and the only statistically significant) roles in driving perceptions of crime. In the case of television, as the importance attached to television as a source of information declines, so does the likelihood of overestimating the level of crime (ie making a misperception  $b=-0.747$ ;  $z=-5.58$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). A similar general profile can be found for reliance on family as a source of information on crime; as family as a source of information declines in importance, so does the likelihood of overestimating the level of crime ( $b=-0.544$ ,  $z=-3.21$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). The other sources of information on crime that were modelled had no statistically significant effect on informing people's perceptions of crime and criminal justice issues.

The influence of television as a source of information (and by implication on the formation of opinions and perceptions) leads to the supplementary question of 'what type of television'? That is, do different types of television programs have different practical and statistically significant effects on our perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system?

The AuSSA 2007 survey provides partial insight through a question which asked respondents 'which type of television/radio program would they prefer to watch/listen to if they were all on at the same time'? Seven options (along with *don't know*) were offered: *comedy show*, *news and current affairs*, *talkback*, *crime drama*, *reality television*, *music* or *none*.

Those who perceived there to have been *a little less* crime in the two years to 2007 were used as a baseline. In broad terms, the modelling results suggest sizeable practical effects between the range of viewing/listening options—all of which were statistically significant. However, because

Dr Brent Davis is the research manager of Modelling and Forecasting at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Kym Dossetor is a research officer with the Modelling and Forecasting program at the Australian Institute of Criminology.

General editor, *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series:  
Dr Adam M Tomison, Director,  
Australian Institute of Criminology

Note: *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* papers are peer reviewed

For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series, visit the AIC website at: <http://www.aic.gov.au>

ISSN 1836-2206

© Australian Institute of Criminology 2010

GPO Box 2944

Canberra ACT 2601, Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9200

Fax: 02 6260 9299

Disclaimer: This research paper does not necessarily reflect the policy position of the Australian Government

of the unstructured nature of the options it is not appropriate to draw generalised inferences.

## Conclusion

The main findings of this study appear to reinforce those of other Australian and foreign studies.

Older survey participants are more likely to hold the inaccurate view that the crime rate is increasing (when there has actually been an overall decline), while males are more likely than females to accurately perceive an increase in the crime rate. The causal drivers of these gender differences are important questions for further research.

Post-secondary education also affected the degree to which individuals regarded the crime rate to have increased over the past two years, with those having higher education tending to more accurately perceive crime levels than their less-educated counterparts.

Entertainment preferences can also play a role in individuals' misperceptions of crime, with increased reliance on family and television as sources of information being associated with a greater misperception of the crime rate.

Taken as a whole, this study essentially reinforces the main findings of most previous studies on perceptions of crime—that there are substantial misperceptions of crime, both of the number of incidences and trends in crime, among the general population. As a consequence, public policymakers should exercise additional care when framing important law

enforcement decisions taken against the background of the public's potential misperceptions of crime.

## References

All URLs correct at 28 April 2010

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2008. *Recorded crime—victims, 2007*. cat. no. 4510.0. Canberra: ABS. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/cat/4510.0>

Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) 2007. Perceptions of crime. *Crime Facts Info* no. 143. Canberra: AIC. <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current%20series/cfi/141-160/cfi143.aspx>

Brantingham P, Brantingham P & Butcher D 1986. Perceived and actual crime risks, in Figlio R, Hakim S & Renegert R (eds), *Metropolitan crime patterns*. New York: Criminal Justice Press

Cohen MA 2000. Measuring the costs and benefits of crime and justice, in LaFree G (ed), *Measurement and analysis of crime and justice*. Criminal Justice 2000(4): 263–315. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, US Department of Justice

Duffy B, Wake R, Burrows, T & Bremner P 2008. Closing the gaps—crime and public perceptions. *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 22: 17–44

Garvey SP 2003. *Beyond repair? America's death penalty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Hough M & Roberts J 2004. *Youth crime and youth justice: Public opinion in England and Wales*. London: Institute for Criminal Policy Research

Indermaur D & Roberts L 2005. *Perception of crime and justice*, in Wilson S, Meagher G, Gibson R, Denemark D & Western M (eds), *Australian social attitudes: The first report*. Sydney: UNSW Press.

Jackson J 2004. Experience and expression: Social and cultural significant in the fear of crime. *British Journal of Criminology* 44(6): 946–966

King A & Maruna S 2009. Is a conservative just a liberal who has been mugged? Exploring the origins of punitive views. *Punishment Society* 11: 147–169

Maguire K & Pastore AL 1999. *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics

Rex S & Tonry M 2002. *Reform and punishment: The future of sentencing*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing

Roberts L & Indermaur D 2009. *What Australians think about crime and justice: Results from the 2007 Survey of Social Attitudes*. Research and public policy series no. 101. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current%20series/rpp/100-120/rpp101.aspx>

Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision (SCRGSP) 2009. *Report on government services, 2009*. Melbourne: Productivity Commission. <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/rogs/2009>

Tyler TR & Boeckmann RJ 1997. Three strikes and you are out, but why? The psychology of public support for punishing rule breakers. *Law and Society Review* 31: 237–265.

Warr M 1995. Public opinion on crime and punishment. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59: 296–310

Weatherburn D & Indermaur D 2004. Public perceptions of crime trends in New South Wales and Western Australia. *Crime and Justice Bulletin: Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice* no. 80. Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research