



No. 2
**How the public sees
crime: an Australian
survey**

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This report is the second in a new series on Trends and Issues in Australian crime and criminal justice published by the Australian Institute of Criminology. The series has been initiated by the Research and Statistics Division under the general editorship of the Assistant Director, Dr Paul Wilson. The first report, Uses and Abuses of Drug Law Enforcement Statistics, was released in August 1986.

This second report is the most comprehensive overview of public attitudes to crime which Australia has yet seen. Surveys commissioned by media organisations inevitably suffer from the limitations of topicality - for example, views on drug-pushing when a notorious case is before the public eye or on the question of child neglect when a conviction for manslaughter has just occurred.

The Institute, by surveying attitudes to a comprehensive range of offences, has been able to produce an integrated and cogent series of responses. In some ways they are quite surprising. It is to be hoped that the law-makers take careful note of the results.

Richard Harding
Director

The Questions Asked

A person steals a bicycle parked on the street. In comparison with his offence how much more serious are the following:

1. A person breaks into a home and steals \$1000 worth of household goods.
2. A doctor cheats on claims he makes to a Commonwealth health insurance plan for patient services for an amount of \$5000.
3. A parent beats his child with his fist. The child is hurt and spends a few days in hospital.
4. A person smuggles heroin into the country for resale.
5. Two adult males willingly engage in a homosexual act in private.
6. A factory knowingly gets rid of its poisonous waste in a way that pollutes the city water supply. As a result one person dies.

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7. A person cheats on their Commonwealth income tax return and avoids paying \$5000 in taxes.
8. A person steals \$5 worth of goods from a shop.
9. A man beats his wife with his fists. As a result she spends a few days in hospital.
10. A person stabs a victim to death.
11. A person illegally receives social security cheques worth \$1000
12. A person armed with a gun robs a bank of \$5000 during business hours. No one is physically hurt.
13. A worker had his leg caught in an unguarded piece of machinery because the employer knowingly failed to provide safety measures. As a result the worker lost his leg.

who defraud the social security system? Is burglary a serious crime? Can these questions elicit meaningful answers? In the first nationwide survey of crime and punishment conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology, a representative cross-section of 2555 Australians aged 14 years and over were asked to rank the seriousness of 13 crimes and for each crime, to act as a 'judge' in allocating their preferred punishment for each offence.¹ A single score for each of the 13 offences was developed by conjoining the ratings given by each of the 2555 respondents.

We all have, and the laws indicate, implicit notions about crime seriousness. Crimes for which the law provides life imprisonment in Australia are considered most serious, and crimes which carry, say, a 10 year sentence, are at least implicitly less serious than those which carry life imprisonment. However, the notion of seriousness is not as clear cut as it

seems.

Judges, magistrates, politicians and others concerned with crime and punishment often assert that the sentences given by courts or fixed in legislation by governments are 'what the public want'. Yet the fact that different judges within one State or Territory in Australia occasionally disagree with each other on the amount of punishment for the same offence appears to dispute the assertion. In Australia it has been rare for public opinion to be systematically elicited on issues relating to how serious certain crimes are seen as being. Generally, it has been judicial or political *perceptions* of the public mood in relation to crime and punishment that exerted a far greater influence on policy than public opinion itself.

How serious is drug trafficking? Are doctors who defraud Medicare considered as 'criminal' as persons

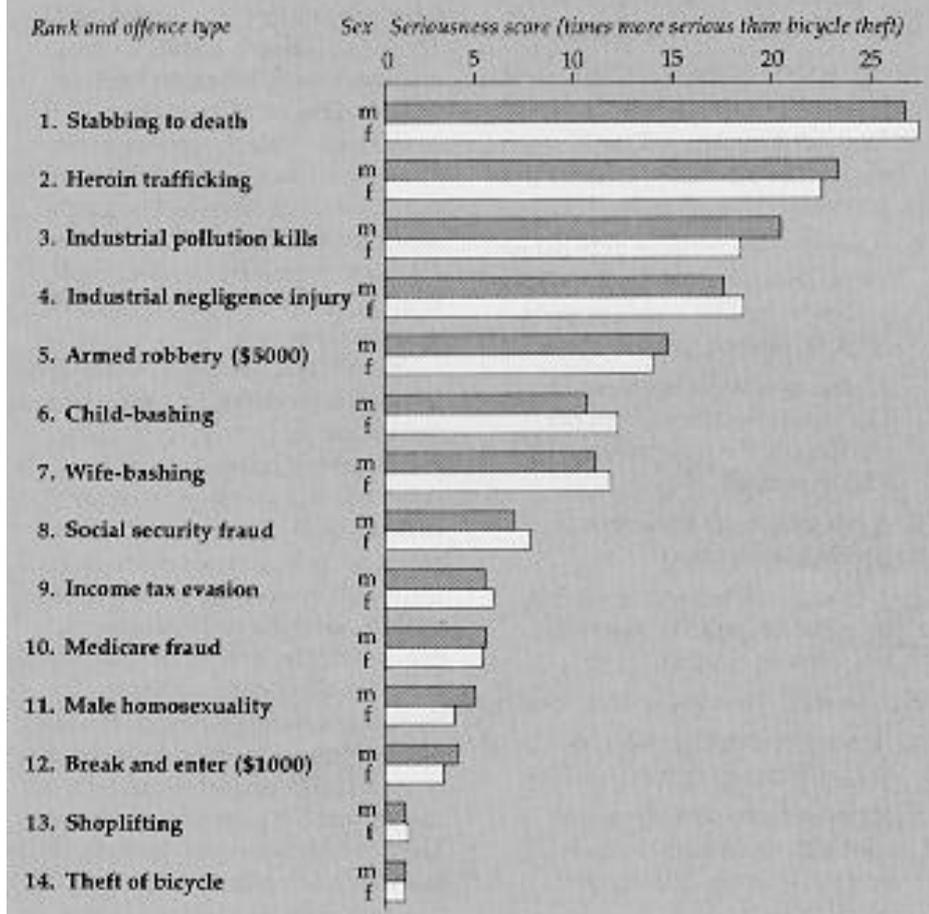
The Results

Of 13 offences presented to the public the stabbing to death of a victim was considered the *most serious*. When asked to compare the seriousness of this offence with a theft of a bicycle (the standard offence with which all crimes were compared), Australians consider this crime to be about 27 times more serious. The second most serious offence was the smuggling of heroin into the country, judged 23 times more serious than stealing a bicycle.

The offence considered least serious was shoplifting goods worth \$5, closely followed by burglary where a person breaks into a home and steals \$1000 worth of household goods. These two crimes were rated respectively, as roughly equivalent to the stealing of a bicycle, and three times more serious than the bicycle theft.

Of some surprise was the fact that the majority of respondents believed that homosexual relations between two adult males in private was more serious than either stealing a bike, breaking into a house or shoplifting. Considering that this behaviour is not

Figure 1 Seriousness of selected offences as perceived by Australians, by sex of respondent



considered criminal in many states its perceived seriousness, relative to these other offences, is significant.

Figure 1 presents the comparisons of public attitudes towards the 13 offences that we asked the Australian public to rank in order of seriousness.

General features of the responses

In the main, male and female respondents did not differ greatly in their responses (see Figure 1). It was, however, noticeable that females were slightly more concerned than males about domestic violence offences, industrial negligence and social security fraud, but they viewed homosexuality considerably less seriously than males. Age of respondent also showed significance, with the under 20 years age group viewing most crimes much less seriously, and, surprisingly perhaps, the over 60s tending to be less concerned overall than the middle age groups (see figure 2).

Respondents with higher education, and ACT residents tended to show less concern, while churchgoers, the middle socio-economic classes, Queenslanders and those from Northern Territory tended to show more concern about most offences, but these patterns were not absolutely consistent across offences. One consistent feature that does emerge is that groups most likely to be affected by a certain type of crime will view that crime with particular concern. Thus women are more concerned about wife beating, persons of parental and grandparent age groups are more concerned about child beating, males are more concerned about homosexuality, and unskilled workers about industrial negligence. These differences between 'at risk' groups and others in the community are sometimes quite significant, and may explain the great depth of feelings which are sometimes aroused about crime and punishment.

Responses to Specific Crimes

1. Offences involving actual or threatened

violence

The first seven offences ranked as most serious by the community with the exception of heroin trafficking, are crimes that involve actual or threatened physical harm to a victim (figure 1). The stabbing offence causing death received the highest ranking from virtually all sections of the sample. Only Northern Territorians placed it behind heroin trafficking and industrial pollution. The other violent offences of armed robbery, and wife and child battering are also judged as relatively serious offences by our sample. Interestingly, with the significant exception of the under 20s age group, the potentially life-threatening offence of armed robbery was adjudged as rather more serious than either of the domestic offences causing actual injury, even where no actual physical harm is caused in the robbery. The threat of death implicit in the armed robbery clearly evokes great fear, but the attitude of the under 20s should be encouraging to those who believe that domestic violence is neglected by the law.

2. Heroin trafficking

Offences involving narcotic drugs are closely associated in public perception with death and violence, and lie in the seriousness ranking between the deliberate criminal act causing death (stabbing) and a negligent act (pollution) leading to a similar consequence. The public's decision to rank the importation of the narcotic as second in seriousness undoubtedly reflects, and to some extent justifies, Federal and State Government

Figure 2 Average responses to the 13 questions, by age-group of respondent

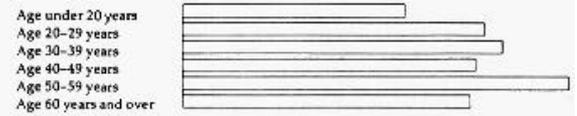


Figure 3 Seriousness scores on deadly pollution and industrial negligence questions, by socio-economic status*

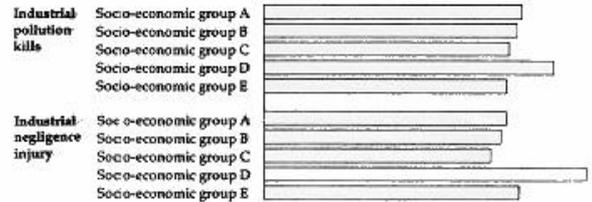
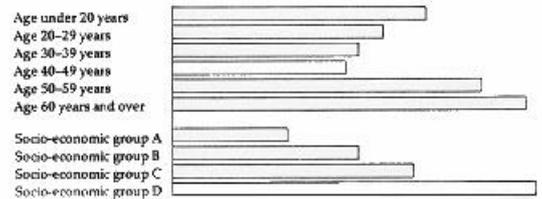


Figure 4 Seriousness scores on child-bashing question, by age of respondent



Figure 5 Seriousness scores on homosexuality question



concerns with the drug problem. Interestingly, the educational level of the respondents, and whether they were churchgoers or not, made very little difference. Political affiliations were significant, however, with National Party voters seeing the offence in particularly serious terms

3. Corporate and industrial crime

Braithwaite and Grabosky have pointed out that corporate and industrial crime may well cause many more deaths in Australian society than the more traditional forms of violence such as murder and manslaughter.² In this survey, pollution causing death and employer negligence leading to the loss of a worker's leg were third and fourth respectively in the ranking's, and both were considered more serious than an armed bank robbery in which no one is physically hurt.

Males were generally more concerned than females at a situation where the management of a factory knowingly permits poisonous waste emissions in a way that pollutes a city's water supply killing one person, whereas females were more worried by industrial negligence causing injury (figure 1). However, blue-collar workers (socio-economic group D in figure 3) were more concerned than other occupational groups about both the issues of pollution and industrial negligence.

4. Domestic violence offences

Violence in the family attracted a relatively high rating. The fact that these offences rate twice as high for example as the income tax and Medicare frauds signifies the realisation of a problem in which previously the law was reluctant to intervene.

Females were more concerned than males, and those aged in the child rearing (20-39) and grandparenting (50s) age group were considerably more concerned than others. This applied particularly to the child-

bashing offence (see figure 4).

5. Fraud offences

Three offences involving fraud — social security, income tax and Medicare — were included in the survey, and filled eighth, ninth and tenth places out of our 13 offences ranked by seriousness. Social security fraud was considered significantly more serious than the other two offences, which were rated close together in seriousness.

It is important to note that the social security fraud was rated highest even though the amount of money illegally obtained was only a fifth of that in the tax and medifraud examples. Other research has indicated that social security recipients who illegally claim benefits are treated much more harshly by the criminal justice system than are defrauding doctors.³ It seems that most sections of the community support this distinction, with only Australian Democrat votes and ACT residents reversing the rankings.

6. The minor offences

Three 'offences' of great frequency but relatively minor consequence were included in the survey. Consenting homosexual male acts are not considered offences in some jurisdictions, while petty shoplifting often results only in a police caution without court proceedings.

The homosexuality question was the most divisive of the 13 questions asked, and produced response-patterns quite different from normal (see figure 5). For example, the under-20s and over-60 year olds were uncharacteristically concerned. It seems that religious teachings (which could be expected to be strongest among the elderly) and the AIDS epidemic (which might affect the opinions of the young) may be strongly influencing public attitudes in this area.

Churchgoers were almost twice as concerned as non-churchgoers; those with tertiary qualifications and those in the upper socioeconomic groups

Figure 6 Seriousness scores on burglary question

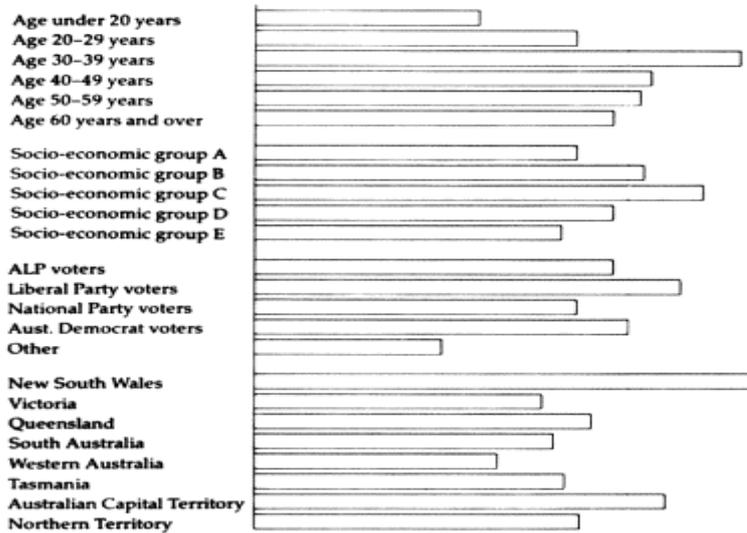
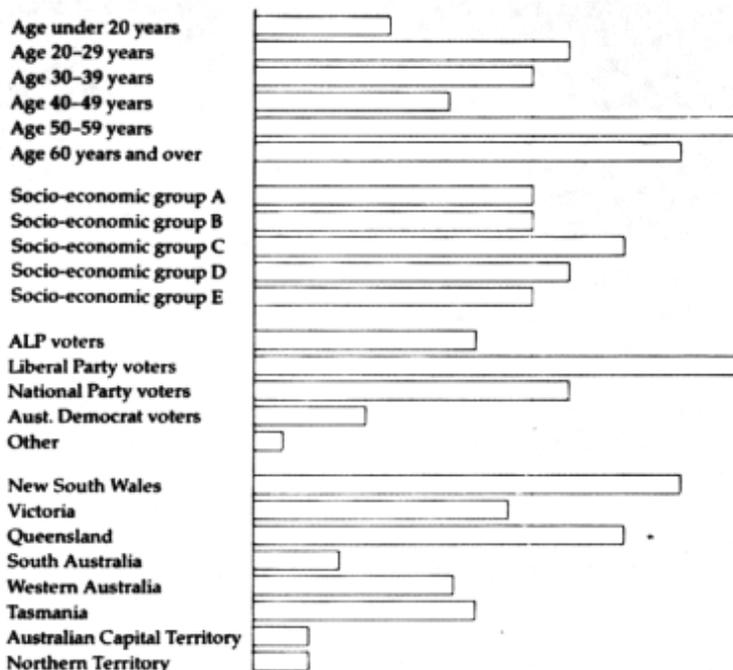


Figure 7 Seriousness scores on shoplifting question



were less than half as concerned as others, and ACT residents rated it virtually zero on the seriousness scale.

Although all sections of the community ranked it eleventh or twelfth, burglary aroused the feelings of the middle aged and middle class in particular. Liberal Party voters and residents of Sydney and Canberra were also more concerned than average.

The breaking and entering, and stealing of \$1000 of goods is, however, a relatively serious property offence, bearing in mind that most burglaries net considerably less than that, and our respondents recognised this in their answers. The extensive media coverage and research literature claim that residential burglary has devastating effects on women. Surprisingly, female respondents rated breaking into a house and stealing \$1000 worth of goods only three-quarters as highly as did males in the sample. However, both females and males, considered this as the second least serious offence.

There was almost unanimity in the low ranking of the shoplifting offence as well, and some groups, notably the under 20s, Australian Democrat voters, South Australians and those from Darwin and Canberra, scored the shoplifting question less than half as seriously as the bicycle theft.

Crime And Punishment

To a considerable extent the 'sentence of the people' reflects the seriousness with which both parliaments and the courts see particular crimes. The notable exceptions to this rule are the occupational' offences of pollution and industrial negligence which generally are rarely prosecuted and attract relatively small penalties. A point must, however, be made that the respondents did discriminate between the violent offence of stabbing to death and the factory negligence of pollution causing death in that former evoked the punishment of imprisonment for a long duration,

whereas the latter elicited, in the main, large sums of fines. Another significant feature was that although violence in the family was rated as relatively serious when it came to judging punishment, neither imprisonment nor fines were the favoured option; the majority viewed community based treatment as appropriate punishment for such offences. If there is any truth in the assertion that criminal justice and penal policy reflect what the public wants then legislators may well reconsider more appropriate methods to detect and punish individuals and companies that do not comply with health and industrial safety standards.

In an associated *Trends and Issues* paper we will consider the specific punishments that Australians gave to each of the offences surveyed here. It would be remiss of us not to mention at this stage though that, generally, people are less punitive towards law-breakers than is usually imagined. For example, even for the two most serious offences — stabbing to death and heroin importation — only a minority of the sample suggested that the appropriate penalty should be the death penalty.

Notes

1 The McNair Anderson and Associates organisation was commissioned by the Australian Institute of Criminology to conduct the survey. The survey was based on a scientifically designed multi-stage probability sample ensuring that all Federal electorates were represented in the sampling frame.

2. J. Braithwaite and P. Grabosky, *Occupational Health and Safety Enforcement in Australia*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1985.

3 See P. Cashman, 'Medical Benefit Fraud', *Legal Services Bulletin*, Parts 1 and 2, 1982, pp. 58-61 and pp. 116-21 . P.R Wilson, 'Occupational Crime: The Case of Doctors' in D. Chappell and P.R. Wilson, *The Australian Criminal Justice system* (3rd ed.), Butterworth, Sydney, 1986 (forthcoming).



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